

# The Perspective of a Lifetime

## Three Life Principles to Beware and One To Live By

**ADVICE.** It's everywhere. Magazine covers. Morning news broadcasts. E-mail forwards. It seems everyone has some advice to give, and most of us must be looking for it, because self-help books continue to sell and those morning shows keep booking guests who offer life direction in perfect sound bites.

Recently I started thinking about some of the guiding life principles that I hear repeatedly – those easy-to-remember ideas that supposedly can help guide us through our daily lives and help us make decisions. I quickly realized that if we were to fully implement many of these life principles, we wouldn't be too pleased with the results.

The trouble is that these ideas get repeated so often that we fail to think critically about them, and we miss opportunities to find a life principle that can help us safely navigate our daily lives. I want to alert you to three common life principles that could cause you harm and give you one life principle that I have found to provide sound guidance. First let's look at three life principles you should watch out for.

### **PRINCIPLE 1: LIVE IN THE PRESENT**

It is good to enjoy the moment, and I do live by this principle – to an extent. For instance, if I'm spending the day with family or friends, I try to focus on them rather than obsessing over business while I pretend to listen to them. In that way, living in the present is great advice. But the trouble is that this principle of living in the moment doesn't always offer the right perspective. How can it possibly help you make effective business decisions, career decisions, financial decisions, or family decisions? Those decisions require long-term thinking. I love McDonald's - in the moment. But afterwards McDonald's doesn't make me feel so good. Living in the moment is important, but it can make us shortsighted and cause us to choose the wrong things.

### **PRINCIPLE 2: TREAT OTHERS THE WAY YOU WANT TO BE TREATED**

The Golden Rule. Hard to argue with, isn't it? The trouble is that we are profoundly different from one another. Treating people the way you want to be treated often only works with people who are like you. Suppose you're a meat lover and you're having a family of vegetarians over for dinner. Should you serve them meat? Of course not! Life demands that we develop greater flexibility than this principle suggests.

The best leaders and managers I know have expanded their capabilities and developed the muscles to adjust to other people's styles and personalities.

### **PRINCIPLE 3: TREAT OTHERS THE WAY THEY WANT TO BE TREATED**

This sounds kind and loving, but sometimes what people say they want is not what's best for them. If your friend is an alcoholic and he says he wants a drink, should you give it to him? Or, to be less extreme, think about people who say they want honest feedback but in the next breath tell you that they only want feedback in a particular area or in a certain way. As I discuss in my seminars and coaching sessions, when people set conditions for honesty, it limits honesty because others will use those conditions as a reason not to be truthful. The result is missed opportunities for growth. This may be the way these people want to be treated, but that doesn't make it the best. This assessment got me thinking about what makes a good guiding life principle. It didn't take me long to realize that for years I'd been observing a valuable life principle in action, but simply hadn't realized the power it could have for me.

Three of my four grandparents lived long lives, and my relationships with them taught me that people who are approaching the end of their lives often reflect on their accomplishments, their disappointments, their regrets, and all they have to be thankful for. They examine how they've made use of their time on this earth. So why not live as if the ninety-year-old me is present with me to give me advice and wisdom right now? At ninety we will understand what is important in the long run, but we'll also know the value of enjoying the present. At ninety we'll know how to treat others, but we'll also understand the importance of saying what needs to be said and of making the decisions that may be unpopular but are the right thing to do. At ninety we'll understand the grave importance of being clear on our top priorities, knowing our negotiables and non-negotiables, and choosing to spend our time with people who enhance our lives and treat us the way we deserve to be treated.

Implementing the ninety year-old principle has made a significant difference in my life. I lived for years sacrificing time with those I love as well as sacrificing my emotional presence when I was physically present. When I began asking myself what the ninety year-old

me would tell me to do, I was shocked by some of my decisions and actions in my professional and personal life. I realized I had wasted time doing many things that had brought little, if any, lasting value. I don't want you to make the same mistakes I have.

Try it. Think of a business or personal decision you need to make, and visualize yourself at ninety. You're sitting in a comfortable chair with your feet up. You're smiling and content with the decisions you have made throughout your life. Now ask yourself what the ninety-year-old you would tell you to do now.

Suppose you need to be honest with someone about their attitude, performance, or treatment of others. What guidance might the three damaging life principles offer?

Live in the moment: Unless you love confrontation, this principle may leave you thinking, "Not right now!"

Treat others the way you want to be treated: This could be helpful as long as you don't mind conflict and aren't upset by hearing difficult messages. Treat others the way they want to be treated: If the person isn't open to coaching or often doesn't want to hear what others have to say, then you'll have to hold your tongue.

But here's what the ninety year-old you would likely think about approaching a difficult subject with someone: Things may be uncomfortable and there may be some trouble in the short term, but in the long run, this is the right thing to do. Time deepens wounds and deepens problems, and ignoring situations often makes them worse. I know that pain in the short term can bring gain in the long term. When I look back on this, I'll be glad I said what needed to be said.

Don't wait until you're ninety to gain this valuable perspective. What is the ninety year-old you advising you to do now?

*Steven Gaffney is a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, influence and leadership and is one of the recognized authorities on the subject of honesty. He is the author of two ground-breaking books, *Just Be Honest: Authentic Communication Strategies that Get Results and Last a Lifetime* and *Honesty Works! Real-World Solutions to Common Problems at Work and Home*.*

*This article is the property of the Steven Gaffney Company. Please email [info@stevengaffney.com](mailto:info@stevengaffney.com) or call 703-241-7796 for permission to reprint this article in any format. Copyright 2010, [www.StevenGaffney.com](http://www.StevenGaffney.com).*