

Life is a Work in Progress

A commentary by Frank Zenie - First, let me begin with a personal story.

Over 60 years ago I began my first job after college and army service. I was a project engineer at a leading maker of measurement and control instrumentation for process-based manufacturing, such as oil refineries and chemical plants. These were often sold as integrated systems and my job was to design the solution and manage the system integration. My early projects were small enough that I could do all the integration myself. I was then assigned to manage a much larger project requiring contributions from many departments including custom products unique to this project. In today's dollars, this project was probably over \$1 million in revenue and physically so large that it required a large truck for delivery.

Everything began smoothly, until other departments proved unable to deliver their components to me on schedule. The window for my calibration and integration got shorter and shorter. I worried, but believed that by working extra hard I could still meet the overall schedule.

Things continued to slip and the components arrived at my department the day before scheduled shipment. The customer, a large chemical manufacturer, had dispatched one of their trucks to deliver our system. I had help and we got everything mounted and connected during the day. I was still counting on turning it on to verify everything was working as planned and we would ship in the morning. It would be a late night for me, but all would be fine.

Of course, all didn't work as planned and by about 11:00 pm, I was alone and totally overwhelmed by the amount of work ahead – and I had neither the time, capacity or skills to fix it. I called my boss at home and explained my situation and asked; "What should I do?". He calmly told me to go home and go to bed, we would work on it tomorrow.

While well intentioned, I was in total denial that, as my time became shorter and shorter, I could make it up. I lacked the judgement to reschedule and ask for help and also lacked the experience to anticipate the likely problems in integrating such a complex system.

Looking back, I wonder how my career survived this debacle. To a great extent, credit goes to my boss who believed I was well intentioned and would learn from my mistakes. I received much needed help and the system was successfully installed a few weeks later.

A few days ago, I was walking down the street and noticed a written message on the window of a high-end men's clothing store that recently opened. Sure, they have an agenda, but it's a powerful and simple message to be proactive. See photo.

On further thought; however, I would modify it to:

No matter how you feel,
Get Up, Dress Up, Show Up
and Know When to Give Up.



I might even add; and “know when to ask for help”.

A day later, I read an article published by Inc. Magazine, “Forget Talent: Here Are the 2 Traits All Successful People Share”. Of course, they actually listed three traits.

1. A love of learning
2. The Ability to Take a Setback and Keep Going
3. You Figure Things Out as You Progress

Very powerful principles indeed, particularly number 3. As an entrepreneur, I want to disrupt old ways of doing things. Since we can’t predict the future, particularly during uncertainty, we must ACT, ASSESS and ADJUST. After all, life is a “work in progress”.

I would only add two more traits to the success message. First, seek honest self-appraisal. Denial is the enemy of success. We must identify and accept problems before we can solve them. Take some time to reflect on what you do and how you live. Accept reality and then improve where you fall short of who you want to be.

Finally, I turn to the Bible of Success, Stephen Covey’s “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”. Covey’s Habit 4 is “Think Win-Win”. I would go further and suggest “Seek Win-Win”. Think about it, if you deliver win-win solutions, people will want you to succeed because they share in the benefits of your success.

Success isn’t complicated. It does require discipline and hard work.

November 2019