

Book Review

The Power of Being Yourself: A Game Plan for Success by Putting Passion into Your Life and Work¹

Reviewed by Major Andrew D. Smith*

*I put myself and my own ambitions before him. I was kept away by this business trip or that business trip . . . But even when I was home I wasn't present . . . I was worrying about my own career rather than the things that I obviously should have been worrying about. I was preoccupied. My heart was more into me than it was into him.*²

I. Introduction

Joe Plumeri seeks to motivate and inspire readers to reach success with his book, *The Power of Being Yourself: A Game Plan for Success by Putting Passion into Your Life and Work*. Plumeri, an exceptionally successful businessman,³ provides guidance in the form of eight principles. The principles are not profound,⁴ but Plumeri deftly shows their effectiveness through anecdotal evidence of his own successes. But the true takeaway from the book is that it is equally necessary to apply principles for success in your personal life. Leaders who neglect to prioritize personal relationships may reach professional success, but may do so at great personal cost.

The Power of Being Yourself's principles for success are primarily leadership tenets, and they include concepts such as being genuine, having a clear vision, leading from the front and having a purpose.⁵ The book takes these very simple concepts and provides real-world examples of their effective application in business. Plumeri's optimism and energy radiate from the pages; he inspires the reader to believe that great success is readily attainable.

However, the fourth chapter, "Let Sadness Teach You," is what truly resonates. Plumeri confronts the reader with the fact that his prolific professional accomplishments came from a workaholic nature that prioritized family last.⁶ Plumeri ignored his eight principles in his most important relationships, and suffered resulting profound personal tragedy in the form of the death of his son. The book has profound value for civilian and military leaders alike. It provides great ideas and new ways to look at basic leadership concepts, while also issuing a dire warning to those who

would seek professional success at any cost.

II. Useful Insight on Leadership

The principles *The Power of Being Yourself* espouses are not overly technical or hard to understand; they are basic leadership concepts. The simplicity of the principles makes them compelling. They are not business-focused principles; they apply in any field. Plumeri skillfully guides the reader through the application of the principles, giving a first-hand account of how simple principles can make a huge impact on even the most powerful corporations.

Plumeri's hands-on approach with subordinates is particularly enlightening. In order to combat his company's impersonal culture, he began writing handwritten notes to employees on a daily basis.⁷ In an age where electronic communications are the norm, Plumeri wrote notes to let employees know how much he appreciated them and their work.⁸

When I first got there no one would communicate with each other. This was a global company with seventeen thousand people working for it worldwide, and I must have sent thirty, forty, fifty notes a weekend. They caused a commotion. They blew people away. People would have them framed up on the wall. They couldn't believe I took the time to send a handwritten note. That made them feel

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¹ JOE PLUMERI, *THE POWER OF BEING YOURSELF: A GAME PLAN FOR SUCCESS BY PUTTING PASSION INTO YOUR LIFE AND WORK* (2015).

² PLUMERI, *supra* note 1, at 72.

³ Joe Plumeri served as the CEO of multiple large corporations, including Willis Group, Citibank North America, and Travelers Primerica Financial Services. He was named to Treasury & Risk magazine's list of "100 Most Influential People in Finance" in 2009 and 2010. *Joseph Plumeri: Vice Chairman*, FIRSTDATA, http://www.firstdata.com/en_us/about-first-data/leadership-team/joseph-plumeri-bio.html (last visited Oct. 21, 2016)

⁴ The concepts Plumeri uses to develop his principles are very similar to those found in other books about leadership and inspiration. See e.g., JOHN MAXWELL, *THE 21 INDISPENSABLE QUALITIES OF A LEADER: BECOMING*

THE PERSON OTHERS WILL WANT TO FOLLOW (2000) (discussing the importance for a leader to value relationships and to have vision, passion, communication skills, initiative and the ability to listen to your heart).

⁵ Plumeri's first principle of success is to be yourself, to be genuine. See PLUMERI, *supra* note 1, at 1-28. His second principle is to have a vision of where you are going. See *id.* at 29-45. His fifth principle is to lead from the front. See *id.* At 95-120. His eighth principle is to have purpose. See *id.* at 169-190.

⁶ *Id.* at 69-94.

⁷ *Id.* at 138.

⁸ *Id.*

good, made them feel special.⁹

As the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Willis Group, Plumeri built offices that did not have doors.¹⁰ By doing so, he made it clear that face-to-face communication was the standard. He wanted leaders to have open doors for their subordinates at all times and vice versa.¹¹ Plumeri not only wanted communication to improve, but he also wanted his employees to enjoy work. He felt the best way to create an environment that people enjoyed was to get them speaking to one another.¹²

The book also highlights the importance of reaching out to people directly, of going the extra mile. Plumeri describes a situation, while he was heading Willis Group, where a major client was unhappy and about to leave the company. He instantly called the client.¹³

Directly after the call, he got on a train from New York to Washington, D.C., to speak face-to-face with the client.¹⁴ The client, so impressed by the fact that the CEO came to visit him personally, stayed with the company.¹⁵

Plumeri's actions were simple, easy, and extremely effective. As a leader, he was unhappy with his company's culture and wanted a change. These three anecdotes, as well as others sprinkled throughout the book,¹⁶ provide great lessons for any leader. *The Power of Being Yourself* shows that ideas do not have to be complicated to be effective. The book reassures that leadership does not take extraordinary talent or genius. It illustrates the importance of showing genuine care, enhancing communication, and giving effort. Plumeri's leadership principles are important to review, not because they are unorthodox or mind-blowing, but because they reiterate basic truths. A leader in any field should analyze the principles from the book, because there is much to garner.

III. Where Plumeri and His Plan Fall Short

Plumeri introduces his own personal tragedy in the

⁹ *Id.* at 139.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 42, 138.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 43.

¹³ *Id.* at 128.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 129.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 130.

¹⁶ Plumeri gives a number of anecdotes throughout the book that help to demonstrate his leadership principles. *See e.g., id.* at 11 (discussing how, after joining the Willis Group, he would take time to personally call all of his executives throughout the world). *See also, id.* at 96-99 (explaining how he used positive thinking and determination to get the "Sears Tower"

Prologue. He explains that his son, Chris, died in 2008 after years of battling drug addiction.¹⁷ He provides the full account of his son's story in the fourth chapter. His son went to a treatment facility to deal with anorexia at the age of thirteen.¹⁸ Plumeri believes his son became a drug addict at the treatment facility.¹⁹ His son continued to struggle with addiction for the next twenty-six years until his death.²⁰ Plumeri attributes his son's struggles to lack of self-esteem, and places the blame upon himself.²¹ He explains that he focused on his work instead of his son.²² He uses his mistake to reinforce the fourth principle in *The Power of Being Yourself*, "making time for relationships that matter."²³

Plumeri admits he failed at his fourth principle; he failed to make time for his son. His true failure was that he did not apply any of his principles to his personal life:

I put so much into my work. I gave so much of myself. People at work waited for me to give them inspiring, motivational speeches, and I did. But I didn't go home and give inspiring, motivational speeches. . . . I had to be a real fraud to really be passionate about motivating other people . . . but as soon as I walked in the door of my own home I wasn't that way anymore.²⁴

Plumeri did not have the hands-on approach with his family that made him so effective with his subordinates. He did not lead at home. He did not have a passion for his family.

Although he understands that he made mistakes,²⁵ Plumeri fails to realize that his personal success required more than adhering to one additional principle. He needed to apply all eight principles in his personal life. He needed to lead at home with the same passion he led his subordinates.

Plumeri's strict adherence to his eight principles in his professional life also led to his personal failure. He did not modify his principles when necessary; he did not prioritize effectively. Plumeri advocates going to every meeting

renamed the "Willis Tower").

¹⁷ *Id.* at XIII.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 74.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at 69-94.

²¹ *Id.* at 69-72, 91-94.

²² *See e.g., id.* at 72, 92.

²³ *Id.* at 93-94, 197.

²⁴ *Id.* at 92.

²⁵ *See e.g., id.* at 69-94.

possible, and explains how he “took every meeting.”²⁶ He states that many of these meetings were disasters, but he believed they were all worth going to because of the opportunities that might present themselves.²⁷ He also extolls the value of attending as many social events, clubs, and other large organizational events as possible.²⁸ He describes this as “playing in traffic.”²⁹ This principle has value; but unchecked, it had drastic consequences for his family life. Taking every meeting at work, and attending as many social functions as possible meant he had to sacrifice time elsewhere, and his family bore that sacrifice.

Not only did Plumeri fail to implement his principles effectively in his personal life, the book’s eight principles themselves also have a major shortcoming in that they do not identify the importance of taking time away from work. It is clear that Plumeri failed, and still fails, to understand the importance of down time:

I would call people on weekends. I would call people when they were on vacation. I never minded being called when I was on vacation. I’m a workaholic. I love to work. That led to anxiety for some of them. That led to resentment and even some bitterness. As I look back I realize I was wrong.

Give people a break sometimes. Let them relax. Let them enjoy a sense of a job well done. I’ve learned from that mistake. Not everybody was going to be as zealous as I was. Not everybody wanted to work all hours and on weekends and vacations.³⁰

Plumeri sees that his actions caused problems with his employees, but he does not seem to grasp how this issue led to problems in his personal life. His plan does not identify down time as a necessary ingredient for success. He only advocates providing subordinates with more personal time. This failure cuts against the book’s fourth principle, “making time for important relationships.” Also, the plan’s silence on the importance of time off ignores the extensive research that shows longer work hours can lead to negative effects on health and productivity.³¹

Plumeri’s personal failures cast a large shadow on his professional accomplishments. On the other hand, his failures

provide more value to the reader than his accomplishments.

The Power of Being Yourself helps the reader obtain the balance between work and personal life that Plumeri never had. Leaders can learn from his mistakes in order to avoid the type of personal regret that far too many professionals have.³² Understanding Plumeri’s personal failings, and the failure of his plan to take into account the need for personal time also helps leaders professionally. Leaders can learn from Plumeri’s failure to provide employees with enough personal time, which led to certain employees resenting him and his leadership style.

Also, the book motivates leaders to emphasize to subordinates the importance of spending personal time with their family. After reading this book, leaders will want to ensure that neither they, nor the people they lead, fall into the same traps as Plumeri.

IV. Conclusion

Joe Plumeri intended his book to motivate and inspire the reader to reach success. The book does motivate and inspire, but not quite as he intended. *The Power of Being Yourself* provides very useful leadership principles to follow. The simplicity and effectiveness of the book’s principles motivate and inspire the reader to believe that success is possible without extraordinary abilities or luck. Also, Plumeri’s professional insight and experiences allow the reader to see basic leadership concepts applied in a variety of creative ways. However, once the reader understands the true cost of Plumeri’s success, the desire for professional superstardom loses much of its appeal. The book intended to push readers toward professional success alone, but it unintentionally leads them toward a more encompassing type of success that includes both personal and professional achievement. Overall, the book provides keen insight on leadership along with a warning to always prioritize what matters most in life; it is a great addition to any leader’s reading list.

²⁶ *Id.* at 122-23.

²⁷ *Id.* at 123.

²⁸ *Id.* at 127-28, 142-46.

²⁹ *Id.* at 121-46.

³⁰ *Id.* at 20-21.

³¹ See e.g., Dean Obeidallah, *When You’re Dying What Will You Regret?*, CNN (June 21 2013, 6:35 P.M.), <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/21/opinion/obeidallah-death-regret/index.html/> (citing to research that indicates that

shorter work hours leads to better problem solving and short term memory). See also Jenna Goudreau, *Why Working 6 Days a Week is a Terrible Idea*, BUSINESS INSIDER (Nov. 18 2013, 4:44 P.M.), <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-working-6-days-a-week-is-bad-for-you-2013-11/> (discussing how decades of research indicates longer working hours can have negative effects on health, family life, and productivity).

³² See e.g., Dean Obeidallah, *When You’re Dying What Will You Regret?*, CNN (June 21 2013, 6:35 P.M.), <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/21/opinion/obeidallah-death-regret/index.html/> (sharing observations from a nurse that the number one regret from dying men was that they worked too much).