



Never Do Your Best

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Lou Holtz, the famous football coach, did a video program in the 1980's entitled "Do Right." It is one of the most watched inspirational videos of all time. In it, Lou suggested three little rules he had for every team he ever coached and also for his family. 1) Do Right, 2) Do the best you can, and 3) Treat others the way you would like to be treated. Each one of these rules sounds logical, but each one can cause problems if applied literally.

I have challenged #3, the "Golden Rule," in other articles by pointing out that not everyone would want to be treated the way I want to be treated. That problem has led some people to consider the "Platinum Rule," which is "treat others the way *they* would like to be treated." The Platinum Rule is more flawed than the Golden Rule, because if we treat others the way they want to be treated, we would go broke giving them things that are not particularly good for them. Rule 3 really boils down to treating each individual the right way. That also implies not treating everyone the same way, because each person has individual needs.

The #1 rule, "Do right," seems straight forward until we try to make it operational. There are always conflicting forces in any decision, and it becomes a conundrum to know what the right thing really is. Often we find that the "right" thing to do in the morning is not the best choice for the afternoon. Doing what is right is always situational, and each person's analysis of that situation will determine the rightness of any particular action. Therefore there is no absolute right thing to do in any circumstance. We have to use our judgment.

The #2 rule, "Do the best you can," sounds bulletproof until we stop and think about it. I have never done anything to the absolute best of my ability because when I think back, there is always something I could have done to improve my actions. There is no way for me to be as smart as I am capable of, or as clever, or as sensitive. In any of my actions there is always room for improvement: sometimes quite a bit of room.

Striving to do the best we can is a formula for analysis-paralysis. With only a little more thought, we can always come up with something better to handle any situation. Therefore, if we follow Lou Holtz's second rule to the maximum, we will spend all of our time planning and no time doing.

I am reminded of Edward Deming's famous formula "Plan, Do, Check, Act." By repeating this cycle over and over, organizations can learn from their mistakes and provide continuous improvement that moves in the direction of perfection without actually ever reaching it. The irony is that many groups have found a way to modify Deming's formula such that it looks like this: "Plan, Plan, Plan, Do, Hope." In order to make the most progress toward the goal of perfection, we actually need to jettison the ideal of reaching perfection and take up the cause of progress. That is how we can optimize our performance over time.

In retrospect, I think that Lou Holtz's three rules would be more operational if they were stated, 1) Do good work, 2) Do the best you can with the resources available, and 3) treat all people the right way. These rules are pragmatic and allow us to be flexible as we seek to make each day better than the one before.

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