

What Are You NOT Doing?

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

This article is for all professionals who want to make the most of their time. The thesis is that we need to consider the things we are not doing as well as those we are supporting with our effort. The idea of noting the things we can do as well as the opportunities we are missing is one that is highlighted in the quality concept called “six sigma.”

Most business professionals are familiar with the term six-sigma. It is a concept where we seek to make our processes so close to perfection that there are only slightly over 3 defects per million opportunities. I have taught six sigma for decades, and one thing about the concept has always bugged me.

The whole premise of six-sigma is based on a ratio of defects per opportunity. When you think about it, the number of defects is difficult to measure, but at least the number is finite. The number of opportunities to make a defect is really infinite because they include all of the steps we **can take** but also all of the steps we decide **not to take**.

If I remember my 7th grade math correctly, when the denominator of a fraction goes to infinity, the ratio becomes a moot point. Now let's consider how the conundrum of an infinite number of possible alternatives creates an interesting parallel for our personal lives.

Most of us focus our energy on the things we are doing. In planning the daily “To Do” list, we tend to list the items of importance that must be done today in order to convince ourselves that we are getting the most out of life.

We rarely spend that much energy on the other side of the equation and think about the things we are deciding not to do. Of course, if you are trying to quit a bad habit, you might list “smoke no cigarettes” on your To Do list for today. We make a conscious effort to avoid the things that we are trying to quit, but we spend far less conscious energy on what things we are avoiding out of neglect. Let me make a couple ridiculous examples to illustrate my point.

On my mental To Do list for today, I do not have an item to avoid becoming a ballet dancer. I am not making a conscious effort to avoid a late-blooming career as a ballet dancer. If you could see my body, you would understand the absurdity of that vision, because it has no basis in reality.

The irony is that there are an infinite number of things I am choosing not to do today. I will not decide to become a politician today. My bucket can be overflowing when I die and still I will never have won an elected governmental office. The number of things I am deciding to not do is infinite.

These crazy examples are just to highlight the dilemma. I have only a finite number of seconds yet to be alive on this planet. Clearly, it is in my best interest to use each second wisely, so I focus on the things I want to accomplish: my goals. Then the dilemma becomes, what potential activities did I miss through the process of neglect? My path forward is very narrow and restricted when compared with the infinite number of things I reject simply by not considering them. What I do not get involved with may be limiting the joy I am getting from life.

The whole concept is so convoluted that my brain starts to hurt after a while, so I cop out like every other breathing person and focus on those few things that are readily available for me to do today. The irony is that I do have the option at any point in time to do something completely different. For example, today I could choose to give away all my possessions and go try to help the poor in Africa for the remainder of my life.

Personally, I am not going to spend more time today wondering about this conundrum. It is not going to change what I do, but I must realize that in rejecting the option to think more carefully about what I am electing to not do, I am limiting my choices in life dramatically. Right now, I am deciding to have a cup of coffee. How about you?

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him** at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

