

Symbols vs. Experience

How to Know What You Truly Want

By Russell Bishop

More articles by Russell Bishop can be found at:

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Why do we seem to struggle so often to get what we think we want, only to be disappointed once it shows up? My experience suggests that most of us don't have a clear picture of what we truly want and what it will do for us if we get it.

I have asked literally thousands of people the "what do you want" question. For the most part, people can list all kinds of things they want. Cars, houses, money, and toys of all sorts frequently come up. Relationships, kids, travel, adventure, and good health also make the most frequently cited list.

Consider completing the left hand column of the table which follows. I have labeled the left hand column "symbols" to represent the things people often focus on in their life pursuits. "If only I had (a certain amount of) money." Or the right house, new car, better job, etc. The point here is to delineate as truthfully as you can, that which you find yourself focusing on in life, those things you want or want more of. These things go in the left hand column.

Symbols	Experience
Car	
House	
Money	
Toys (golf clubs, boat, etc)	
Travel	
Perfect Relationship	
Job	
Career	
Etc	

From here, spend a little time in reflection on the question, "Why do I want those things?" "What do I hope will be true if I have the (job, money, house, etc)?" A slightly more refined question would be, "what experience am I looking for"- if I only had the right car, house, money, etc, what would I then be experiencing?"

Take the money question for a moment. Most people I have worked with say they want more money. When I ask them why, or what more money would do for them, I usually hear what they could do with more money. Buy the house, car, etc frequently come out. However, I then ask them to think a bit more deeply on the question of experience. "What positive experience or experiences would you associate with having more money?"

From here, the answers become more interesting. "If I had more money, then I would experience . . ." Greater Freedom. Security. Peace of mind. Sense of power or accomplishment. Success. If you were to answer the question yourself, what answers would you find? If you think about it and then place those experiences that you are seeking in the right hand column, it might look something like this:

Symbols	Experience
Money	Freedom
House	Security
Car	Fun
Toys (golf clubs, boat, etc)	Excitement
Travel	Happiness
Perfect Relationship	Love
Job	Peace of Mind
Career	Success

In the example here, money is one answer to the question "What do you want?" If we ask what positive experience is associated with having enough money, we may find that the person wants greater freedom, security and peace of mind. We can then ask: "Do you know anyone with a lot of money who doesn't have much freedom, security or peace of mind?" Howard Hughes would be a classic example of someone who had loads of cash and not much freedom, security or peace of mind.

Of course, you can always ask the question the other way around. "Do you know anyone who does not have much money and yet experiences freedom, security and peace of mind?" Mother Theresa would have been an example on this side of the coin. And, just to keep it real, there are people with lots of money who are free, secure and at peace and those without money who aren't free, secure and at peace. So the question becomes one of how do I produce that which I really want? which I want?

Eric Hoffer, the longshoreman philosopher is often quoted as having said: "You can never get enough of what you don't need to make you happy. Sometimes, he is quoted as saying, "You can never get enough of what you don't really need."

If I am after the experience of being secure, free and at peace, is there any amount of money (or house, or car, or perfect relationship) that will produce the experiences I seek? The obvious implication here is "NO!" So, what do I truly want and how do I produce it? Is it the symbols of life that I truly want or is it more likely to be the experiences found in the right hand column? If you are like me, the answer is "BOTH!"

So, play with this a little. If what you want is freedom, peace of mind, security, a sense of fullness or completion, and you have freedom, peace of mind, security, and a sense of fullness or completion in your life, would it matter how much money you have? Wait a minute. Is this a trick question?

Well, yes and no. What I have found is that the more I focus on the positive experiences I want out of life, not only do I tend to produce those more frequently, but also the easier it is to produce the "things" found on the left hand side of the equation. Strangely, focusing on money hasn't made me any more secure or free, yet focusing on producing freedom and security has made it easier to create material success to go along with those inner qualities of success.

Again, have you ever really, really wanted something, worked hard on getting it, got it and then found you weren't any happier? If so, my suggestion would be to spend more time focusing on creating what you really want--those items in the right hand column. After all, can you ever get enough of what you don't really want? In subsequent articles, we will explore how to produce more of what you truly want out of life.

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A recognized expert in personal and organization transformation, Russell has coached thousands of individuals around the world, helping them discover more about who they truly are and how to create balance and success in their personal and professional lives. He is the creator of Insight Seminars, one of the largest and most successful personal transformation programs in the world, with well over one million graduates in 34 countries.

Russell is an internationally regarded speaker, educator, coach and consultant. His corporate clients include Fortune 500 executives in aerospace, healthcare, pharmaceutical and biotechnology, information technology, telecommunications and oil and gas. He has extensive international experience working in Europe, Asia, North and South America. Having started five different organizations in his career, Russell is well versed in the growth and expansion challenges faced by founding entrepreneurs and CEO's. Executives and senior teams frequently engage his services on issues of leadership, growth and work-life balance.

Today, Russell is the the founder and President of Bishop & Bishop, a consulting and coaching company whose seminars, coaching, and consulting offer individuals and organizations a new approach to integrating personal and spiritual values into their personal and professional lives. He is the author of numerous articles on the power of choice and awareness as well as his forthcoming book, Lessons in the Key of Life: Questions for Those in Search of Answers.

In addition to his consulting practice, he has lectured on productivity for the executive MBA programs at UCLA, University of Texas and Washington University in St. Louis. Russell previously served on the Board of Directors for the University of Santa Monica and was a charter member of the Advisory Board for the Points of Light Foundation. He received a Master's degree in Educational Psychology from the Davis Campus of the University of California and currently resides in Santa Barbara, California and Mauna Lani, Hawaii with his wife, Valerie. Russell is an avid golfer and amateur chef.