



THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE OUR ATTITUDE IN THE WORKPLACE

BY KALI SAPOSNICK



Prisoners of Our Thoughts: Viktor Frankl's Principles at Work

When I first read Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, I was deeply moved by the inner heroism of this extraordinary man, who transformed the horrific suffering he experienced in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II into a profound sense of hope for millions of people. I have returned to this book many times to infuse myself with Frankl's confidence that each of us has the ability, at any moment, to access our limitless potential and create meaning in our daily lives.

Key to Frankl's thought was his therapeutic system called Logotherapy, which "seeks to make us aware of our freedom of response to all aspects of our destiny." Rather than accepting the prevailing reductionist and nihilist views of his day—that life had no meaning—he urged people to "say yes to life in spite of everything."

Seven Core Principles

In the ambitious book *Prisoners of Our Thoughts: Viktor Frankl's Principles at Work* (Berrett-Koehler, 2004), author Alex Pattakos, a long-time student of Frankl's, shows how we can exercise this freedom in the workplace. Using seven core principles he extracted from Logotherapy, Pattakos illustrates how we can respond creatively and valuably at will to the challenges in our organizations. The seven principles are:

1) We are free to choose our attitude toward everything that happens to us.

- 2) We can realize our will to meaning by making a conscious commitment to significant values and goals.
- 3) We can find meaning in all of life's moments.
- 4) We can learn to see how we work against ourselves.
- 5) We can look at ourselves from a distance and gain insight and perspective as well as laugh at ourselves.
- 6) We can shift our focus of attention when coping with difficult situations.
- 7) We can reach out beyond ourselves and make a difference in the world.

Pattakos offers a roadmap for tapping into the power of these principles by focusing each chapter on ways to shift from being *prisoners of our thoughts*—for example, complaining about our jobs or fearing organizational changes—to developing what he calls true optimism. Unlike positive thinking, true optimism involves not only choosing a positive attitude, but visualizing the possibilities that may result from our choice of attitude and generating the passion to actualize those possibilities.

The Space Between

The idea of choice is central to Frankl's—and Pattakos's—work. In a moving introduction to the book, Stephen Covey, author of *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People*, cites the following three lines he once came across from a now-forgotten source that affirm Frankl's central teachings:

Between stimulus and response, there is a space.
In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our happiness.

He explains, "The space between what happens to us and our response, our freedom to choose that response

and the impact it can have upon our lives, beautifully illustrate that we can become a product of our decisions, not our conditions." In other words, we have the power to shape our circumstances rather than be dictated by them.

One of the book's compelling examples of the exercise of this power centers on the dilemma faced by Tom Chappell, president/CEO and cofounder of Tom's of Maine (of toothpaste fame). After 30 years of successfully applying environmental ethics to business, Chappell was pressured by the new young MBAs running his company to compromise his vision of making natural, environmentally friendly products in order to focus on growth and profits. For three years, he searched for inspiration about which direction to take the company, attending Harvard Divinity School part-time and reading philosophical works extensively. Eventually, he was able to reaffirm his commitment to running a company "in direct relationship to employees, customers, suppliers, financial partners, governments, the community, and even the earth itself." In short, by rediscovering the meaning in his work, he has been able to sustain a successful business in the broadest possible terms.

Likewise, by drawing on what Frankl calls "the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way," we can create deep meaning, experience great fulfillment, and become catalysts for profound change at work, in our families, and in communities. The beauty is that we possess this capability already; we just have to learn how to use it. ■

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