

ACE WOMEN'S Network™ Michigan

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Finding Peace: Just Answer 'Yes' to Two Simple Questions

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Over the past several years, I have had the opportunity to facilitate eight two-day sessions with transitioning CEOs on the topic of 'Creating a Great Rest of Your Life.'

It is not necessarily easy to go from being a CEO to being something else!

The leaders in these sessions are all amazingly successful from a socio-economic perspective. They have achieved what most people can only dream of in terms of both prestige and ability to impact the world. If they are not careful though, they can live out the rest of their lives being defined as a 'used to be.' They are frequently introduced as 'the former CEO.'

As we reflect upon the topic of creating a great new life, we often end up discussing how 'success' can be defined at a deeper level.

Two of the factors that consistently emerge as most important for true success are happiness and meaning. No matter how much you may have achieved in the past, loving what you do and finding it to be meaningful in the present are critically important at any age. At the end of the day happiness and meaning can only be determined from the inside – not the outside. No one can tell you what can make you happy and no one can tell you what is meaningful for you.

Fortunately, many of the participants in these sessions have done a fantastic job of creating happy and meaningful lives after leaving their CEO role. Unfortunately, some have not. If I wanted to pick a former CEO who is one of my ‘poster boys’ of true success in creating a great new life, it would be Harry Kraemer!

Harry served the pharmaceutical company, Baxter, for 23 years and went on to become President, CEO and Chairman.

After leaving Baxter, Harry has succeeded in creating a new life that can be a role model for other leaders.

He is now a Clinical Professor of Leadership at the Northwestern University Kellogg School of Management where he has been chosen by the students as Professor of the Year. He loves teaching, loves the school, and loves the students. They feel the same way about him.

In addition to working as a major advisor in a leading private equity firm, Harry is a bestselling author and sought-after speaker. He travels around the world giving talks related to Value Based Leadership.

Harry is committed to an amazing organization called the One Acre Fund that helps small farmers in Africa. The Fund was founded by Andrew Youn, one of Harry’s former Kellogg students. In fact, Harry donates all of the money from his speeches to the Fund. Over the years, he has been able to donate millions of dollars.

Harry also loves his family and is just a happy person. I am honored that he is a member of our *100 Coaches* pay-it-forward community.

After giving a talk in one of our *100 Coaches* sessions, he was asked a challenging question:

“Harry, in your role as a CEO you have had to make some tough decisions. You have had to lay people off, fire people and do things that made people very sad. You seem like such a nice guy. How did you make peace with this? How could you sleep at night?”

Harry’s answer was both very simple and very profound.

“I ask myself only two questions: 1) Did I do what I thought was the right thing to do at that time? And 2) Did I do my best?”

“If the answer to these two questions was ‘yes’ and ‘yes,’ I could always make peace with myself and had no trouble sleeping at night.”

In life, at any second in time, we can only do what we think is right and we can only do our best. That is all that we can do.

In hindsight, we sometimes make the wrong decisions. What we thought was the right strategy did not work. Sometimes we fail in execution. We did our best and still lost.

Whether we achieve results or fail, if we are doing what we think is right and we are doing our best, we can make peace with who we are and what we have done.

At any stage of our lives, like Harry Kraemer, we have to earn respect from others and also from ourselves.

Rather than ‘resting on our laurels’ we need to keep asking ourselves – at any point in time:

- Am I doing what I think is the right thing for me to do – now?
- Am I doing my best – now?

We cannot change our past. We cannot control the future. We can control what we are doing now.

To me, the essence of mindfulness is not just studying wise words and meditating. The essence of mindfulness is the awareness of now.

All we can do, at this second in time, is to take care of now.

By asking ourselves Harry’s simple questions, we can both help others and find peace in ourselves.