

The Principled Employee

by
Alden B. Davis

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1st Edition

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Introduction

Principles: The foundation upon which decisions are made. That which governs my conduct. A settled pattern of action.

What secret allows some people immediate success when entering the workforce while others end-up sidelined?

The answer is explored in this book. People coming into the workforce face a bewildering maze to navigate with gates controlled by people of multiple generations. The physical work environment must be mastered as well as the social environment. Without a coach and a mentor, a person is left to discover their way by trial-and-error, sometimes with dire consequences. My father learned the hard way. As a new research scientist, he was excited about his ideas and when his supervisor did not respond, he took the ideas up a level to his manager. This subtle violation of corporate hierarchy and political faux pas eventually cost him his job.

Four principles are offered to guide successful entry into a workforce; guidelines to help think through one's approach. Few in number, the intent is to cover the broadest array in the most efficient way. Principles are being offered, not rules. Principles are designed to provide guidance in situations and help a person think through their actions. Rules demand compliance, but can leave a person without direction in a dynamic world that demands flexibility and spontaneity. These four principles are related to each

other through their motivational and operational characteristics. Two principles balance the tension between a starting place and an ending place; two principles hold the dynamics of how and why. Each principle is made up of two components to enable complete thinking. First, is an affirmation, a non-negotiable; a stance or standard that is accepted. This is followed by a statement of intent or desire. Each principle sets the stage for a wide range of topics to be discussed and insights shared.

The thoughts in this book are offered to maximize success in the most effective and efficient way based on a careers worth of observational data in the experience of entering a workforce.

The principles are as follows:

1. To acknowledge the fact that there is a system defining the world in which I work in a way that I can comply yet be flexible to adapt to changes in the system over time.
2. To be professional in all my work dealings in a way that a positive perception is created of me.
3. To work and deliver results on all my projects in a way that my performance is guided by principles and driven by passion.
4. To position myself for my desired future in a way that my performance is awarded with promotions.

As each principle is explored, supplemental

handouts are referenced and available at www.MyValueTree.com, under the heading Principled Employee.

A world of opportunities and possibilities will open itself up to you with mastery of these principles over the course of your career.

I wish you great success on your journey.

Alden B. Davis
www.MyValueTree.com

Principle 1

To acknowledge the fact that there is a system defining the world in which I work in a way that I can comply yet be flexible to adapt to changes in the system over time.

"How come the President's car is allowed in the parking lot without displaying a parking tag, like the rest of us have to?" gripes a new employee. The answer is simple, "He is the President." With rank goes privilege. There is a group of people in the workforce today who struggle with this notion that a hierarchy of power exists and some people receive special treatment. Does this make them a better person than you? No, but it does mean they have achieved a different status than you. Just because you got into the organization it does not mean you are on equal standing with everyone else. Just because you can directly e-mail the senior people it does not mean you are on a first-name basis with them or in their circle. This principle is offered first because many people entering the workforce struggle with the concept of authority, power, hierarchy and differentiation. We all fit into a system at work; a governance or regulatory process. Be it a small owner run business or a large multi-national corporation, a trade association or global non-profit all these organizations require governance, or a system by which they work. Sometimes it is a very defined system, as in the military, and other times it is more informal. But in all cases a system exists. Job number one entering the work world is to

acknowledge this reality and choose to submit to it. You choose to pick-up the straight-jacket and put it on. People who understand this reality get with the program faster, are assimilated more quickly and get on with their career.

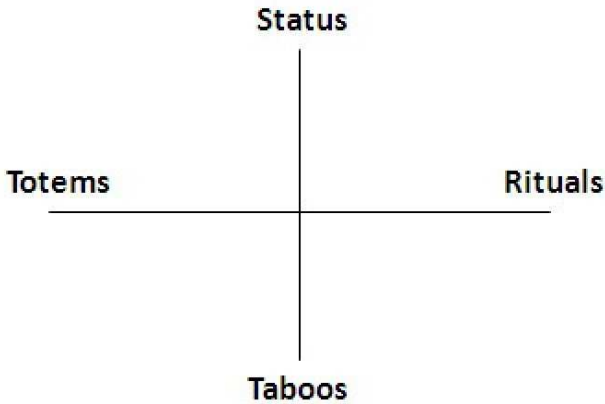
Does "assimilated" feel harsh? Does it seem like personal identity is being lost in the transaction? This is the nature of work. It is not about you, it is about the work. It is about the accomplishment of tasks and someone's willingness to pay for them. In this world of work there are winners and losers; people who advance and people who do not; people of power and people of little influence; people who make a lot of money and people who make little.

Do you like playing any kind of game; board game, card game or athletic games? Step one is learning the rules. As the rules are mastered, so is the game. View the work world as a large game and your first task is to learn the rules and master them; do not argue with the rules, do not try to change the rules, do not grouse about the rules, just learn them. The rules were never neatly presented to me over the course of my career. I learned them through trial-and-error and sometimes through the guidance of a sympathetic person. Thirty years in and I still run aground sometimes when it comes to issues involving personal ego and politics. Mastery of the game at this level becomes art.

The first, and most obvious system of which to be aware is the legal environment within which the organization is operating. The legal structure of the

organization plays a major role in how the organization runs. Without going into the details of an LLC, or a non-profit, or a public corporation, they all have in common a structure of accountability. Who can legally bind the organization with a contract, who can borrow money, who will watch out for the integrity of the business are all described in the company's by-laws. By definition, there is a difference between the chairs people sit in. As the organization grows, the accountability is divided into smaller pieces and distributed to other people. People who represent this legal side of the organization are called "management" and they serve a specific function of being its representative. By legal structure, these people have power to make decisions regarding the business and they have power over you. With power comes the accountability for results and this ties right in to a person's tolerance for risk and variation. If a person has a low tolerance for risk, the organization becomes highly structured and managed with lots of checks-and-balances. If a person has a high tolerance for risk, there is less organizational structure, a more free-wheeling attitude and less control.

The system that grows around the structure is part of the organization's culture. Being able to crack the culture code by design can greatly aid a person coming into a new organization and reduce the chance of creating inadvertent, negative impressions. Culture is experienced. It is the selected behaviors of a group of people reinforced by physical items. Graphically depicted as follows:



Astaught by Dr. Paul Boulian

Culture is decoded by working through this model. Samples available at www.MyValueTree.com

This model has provided insight and guidance to my work in countries and businesses all around the world. Through observation and conversations I create these models and then flex my style for the best fit. Pitfalls are avoided and results are achieved.

Work through the model as follows:

1. **Status:** List what is important to the organization. Not what people say, but what their behaviors say is important. The items on this list are what animate the organization; they put the life into the organization; they give the organization energy and set the tone. Examples are happy customers, happy shareholders, safety, quality, technology, ethics, problems, power, results, performance.

2. Taboos: These are the no-no's in an organization. What you never do. They set the lower bounds for behavior while Status sets the upper bounds. Taboos are usually discovered when one is violated, amidst gasps, giggles or groans. Examples could include kick-backs, illegalities, bribes, payoffs, coercion, stealing, passing on bad work, shipping defects.

3. Rituals: The repeated patterns of behaviors. These are what we "do." These are about action. Anything that happens regularly can be considered a ritual. Examples are monthly budget reviews, customer feedback focus groups, performance appraisals, training, grievances, month-end shipment pushes, singing Happy Birthday.

4. Totems: Totem poles are carvings that tell a story. They are the physical representation of things not seen. Totems are the symbols of what is said to be important. For example, if we give status to quality, the symbol may be letters of recognition; for safety, it could be safety-glasses. For power it could be a corner office.

Look around you right now. What rituals are underway; what do people do once a year, each quarter, weekly or daily. When I worked on an assembly line, *status* was meeting daily production. *Taboo* was missing schedule. *Rituals* were the daily 6:30am line shortage meetings, and *totems* were shortage lists with all items crossed off. This is more than a mental exercise; it is an actual activity to do.

Go to www.MyValueTree.com and print a copy of the Cultural Assessment and begin recording your observations. Notice how all the items link together. Rituals follow status and are reinforced through totems. And taboos, look for what gets the boss mad or where negative consequences exist. Good idea to refrain from such behaviors.

Let's go a little deeper into taboos and the legal structure of the organization. It is a primary concern of management to protect the organization from legal exposure; from liabilities. There is a rich body of case law that highlights these liabilities with employee behaviors in the spotlight. These are taboo. Infractions of these taboos can damage your career, even if you claim being naive, because they mark you; and organizations can have very long memories. Stay away from anything that could be mistaken for

- * sexual harassment - suggestive comments, innuendo, touching, excessive requests for dates, leering, dress, photos, jokes. Basically, if it has to do with sex, it does not belong at work and you are advised to stay away from it. The fines for employers who do not deal with this can be huge; upwards of \$30M for class action lawsuits. If you choose to behave this way, do so at your own risk because no one will have your back when things go bad. The penalties are just too big.

- * discrimination - your views about race, religion, orientation, ethnicity do not get to follow you into the workplace. This is about the work, not a platform for

individual viewpoints on life. Excluding people, joking, assigning tasks, harassing, disapproval, or basic ugliness toward another person can not be legally tolerated by management so stay away from any behavior that looks this way.

- * ethics - decisions that create unfair advantage, harms others, avoids responsibility fall into this category. Collusion, price-fixing, kick-backs, falsifying documents are taboo. While these behaviors may generate short-term positive results for you, they are always discovered and the consequences are always negative.

- * safety and the environment - not following safety procedures, not wearing protective personal equipment, locking emergency exits, horseplay, shortcutting industry codes, risk taking, illegal chemical disposal, not reporting spills or releases, falsifying records, wrong labeling are taboo.

- * revenue recognition - booking revenue before the deal is closed, fudging dates to hit quarterly goals, pulling revenue forward, masking one-time events as increased sales all create a more positive picture than reality and this causes big problems with financial regulatory agencies. Taboo. Stay away and do not participate. This can be a career killer.

Regardless if the business is casual or rigid about these taboos, it is good personal practice to avoid all of them.

Principle 1 is about accepting the fact that a system exists. In addition to the governance system, there is a political system, an information technology system, a work design system, a material flow system, a planning system, a human resources system, a financial system and a management system...just to name a few. Each one of these has its own set of rules that must be mastered by you. As you master the rules you grow in your career. Unless you were hired to specifically change the rules, focus your energy on learning the rules, not challenging them.

Acknowledging these systems is the first step in being able to deal with them. There are many people who say, "I hate office politics." While I agree that they are a waste of energy and a distraction, they exist and can only be ignored to your own peril. Organizations are collections of people, and as such, are full of various motivations. There are people who value being on a team and working collaboratively and there are people who are out for themselves and only need other people to the extent it helps them. Low probability that anyone will ever describe the political environment within which you are working. It is up to you to discern it and respond accordingly. Do not complain when another person outmaneuvers you if you are not interested in engaging in a political arena. Politics is defined as, "Sagacious in promoting a policy; ingenious in statecraft; of plans shrewdly contrived, especially with regard to self-interest. Artful in address of procedure; worldly-wise."

"Sagacious" is an important part of the definition and

adds richness; it means, "keen in sense perception, especially in scenting; of keen penetration and judgment; discerning and farsighted in judging people, motives and means; shrewd." Key competencies to succeed in the political system are selling and building constituencies. Learn the organization, learn who the organization serves, learn how the money flows through the organization and then look ahead one year and think about what must be done today to prepare for tomorrow and begin building a community of people supportive of the idea and move it into action. The ability to position the organization for the future is important and necessary and available to you after you learn how the place works.

What about the human resource system? Why does it exist? To set the stage, remember that the organization is a legal entity and must be protected. The human resource system protects the institution from all people-based liabilities. This includes having the right talent, growing the knowledge base of the organization, ensuring performance standards, talent planning, succession planning, compensation planning, labor relations, complying with all regulations and talent selection. Understanding this system allows for better career management, developmental assignments and avoiding a full range of taboos.

The first principle encourages you to accept that you are submitting to a system. If you choose to buck the system, the system must reject you over time and work you out.

The second part of Principle 1 says to **"comply yet be flexible to adapt to changes in the system over time."** As the past Chairman of United Technologies would say, "the pendulum is always swinging from centralized to de-centralized and cost comes out each time." He is being very clear that the organizational structure and management system is always in motion and subject to change. The counsel in this statement is to always be flexible. But the reality is, it could take three years before one is really comfortable with the system and understands how to perform safely within it. Security in one's job is a big deal; and now everything is going to change? "No way," people will say, "I spent too much time learning the current system." And they will drag their feet and be passive aggressive. But to demonstrate behaviors other than, "let's do it," is to negatively brand one's self. The world changes. Technology is changing even faster. Regulations are coming at a faster rate. Competition is fiercer and the playing field is less stable. No system has a very long shelf-life these days, so in order to stay relevant to the organization, a person must stay flexible and be willing to adapt.

This goes for management as well. It is not uncommon in large corporations to experience management rotation every 24 months. With this much change it is easy for people to shut down and retreat into the safety of the system they know, blocking the new ideas and perspectives that are coming in. I am not saying it is easy to remain adaptable to change over the years, but it is a career imperative. Change is the new normal, and adaptable is the desired trait.

Principle 2

To be professional in all my work dealings in a way that a positive perception is created of me.

"Profession" is the occupation to which one devotes oneself, but it is distinct from being a laborer.

"Professional" is following the standards of a profession. Principle 2 says "to be professional in all my work dealings;" regardless of what type of work is being done. This would say "professional" is more an attitude rather than a distinction of work.

"Attitude" is an important topic to consider because it is how you position yourself. That is what attitude means; it is a position like an airplane or as in ballet. It is your stance, it is how you hold yourself. Attitude is mental and physical and it directly influences how people perceive you. The way a person holds themselves largely depends on how much control they feel they have over the world around them. In academic terms this is called my locus of control, and it is either internal or external. Internal locus of control means I exert a great deal of influence on the world around me. I bring possibilities into existence and I am accountable for how my life is going. On the other hand, people with an external locus of control rely on the world around them for things to happen. They exert very little influence over the events in their life. They only get what the world gives. They tend to be victims and take no accountability for their life.

Attitude follows my locus of control. People with a strong internal locus of control tend to be positive, up-beat and "can do." They believe they are in control, which gives them confidence, which makes them stand out, which attracts possibilities, success and champions. But, when a person feels like they have no control the world quickly becomes unfair, uncaring and unpleasant. There is low energy to tackle problems which makes them appear disconnected, which reduces opportunities to get involved, which makes them less valuable and they end up attracting negativity, drama and detractors.

Be open to attitude check-ups. During a particularly frustrating time at work while leading organizational change, I was becoming frustrated with the people and lack of progress. Colonel Hackling came up to me and said, "Alden, you will catch more flies with honey than vinegar." Being in a vinegar state of mind I was not overly receptive to this observation, but with more reflection, he was right. My attitude had grown sour and unpleasant and I was becoming less effective. It was time for an attitude check-up. If you do not have a Colonel Hickling in your life to watch out for you then learn self observation. This is the ability to "get outside yourself" and watch how you are behaving in a situation, as if watching a movie. Wake up and pay attention to how people are reacting to you and listen to what is being said. Is the conversation dominated with complaints and gripes? Are people commiserating with you? Does the tone tend to be negative and non-constructive? Positioning oneself in such a way is not professional and will only have long-term negative consequences.

Why would anyone choose to associate with a dis-empowered complainer? Choose an attitude that will give you altitude. Reference the handout at <http://www.myvaluetree.com/StarPower/AttitudeModel.pdf>

As a professional, work is accomplished according to standards. A standard is a criterion for goodness as established by an authority. When it comes to the work world, there are at least three "authorities" of whom to be aware; the boss, the industry and you.

Your personal standards speak to who you are. Honesty, integrity, reliability, orderly, thorough, focused, serious, positive, careful, considerate and fact-based are great words that only have meaning when you can describe the criteria you use to put these words into action. For example, are there degrees of honesty? When eight hours are entered on the time card and it was really seven hours and fifty minutes, is that being honest? Calling in sick to avoid missing a deadline, is that being honest? Committing to a ship date that is not possible just to get the order, is that honest? As a professional, you have standards that guide your behavior and you follow them. Behaviors are the demonstration of your real standards.

Personal standards also include speech, dress and hygiene. Remember, Principle 2 says, "To be professional in all my work dealings in a way that a positive perception is created of me." Experience has shown me that when people perceive someone positively, it helps in their success. The encouragement is to live to standards that will allow

the broadest range of people to be comfortable with you. This means that crude, foul and obscene speech have no place in the work world. Be approachable by being clean, deodorized, groomed, mouth-washed and not overly fragranced. Dress appropriately for the business, but if given choice, dress conservatively, modestly and tastefully. Cover all major body parts and make it easy for others to do business with you without being distracted by your attire. Your dress is the "packaging" that others see, it sends major messages about how serious you are, and is worthy of you having standards.

The boss also has standards, and many of them will overlap your personal standards. I had a boss who did not allow jeans at work. This was not a problem for me because it matched my own standard, but for other people it was a point of contention. Other standards will include writing style, presentation formats, client engagement, phone etiquette, cross-training, staying busy and being involved. The boss defines the criteria of goodness and adherence is prudent counsel.

Industry standards are also of importance. These you will learn through school, training or on-the-job. Industry standards are core to a person's professionalism because they establish a foundation for performance and quality. Knowing the standards conveys a sense of competence and confidence. There are writing standards, welding standards, accounting standards, electrical standards, material control standards, quality standards, engineering standards...pretty much pick a field and you can find

the standards. I just received a mailer from a lawn care company and they say, "we abide by the highest lawn care standards in Connecticut" as it applies to chemical application. It is a great claim and it creates in me a sense that they are responsible and professional. Take the time to research the standards in your chosen industry and learn to apply them to your work. This is what makes *you* a professional.

Principle 3

To work and deliver results on all my projects in a way that my performance is guided by principles and driven by passion.

Passion is a great place to begin; that object of great interest, the energizer, the devotion to a cause that does not lose vigor. It is a very fortunate person whose work is their passion; they are energized and engaged and greet each day with enthusiasm. This builds a positive perception with other people and, in turn, tends to create a cycle of positive reinforcement. I just got off the phone with a person I have known for over fifteen years in the corporate world. He has progressed nicely, moved into the executive ranks and had a good future. As he reflected on his situation, however, he felt that he was just going through the motions without any real passion for his work. He resigned at the start of the year and is preparing to start a surface finishing business. He is excited about his future. Thirty minutes before his call, I was talking with a woman I have known the same amount of time, at the same company, who just had the wind knocked out of her through company politics. She is now on blood pressure medication, feeling vulnerable and each day at work her spirit is being crushed. The passion that once drove her work has been replaced with survival and this starts a cycle of negative reinforcements. Once you know what drives your passion at work it is up to you to nurture it, protect it and feed it. Passion

puts the "positive spring" in your step and that is a big part of your personal brand.

Principle 3 is about "work" and "results." Consider this: Pritchett and Associates found through their organizational change research that the average employee gives 4.8 hours of productive labor each day. This would say they are working at 60% efficiency. I have confirmed this number with hundreds of supervisors over the years. The principled employee is choosing to give more than what the system seems willing to accept. Have a personal work ethic. Come prepared to work. When a business is staffed with people who give 60%, it must over staff to meet the requirements, which means the cost structure is inflated making the business less competitive. Come prepared to work. Give your best because of personal pride. You agreed to work for a certain pay rate so give your best effort. Do not drag your feet getting to assignments, do not day dream, do not prolong getting set up, do not surf the web, do not engage in excessive chatting and story telling, do not extend breaks and lunch time, do not make bathroom time reading time, do not show up late and leave early, do not get stuck pondering, do not overly socialize, do not stare blankly into space, do not nap, do not roam, do not make excessive personal phone calls, do not bring your drama into work, do not show up drunk. I know, where is the fun you wonder?

True story. A utility company line maintenance crew had perfected the contract clauses to the point that they actually did 45 minutes of real work each day.

While these practices are buried deep within the system and wrapped in layers of management collusion, someone, somewhere is paying for it. Just because the system has devolved to this point, principle 3 calls us to have self-respect and honor and work to our fullest capabilities in exchange for the pay received.

Come prepared to work and be known as proficient. A proficient person can take a job, plan out the work, line-up the tools and procedures, begin the job and take it to completion with minimum stops and interruptions. You build a strong and positive reputation when you do this and that makes you promotable.

Come prepared to work and embody the attributes of a professional described in Principle 1. Aside from the very rare situations where a person gets ahead because of nepotism or political advantage, it is a track record of hard work and delivering results that forms the foundation of your success.

Results. Another good word to understand. In a recent conversation with a group of successful entrepreneurs, they were lamenting about the word "done" and how there seems to be multiple meanings for how "done" is "done." An example shared was as follows:

"We are installing a new piece of equipment that required an air line. My guy told me that the air line was in. I took this to mean that air would come out of it, but when we hooked up the equipment, no air was available. Upon which he said, 'well, we still need to connect it.'" "Done" to the boss

meant the job was complete and air would come out. "Done" to his guy meant that the pipe was in place, but not functional.

Delivering results means that the work is completed as defined by the boss. Where I worked, a document was circulated called "completed staff work." It described in great detail how to know when your work was "done." The nature of staff work is to produce solutions for your boss and it was considered "done" if you would be willing to stake your professional reputation on the options presented, the thoroughness of analysis, the rationale for the option chosen and the quality of the work presented.

People who deliver results are good project managers. They can think about tasks against time and arrange their work so that deadlines are met. They understand the critical path of work, which tasks are dependant on the others and how to manage their time to get everything done. This is a great ability and gives an edge over the other people. Think about your work as a project; it has a beginning, middle and end. The end is clearly defined, the timeline is known and the resources available are understood. When you can bundle your work this way you develop the reputation of a person who "gets things done."

Performance guided by principles. This says your work is governed by a set of standards; that you are predictable. Here are some good ones that you may want to work by:

- a. EHS: to take responsibility for the environment, health and safety in a way that work is only performed when safety has been considered and incorporated.
- b. Product Quality: to ensure that the understanding of customer requirements guides the decision to pass work on.
- c. Work Quality: to work in such a way that the desired result is achieved the first time with fewer and fewer mistakes through time.
- d. Orderliness: to put things where they belong in a way that makes them available for use next time.
- e. Stewardship: to take care of people, equipment and products in a way that leaves them better and safer than found.
- f. Proficiency: to have the level of knowledge and experience necessary to do the job in a competent manner in a way that does not need "cheat-sheets", can take the job from start to finish without unnecessary delays and has a clear idea of what must happen.
- g. Discipline: to have people hold themselves accountable to one another in carrying out their responsibilities at the right time on the right things.

You appear to others as a steady person when you live by principles. When you can describe your principles to others you begin talking like a leader and when they follow you, you are a leader. This is another important competency to have especially if you are desirous of career growth.

Principle 4

To position myself for my desired future in a way that my performance is awarded with promotions.

Ed Locke is considered to be the pioneer in goal-setting theory. He became a specialist in the field of organizational psychology and is touted as the most published in the field. His research shows that goal setting positively impacts performance. The more specific the goal and the more intensely it is desired the higher the probability of achieving it. Principle 4 is about your future; not just any future, but your desired future. I have heard so often people say, "When I started here, I figured I would only be here a year or so. That was 15 years ago. Where does the time go?" The sobering reality is that time goes by quickly and the next five years will be gone before you know it. Where would you like to be in your career? My observation is that people who do not know what they want, get what the organization gives them. And I do not mean pay. The money will come, but what do you want to be doing that is bigger than today? The clearer you are about what you want the more you can take advantage of opportunities today to position yourself. If you know where you are going you can look for the projects and tasks that will take you on your way. If you do not know for what you are looking you will never see it when it appears. I have seen this happen too often with people to know that it is not luck...that they can speak their future into existence.

Tom DeForge is a great example of this. Years ago, as a supervisor at Pratt and Whitney, maker of jet engines, he was in my first Kaizen event in the tube shop. “Kaizen” is an accelerated change process that always delivers double-digit performance improvements. It is driven by the philosophy that “waste is evil.” Tommy is a “can do”, “go-getter” kind of person and he immediately gravitated to this process. Shortly after our workshop, Japanese consultants from Toyota were working around Pratt and needed a host. Where other people saw this as an inconvenience, Tommy saw it as an opportunity because he knew he wanted to do this kind of work. So Tom took them out for dinner. It was Tom who made all of their arrangements. It was Tom who set up their workshops and got the Pratt people there. It was Tom who made sure all the improvements were implemented, all while being a supervisor. Guess what happened? The Japanese saw Tom as a person they could trust and soon asked him if he would do pre-workshops to get everyone ready. Tom had a vision of becoming a Lean Consultant like the Japanese, and shortly thereafter, they asked if he could prepare other clients. Tom left Pratt and started Lean Value Solutions International. Tom literally spoke his future into existence. Today he has a great training center, a global clientele, a great reputation in the marketplace and a track-record of proven success. And he has been financially more successful than he ever dreamed possible.

Look around. Do you see anyone doing what you would like to do? Go interview that person and ask

them how they got there. The universe gets put into motion when you start taking action.

The principles in this book build on each other. When they are embraced and lived to the fullest you will be proven and known as a trust-worthy person. You have done what you need to do to be a principled employee and created for yourself the best positioning for advancement. Best to you in the adventures of your career.

- Alden B. Davis, *founder*
MyValueTree.com

Appendix

Insights from the Ocean

an essay by Alden

Jupiter Beach, FL. A beautiful stretch of beach located north of West Palm Beach, a place where the giant sea turtles come to nest and where I like to stay when working in the area. It had been another tough day and I found myself drawn to the ocean for an evening run as a way to change gears and decompress. After the run, exhausted, I stood where the waves meet the shore and the words came to me, "It will come." What? A great shell? Maybe an insight. So I waited and the waves moved around my legs and my feet sank deeper with each wave. Then the insight came..."If you stay here much longer, stupid, you will get stuck!" Laughing at myself I had to work to extract my tired legs from the sand. And another insight came. "To stay on top of the sand I must keep moving; I must stay active; I cannot stop." The settling begins the minute I stop and it takes effort to get moving again.

How much like in business? We work so hard just getting everything to operate the way we want it. No variation, no surprises. The process is stabilized, people are trained, and results meet everyone's expectations. We finally get to go home at a decent hour. It is a well deserved stop after the run; a time just to catch our breath. But

the Ocean tells us that in stopping our feet get stuck.

So, I have to keep moving after the run. Walking is fine; even a slow walk. I just need to stay active to stay on top of the sand. This means I must keep reading and growing my thoughts. The people need to stay engaged and challenged. We put energy into moving forward.

Equipped with this new perspective I begin walking and the Ocean shares its second insight. There are treasures to be found on the shore if I just look. On this particular day the beach is uniquely different from all the other times. Piles of shells line the beach and a local person offers “maybe the recent storm brought them all up.” Piles. Two inches deep, twenty feet long, eight feet wide stretching all along the shore just below the high tide mark. It was not uncommon to see a person sitting in the middle of a pile just combing through all the shells. The Ocean encourages me to slow down and look. So, bending over I get closer and begin seeing perfectly flat, cookie-sized rocks with holes in them. Great for wind chime clackers! The selection begins. But then I see the oyster shells. Can I find a matched set? How about small conch shells? Here is a great shell worn through as a ring. Sea glass. Brown, green, clear. The Ocean reminds me that there is beauty in the diversity.

The twilight is quickly slipping into dusk as I get lost in all the shells looking now for matched sets of clam shells. The Ocean knows that its expanse fills my sight but for the moment it permits my focus to get lost in the beauty of the details. One more perfect little shell. Our minds can get so lost in the expanse of the business. What lies over the horizon? So many big issues to occupy my mind. It is easy to stay focused on the horizon and miss the magic right below my feet. The Ocean reminds me that the details are worthy of my attention, also. The details. You know; the Pareto of information focusing my mind. The “clean corners” in every task completed. 100% accuracy of the data in my files. People who fully understand the implications of their daily decisions. Smiling at the customer when they walk in. Saying “thank you.” Picking up that piece of trash. It’s that one measurement on one attribute helping me see an issue clearly. I can lose my way in the expanse but the details keep me honest and on course. Walking on the edge between the water and shore the Ocean asks me to consider the waves and their work. They are always in motion. Sometimes aggressive and many times just a calm lapping. It is along this edge that the shells get turned over and new ones exposed. From moment to moment the display of shells changes and the beach is anew. They are underwater and then in open air. But always being turned by the waves. These changes go unnoticed as I

walk because my focus is the beach.

Unless I slow down and closely observe, the possibilities of the details get lost. The imagery of a stained-glass window is created through the assembly of a myriad of small pieces of glass. And each piece of glass is only possible because of the technology and process that allows the glass to be made. It is the same with a mosaic. Only through the small tiles is the image complete, and each tile is the resultant of a complex process. My experience walking along the beach is defined by the collection of each individual shell and rock assembled and each shell and rock is the resultant of a unique process. The mosaic of my business is crafted through the assembled thinking of the people and the thinking moves and evolves with each passing wave of activity. Opinions get turned over, new thoughts exposed, other thoughts buried. The external environment washes against my business relentlessly. Sometimes aggressively and many times just a calm lapping. But it is always impacting the thinking of the people. The ocean encourages me to slow down once in awhile and shift my gaze from the big picture of the beach to the details of each shell being turned over.

As the shells are examined differences in age become apparent. There is beauty and uniqueness in age and wear. A prize among

beach-combers is sea glass. Broken pieces of bottles ground smooth through the working of sand and waves; green, brown and clear glass with a frosted finish. New glass gets thrown back for seasoning, but the aged and worn glass is sought out. The Ocean asks if I seek out aged and worn people. People with wisdom. People who know the consequences of decisions and appreciate the intricacies of life. The Ocean shows me shells that have been worn totally smooth. They have a beauty unto themselves and shapes not possible without the workings of the ocean. A conch shell is now an open spiral, or maybe just a ring. Much more fragile than when it was new. Appreciated for what it has become not its original functionality for which it can no longer serve. Am I open to seeing the maturity in people for what they have become, not for what they were? As I get older, will I accept the new purpose being crafted for me by time and age? The Ocean tells me that to do anything other than embrace the aging is futile. Sea glass with sharp edges gets thrown back no matter how old it is. Sad indeed to become old, out lasting younger purposes and now showing none of the beauty which could have come through the workings of life, self reflection and learning.

There are three roles played by shells along the shore. The high-water-line shells, the shells being turned along the edge of wave and beach

and those shells hiding just below the water out of waves' reach. The high-water-line shells rode the waves, had a great ride and now are reminders of what once was. "Use to be." Ever hear yourself say this? "Use to be a time when this was the number one business." "Use to be when I enjoyed coming to work." "Use to be." Memories of the past making today seem less interesting. These shells will stay out of the action until caught by a new wave, higher than what use to be. Once caught, the shell will become part of the edge once again, worked upon by the waves. Joining those shells riding the edge. Getting turned over every day, aged, worn and in the place of maximum opportunity. And then there are the hiding shells. Never had a great ride, not in the daily game, not growing much. Hidden and unseen. These shells are safely stuck. It would take effort to draw them out. Treasures there might be, but too deep to be seen. I could wade in up to my waist and reach down in an attempt to draw them out, but why would I when the edge is so active. Maybe the Ocean is telling me that it is OK to let them be hidden. It is not their time and it is not my responsibility to draw them out. Focus your attention on the shells which have made themselves visible.

Other people are walking the beach and finding treasures. "This experience is here for all to enjoy," the Ocean says. The process is

universal, the experience incredibly personal. My motivation for walking the beach is unique to me and my definition of treasures is relevant only to me; and this will stay hidden unless we choose to share. Once shared, though, a new thought may be triggered or I might be inspired by your purpose. I might even choose to keep an eye out for the treasures you seek and help you. Our results vary with effort and timing and if we help each other we can improve our chances of finding what each desires.

So why do all these people come to work and for what do they look? Their motivations are as varied as the number of people. To get everyone actively engaged in the walk it would be great if I knew what drove them and what they wanted. Could I use my position and power to help them? The Ocean tells me I can. All I have to do is talk with them and ask. The process of having the conversation is simple but only possible if I care.

On the two previous days the beach was my inspiration. Today I go out with camera to capture the scenes. EVERYTHING has changed. The ocean is flat, no wind, no action and NO shells. Virtually everything was gone along the entire beach. It was as if it had been swept clean. The Ocean does not appreciate my disappointment and reminds me that it does not respond to my desires. Nothing can be taken for granted. "But this is not what I expected!" "And

your point,” replies the Ocean. “I am not here to address your expectations. I am just being Ocean. You had two days to enjoy and now you have something different. Not better or worse, just different.” Sometimes my markets are hot and sometimes they are not. There are large forces within which I fit. This means I must be ready to take full advantage of the good times and realize that they are transient. Were there still treasures on the beach? Yes. But now they are fewer and require more work to find. Are my business processes capable of succeeding in a wide range of market conditions? The Ocean tells me they must be.

I run along the edge one last time and the Ocean reminds me the edge is where all the action is. But there is one last insight. The Edge occupies an intriguing space between Now and Future. A space just beyond the reach of Now, but always vulnerable with each next wave. In business, I need people who know how to navigate the Now. People who can attend to all the daily details. But the Now is quickly overtaken by another Now and in this quick conversion it is easy to miss what is ahead. I need people who can walk just above the Now. People capable of seeing what is next. People who can reconcile Future with Now and define activities for tomorrow so that we are not totally defined by the waves. The Ocean told us that change is inevitable. Edge walkers keep me ahead of the change. Edge walkers

appendix

help me see the next Now.

As I left the beach, Ocean encouraged me to find the Edge in my life and create an exciting future by living just beyond the grasp of Now.

note: pictures from the essay are posted at
<http://www.myvaluetree.com/StarPower/OceanInsights.pdf>



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Known by colleagues and friends as the “corporate plumber,” Alden B. Davis designs, orchestrates and leads large-scale institutional change. In industry since 1980, he started in production control, moved to frontline supervision, business unit manager, Operations management team and today he focuses on plant “turnarounds,” collaborative labor-management relationships, leadership development, and financially based change processes. United Technologies Corporation has been his most recent focus. Alden is a frequent conference speaker and workshop leader and has presented to numerous organizations including the Business Council to the UN, Goal QPC, Connecticut Quality Conference, Univ. of Puerto Rico, UCONN School of Business, MIT and Boston University. Alden is degreed in Business and Engineering from Arizona State University, holds two patents and lives in Avon, CT.

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