Exercise Your Freedom to Choose Success

By Paul J. Meyer

You may lead a rich, full life or a shallow, empty existence. But whatever you gain from life is largely a matter of choice – your choice. You are free to choose whatever you want to do or to be. Your greatest power is the power to choose your own destiny. That freedom of choice is your birthright and no one can steal it or deprive you of it. The reality of the power that comes from your freedom of choice becomes evident when you understand the unalterable principles under which this freedom works.

▲ *Choice is a talent that you must develop and use.*

Like any other talent, the power of choice can be developed. If you are reluctant to make choices and decisions because you fear failure, you may choose to play it safe and miss experiences that could lead to making better choices. Good decisions are based on prior decisions.

▲ *You must choose for yourself.*

Because no two people are exactly alike, no one can make a completely satisfactory choice for someone else. When you allow others to make your choices, you hand over to them your destiny and rob yourself of your birthright. You then bear the consequences of borrowed choices.

Certainly it is wise to collect all the facts before you choose or make a decision, but the opinions you solicit should be considered for what they are – the opinions of others. The choice is yours.

You are eminently more qualified than anyone else to choose what is best for you, what course you should take and what destiny will be yours. The world stands aside for you when you know where you are going, but it gives little notice or attention to one whose choices are dictated by others.

▲ *The choice determines the consequences.*

You may select any action you choose; but once you make a choice, the consequences follow the principle of cause and effect. A poor choice leads to undesirable results as surely as a wise choice produces a favorable consequence. Often a desirable result must be paid for in advance with work and effort while the resulting penalty of a poor choice is often deferred. Postponement of the date when we must "pay the piper" may lull us into the belief that we will somehow escape making the payment, but it doesn't happen that way. You cannot have the pleasures of one choice and the rewards of another; nor can you blame fate or luck when you must subsequently pay the price of a carelessly-made choice or decision. To control the outcome of your ventures, guard your decisions and choices with meticulous care.

Once you accept responsibility for exercising your freedom of choice, you can use it to make whatever changes of

habit or attitudes are necessary for developing personal leadership and self-motivation. Give your choices time to yield results; be patient. Today's habits are the result of choices made long ago. Tomorrow's habits will be the result of the choices you make today and the attitudes and habits you adopt.

Making Choices with Self-Confidence

Self-confidence comes from practical know-how; know-how comes from knowledge and experience; and experience necessarily involves confrontation and engagement. When you know from first-hand experience that you can do something, you are incomparably more confident than if you have merely observed how someone else did it. You can always acquire knowledge; libraries are full of it. But experience is something else. Real experience – the kind that turns theoretical knowledge into practical, personal know-how, and results in self-confidence – comes only when you are willing to become involved in situations that others avoid. Conflict and involvement give you the assurance that you are truly in control of the situation. Once you recognize the significance of practical experience – what it is and what it can do for you – you usually welcome even those stressful experiences that stretch you to the limit of your abilities.

When you know where you stand and where you are going, your confidence knows no bounds because you are motivated by results, not by methods. But if you do not know where you are going or what path to follow, you have confidence in nothing and are fearful of everything.

Self-confidence allows you to be realistic instead of dependent on vague hopes. When you are realistic, you do not wait for time and circumstances to come along and transform your dreams into reality. You take the lead and work progressively toward achievement; and most important, you have confidence in your own ability to lead, to grow, and to make the internal changes necessary to reach your objectives. You believe in the concept of continual change. You know that you are indeed a creature of change. Your response to new experiences is that they are natural and to be expected. They pose no threat to you.

Plan Each Day with Positive Expectancy

An attitude of positive expectancy is crucial to accomplishment and success. Here are some tips on how to plan each day with positive expectancy:

First, you must vividly imagine. You must develop the faculty of seeing, with your mind's eye, a concise and clear image of your expectations. The law of attraction is demonstrated by the tendency to draw to ourselves that which we set out for ourselves. It is difficult, if not impossible, to

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achieve beyond our self-imposed expectations. You must understand and exploit the natural tendency of becoming precisely what you imagine yourself to be. Your mental picture of expectancy is most likely to become a reality.

Second, you must ardently desire. The more vivid your expectancy, the stronger your desire becomes toward the achievement of your goals. An ardent desire burning within creates a success consciousness that develops habits of success. Those habits drive dividends commensurate with your investment; they consistently challenge you to climb to greater heights. You enthusiastically accept the challenge of accomplishing your dreams.

Third, you must sincerely believe. The accomplishment of your goals, however vividly imagined and ardently desired, also depends upon a sincere belief in your ability and worthiness to attain them. Speaking of the power of such belief, Benjamin Disraeli said, "Man is not the creature of circumstances. Circumstances are the creature of man." William James affirmed the same truth when he said, "Our belief at the beginning of a doubtful undertaking is the only thing that insures the successful outcome of our venture."

Fourth, you must enthusiastically act. Enthusiasm and action are effective partners in bringing imagination, desire, and belief into reality. You must plan the short-term actions required to accomplish your goals. You must consider all the obstacles you expect to face and accept them as opportunities for creativity. Actions empowered by enthusiasm breed a positive state of acceptance of yourself and others. In such an atmosphere of acceptance and selflessness you find that the more you give, the more you are capable of giving, and the more you give the more you receive in return. The unfailing cycle of giving and receiving reinforces your commitment to positive expectancy.

When you live with positive expectancy, it does not mean that life will be free from disappointment, frustration, and difficulties. Positive expectancy allows you to transform problems into procedures and adversity into opportunity. With the pervading thoughts and concise mental picture of positive expectancy, you seek personal growth and welcome change.

Challenge yourself today to plan and live each day with thoughts and dreams filled with positive expectancy.

Positive Expectancy

Positive expectancy fosters exciting, worthwhile goals that motivate and inspire. Psychological studies repeatedly demonstrate that expectations, positive and negative, tend to be fulfilled. Positive expectations capture the imagination and constructively influence reactions to outside events and circumstances. A winning frame of mind – the determination to make the most of every problem or project – produces remarkable feats on both individual and group levels. It gives individual team members and the team as a whole the desire and courage to become proactive, to ask questions, and to assume greater responsibility for achieving goals.

Hold positive expectations for your team. The attitude of positive expectancy is captured in this truth:

Whatever you vividly imagine, ardently desire, sincerely believe and enthusiastically act upon . . . must inevitably come to pass!

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Utilizing Resources to Grow

Every company needs to experience positive, sustainable growth, and it takes leaders at all organizational levels to achieve it. In the years ahead, leaders who can truly help their organizations produce profitable growth are the ones who will find themselves moving into positions of increasing responsibility and control. Success in this area can only be achieved, however, by adopting the skills and habits growth leaders possess.

Working through Others

Growth leaders demonstrate personal commitment to increasing the company's revenues. With that as the base, they get the rest of the organization as engaged about growth as they are. To do that, they show:

❖ *A belief in people.* Effective growth leaders believe people possess the potential for development and achievement. They believe people are basically intelligent and creative and that they want to do a good job. This message is communicated through words, attitudes and other nonverbal cues. They expect peak performance and top quality, but treat people with tact and respect.

❖ *Are realistic.* If an objective seems unobtainable, many of a leader's direct reports will disengage and simply move in the direction of least resistance. While the best leaders establish challenging goals, they are also obtainable. Establishing realistic goals consistent with the organization's stated purpose while considering possible constraints is a critical determinant for success.

❖ *Take risks on people.* Good leaders are willing to take some chances with people. They put them in stretch assignments, and then help them implement the ideas they come up with. This nurturing fosters creativity and inspires their people.

❖ *Celebrate success and failure.* It's one thing to know that a certain number of growth initiatives won't succeed. True organizational culture is determined by what happens when a project succeeds – and particularly when one fails. Celebrating failure seems counter-intuitive, but sends a message to everyone that risk-taking is to be encouraged, even when it doesn't work.

❖ *Inspire, communicate and delegate.* Leaders in growth organizations must work effectively in inspiring, communicating and delegating critical objectives at all levels. Especially critical is that the same sense of urgency expressed by a leader is consistently displayed by the senior management team.

❖ *Instill accountability.* Delivering growth goals while building a culture of continuous improvement demands a high level of accountability. Stakeholders must believe that they have been given the tools, training and direction necessary for success and that everyone is held to a high and consistent level of accountability in delivering objectives successfully.
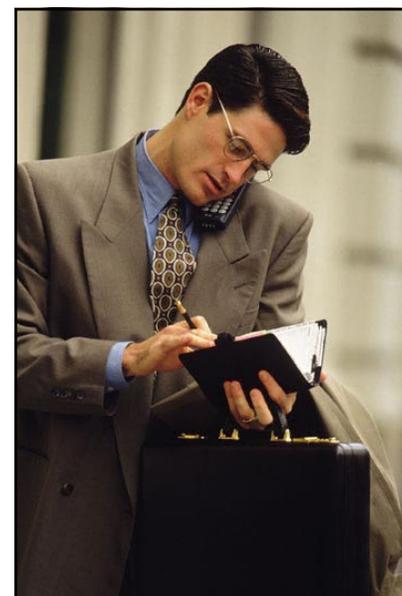
Sharing a Message/Instructions Effectively

Messages – E-mails, faxes, memos, letters – bombard people relentlessly from every direction so the ability to write clearly and persuasively is more valuable than ever before. Whether your purpose is to provide information, to change an attitude or behavior, or to persuade someone to perform a specific task, written communication is a substitute for your presence. But at other times, writing is the method of choice – even more effective than spoken words. When do you "put it in writing"?

◆ *To save time.* Writing reduces the need for time-consuming meetings. Writing saves time by telling team members ahead of time what will be done at a meeting and what each individual's responsibilities are for the meeting.

◆ *To remind.* Written plans of action serve as a reminder of what needs to be done, who is responsible, and when the action should be completed. A written plan facilitates accountability and creates a benchmark for measurement of performance.

◆ *To prevent misunderstanding.* Putting important information in writing prevents misunderstandings. People can reread directions, instructions, or important information when it's at their fingertips in writing.

Planning before sending an E-mail, dictating, or writing ensures the best possible reception for your message. Ask yourself these questions:

◆ What is my purpose for sending this message?
◆ What response or action do I want as a result of this message?
◆ What do I know about the recipient of this message that will help me present it in a form that's most likely to be positively received?

As you write or dictate, try to visualize the person or group with whom you wish to communicate. Assume an appropriate tone in the writing and choose language that communicates just as you would if you were in a face-to-face meeting.

Choose an appropriate form for each written message. In most business situations, E-mail is the logical choice. It is quick, readable, and easily copied. For some special purposes, a handwritten note may serve your purpose just as well.

Skill in writing E-mails, letters, and memos is invaluable since they're so widely used in business organizations. They may deal with simple announcements or with complex or highly confidential matters involving personnel, new product research, financial affairs, or company policy. Make letters, memos, and E-mails long enough to cover the message but short enough to be read and the message heeded. Make E-mails brief and to the point, and limit letters and memos to one page as often as possible. Cover only one subject; it's better to send two separate E-mails, letters, or memos to the same person than to mix two different subjects.

Giving Instructions

The more expert you become in giving instructions, the more everyone benefits. Team members understand exactly what you want and comply conscientiously and cheerfully. Here are suggestions:

◆ Preparation – Be sure you know exactly what you want to communicate. If you need to ask for information or conduct a discussion or brainstorming session before reaching a decision about what orders to give, separate that session from the actual giving of instructions or orders. Any apparent indecision or confusion on your part creates doubt and lack of confidence.

◆ Consideration – Check on the team member's time and workload before directing any change in procedure or priority. Be sure you have the right employee for the job. Along with instructions, assign a priority to the job.

◆ Presentation – Give instructions in a logical sequence and in clear, concise language geared to the team member's intelligence and education. Check to see that your instructions were understood, and explain again any part that seems unclear. If the order has several parts, or if it's to be a permanent procedure, follow oral instructions with a written message.

◆ Attitudes – "Ask" rather than "tell," but make it clear you expect compliance with your request. Be considerate of team member needs and desires, but never apologize for giving an order. You represent the organization, so make it clear that you support the organization and its goals. Give individuals an opportunity to ask questions or express opinions, but do not feel bound by those opinions.

◆ Follow-up – Check on compliance with your requests and instructions. Amend your instructions when that seems logical. Express appreciation when your requests and instructions are carried out well.

Improve Productivity with Postive Feedback

One of the most effective methods of developing productive attitudes in people is to give specific feedback about both effective and ineffective behavior. Even people with good attitudes do not automatically know what behaviors are appropriate. They must be taught by separate instances of feedback how to choose the most acceptable behaviors.

Providing feedback on performance is a continuous process. Feedback has a greater impact on productivity when these principles are observed:

◆ Give feedback as soon as possible. The purpose of feedback is to reinforce desirable behavior and to discourage undesirable behavior; its effect is most powerful when it follows behavior immediately. When praise for a specific task well done occurs promptly, it does more to encourage continued high level achievement than a good rating on a semi-annual performance review several months after the good work is first accomplished. Likewise, immediate correction of an error accompanied by positive suggestions for improvement is more likely to produce a desirable change in behavior than an unfavorable performance review at some time in the distant future.

◆ Give feedback on both positive and negative factors. Giving feedback only to correct errors causes people to become discouraged. They may believe that the only way to gain your attention is to do something wrong. Since most people crave recognition, a lack of positive feedback often encourages negative performance. Being criticized is better to some people than being ignored. Attention of any kind can be a form of reward. Watch for outstanding performance, improved performance, and continued quality performance in your team members, and at least mention that you have noticed it. Visibly reward positive performance when possible. Give extra compliments for work well done, for innovative ideas pursued, and for extra effort expended to meet a deadline. People who regularly receive praise and recognition for work well done are less likely to react defensively when you find it necessary to correct errors.

◆ Regard feedback as coaching for growth. Keep in mind that if a team member's behavior is inappropriate, avoiding confrontation usually prolongs and intensifies the negative situation. As long as the behavior continues, you, your organization, and your clients suffer from the person's less-than-effective performance. And by persisting in current habits, the person misses a valuable opportunity to reach higher levels of development and achievement. Ideally, you should give much more positive than negative feedback to your team members. But when you must address a negative situation or action, adopt an attitude that giving feedback is an opportunity to coach the other person to grow. It may seem unpleasant to address unacceptable behavior, but in the long run, the manager who cares enough to confront the issues directly creates a more efficient, pleasant work environment for everyone involved. When you coach for improved performance, you communicate that you care – about the team member, the organization, and the customer. As you confront inappropriate behavior, keep these tips in mind: • Address the situation as privately as possible. • Give the person the benefit of the doubt. • Avoid sarcasm and joking about serious issues. • Avoid words like always and never. • Confront only specific factors the person can change. • Give the person ideas for fixing the problem. • Affirm the individual as a valuable team member.
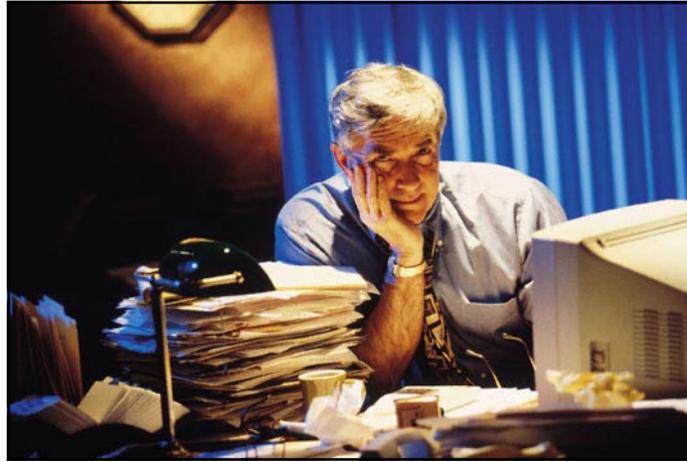
◆ Make feedback specific to behavior. Effective feedback focuses on a specific situation, action, or decision and the consequences. Praise and correction alike are most effective when they are specific. Non-specific over-generalizations, on the other hand, are confusing and counterproductive. In addressing negative situations, dealing with specifics helps separate the unacceptable behavior from the person. For example, if you tell an associate, "You're one of the sloppiest individuals in our organization," the person might wonder whether to buy new clothes, reorganize the work area, or be more meticulous with paperwork. Instead, state the unsatisfactory behavior in specific terms and give the person an opportunity to analyze the cause. You might say, "You have missed two of your deadlines in the last week, and I have noticed your desk looks disorganized. How do you see these two items being related?" Listen carefully. You may learn that the cause is beyond the person's control. But if you decide that the person's behavior is the cause, first explain why it is unacceptable. State what you expect in the way of changed behavior, and the benefits for making this change. Emphasizing the benefits increases your ability to gain the person's commitment to change.

Overcome Negativity with Positive Attitude

Because a positive attitude forms the foundation for a positive self-image, building a positive attitude is the most effective method for developing a positive self-image. Simply stated, a positive attitude is the opposite of a negative attitude; it is entering every activity without giving mental recognition to the possibility of defeat.

Almost all of us have at least a few negative attitudes from time to time. In addition, you will often notice these same debilitating habits of thought in others. Recognizing negative attitudes for what they are is the first step toward taking specific actions to replace them with more productive attitudes; once negative attitudes are acknowledged, replacing them with more positive, constructive attitudes is a matter of commitment and persistence. **Here are frequent negative attitudes encountered in the workplace:**

◆ *Blaming others.* Blaming others causes one to react with hostility toward other people or circumstances in order to avoid accepting personal responsibility. When you as a leader in your organization assume responsibility for your work, your decisions, and the results you produce, those in your work group will be more likely to follow your example. Take strong, appropriate action to develop a corporate culture in which people do not blame others but assume responsibility for the consequences of their decisions.

◆ *Giving up.* One of the most common reasons for failure is simply giving up before the goal is reached. To work on eliminating this negative attitude and habit, adopt a "Never Give Up" attitude on every goal you set, and demonstrate that determination as you lead your work group through the action steps required to reach that goal. View stumbling blocks as stepping stones. Learn all you can from obstacles; then go over them, under them, around them—or straight through them.

◆ *Excessive worry.* It has been said that worry is the interest, paid in full, on troubles that rarely happen. Worry fritters away valuable energy and immobilizes. In contrast, facing each situation as it arises – identifying a goal, developing a plan of action, and then taking constructive steps – is the most effective way to overcome the crippling habit of excessive worry.

◆ *Indecision.* "Analysis paralysis" keeps some intelligent leaders from moving forward to the organization's goals; they spend so much time gathering information, analyzing data, and reconsidering issues that they never get around to making a decision and moving on. The most effective individuals are those who gather information in a reasonable amount of time, assume a certain degree of calculated risk, and then make the best decision they can based on the available information.

◆ *Feeling guilty.* This attitude is caused by conditioning that implies you're not smart enough, not good enough, or not experienced enough to do anything right. People who accept such conditioning suffer from a low self-image and blame themselves for everything that goes wrong. Whenever one of your team members appears to assume false guilt, help that person to analyze the causes of the problems, what steps can be taken to rectify the situation, and how to avoid similar pitfalls in similar situations in the future. Help them to see the things "done right" rather than focusing entirely on the things "done wrong."

◆ *Unreasonable fear.* Helping people to understand that fear robs them from using more of their potential may help motivate them to change this negative attitude. Another important approach is to analyze each situation in which unreasonable fear is experienced and to formulate an appropriate plan of action to react more constructively in similar future situations.

◆ *Overdependence.* Overdependence is often expressed as a strong need for the approval of others – a desire so strong it causes people to act against their own best interest. Try to give the overdependent team member opportunities to experience success. Encourage them to enjoy the intrinsic satisfaction that comes from a job well done. As they use more of their potential and grow and develop, they will find that the positive attitude of being independent offers more gratification than the negative attitude of overdependence.

◆ *Fear of success.* Many people actually fear success. These people feel unworthy and undeserving of success. A great deal of courage is required to leap this hurdle to a positive self-image. Those who fear success need to be convinced that it is appropriate to like themselves, and that they are worthy of success.

Encourage Healthy and Dynamic Learning

Increasing the productivity of people in your work group automatically increases their ability to reach their personal goals along with the goals of the organization. At the same time, you reduce the time you spend personally to achieve those team goals. One of the most effective strategies for improving the productivity of people in your work group is involving them to an appropriate degree in the organizational goals program.

Increasing productivity means surpassing your previous best. It happens only when you adopt new goals that build upon past performances. Communicating this idea is the first key to unlocking the potential synergy of the team. To gain team commitment for continuous productivity improvement, you may have to nurture the "Let's beat our best" attitude with team members on a one-on-one basis. Earn behind-the-scenes agreement and commitment from key group members before presenting new, challenging goals to the entire team. Laying such a foundation through both formal and informal communication is critical in developing effective teams motivated by the benefits of team achievement.

Always remember that communication is a two-way process. As you communicate organizational goals, solicit ideas and input from team members. Emphasize the positive aspects and benefits of the organizational and departmental goals. Give people an opportunity to accept goals for increased productivity, to make a personal commitment to their attainment, and to develop action steps for their personal contribution to team progress. Then they have a clear understanding of how they can achieve their personal goals by contributing to the achievement of organizational goals.

Creating a Learning Environment

A work environment that encourages learning is essential for continuous productivity improvement. First, clearly send the message to your people that continuing mental and educational development – through both formal and informal plans – is vital. Then nurture the three primary freedoms that create a learning environment: freedom to express dissent, freedom to make mistakes, and freedom to invest time in learning.

An indispensable aspect of a learning environment is the freedom to engage in solution-oriented discussion and discovery. Make sure people are rewarded not for maintaining the status quo but for achieving constructive results. When people sense undue pressure to agree and to conform, they avoid pointing out even the most obvious problems for the sake of maintaining consensus and goodwill. The results are often embarrassing, and at worst, tragic. In contrast, a dynamic learning environment nurtures and supports people who express their ideas about existing policies and procedures that are not working well. Irate controversy, of course, is to be avoided; courtesy and positive attitudes should always be valued and maintained. Constructive, courteous dissent produces creativity, progress, and productivity.

Encourage those who possess the ability and the inclination to pursue answers to complex questions. One common yet misguided approach related to time efficiency is the autocratic demand for immediate answers and solutions. This approach rewards shallow thinking on the part of team members and exerts pressure to be agreeable at all costs. Give people adequate time and support to develop insightful solutions.

Valuable experience involves making mistakes and learning from them. If you never make a mistake, it is because you have never stretched to reach a new challenge. Mistakes teach people what does not work. Then they are free to move in a new direction to reach desirable goals. Establish "safety nets," policies that protect people when they make honest mistakes in pursuit of corporate goals. In so doing, you encourage them to shed their protective, perfectionistic guards and to experience enthusiasm for innovation and learning.

Give your team members the freedom to schedule the necessary time for job-related educational development. Appropriate time allocation is a key factor in creating a learning environment. Although continuing education and training take time away from immediate results, the investment of time now provides huge dividends later. Goal setting, leadership, and management development are important for all team members' continued professional development.

A healthy, dynamic learning environment is characterized by freedom to express dissent, to make mistakes, and to invest time in learning. These elements of a learning environment provide the necessary backdrop for effective communication, leading to continuous improvement and increased productivity.

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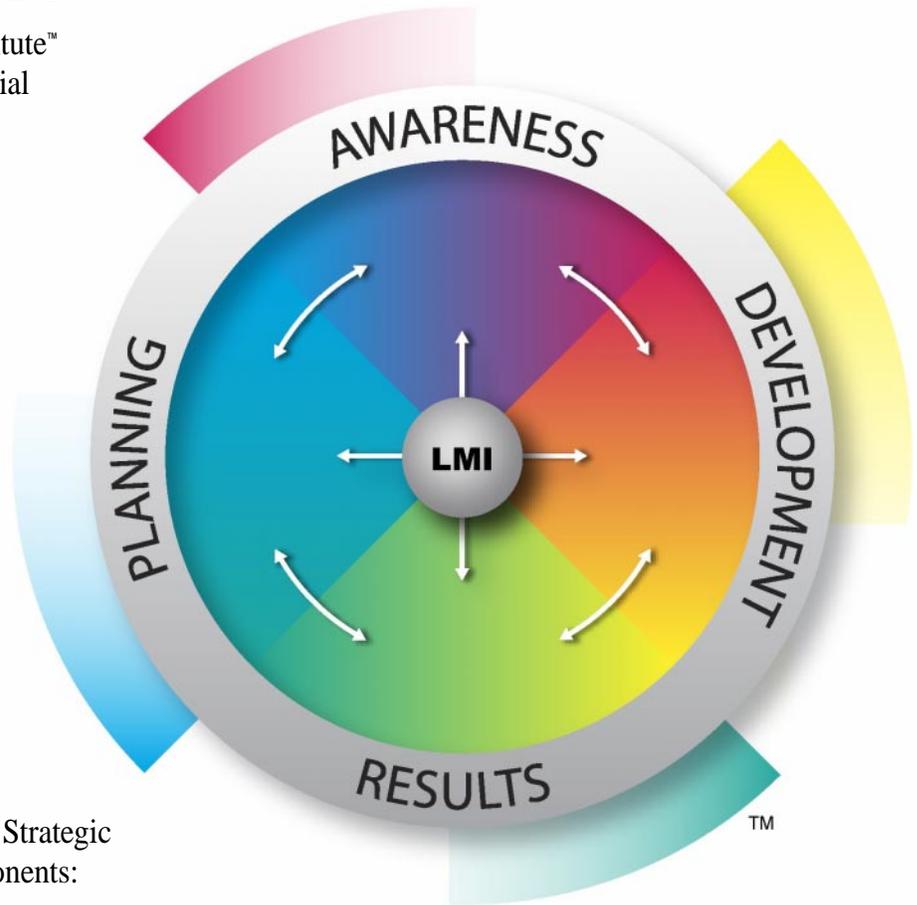
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