

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

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What matters to you the most?

“A framework to explore the consciousness that is paving and shaping your path.”

Steven Ringelstein

What matters to you the most?

This is a question I have asked hundreds of leaders of Fortune 500 companies, mid-size private firms and small businesses in the past decade. The most typical answers are “my family,” “my kids,” or “my company’s success.”

Over time I refined the scope and asked, “What matters the most to you *about you*, that does not involve anyone else?” Some would tilt their head with a puzzled look and after a pause might say, “My health?” or “My success?” with an unsure tone, questioning whether they really knew the answer. Some told me that no one had ever asked them this question before.

When I asked: “So you are watching everyone’s back, but who is watching yours?” some referred to a spouse with some doubt; some referred to a peer or a VP who is their right hand support and some stayed reflective in silence or simply said, with sadness, “No one.”

How do you relate to what matters to you the most?

You might find that knowing what matters the most to you might not be as easy to answer as it first seems. If you Google “finding your life purpose” you will get 24,400,000 results. This clearly indicates the huge wave of people attempting to answer a similar question. This thought piece **is not** about finding your life purpose. It is not about identifying the one thing that matters the most by thinking about it or trying to figure it out. It is simply a doorway question to help gain access to your own consciousnesses. It can reveal to you the invisible path you have been on that is contrary to the path you think you have been on. This revelation can illuminate the path ahead of you. It can empower you to consciously choose the next steps on your path.

If you are creating a process for a team in your company, would you want to ensure that this process focuses on the things that matter the most? If you are developing a corporate strategy, wouldn’t you want to focus on a strategy that matters the most? If you have friends or family members, wouldn’t you want to make sure that you focus on the people that matter to you the most? You want to be able to look back at your life and say, “The secret to my happiness and success was my consciousness to know and to choose what mattered to me the most every single day.”

In this thought piece I want to provide you with a framework that will allow you explore the consciousness that is behind all that you and your organization do, all that you are, and all that you are to become. You will be able to use this framework to assess your own decisions and choices along with

those of your high performing team if you are a part of one. These tools might also assist you in the creation or transformation of high performance teams.

Sounds like an ambitious goal doesn't it? Here is the good news: there is no goal to achieve. This will provide you with the possibility of getting insights into what at first appears invisible to the mind, but is evident in the choices and decisions that you make every day.

What is your consciousness?

I've mentioned the word consciousness a few times in this document so far so I want to clarify its meaning before we move on. According to [Wikipedia](#):

Consciousness is a term that has been used to refer to a variety of aspects of the relationship between the mind and the world with which it interacts. It has been defined, at one time or another, as: subjective experience; awareness; the ability to experience feelings; wakefulness; having a sense of selfhood; or as the executive control system of the mind. Despite the difficulty of definition, many philosophers believe that there is a basic underlying intuition about consciousness that is shared by nearly all people.

For the purpose of this thought piece we use the term *consciousness* to refer to the invisible, underlying awareness that demonstrates itself through all of your decisions and choices. It can reveal the hidden motivation behind all that you do and do not.

In order for you to enjoy the methodologies I'm about to propose in exploring the consciousness behind your actions, you will have to temporarily subscribe to the following assumptions. You are likely to disagree with some of them and that is perfectly fine. I am asking you to play with them on a temporary basis only, with the freedom to dismiss them later.

Assumptions:

1. You don't really know what matters to you the most.
2. You care to know what matters to you.
3. What matters to you is not what you think.
4. What matters to you is not what you already know.
5. What matters to you is not as clear and visible as you might think.
6. Actions speak louder than words; therefore what you do matters more than what you think or say.
7. You are 100% responsible for creating your own reality, where you are and what you do.
8. You are also 100% responsible for everyone else around you. Their actions are in harmony with the role and script you gave them to perform in your movie.
9. You favor the adventure of the journey, to explore regardless of the outcomes.
10. You are not committed to do anything with what you discover.

What's in your "conscious investment" portfolio?

Consider that we invest our energy in thoughts, feelings, time, money and relationships. Together these investment portfolios illuminate what you think is important and show in what you are truly invested. "Conscious investing" gives you the freedom to invest 100% of your energy in what matters to you the most.

Imagine mapping your investments on a pie chart for each of the following areas:

1. What do you mostly think about?
2. What are your largest emotional investments?
3. What do you do with all the time you have?
4. Where are you investing your money?
5. What are the relationships you are mostly invested in?

What do you think about most often?

Imagine that you attended a Vipassana silent meditation retreat for 10 days. You had never done anything like this before in your life. You are used to be active and on the go. You have committed to sitting in silence for 10 days, 14 hours a day with your eyes closed. All you had were your thoughts and there were millions of them that were impossible to keep track of.

Interesting phenomena occurred in the first couple of days. You noticed that you were having the same thoughts over and over again and there were not as many thoughts as you originally imagined. After few more days, thoughts seemed to group into categories. You noticed that you were primarily thinking about escaping the retreat, about the gourmet food you wanted to have, and about the guests in the other section of the meditation temple who you were not allowed to interact with.

You concluded that at the core of your thinking you are all about being rebellious and you are passionate for food and sex. So you said to yourself, "That's it? Is that how shallow you are?" It was only after you left the retreat that you realized that these three thought categories reflected the values of what mattered to you the most. They were:

1. Your need to rebel or run away was about the value of FREEDOM and your need to experience it.
2. Your passion for food was about your PASSION AND LOVE FOR LIFE in all that you do.
3. Your obsession with the other sex was about CONNECTION AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHPS with all people and life.

Near the end of the 10 days the pain in your body from sitting for so long consumed your mind to the point where no thoughts existed any more. It is only then that the feeling of bliss emerged: no pain, just pure awareness of love with intense sensations flowing through your body. Some said that you had a spiritual experience; for you it simply felt like being present and aware.

Since you were committed to the journey of exploring what matters to you the most, a couple of years later, you decided to embark on another life experiment. You took off for five months to sit on the

beach along the coast of Oregon and do absolutely nothing. It was the most challenging effort you have ever undertaken. How could you do nothing? Not talking to people, no TV, no reading and no socializing. You ate, slept and sat on the beach for hours, just being. You wanted to experience freedom. You thought freedom was about having all the money you need and the time to enjoy your life.

Here you were sitting on the beach with enough money to be able to do it and all the time in the world. Unfortunately you did not experience freedom. In fact you felt imprisoned and miserable. Your mind and its millions of thoughts were torturing you one minute at time. Your thoughts, your beliefs, your emotions were the walls of your prison. You were enslaved to all that you were taught, all that you believed, all that you thought, including what you thought about your thinking.

Your mind was trying to talk yourself out of doing nothing and once again escape. One morning you tried to escape doing nothing and decided to go for a run on the beach. After 10 steps you twisted your ankle and could not run anymore. You immediately surrendered back to the “prison” of doing nothing.

What did you learn after five months of doing nothing?

Real freedom is a freedom for your own mind. You wanted freedom from all that you know, or think that you know, freedom from all of your life’s conditioning to focus on what matters to you the most. So now what mattered to you the most? This time what emerged was:

1. Freedom
2. Love and passion
3. Connection

You found it interesting that years later you were still connected to the same three things that seemed to matter the most to you years back. Is it a coincidence?

After serving years as the CEO of a manufacturing company, leadership was the expression and experience of these three values in all that you did. In your 360 report to evaluate your leadership performance, it was written that your success was attributed to your ability to inspire others to experience freedom in all that they do, to love what they do and to connect to others in a meaningful way. They said that you were leading these principles by example.

So today, what do you think about all day long? How do you show up as a leader? How can you explore your thinking mind? I mentioned two methods to use, meditation and doing nothing which I still practice. Meditation I practice daily; doing nothing I practice once a week for half a day to a day. Other methods could include journaling your thoughts of the day, creating collages of the ideas you think about, and noticing or documenting what you talk about to others or what others talk with you about.

If you take time to listen to the conversations that are most popular or common in your organization, you will discover what your company is obsessing or thinking about. Sometimes you will have to listen to what is not being said but everyone is thinking it. What is your company invested in? What are the common questions your organization is asking these days? Is what matters to your organization also what matters to you?

What are your predominant emotional investments?

We know “other people” who are clearly invested in negative emotions such as shame, guilt, apathy, grief and fear. And more “other people” we know are invested in desire, anger or pride. I used “other people” as a polite invitation to take a truthful look at yourself and your own emotional investments.

Fewer “other people” are investing their emotions in courage, willingness, acceptance and exploring the reasons for why they do what they do. Even fewer individuals invest in love, unconditional love and joy, peace and self-realization. If you are reading this thought piece now you might be investing your time in reason, in the need to understand your thinking or you might be on the road to self-realization. You can probably identify with all of these emotional investments. You can probably recognize that at different times you have invested strongly in one emotion or another. When going through turbulent times you might be investing in a rollercoaster of all the emotions at once.

Imagine that years back you were the CEO of a privately held aerospace company. After five years of huge success you learned that your CFO, partner and best friend over the course of a year had secretly moved your company funds to offshore accounts and falsified financial statements to hide the activities. You learned that you lost all of the company assets overnight. You also lost all of your personal assets that were managed by your best friend, the CFO. For the next six months you were clearly invested in anger, revenge and you were even planning the perfect murder. You let go of the murder idea and began focusing on rebuilding the business.

You started a new company to service your loyal customers; you hired a new team and moved to a new location. In a little over one year, your staff began to leave, work was not getting done and the company was failing. You had no idea why. You blamed the aerospace industry, your competition, the big guys, Washington and everyone else except yourself. You were stressed, frustrated, annoyed and resigned. You failed to see that you were the one who created a company that was angry, filled with distrust, silos, non-cooperation and overwhelming fear of the future. Your emotional investments became the foundation for a dysfunctional company.

Look at your life, your job, your leadership role today. Where is the core of your emotional investment? How do you feel on a typical day? Are you invested in stress? Overwhelm? Frustration? Do these investments illuminate the path you are on? What is the organization you work for mostly invested in? What can you tell about the path that your organization is on? We all know what it “feels like” to be in this organization most of the time. You now know what matters the most to your organization. Is that what matters to you the most?

What do you do with the time you have?

You might be wondering, who’s got time? It is true that in our culture no one has time and the pile of things to do only grows with years. The overwhelming time constraints on leaders are getting more challenging, and almost impossible to control. In our consulting firm we have been teaching the Time Management Investment Module for nearly a decade.

The purpose of this module is to help leaders regain control over their time. In the initial assessment we ask leaders to put a dollar value on every hour of their time from the moment they wake up to when

they go to bed. We take their actual paid hourly rate and apply it to all of the activities that in their opinion are worth their full pay. All other activities get assigned with a lower dollar value as given by the leader.

When we averaged all C-level leaders across a multitude of industries and positions, we learned that they invest 60-100 hours per week spent at work. We also learned that C-Level leaders focus their time and energy only one day a week (or 8 hours) on what they believe they are paid to do.

While these numbers are not scientific in the nature of how they were obtained, they clearly direct us to ask the question, “Do we really know what matters the most?” Maybe we know what matters but are unable to focus on it. It could be that what we think “matters” is just that – thinking. However what we *do* is a true representation to what really matters to us. Alternatively we might be doing what matters to others against what matters to us.

I’ve had leaders who could only account for 10% of their time actually being worth their pay tell me: “You cannot realistically expect leaders to be any more than 45% anyway and in our company 10% is actually good.”

Do you resonate with these numbers in your role? Imagine you were frustrated enough to deal with the lack of time reality and started to do what you do in a whole different way. You began identifying what matters to you the most and planned your day, your week, your month differently and accordingly. You designed and allocated the time needed to what matters the most and everything else went away. Can you imagine that?

If you structured your calendar according to what matters to you the most, it might be impossible to implement at the organization you are at. After all you do not work in a vacuum, you have many meetings to attend in which your presence is mandatory. How can you walk away from all of that?

You are absolutely right; you are part of a system and are not working in a vacuum. Look at how most of the people in your company invest their time. Most likely just like you, they sit in more meetings than they want to, discuss more things than they care for with people they couldn’t care less for and invest their time in activities versus getting results that frustrate them. If this sounds familiar to your organization you might want to start asking around what matters the most to us as an organization.

When you look at your own time investments you will get an illumination of your truth. This illumination of the gap between what you actually do and what you want to do is not meant for you to pass any judgment on yourself but simply to become aware of the path you are on today. You will have therefore created the opportunity to walk a different path tomorrow.

Where are you investing your money?

Investments are where we put our money to make more money. We rarely think about all of our spending as investments. We rarely think about connecting our investments to what matters to us the most or to our true passions in life. I call that conscious investing. Imagine investing 100% of your money in what matters to you the most.

If you have served as a CFO for an organization, or the CFO in your own life, or if you are simply responsible for the budget of a project, you have probably looked at profit and loss and balance sheet reports before. It was the end of 2002 when I was awakened to really see my own company and personal financial reports in a different light. In the profit and loss report the income categories indicated who was paying me money for my services and more importantly who I was impacting in the world with my services. The expense categories showed me how I was spending my money and who I was investing my money in to help grow their businesses. This new lens illuminated a great misalignment between what and who was important to me the most and to my investments.

My personal largest investments today are assigned to traveling the world, fine dining and engaging in amazing experiences that allow me to experience and express my passions. They are aligned with what matters to me the most.

What if your financial investments would perform better if they were aligned with what matters to you the most? What if they were aligned with the people that matter to you the most? In your company it could mean questioning the customers you work for and reassessing the vendors you chose to support you. Internally in your organization it could mean re-establishing your own internal network of teams and individuals that you will collaborate with outside the formal organizational chart.

Does your company say it is investing in innovation but has no budget for it? What about the need to collaborate more without the budget for the new IT tools that will allow that? Did you ever hear the leadership in your organization say, "Our people matter to us the most but we have limited investment in leadership development and training?"

Look at your organizational budgets and you will know what matters to your company the most.

What relationships are you mostly invested in?

I am not a relationship expert. Relationships are the most complex realm of business and the most challenging in life. That said, I can only share my opinion.

I divide all relationships into three categories:

1. **Indifferent** – Not positive, not negative. Interacting with people you feel indifferent about. They do not add anything or take away anything from you. No meaningful energetic exchange occurs. You remain indifferent with no value or takeaways.
2. **Negative** – Interacting with these individuals typically feels draining: you feel tired, exhausted, frustrated, feeling you want to get away from them. You feel repelled by them.
3. **Positive** – Interacting with positive individuals typically makes you feel more energized, more excited, bigger, better and more gifted than you were before the interaction. They feel magnetic to you.

The key to this simplified approach is to look for the TYPICAL as a common theme in the relationship and not focus on the special cases that might occur from time to time.

Over 20 years ago I was not so happily married. I developed allergies to everything that was around our house. The cats, the orange tree, the olive tree, the grass. In a medical examination at Mayo Clinic I was diagnosed with asthma, and strong allergies to more than a dozen different plants. My condition continued to worsen over the next five years.

One day a friend asked me: “Who are you allergic to?” Making a joke, my answer was my wife! After I said that it occurred to me that I was fully invested in a toxic relationship and my body was reacting to it. I want to clarify that the relationship was toxic to me not my ex wife. She was an amazing lady but our interactions were not in alignment. Our relationship came to an end that year. To my surprise, within 30 days of her leave, all my allergies and symptoms disappeared.

I became very aware how I am impacted by the negative and positive relationships in my life. I learned that investing in negative relationships thinking they will get better is like buying a bad stock that is losing money with hope that it will go up one day. But then the company goes bankrupt.

As a result of this new awareness, I first eliminated the INDIFFERENT relationships. What’s the point of having meaningless relationships to begin with? I then eliminated the NEGATIVE relationships and gained lots of more time and energy to invest in the relationships that matter to me the most. In business it meant letting go of the clients that sucked my energy. It also meant letting go of some of our vendors that were terribly frustrating. It also meant letting go of some of my executive team members that were not contributing to my well being. When eliminating these relationships was not possible, transforming these relationships to positive ones became the strategy.

In working with C-Level executive teams over the years, we discovered another interesting phenomenon. When we traced the root cause of a very large visible problem, of a program we found that almost always it came down to a negative relationship among the individuals close to it. Rather than attempting to fix the problem with technology, processes, or more systems, it came down to asking the leaders: “Who are you allergic to?” We then were able to address and transform one negative relationship into a positive one. Following that approach, new processes and systems emerged to reflect that shift.

What relationships at work or home matter to you the most? What is your relationship portfolio of investments look like today? Are you and your organization investing in the relationships that matters the most?

Conclusion

“Only few things matter, but they usually matter a lot”

I started by exploring the question “What matters to you the most?” as a doorway to gain access to the consciousness behind all that you and your organization do, all that you are, and all that you will become. I pointed out that the answers are not what matter as much as the journey of exploration.

I defined consciousness as the invisible, underlying awareness that demonstrates itself through all of your decisions and choices. I outlined 10 assumptions that define your life reality as 100% choice made by you.

I gave five different methods of illuminating the consciousness behind what you do:

1. What do you think about most often?
2. What are your predominate emotional investments?
3. What do you do with all the time you have?
4. Where are you investing your money?
5. What are the relationships you are mostly invested in?

In real life the five different investments areas are not separated from each other. For example, if you are invested in a negative relationship you will tend to think more about it, feel more negative emotions, and spend more time dealing with it and sometimes more money paying other professionals to help you out.

It has been my experience working with top leaders that when they get insight to the gap between their actual investment portfolio and what matters to them the most, only 5% have the courage to do something about it. The rest continue to live with the gap.

Embarking on the journey of your own consciousness and what matters to you the most through your “conscious investment” portfolio can lead to greater understanding of why you do what you do and illuminate the path you are on. You have the freedom to choose your investments. That alone is a worthwhile inquiry.

I invite you to join me in this exploration of the mind and consciousness – behind all that you are – to engage in a dialog that will shed your light on the question, “What matters to *you* the most?”

About Steven Ringelstein:

As CEO of The Business Gym, a leadership development consulting firm, Steven brings over 30 years of experience in leadership of high performance teams. He is considered an expert in strategy development, creating high performance teams and shifting organizational culture.

The Business Gym clients include highly technical and sophisticated management teams in the healthcare, aerospace, microchip, financial services and consumer products industries.

Prior to The Business Gym Steven was a CEO at several high-tech manufacturing companies. Steven brings a wealth of know-how to manage an organization with limited resources and create remarkable results. His clients say that he is a unique consultant because he has the practical experience of walking in their shoes.

Although some people have joked that Steven is from Mars, he is first generation born in Israel. Following his military service in the Israeli Air Force he held diplomatic positions with Department of Defense in Washington D.C and New York City.

Steven holds an MBA and MIM from Thunderbird, the Garvin School of International Management. He has a BBA in International Marketing & Management from The City of New York University. He holds numerous other professional degrees and training.

