**Focus on the Plan, Not the Product**

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I remember when I was 24 years old. I was one of those weird people who wasn’t recruited into this business; this was where I always saw myself growing a business and a career. Like many of us in the business, I started my career with a healthy balance of excitement and fear. As you can imagine, some days were scarier than others.

I remember being so excited at this stage of life. I had just married my wife, we had just purchased a new home, and I was embarking on my chosen career path. Everything happening in our life was so energizing and symbolic of creating a new life together. This is when my wife came to me with some really life-changing news. And, no, it wasn’t that she was pregnant with triplets! She had a good-paying job, but had decided that she wanted to go back to school to attend Teachers College. And let me be clear—we could not afford for her to leave her job and go back to school. So I found myself at this interesting crossroads. I really wanted to support her in her professional life because she had always supported me. I wanted to make sure that I was just as supportive of her in achieving her goals. But I also really wanted to avoid defaulting on my mortgage. I was scared as heck that we would be relying solely on my income as a new financial advisor with no experience—100 percent commission-based. I was still in training at this point.

It didn’t take me long after training to realize that this business wasn’t going to be like I pictured it in my head. I thought that I would get licensed, get some business cards printed, and sit back and wait for the phone to ring. This wasn’t the case. What this did to my behavior was bittersweet. I had no choice but to work very hard, which is something that I was OK with. There is no better cure for call reluctance than the threat of not being able to make your mortgage payments! But I was also in a constant state of fear that I wasn’t going to make it. The survival rate in our business is less than 10 percent, so feeling as though I wasn’t going to make it was pretty much the logical conclusion. What had been a combination of excitement and fear during training tilted to the feeling of a lot more fear and a lot less excitement.

Looking back, I feel that because of this pressure, I wasn’t doing a great job for my clients. For example, sometimes I would go to see clients who said, “We need $250,000 of term insurance.” I would say, “Great! Sign here and here,” and then I would get out of there as quickly as possible before they had a chance to change their minds.

I was inexperienced, I was scared, and I needed money. I soon realized that I had been doing my clients a disservice. These were people who placed their trust in me (whether I realized it or not), and I wasn’t giving them the true service they deserved. I was focused on selling and making enough money to survive. It didn’t take me long to learn a much better way of really and truly helping my clients. And since learning and honing this idea for the last 14 years, I have never had to make another sale in my life. I cannot tell you how amazing it feels to be able to have success in this business and never have to sell or ask for a referral. I am very excited to share this with you. My promise to you is that you will leave here with tools and processes that can be implemented as soon as you get home to change the way you run your business.

## A Means to an End

I live in Canada. In Canada, it snows a lot. And under the layers of wet snow, there are layers of slippery ice too. The result? Lots and lots and lots of car accidents. One thing that helps in Canada is changing the tires on our cars when the seasons change. We have one set of tires on our vehicles for the summer months and a different set for the dangerous winter months. Every year around November, I book an appointment with my mechanic to have my summer tires removed and my winter tires installed. When I go, I always have two goals in mind. The first goal is to have my winter tires installed properly and safely so that I can make sure I’m always keeping myself and my family safe on the roads. And the second is to avoid falling in love with any of the new vehicles I see on the showroom floor.

I want to take a minute to show you some images. These are a small sample of the different types of wrenches my mechanic could use to safely install my winter tires. [visual]

So I have a question. Who cares which wrenches their mechanics use when they’re fixing your car? Nobody? Well, you are in good company, because I couldn’t possibly care less either. As long as my winter tires are installed properly and safely, do I care which wrench or any other tools he uses, let alone the brand of tool used? Will a lug wrench from ABC Company accomplish the same thing as a lug wrench from XYZ Company? Of course! So why in the heck would I care which one he uses?

This is where I have to share some bad news for all of us. Now, this bad news may hurt. Are you sure you’re ready for it? OK, brace yourself—here it comes.

Clients feel the exact same way about the products we offer in the financial services industry. Most often, the products we are selling are a promise on a piece of paper that our clients hope they never have to collect on.

This is where I learned the most important lesson in my career: The products offered in our industry are a means to an end. And people only care about the end. When I say clients only care about the end, I mean *only*, not mostly—*only*!

So our job is not to sell products, but rather to help clients determine the problems that our products are going to solve. Just like my problem wasn’t which wrench was best, but rather that winter was coming and I didn’t have safe tires on my car, our clients aren’t concerned with which investment products are best but rather how to achieve the future they want.

This means that great financial advisors should always start with the end. They have a clear understanding of their clients’ vision. When you stop working with products and start working with vision, you will never have to sell or ask for a referral again.

## Vision

I used to think that I had a really great understanding of my clients’ goals and dreams. They would tell me that they would like to retire at a particular age and with a particular dollar amount needed for income, I would enter the information in my financial planning software, and, poof, I’m the dream weaver. I was so confused as to why clients weren’t engaged in their financial plans. I felt frustrated that I was putting all of this time and effort into getting a plan together for them, and they seemed indifferent and couldn’t remember what I had presented at our last meeting. I clearly remember thinking, *why do I care more about their retirement than they do?*

What I now know is that the retirement plan has almost nothing to do with getting them excited and engaged in terms of retirement. I know this because a very important mentor came into my life at just the right time. The second I heard him speak, I knew that he had the missing link. His name is Steve Moore, and he is a retired coach in the National Football League turned consultant. He is also the author of one of the best books for advisors ever written, *Ineffective Habits of Financial Advisors (and the Disciplines to Break Them)*.

I remember having a conversation with Steve—whom I now just call Coach—and he asked me what my biggest frustrations with the business were. The very first thing I mentioned was that I felt clients weren’t engaged in their financial plans. He told me the reason I was experiencing this frustration was that, although I was able to calculate the figures for my clients’ retirement plans, I had no idea what their vision was. I could crunch all the numbers in the world for my clients, but if I didn’t understand their vision, there wasn’t a chance that they would be engaged.

Quite often, when I was doing my fact find for retirement plans, clients might say something like, “We would like to travel,” and I would write down “travel” on my yellow notepad and move on to the next thing. I remember getting back to the office and looking at the word *travel* on my notepad and feeling a little disappointed in myself as I didn’t know what to do with it aside from allocating some of the budget for it to the retirement plan. This is meaningless to the clients.

Let’s take a look at how I go deeper with them if they tell me something super vague like they want to travel. What Coach taught me is that clients really need to know that you understand them. The only way to do that is to listen as much as possible while asking the right questions to extract useful information.

To be an exceptional financial advisor, we need to focus on asking terrific questions and probing further. This was something that was really hard for me, as I am not the most talkative person. I am much more comfortable at home with a book than I am at a party. But once I started implementing this, my relationships with my clients got deeper and deeper.

And something amazing happens when you go deeper with clients. They become more comfortable with you, you become more comfortable with them, and they start sharing more personal information that helps you truly understand their vision and, as a result, truly meet their needs.

I’ll give you an example of what might happen now if a client says to me that he or she wants to travel:

**Advisor:** Travel. That’s sounds fun! Tell me about some destinations on your bucket list.

**Client:** Well, we want to make sure we get to the Eastern Caribbean.

**Advisor:** Eastern Caribbean? That’s interesting. Any island specifically?

**Client:** St. Lucia.

**Advisor:** Sounds nice. Why St. Lucia?

**Client:** Well, many years ago, when we were engaged, my wife and I wanted a destination wedding. St. Lucia was our first choice, but at the time, we couldn’t afford it, so we settled on another location. We always promised ourselves we would get there some day.

**Advisor:** What a neat story. Thanks for sharing that with me. How about we incorporate a first-class trip to St. Lucia in your plan so that you two can keep that promise to each other?

**Client:** That would be awesome! My only concern is that I wouldn’t want to spend the money on this trip until the business is paid off in three years. Can we do this without impacting our retirement plan?

**Advisor:** Let me work on that for you. So let’s assume we incorporate a three-year plan to make this trip a reality without impacting your retirement plan. Picture this: You’re sitting on the beach with you wife, an ice-cold cocktail in hand, staring out into the beautiful blue ocean while reminiscing about your plans 20 years ago to be here in St. Lucia. How does it feel?

**Client:** It feels amazing, like we’ve made good on a promise to each other and proud of what we have accomplished in building a life together.

Now, this conversation may sound a little bit cheesy, and, admittedly, maybe some of it is, but I can promise you that it’s real. These are the types of conversations that you can have with your clients. And when you get this deep, they feel connected with you. They’ll be thinking about how thankful they are that you put them on that beach.

So, if we can make this plan work for our clients, a plan they have vividly imagined, and you walked them through how it would feel, how engaged do you think they are versus if you had simply let them answer “travel” and then moved on?

This works the same way for something that might not be as fun as planning for travel or retirement. It works the exact same way for life insurance, retirement, debt reduction, education funding, and so on. When you go deeper, you truly understand them, and, as Coach always said, when you truly understand someone, you can truly help them.

## Extracting the Vision

One of my biggest challenges is that I love food. Unfortunately for me, we aren’t talking about salad here. When I was in university, in one single meal I’d often eat an entire day’s worth of food. That’s not hard to do on a diet of nachos, chicken wings, and beer! When I was younger, it was never a problem. I just had to think about going to the gym, and I would lose five pounds. I remember one day visiting with my cousin at my grandparents’ home in Florida and him telling me after a big meal, “Just wait until you turn 25—those meals will catch up with you and that extra weight won’t disappear as easily as it does now.” But like any young adult, I believed that I would be the exception.

As it turns out, my cousin was right, and toward the end of my university years, the extra pounds seemed quite content to hang around and not disappear like they had in the years before. I started to feel sluggish and tired, and I knew I had to do something about it. I remember reading several diet books, and although they all had different philosophies, I agreed with all of them. The problem was that I wasn’t able to stick to any of the plans, which seemed so easy when reading about them, but in practice they were terribly time-consuming and required a lot of discipline that I clearly didn’t have. Let’s face it, you don’t have to be a genius to know that eating lean protein and lots of vegetables, avoiding processed foods, and exercising for 30 minutes a day is going to lead to weight loss. The problem is, this is easier said than done. There are habits to break, temptations around every corner, and behaviors that need to change. What I learned from this experience, and many like it, is that it is really easy to share a philosophy, but often difficult to put it into practice. That’s why I now want to share with you the step-by-step process of how I accomplished this—how I extract my clients’ visions.

It was Theodore Roosevelt who famously stated, “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.” I have heard this statement just about as many times as I have heard different people take credit for it. Usually when it’s spoken, I personally feel that people might get it, but it doesn’t lead to the right action. Yes, it is indeed very true; however, how does that translate into efficient implementation? Do we listen to the client with puppy dog eyes? Do we bombard clients with “I understand” over and over? Do we tell them straight up, “Do you know how much I care about you?” Sincere or not, you might come across as a crazy person with that last one.

What Coach taught me was that before people can feel that you care about them, they need to feel that you know and understand them. It’s pretty hard to argue with that! So therein lies this question: How do we get to know someone on a deeper level when we’ve only ever had a professional relationship?

In turns out that accomplishing this is not an exercise in finding good answers, but rather in asking good questions. I want to share with you one question that has done more to deepen relationships than any other, but it seemed so simple that, at first, I couldn’t believe the results. Even more, I wasn’t prepared for the level of emotion. The question is “Why don’t you start by telling me your story.” Sometimes clients will need prompting, such as “Where were you born?” But the amazing thing that happens is that whatever they tell you is obviously something that is meaningful to them. And although this is a time for listening and taking as many notes as possible, it is imperative that you ask follow-up questions that are genuine in your ambition to get to know your clients on a deeper level than any other professional in their lives.

What I wasn’t prepared for was how much I was learning about clients that I thought I knew well. Of the first five clients I took through this process, two of them ended up in tears. Talk about connecting! I could feel myself going from number cruncher to the professional who knew and understood his clients better than any other professional in their lives.

What Coach taught me next is that people don’t think about money like advisors do. People want outcomes, not benchmarks and confusing financial data. They want to retire at the cottage. They don’t care if the investment style is bottom-up, top-down, value style, or growth style any more than we care about which type of wrench our mechanic uses to change our tires. What they care about is whether or not they can retire at the cottage. Yet how much time do we spend talking about the markets and product features in relation to the time we spend talking about their goals and how that makes them feel?

Subject to some debate, it was Maya Angelou who said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” This is another quote that I think is overused without being understood. If your clients know that you truly and deeply understand them as people and are working with them to make their vision a reality, they will be engaged, loyal, and raving fans of your work.

So the first step in the process is get to know the person. To do that, uncover your clients’ stories. But knowing a client’s story is only half the battle. It tells us where they’ve been. The next step is getting clear on where they want to go. Well, Coach had a simple answer to this as well. Again, it is one simple question that requires you to dig deeper. The second question is “What do you want to accomplish that requires planning, money, and time?” Sometimes this requires a little priming to get the conversation started, but generally you can nudge it in the right direction. Most people would like to retire at some point, travel, help the kids with their education, or do some renovations. As I mentioned, this does require some follow-up questions, so you aren’t stuck with the word *travel* on your yellow notepad with no idea as to what to do with it.

That being said, for me, this was much easier said than done. For all of you extroverts, this stuff probably sounds super fun and easy. Not for me! As I mentioned, I am not the most conversational person. I am an introvert by nature. Having these types of conversations really intimidated me. And they still do today. So, if I can do this, you can definitely do this too!

Coach had sent me an article from the *Harvard Business Review* that provided some great insight on how to find someone’s true purpose. One of the techniques was to ask, “Why?” And not once, not twice, not even three or four times, but five times. I remember thinking how awkward it would be to ask “Why?” five times in a row. But it turns out, there’s always more to discover; it’s just a matter of asking intelligently. So here are a few ways to ask “Why?” intelligently. These simple follow-up questions have made me a lot of money and deepened a lot of relationships:

* Why is that important?
* Can you tell me more about that?
* Interesting—how did you settle on that?
* What was the catalyst for that?
* Why do you care about that?

One of the biggest things I’ve learned is that the answers to the question “What do you want to accomplish that requires planning, money, and time?” along with intelligent follow-up questions will lead you directly to your client’s vision.

Let me share what this can produce. Here is my own Financial Vision Document.

What’s amazing about this process of discovery is that while financial planning often feels overwhelming, you will see here that there are really only five things that we want to accomplish that require planning, money, and time. And pay attention as you read this, because what I think you’ll find, as I share my vision with you, is that you feel more connected to me and that you understand me better. Let’s see if extracting the vision really works:

We want to become financially independent. To us, financial independence means we would be able to live at the level we have grown accustomed to without any financial concerns.

We enjoy our cottage property on Grape Island. Not only do we love to be around the water, we see the cottage as a family gathering place that will create a lifetime of memories. We are really looking forward to a new build on the property in the next year or two.

It is important to us that Ellie and Brendan have the opportunity for an excellent university education. That being said, we want to help them, but we also want them to contribute financially to their education by working summers so they never get the impression that things will just be handed to them in life.

In addition to ensuring that Ellie and Brendan have funding for a great university education, we realize that there is a widening income gap worldwide. Although we hope that this trend slows down, or reverses, we want to make sure that our estate is large enough to leave them in a strong financial position.

During preretirement and retirement, in addition to maintaining our lifestyle, there are a lot of places we would like to visit both as a couple and as a family, such as: St. Lucia, Western Europe (again), Thailand, and Japan.

The above shows the types of things that our clients primarily care about, and everything else, including what wrench is used, is secondary to the vision. Again, after confirming with your clients that these are the things that are truly important to them, you need to again stress *feeling* in the presentation. For example, I would say, “Mr. and Mrs. Client, if we could show you a way to accomplish these five things, how would that feel?” The answers I most commonly get are “perfect,” “amazing,” or “awesome.” Now the clients are not worrying about what type of product we use; they just want to end up on the beach or to have the savings to put their kids through school. They are working with us to accomplish these five simple goals that, when accomplished, by their own admission, are going to make them feel amazing.

So our job from here as financial advisors is now to get a little bit more technical and determine how we can make their vision a reality. It’s at this point, and only at this point, that products become relevant. By now, we’re deeply connected to our clients, have a thorough understanding of who they are, and have a clear vision of where they want to go. We’re 90 percent of the way through the process, and this is the first time that we’ve mentioned products to our clients.

* Financial independence goal involved $2 million of term insurance, a disability policy, and $1.9 million of retirement savings.
* Cottage building goal involved working with them and going through their budget to make sure it was realistic. Although you might think, *I didn’t make any money from this*, you’d be wrong to assume that. Working through the budget not only helped to determine that this was a realistic goal, it determined that it is a realistic goal after we proved that all of our other recommendations were affordable. The huge upside with this is that they see you as their advisor, playing a key role in making their cottage a reality, consciously or subconsciously, that will stick with them forever.
* Children’s education goal led to $200/month/child into a Registered Education Savings Plan.
* Income gap concerns were resolved with a $3 million joint last-to-die whole life insurance policy.
* Travel goals were factored into the cash flow and retirement plans and, as mentioned, led the advisor to learning a lot about the client and attaching emotion to the goals (e.g., St. Lucia story).

I can tell you with confidence that when you have such a deep understanding of a client’s goals and vision, there is practically zero selling involved, which for me is the best part. I am not a good salesperson, and I have no desire to be. I want to be a trusted professional, not a smooth-talking salesperson. I want to work with clients to make their vision come to life, plain and simple. I promise you that when you work hard to extract what is truly important to them, help them, and get specific about their goals, they will fall in love with you. It’s been the single most rewarding thing in my career.

## Keeping the Vision Alive

About three or four years ago, I decided that my office was so just so messy and out of control that I felt that I couldn’t do another bit of work until it was cleaned. Maybe this was my way of procrastinating, but it had to be cleaned nonetheless. While I was cleaning out a file, I found a sheet that had my “Weekly Success Checklist.” This was a tool I had made up to help keep me accountable every week by ensuring that I was executing key actions, such as number of appointments booked and number of financial plans completed, ensuring that revenue targets were on pace, and setting aside time for studying and making it to the gym. Using this sheet to track everything was working really well. The problem was that when I saw it, I could not remember why, how, or even when I stopped using it. All of my memories of using this to keep me organized and on track were all positive and effective, yet for whatever reason, it quietly disappeared from my routine (and memory!).

The reason I tell this story is that the same thing will happen with your clients who open up to you with their vision. The emotion will be high, and they will be so happy with you when you’ve worked with them to establish their vision; however, if you don’t keep it in front of them, regardless of the fact that it is what they truly want deep down, they will forget exactly why they are working with you. When that happens, they have no other choice but to return to becoming product and market focused. After all, they need something to focus on, some metric of success. As Zig Ziglar used to say, “People often say that motivation doesn’t last. Well, neither does bathing—that’s why we recommend it daily.”

The next step taught to me by Coach was how to keep the vision alive. We do this in two ways. The first is to provide the clients with a road map of what the next two years of the relationship will look like. [visual] Imagine how powerful it is for the clients to see that you have thought enough about them and their situation to plan out your next eight meetings. Do you think any of them has ever experienced this before? Each quarter we review the vision to make sure that we are still tuned in to their true goals. We review the road map to make sure that we are on track and to remind them of all of the things we have accomplished together. We also use a tool called “Goals-Based Reporting” to move the focus to the plan and not the markets to show progress. [visual]

This tool is all clients really care about when they are reviewing their financial planning progress. It shows them a line graph of where they need to be in terms of their retirement plan, for example, and each quarter their investment balances are updated on a bar graph. If the bar graph is touching or above the line, they are on track or ahead of schedule. As long as this is the case, clients don’t really tend to care about much else. Looking back, however, I realize that, in the past, I had a tendency to spend very little time on this during a review and more time on complex investing and economic data that caused them to glaze over and experience confusion. Whether this is for investments or insurance, it makes no difference.

For example, we could say to a client, “You have $3 million of life insurance.” To the client, that’s like saying, “I used a four-way lug wrench to install your winter tires.” It doesn’t mean much, and it doesn’t make you special as their advisor. But if you said, “We have put sufficient insurance in place so that if anything were to happen to you, your mortgage would be paid off in full at 123 Any St., your wife would see your income continue until what would have been your retirement age, and your children will have their educations paid for, money for their weddings, and $50,000 each toward the down payment on their first homes.” How might that make your client feel?

## Determine the Core Needs

As Steve Jobs used to say, “There is . . . just . . . one . . . more . . . thing.”

Early in my career, I spent a lot of time getting clients to work with me to complete a “budget.” I found it so frustrating! Clients had a hard time putting a number to each of the 30 plus items I had listed. I was asking them silly things like what they spent at the corner store each month. Although this exercise could have been very helpful if done properly, it turned out to be a big waste of time for me and them. Even though I was feeling down on myself for not being able to run a successful enough appointment to get their monthly cash flow sorted out, I didn’t want to give up. If I could get a solid grasp on this number, I would have such a better idea of what was needed as a retirement income, a disability benefit, life insurance, and so on.

One day, the solution came to me when I was thinking about a quote that is often credited to Albert Einstein: “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” How can cash-flow planning be as simple as possible? The first thing that came to mind was, what was really required to at least maintain your dignity? I arrived at this figure by determining this: What does it cost to stay in your home, keep a vehicle on the road, and eat? The great thing about these figures was that they were all very easy to determine as most of them are on autopilot—meaning they don’t change much month to month.

What I found was that clients loved figuring out this number for themselves and were often surprised at the outcome. More often than not, the number was much lower than they thought. As an advisor, this number becomes very important for planning purposes. For example, it helped to determine that, to maintain their dignity, this was the bare minimum clients required for the following:

* Disability income
* Income continuation portion of the life insurance need
* The minimum amount of retirement income that should be covered from guaranteed sources (If this amount was not covered by government programs or employer pension plans, then it should be made up for with an annuity or other guaranteed product.)

In fact, the “core needs” or “dignity” number has become so important to my practice that we actually developed a tool around it called @-A-Glance. This tool shows the breakdown of the following:

* Core needs
* Net worth
* Guaranteed income sources
* Income sources for lifestyle
* Investment balances funding retirement
* Protection products owned
* And, most importantly, the reason each of these products is owned

I can tell you that a real sense of peace seems to come over clients once they learn this number.

Another thing I’ve found is that clients love to see this updated about once per year. When I first developed this tool, I was presenting it sporadically, but the clients actually started asking me when I was going to show them an update. I think the main reason for this was that when clients are in the accumulation stage of life, they love to see their net worth investment values and guaranteed income sources increasing and the gap between core needs and guaranteed income sources decreasing, and they want to you to report on that often. I’ve always had a lot of fun sharing this with clients.

The bottom line is that we need to work with people and not products. Products are simply a means to an end. When I learned this and made it a core philosophy of my business, not only did my practice really start to thrive, but I gained a real sense of pride as I evolved from salesperson to trusted professional in my clients’ eyes. It was and still is the best thing I have experienced in my tenure as a financial advisor.

When I learned to work with clients to extract their vision and keep it alive, my relationships became deeper and deeper. When I started determining clients’ core needs or dignity number, it gave me a starting point for so many of the solutions that we offer. Clients love having a clear picture of the future just as much as advisors love having enough information to put a solid plan together. It’s a win-win.

When you put all of these things together, you will be the trusted professional in your clients’ lives, and you will never have to sell or ask for referrals again. Your recommendations will be logical tools needed to bring their vision into reality.

And, when your spouse reminds you that she is thinking about going back to Teachers College, but she still wants that luxury vacation in St. Lucia, you get to sit back and say with a massive smile on your face, “No problem, darling. We can definitely make that work.”