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How to achieve success

I had the good fortune to hear an inspiring speech interspersed with hilarious jokes by Jeffrey H. Smulyan, CEO of Emmis Communications Corp. He spoke at the opening meeting of the Indianapolis Chapter of Hadassah on Sept. 30. Hadassah had asked him to speak about how to achieve success. If anyone should know, it is he.

Emmis is an Indianapolis-based radio, TV and magazine publishing company with operations in 10 U.S. markets, as well as Hungary, Belgium, Bulgaria and Slovakia. Some of Smulyan's other achievements are listed at the end of my editorial.

Rather than talk about radio, community involvement, politics, baseball, negotiating with the PLO – some of his areas of expertise – he chose to share lessons he has learned in life and to talk about the values that he holds dear. The most important of those is that one must keep one's life in perspective.

I understood him to say something like, if you, your family and friends are healthy, and you reflect on your problems in that context, they become inconsequential by comparison. He was finally able to get this across to his children after they called him on 9/11. He was in New York and as soon as they found out he was safe, they told him they understood that lesson.

Another important lesson is: "No human being is ever going to exist without cycles. I have never met a person, a company or a government that doesn't have various cycles." When he talks to graduates, he tells them to go out and be prepared to fail.

What he told his children is that if you have the luckiest life in the world, 60 percent of your experiences will be positive and 40 percent negative. If you have an unlucky life, 40 percent will be positive and 60 percent negative. He knows some people with the former who were miserable and others with the latter – or even less than 40 percent positive – who led happy lives because they learned to deal with the tough times. "The key is how you cope with adversity," he concluded.

Smulyan mentioned Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If." Basically it says if you can deal with success and failure so that nobody can tell the difference, that's when you will be a man. [You have to] "Shrug your shoulders if you win, and shrug your shoulders if you lose," Smulyan commented.

He has had many, many experiences both positive and negative.

“I’ve said for many years that the line between genius and idiot is very fine and I’ve been on both sides many times, sometimes you’re even right and wrong at the same time. Sometimes a deal can go both ways!” he remarked.

For example, an Emmis innovation was starting an all-sports radio station, WFAN, in New York City. When it first went on the air, one of his dear friends in the industry told him, “I always thought you were a smart guy, but this is the single dumbest idea in the history of the world.” In the first 2 years he was right, it lost millions of dollars.

One of the nice benefits about the work environment at Emmis is that the rest of the staff doesn’t take each other too seriously. Some of the other senior executives who were not in favor of this radio station, would joke, “Well, it’s 4 o’clock in the afternoon, the end of another business day and another \$23,000 lost.” Then – lo and behold – the station turned around and became one the greatest success stories. A number of years later, Emmis sold WFAN for a gigantic profit.

One last piece of advice from Smulyan is that he never created any value when he didn’t go against convention.

“That doesn’t mean running an irrational organization, but the great ideas of the world are always created by people who have the ability to look a little differently at how things operate. That is one of the things I am proudest of about our organization,” he said with a smile.

It was generous of Smulyan to share his wisdom and the benefit of his life experiences, even though he said he couldn’t even pay his children to listen to him. Seriously though, it is nice to know that everyone, even someone as talented as Smulyan, has had challenging days as well as good ones. In fact it was probably the difficult days that made him the capable person he is today. Along with the following in italics and many other accomplishments, judging from laughs he inspired while speaking, Smulyan could also be a very successful stand-up comedian.

Jennie Cohen 10-10-07

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In 1994, Jeffrey H. Smulyan was named by The White House to head the U.S. Delegation to the Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunications Union. As a United States ambassador, he helped negotiate a landmark agreement between Israel and the PLO. He received the American Women in Radio and Television's Star Award in 1994 and the Entrepreneur of the Year Award from Ernst & Young the following year.

In 1995, the radio industry newspaper, R & R, voted Smulyan one of the 10 most influential radio executives of the past two decades. In 2000, Smulyan was honored with the American Women in Radio and Television's Silver Satellite Award, the National Association of Broadcasters' National Radio Award, and as Radio Ink's Radio Executive of the Year. In 2004, he was inducted into the Broadcasting & Cable Hall of Fame. More can be found at www.emmis.com.