



Larry Stybel and Maryanne Peabody

In Honor of Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus: how we learned to focus on the right “Ring” in a Three Ring Circus.

Founded in 1871 Ringling Brothers & Barnum Bailey Circus was one of our rites of Spring, as the Circus came to New York City’s Madison Square Garden each year. We mourn the passing of Ringling Brothers. It ended a long run in 2017.

This article is a tribute to what we learned at Ringling Brothers and how we apply it in leadership.

As a child, our parents took us each Spring to Ringling Brothers & Barnum Bailey Circus playing at Madison Square Garden. With its three rings of action going on at the same time, it was the Greatest Show on Earth.

Our parents could only afford highest level seats.  Usually we had a commanding view of all three rings. But because we were in the cheap seats, we would usually be in front of Ring 1 or 2.

The first year at the circus, we tried to take it all in:  there was action in Rings 1, 2, and 3 plus the New York City audience itself. That alone was a show worthy of observation!

All we got from the show was a headache: here was too much going on to fully absorb.

Next year, we changed tactic.

We would focus on the Ring directly below me.  Tune everything else out.   Focus. Focus. Focus.

We got to focus. We avoided a headache. But we were focused on the wrong thing.

We were in the cheapest seats: the ring directly below us was often the worst act.

By the third year, we mastered the art of watching a three-ring circus from the cheap seats: regardless of where we were, focus only on the center ring.  Ignore everything else.

What does this have to do with leadership?

1. Your job probably has fifteen rings to focus on at the same time.  You can’t absorb it all.  Don’t even try.  Being effective means being deliberate about what you will NOT pay attention to.  Sigmund Freud once said the true mark of an intelligent person is what the person “chooses” to ignore.
2. What is going on directly in front of you may not be the most important act. Quietly ask yourself, “Where is the Center Ring?”   The greatest threats/opportunities may be oblique to your line of sight.  Think of Blackberry’s dominance as a mobile business communication tool.  Apple came out with the IPhone. It was not perceived as a direct competitor to Blackberry. It was a young person’s consumer integrating an IPod and a mobile phone. Why worry?

“Where is the Center Ring?”

The value of having a private leadership coach is helping you identify the Center Ring. The Ring directly in front of you may be too close and make too much noise but the Center Ring may be oblique.

If you don’t have a coach, ask yourself this question: “What happens if I do not spend time on this issue?”  If the answer is, “Not much,” then it probably is not a Center Ring issue.

We find Stephen Covey’s concepts on [time management](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/time-management) of value. Ask two questions: how urgent is it; how important is it?

Much of our professional lives are consumed with urgent and unimportant emails, meetings, and personal problems others bring to us.  The art of leadership is to diplomatically assign someone else to handle it or deflect it, or defer it.

Issues that are both urgent and important are obvious. You don’t need a coach to tell you about these issues. They command the Center Ring.  You MUST focus.

Issues that are not urgent yet important are the very critical leadership issues that should command Center Ring attention but often do not.

This is what happened to Blackberry.

Don’t let it happen to you.

There are good reasons to believe you need help to focus on the Center Ring.

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This article was first published by PSYCHOLOGY TODAY. Each month, Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel provide their perspectives about leadership and career success. There have been over 220,000 downloads:

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Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Boston-based Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. The mission is “Increased Leadership and Career Success:” for valued professionals: retained search+, improved relationship management for leaders, and campaign management outplacement.

Based in Boston, it is part of a network of 200 consultants in 25 U.S. cities and 32 countries. Clients include 21% of the one hundred companies named by **FORTUNE MAGAZINE** as “Best Employers in the United States:”

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