

The Perfect World

by Scott Friedman, CSP

I can't tell you what I discovered about the concept of a perfect world without telling you where it all started. So let the "perfect" journey begin.

The year was 1989; it was another beautiful Colorado summer morning like any other: 60 degrees, bright blue sky, with a few cotton-like clouds. I was getting ready to leave my office to give the 300th speech of my career. (Of course the first 232 were for services clubs like Optimist, Rotary, Parents without Partners, and Parents without a lot of other things, too.) I had just started to make a few bucks in the speaking business, had recently bought a house, and felt pretty good about my future. I was living the good life; after all, I was President of the Colorado Chapter of the National Speakers Association. They don't elect just anyone you know. Or do they? Of course they don't.

The phone rang; it was a stranger, Nancy McGraw. She needed information. The President of the Colorado Speakers Association would surely have it. Did I know of any public seminar companies that were hiring? She was looking for part-time work as an on-site person for a public seminar company. They're the ones who handle registration on site, sell the products, and stand at the back of the room while the speaker is speaking, absorbing all of those wonderful ideas. Nancy had done a little work for Seminars International in the D.C. area before moving to Colorado. Did I know of anyone hiring?

“I don’t, but why don’t you come talk with me and see if you’d like to work for a professional speaker.” Nancy came in the next day and hasn’t left. Not that I wanted her to.

After one year, we found that “one thing” that Jack Palance talks about in “City Slickers.” That one thing that, when you find it, you know it—exactly what you’ve been looking for—the panacea! Nancy and I were talking about how to work better together. How can we be more efficient and effective in the office? How can we highlight our strengths and outsource or minimize our weaknesses? Out of the discussion, came that one thing we knew we had been looking for . . . the perfect world concept. How do we create each other’s “perfect world?” Wouldn’t it be nice in our employer/employee relationship if we created a situation in which we both did more of what we loved, outsourced what we didn’t like, and focused on living true to our values? What a concept! In fact, that would be each of our job descriptions: to create each other’s Perfect World. Simple, yet profound.

My Perfect World

Okay, Nancy asked, “What is it for you? What drives you? What do you value? What is your perfect world?”

“It’s anything that revolves around fun and freedom,” I said. “Freedom to come and go as I please, freedom to create, and freedom to make a difference in this world in ways I’d like. If you help me do that, I’ll be one happy camper.”

So what does creating a Perfect World mean for Nancy? A lot.

Nancy takes care of everything in the office, and takes care of many things in the house and even the garage. (We work out of my house.) She does all the stuff that doesn't show but makes all the difference in world.

In addition to running the office, she covers for me when needed, reminds me of birthdays two weeks out, and never lets me leave the house wearing one black sock and one blue sock. Nice to have your own fashion police right there on staff. She takes me to and picks me up from the airport, does whatever it takes to get mailings out on time, and will run errands all over town at any time of the day or night. And to this day she is the only person who has successfully surprised me on my birthday. How clever, throwing me a surprise party at the airport in Denver for my fortieth birthday. As I came off the plane and saw friends and family, I wondered where they all could be flying off to today. Nothing like a good surprise as your mind slowly puts all the pieces together. I was truly floored by this great surprise—and tickled.

If you ask Nancy what she does for me, she loves to kid around by saying, “Everything except sex.” Yes, if I'm in a bind—and I've been in quite a few binds—she'll do just about anything to create my perfect world. Anything that is, except sex. After all, she *is* married and that “sex” stuff just doesn't have a place in the office.

Nancy's Perfect World

“Okay, Nancy, what is your Perfect World?” I asked.

“Get rid of anything to do with accounting and technology, have more time for marketing and taking care of our clients. I’d also like to spend more time with my son (who at the time was 12) and with family around the country. I’d like to travel more, have more fun, and partake in the delightfully unexpected more often.”

“Okay, done,” I replied. “No more accounting and technology. We’ll order out. This will free you up to do more marketing and spend more time with clients. You can ‘call in well’ anytime you’d like if it gives you the opportunity to be with David and the family. We’ll create an incentive plan and your reward will be free tickets to travel anywhere you’d like. And I’ll do my best to keep things from getting mundane in the workplace.

“At the end of every month, we will grade ourselves on a scale of 1-10 on how well we did at creating each other’s perfect world. If we aren’t at a 9 or 10, we’ll figure out a way to raise the score the next month.” And for the last 13 years, we’ve stayed in tune with each other’s Perfect World.

The Perfect Birthday Surprise

Nancy’s 50th birthday was a slam-dunk. David, her son, husband, Jack, and I etched the plot. David called about three weeks out and said, “Mom I feel terrible, but I can’t come home for your birthday. I have three tests that week, and I can’t make them all up. What if I came back two weeks later and we’d have more time to spend together?” Nancy was disappointed, but she understood.

Fast forward to July 7, 1999, Nancy's 50th birthday. Being the loyal employee she is, Nancy is working a half day. About ten o'clock, the phone rings. It's my buddy Tim, but Nancy thinks it's a client. I answer and say, "You've made a decision, and you'd like me to speak on October 23rd in Orlando." (I covered the phone.) "Nancy, do me a quick favor, take my keys and run to the car and get my road calendar out of the trunk." (She'd done this before when I'd forgotten to bring in my calendar.) She gets there, opens the trunk, and sees David, who screams, "SURPRRIIIIIISSEEE!"

After Nancy came to, she knew she was somewhere in the vicinity of her Perfect World. David had been happy to play along and was certainly glad he survived his time in the trunk. (It was only six hours . . . just kidding!)

The Perfect Raise

On to September 2001. Celebrating 13 wonderful years of working together, I wanted to give Nancy an "out-of-the-ordinary" raise and do it in a way she wouldn't soon forget. Anyone who could put up with me for 13 years deserves not only a medal, but something very special.

My "Keep the Fun Meter on a 10" buddy, Gary, told me to lease Nancy a car. "Lease her a car that she wouldn't buy for herself, and she will appreciate it every day. (And the good news is, with the tax break, your gift goes twice as far.)"

What a brilliant idea. I mean a *perfect* idea. So I called Nancy's husband, Jack, to help with the latest scheme.

Here was the plan: Nancy's son, David, would fly out of Seattle around 9 a.m. PST and I'd pick him up at the airport on my way back from Colorado Springs where I had a speech. Nancy was scheduled to take my car in for servicing. That's where I'd drop David off. Clad in a mechanic's hat and glasses, David would drive up in a loaner from the service department, which would just happen to be her brand new car. In best disguise, he'd say, "Ma'am, here is your loaner, ah, go ahead and just keep it," and you know what? I'm coming with you!" He'd give her a big kiss and he'd drive her away. Seemed like the perfect plan.

It was the appointed day, a Tuesday in September. I awoke in a Colorado Springs hotel all excited about putting the plan into action. David would be at the airport in Seattle by now, ready to fly out. Nancy's husband, Jack, called me as I was about to go down to the meeting room. I already knew. I had been watching the Today Show as the second plane flew into the second World Trade Center tower.

Everything seemed surreal. They had closed all the airports around the country. David wouldn't be coming to Denver today. The planned surprise didn't seem a big deal any more. Nothing did. A dark shadow had been cast over the world. With a lump in my throat, I went downstairs to fulfill my speaking engagement with the Rocky Mountain Telecommunications Association. I tried to offer hope.

After my program, I drove up to Denver from Colorado Springs. A friend and I picked up Nancy's new car. Instead of driving it to the dealership to drop off

David, I drove it home and parked it in my neighbor's garage. Fortunately, my neighbor Marianne had an extra space and was willing to hide it.

Two mornings later, filled with sorrow and still in a daze, I knew it was time to take a break from our moping around. I remembered what I had told the Columbine school administrators soon after the tragedy at their year-end meeting, "Your job is not to stop mourning, but to stop only mourning. It's okay to take a break and celebrate what's good."

So I called Marianne and gave her the plan.

Here was the scene that morning: The phone rings in the office. It's Marianne.

Nancy says to me, "Marianne thinks she left her coffeepot on. Could one of us run over and check? She said she gave you a garage door opener a few years back; do you still have it?"

I respond, "I think it's in the bottom drawer in the kitchen." Nancy finally finds the opener and heads over to check on the coffeepot. The first thing she sees when she opens the garage is a shiny new car. As she tells the story, she thought, "Wow, Marianne got a new car. I wonder why she isn't driving it to work?" Then she sees a huge card on the car with NANCY in big letters written on it.

She goes over to the card, opens it, and reads, "Happy 13 Years! Thanks for helping to create my perfect world. I couldn't have done it without you."

Not sure if the car is really hers, but thinking it may be, she comes back to the house for an explanation with her mouth open, muttering, "Oh my gosh."

More than once, I confirm the good news and ask if she turned off the coffeepot. In the midst of a very tough stretch, we take time to celebrate.

(One important note: I was in a fortunate circumstance to be able to afford a car for Nancy. You don't have to be that elaborate. A special card, a dinner at a wonderful restaurant, a certificate to get someone's windows cleaned—any extra and carefully thought-through gesture will have the same joyful effect.)

Creating Others' Perfect Worlds

What if we lived our life with each other's "Perfect World" in mind? What if we spent more time asking questions and paying attention to the perfect world of our co-workers, spouses, family and friends? What if we made choices in life based on those perfect worlds? Would you sell more? Would you laugh more? Would you love more? Would the quality of your relationships improve? Would the quality of your life improve?

So how do you best go about creating another person's Perfect World?" You start by looking at the world through their eyes. It's not always easy if you only have eyes for "I." Get past your self-absorbed self. Pay more attention.

Start by asking questions. Ask the customers themselves: "If we could have done one thing better in working with you, what would it have been?" Find out and then deliver. Ask: How can I create a better experience for my customers? What can I do to truly connect with them? How can I move from being ordinary to extra-ordinary?

Do you want to keep good customers? Want to keep good friends? Want to keep good employees? Find out what drives them. Find out what constitutes their Perfect World.

According to the United States Department of Labor, 87% of employees leave their jobs because they are unhappy with their managers. Do you think those managers are tuned in to employee needs and values?

The University of California at Irvine School of Psychology and Human Behavior conducted a survey to determine motivating factors for employees. Would it surprise you that money ranked near the bottom? Appreciation, flexibility, challenging work, and good communication were the top four.

The most effective company incentive programs I've seen are the ones customized to meet the desires of each employee.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "One of the most beautiful compensations of this life is that no one can sincerely try to help another without helping himself." It's a wonderful way to live.

So, you may be asking, "What does this have to do with a book on humor?" Good question. Glad you asked. You see, humor doesn't have to always be about silliness and laughter. Humor evolves naturally from an atmosphere in which we have created delight. Take an environment free of sorrow, pain, and resentment, then enhance it with delight and we have created a space for humor.

By living the "perfect world" philosophy, we provide an opportunity for joy, spontaneity, curiosity, silliness, and laughter to flourish. And that's humor at its very best. In fact, that's . . . perfect!

