



## Reading | Walking the I-Beam

priorities™ magazine

### The Big Question: Walking the I-beam

Finding your own governing values is as simple as answering one question: What matters most? Or, what would cause you to cross an I-beam with a 1,360-foot drop to the ground? Imagine that you and I are standing in a room at opposite ends of a 120-foot steel I-beam, the type that's used in construction. I pull a hundred-dollar bill from my wallet and shout - 120 feet is a long way - "Hey, you down at the end! If you'll walk the length of this I-beam in two minutes without stepping off the other side, I'll give you a hundred dollars!" would you come? It's your own choice, of course, but I'll bet you're already on that beam.

*"They (people) place a higher priority on life than they do on money."*

### The One Hundred Dollar Question

Now let's change the scenario a little. We're still at opposite ends of the I-beam, but now we're at the top of two 100-story buildings in Manhattan and the beam is just long enough that 12 inches or so are resting on each building.

### The One Million Dollar Question

I'm on the top of one building, you're on top of the other, and between us are the I-beam and a drop of about 1,360 feet to the pavement. Just to make sure it doesn't fall, I'm going to bolt the I-beam to a bracket on each building. It's raining - not very hard, more like a thick mist and since it's always windy at the top of the tall buildings, we'll say that the wind is blowing about 40 miles per hour. I'm still holding the hundred-dollar bill, and my offer still stands. Would you come across now? I've shared this scenario with a lot of people, and I've yet to find someone who would come across the I-beam for \$100. At \$1 million, taxfree, some hesitate before turning me down. But they won't come across for the simple reason that they place a higher priority on life than they do on money.

Let's change the situation again. This time I don't feel like giving you money. In fact, I've just kidnapped your two-year-old daughter, and I'm holding her over the edge of my building. I yell across to you that if you don't get over here in two minutes I'll drop her. Would you come now?

### The Only Real Question

I use this example often because it helps people identify what is most important to them: what I call governing values. There aren't many things that could get us to cross that

I-beam. We place a high value on our own life and safety. But we also understand that there are certain things we hold more precious than our own lives. A two-year-old daughter or son is one of them. Money and safety both have value, but love of a child is worth much more. Our governing values are ideals and purposes so large and important to us that things that scare or bother us - like the drop from the top of the 100-story building - become trivial by comparison. Often we can't explain why our governing values are important to us; they just are. They are the fundamental building blocks of our personality. They are crucial for our personal fulfillment. And each of us has a unique set of them. No matter what our background, no two people's values are alike.

### **Discovering Our Governing Values**

Stephen R. Covey points out that our governing values are driven by four distinct but related needs: to live (physical), to love (social), to learn (mental), and to leave a legacy (spiritual). Combining those elements is like conducting a chemistry experiment. When the choices we make meet our needs, we have a richer, more fulfilled life. We feel a sense of purpose. And when we reach a "critical mass" in all four areas, the result is a spontaneous combustion of synergy that gives us a passion for life. In 1992, we asked people in a nationwide survey to identify those things of highest priority in their lives. Here are the top 10:

What Matters Most

1. Spouse
2. Financial security
3. Personal health and fitness
4. Children and family
5. Spirituality/religion
6. A sense of accomplishment
7. Integrity and honesty
8. Occupational satisfaction
9. Love for others/service
10. Education and learning

This list is, of course, just representative. Your values may include some of those on the list, but they will also include things that are unique to you and very personal.

The concept of governing values isn't new. Six years after the end of the American Revolution, representatives from the 13 states came together in a convention to define the highest priorities and values of their new country. In essence, they said, "We've just crossed a hellish I-beam, the Revolutionary War. What did we cross it for?" They talked about principles like justice, freedom of religion, the right to vote, freedom of speech and the idea that a strong central government should have certain checks and balances to protect citizens from tyranny. The document they wrote to preserve these ideals begins: "We, the people of the United States." And it is ours. We still live by it. Even now, over two hundred years later, we follow the principles that the Founding Fathers laid out in the Constitution.

### **Founding Fathers' Governing Values**

We can also identify our own governing values and write personal Constitutions. This is probably one of the most difficult things you will ever do, but it will also be one of the most worthwhile investments of time in your life. Ask yourself some difficult questions: What are the highest priorities in my life? And, of these priorities, which do I value most? Then make a list of your governing values in order of

priority with a brief description of what each one means to you.

#### Now It's Your Turn

He had thought a lot about that I-beam, and he had found some things in his life that mattered a lot. He knew he wasn't even close to giving them the attention they deserved. He was in the middle of a nasty divorce, with attorneys involved, and although he was very successful in his work, he felt the other facets of his life were crumbling. After he left the seminar, giving it a lot of thought, he wrote down his own governing values, made an appointment with his estranged wife, attorneys in the next room, showed her his list, and she was blown away. She left that meeting, made a list of her own values, and they got back together a second time and compared them. Two individuals' governing values are never the same, but it turned out that theirs were almost identical. They fired the attorneys, and piece by piece they put their marriage back together. And for the first time in his whole corporate life, this guy started controlling the events in his life and paying attention to what really mattered to him. Everything we do to live in harmony with our values is like keeping a personal promise, uniting our daily reality with our goals. I've always been impressed with Abraham Maslow, a pioneer in the field of psychology, who referred to this unity as "self-actualization" and for years believed that it was the highest of all human experiences. Later in his life, though, he changed his theory and added an even higher experience to his model: "self-transcendence," or living for a higher purpose than self. I can almost see him walking across that I-beam, in the wind and the rain, risking his life for something he valued even more than himself.

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