



## Three Life Lessons I Learned Being in the Circus

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During grade school, I was a member of the Sarasota Sailor Circus and walked the high wire in front of hundreds of people. This circus started in 1949 (<http://circussarasota.org/community-outreach/sailor-circus/>) and grows every year. During my time in the Sailor Circus, we had a wonderful man who directed it, Coach Bill Lee. Coach Lee was retired from the United States Military and he ran the circus with (almost) as much structure as the military. Coach Lee was known for his rules, his focus on safety and his drive to give a great performance. From Coach Lee's guidance, I have learned that the following life lessons are very relevant to keeping high professional standards.

### 1. You can't perform well without a lot of practice.

It is critical to thoroughly rehearse again and again before 'show-time'. The Sailor Circus used to only have shows during the public school system's Spring Break. Our try-outs began in October of the year before. Therefore, we began working on each act 5 months prior to the performances. Just prior to show-time, we were at the tent 6 days a week practicing and prepping for the show. All this practice proved for a great performance, time and time again.

We have opportunities in our professional lives every day to practice our performance. Typically 'practice' is saved for the big events such as a job interview, a training or speaking engagement or when someone provides a presentation at a meeting. What if you were to think of every action that you take to perform your day-to-day activities as practice to help improve your services so that the next time you may perform them a little bit better?

### 2. You must have trust in your team.

October at the Sailor Circus started with 'try-outs'. This was a period of time when the coach of each act assessed who was the best fit for the act. Sounds like a job interview, doesn't it? Once the right people were chosen, those individuals and teams worked hard to perfect their acts. Most acts were done in teams. Many of the acts had some level of danger involved. Having trust in your teammates was critical.

I remember doing a skating act where my skating partner put a hoop (that looked like the number eight and had a revolving piece of metal in the middle of the 2 hoops) around his neck. The other end of the hoop was placed around one of my ankles. We held each other's arms and started skating around in a circle (note that I was skating on only one foot/skate). Then..... (drum roll please) I would pick up my foot off the ground and cross it over my other foot which



was attached to his neck (“look Ma, no hands!”). My partner would skate in circles with me hanging (head and face very close to the ground) and spinning by the hoop! It was quite the spectacle. The audience loved it! I have to admit that it was a great part of the skating act and it was fun. But it also took a lot of trust. I had to know that my partner was able to keep us both from falling and trust that I was safe in his hands.

I find that in professional relationships, it is also important to trust those whom you work with. If you find that you cannot trust your team, it may be a sign that this team is not the right fit for each other. Doing professional team building activities really helps promote this. Some companies participate in day-long or weekend retreats. Others choose to do small activities at lunch meetings. Anything that your organization can do to help staff and volunteers know each other better (on both a professional and personal level) will help them trust each other.

### **3. You always want to provide your service with a smile.**

Coach Lee was known for enforcing ‘a constant smile while performing’. Even when we did a rehearsal of the show without an audience, we had to smile the whole time as if it were show time. Coach Lee would actually make people who did not smile stand in front of a pole and smile “until the pole smiles back”. This took about 10 – 15 minutes before the person understood the importance of smiling and, even though the pole did not smile back, they were allowed to stop. Coach Lee was helping us understand that service with a smile is important.

In all of our daily lives we sometimes come across people who do not perform their job with a smile. It is so much more pleasant to work with the person with a smile. It makes us more likely to return to that place or use that service again. Smiling at people helps to make them feel good. It also helps us feel better (especially when the smile is genuine. Check out <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/18/science/a-feel-good-theory-a-smile-affects-mood.html> for more information on how smiling affects us.). Even when you have an angry or disgruntled client/customer, treating them in a respectful and nice manner will always improve the chances of a positive outcome.