

Empowered Choices

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Thank you President Caret.

Congratulations to the Deans' scholars and President's scholars for your outstanding academic achievements. You should be very proud of what you have accomplished through your hard work and dedication to learning. I'll take the liberty of speaking for my faculty colleagues – we are very proud of you!

I am very honored to be given the opportunity to speak today to our San José State University scholars, their families and friends, my wonderful husband Eric, and to all of my wonderful colleagues here today celebrating the academic excellence of our honorees.

As you can see in the program, the title of my short talk today is “Empowered Choices.” Why would I want to talk to you about this topic and what does it mean?

Well, I have an incredibly positive attitude and this is an extremely positive event, so I want to talk about something very positive! Also, “empowered” is one of my favorite words. It means having and exercising the authority or power to do something. “Empowered” is often used in the context of an employer authorizing employees to make certain decisions for the company. Instead of a manager telling an employee every detail of how to complete a project, the manager could instead discuss the goals of the project and let the employee determine the actions to get there. The empowering approach will lead to happier employees who are able to exercise responsibility over their work with positive benefits for both the employer and the employees.

But, today, I'm going to talk not of someone else empowering you, but of you empowering yourself – of you recognizing that you have authority and power to do many things. While it may seem obvious that we have the power to decide what we do, we all know that we occasionally can be in a situation where we hear ourselves say: “I have to do this” or “my employer (or professor) is making my life miserable,” Or, you think – I can't make a difference because it's too big of an issue, or you find that you aren't really enjoying what you are doing.

So, how do we empower our choices? How do we take ownership of our time and actions rather than feeling that someone else or something else is controlling our time, actions and happiness?

First, we must acknowledge that we have control over most things in our lives. Therefore, we have the power and ability to make choices about most things that affect our lives. If you don't agree with something some "boss" in your life is making you do or you don't like the approach that "boss" is taking, you can make suggestions, negotiate for an alternative approach, offer to take over the project yourself, or, chose to go elsewhere.

Sometimes we may feel restrained or held back by actions or demands of others. But sometimes, it is really us holding ourselves back by forgetting that we do have a lot of control over most activities and decisions in our lives. So, making an empowered choice implies that we must know that we have the power and ability to decide for ourselves.

I want to offer three suggestions for how to make optimal life choices. That is, empowered choices – ones that you will feel you have ownership of and that will bring you greater satisfaction and enjoyment.

Suggestion #1: Have a personal mission statement for both your personal life and your work life.

You need to know what you want so that you can make the best choices for yourself. While this may again seem like an obvious suggestion, I think it is sometimes overlooked in our busy lives where we might be taking direction from others, or, staying on a narrow path too long thereby losing sight of what we really care about or what we want to do or how we want to go about achieving things in our lives.

What shapes your personal mission statement?

Well, know your core values and desires. What drives you? What is most important to you? Also, know what motivates you - what do you have a passion for? What makes you jump up and down with excitement? I would guess for many of you students now, it is your chosen studies that you have a passion for and that has helped you to excel at them. The same is true for everything in your life. You'll perform at your best, have a great sense of enjoyment and be able to accomplish more if you have a passion for what you do – so know what you have a passion for.

And, don't be too narrow in describing your mission statement. For example, a few years ago, a large organization of CPAs created a vision statement that better reflects today's world of accounting – which is a lot more than auditing and tax returns. In fact, the new CPA vision doesn't even include the words auditing or accounting. Imagine the greater empowerment and career satisfaction of a CPA with a vision that says "I will deliver value to my clients by designing pathways that transform visions into reality!" rather than, "I will audit your books."

Also, don't be afraid to periodically rethink and reevaluate your life choices and mission statement. You will change. Your interests of tomorrow may not be the same as today. Also, the world around you changes – new technologies and changes in society will lead to new types of work and challenges.

For example, I used to describe my work as dealing with federal tax law. After a few years of teaching, I realized that I was really more focused and more interested in tax policy. With that focus, I was able to move into a broader and what I discovered to be a more exciting range of issues. For the past several years I have spent much of my time teaching, speaking, researching, writing, and working with other tax professionals and policymakers, on taxation of electronic commerce at local, state, federal and international levels. That would not have happened if my mission statement for my work remained focused just on federal tax law or if I were not also watching trends in the economy – which leads me to

Suggestion #2: Always be intellectually engaged. Be curious. Always be open to and seek out information to help you to make the best decisions. Continue your education in some way – what your professors refer to as lifelong learning! It doesn't have to be in the classroom – it could be reading, involvement with a professional organization, or surfing the net. Seek input from many sources. Don't always hang around with like-minded people. Listen. Ask questions. Be open-minded. Take time to ponder. Have fun seeking out new ideas and experiences – be adventuresome! Take on new challenges, such as work assignments that will help develop skills you desire or that will allow you to engage in new challenges.

For example, I read articles that discuss political views or tax and economic policy perspectives that I don't philosophically share because it better enables me to understand and argue for my views. It helps me to identify areas for research and tax policy projects for my students to discuss. I belong to several professional organizations where I can discuss tax policy issues with many different people, which helps me identify solutions and gives me a network of people to work with in achieving certain goals.

Finally, Suggestion #3: have the attitude of an empowered person. Think and believe that what you do matters – that you can make a difference, and act accordingly. Have a positive attitude in your ability and authority to control what lies ahead for you. Be able and ready to be a champion for your ideas and what matters to you. Don't give up.

Words and attitudes affect your ability to make empowered choices.

Is your attitude one of an empowered person? Or that of someone who feels they can't make a difference? Does your vocabulary match your attitude and goals? Do you say – “I have to do it this way” or do you say “Gee, perhaps there is a better way to do this and I can work to make it so?” Is your approach to life more reactive or proactive? Are most things “impossible” or are they instead “exciting challenges?” Do you see things as always “cast in stone” or “written in sand?” The words you choose reflect your attitude and shape your thinking and actions – and therefore, those words affect the degree to which you have empowered your choices.

So, that's it – three actions to help you make empowered choices for yourself. 1) a personal mission statement, 2) intellectual engagement, and 3) an empowered and positive attitude towards all that you do and plan to do. What you do matters and you are the one with the most control over your decisions, activities and outcomes.

Both personal lives and careers involve many choices. I encourage you to keep in mind that you can empower your choices to enable yourself to make decisions that will help you achieve your goals.

I wish you well and hope you will always take ownership of your decisions and actions and achieve great satisfaction and enjoyment from everything you do.

Again, congratulations to all of the San José State students being honored here today on your outstanding achievements!

Thank you.