

Matthew Bailey on Benjamin Franklin

Journalist, publisher, author, philanthropist, postmaster, abolitionist, public servant, scientist, diplomat, inventor, statesman, husband, father, traitor, patriot, and criminal, are some of the many titles used to describe the man who signed his name B. Franklin. One need only look around the campus of the University of Pennsylvania or the city of Philadelphia to feel the monumental impact that this man, this veritable American institution, has had. But beyond all of this, Benjamin Franklin was a man whose imperfections and successes provide insight into the power of organization and personal leadership has upon not only the individual's life, but of those around them.

Brief Biography

Franklin's life was set against a backdrop not uncommon of colonial America. Born on January 17, 1706 in Boston, Ben's parents intended for him to become a priest.^[1] However, without the resources to pay for much formal education, Ben stopped schooling at age 9 and at age 12 he was apprenticed to his brother James as a printer.^[2] While good at this, Ben was unsatisfied and soon began secretly writing letters to the paper his brother published under the pseudonym "Silence Dogood". He would continue in this role until, at age 17, James was jailed for upsetting the clergy and Ben began managing the paper.^[3] Flourishing under the younger Franklin's leadership, James would begrudge Ben his success and upon his release began beating Ben. This led Ben to – in a criminal act in that day – run away – first to New York and, finding no work there, eventually to Philadelphia.^[4]

In Philadelphia, Franklin would again work as an apprentice printer. When he would ask for money from his family to start his own shop, he would be denied. He would try his hand as a store clerk and in some other roles, but would always come back to printing. Despite some success in writing/printing currency and pamphlets, it wasn't until, in 1729, he purchased the Pennsylvania Gazette that he came into his own. After this, he would marry Deborah Reed – who would own and operate a General Store attached to his printing shop. Then he would go on to print the famous Poor Richard's Almanac and, based on his success, create franchises of his printing company throughout the U.S. and West Indies. Further, he would have three children (William, Frances, and Sarah). Frances would die at age 4. Upon his "retirement" at age 44, he found himself needing engagement. He would go on to become the joint Deputy Postmaster for the United States, conduct scientific experiments, serve as Massachusetts, New Jersey, Georgia, and Pennsylvania's representative to England, and begin founding different improvement societies and civic organizations.^[5]

Come the American Revolution, Franklin would serve as a member of the Continental Congress, an Ambassador to France, and both a driving and uniting force behind the American Revolution and Union. However, Franklin's loyalty to the American cause would lead to a permanent estrangement from his loyalist son, William.^[6] Further, in 1774, his wife of 44 years would die – but had not seen Franklin in over 10 years due to his travel. Before his death in 1790 – at age 84 - Franklin would help establish the Pennsylvania government, instigate for women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery, and continue to invent. At his funeral, more than 20,000 people would pay their respects.^[7]

Accomplishments

Franklin was noted as a successful publisher, author, philanthropist, public servant, scientist, diplomat, inventor, and statesman. His success spanned many areas of his community and professional domains. As a statesman, Franklin was the only "founding father" to sign all four of the U.S.'s "founding" documents (the Declaration of Independence, Alliance with France, the Treaty of Paris, and the U.S. Constitution).^[8] He was an advocate for American Independence and their eventual Union. He was both a driver of these causes and a unifier of the different factions involved. He served as America's ambassador to France and is largely credited with securing the treaty of support and assistance which led to the eventual American victory.

As a scientist and inventor he is credited with inventing the flexible urinary catheter, the lightning rod, the bifocals, swim fins, the Franklin stove, and numerous other inventions.^[9] He charted the gulf streams, researched that storms moved from east to west, discovered whirlwinds, and formulated Daylight Savings Time (though we shouldn't hold that against him).^[10] He developed the United States postal system, organized its delivery routes, started the first public library, the first fire company, numerous societies for enlightenment, self-improvement, and abolition, and the University of Pennsylvania – amongst many other things.^[11] He ran a successful printing business and would eventually franchise it throughout the Eastern Seaboard and the West Indies. He authored and published what has become an American icon in Poor Richard's Almanac.^[12]

In sum, he was extremely successful professionally, in the community, and – to a large extent was happy with himself. He became an institution within America who graces the \$100 bill and is seen as “larger than life”.

Lessons from Life

1. Franklin integrated his professional, community, personal, and home life successfully in his inventions. Most of Franklin's inventions were based around needs he identified within his community, family, or for himself.^[13] For example, his development of the flexible urinary catheter was to assist his brother John who suffered from kidney stones.^[14] He developed the bifocals to assist him in his constant and voracious appetite for reading. Further, he developed the Franklin Stove because friends he knew needed a better, more efficient, safer, and cheaper way to heat their home.^[15] To his credit, Franklin never took patents out on his inventions because he felt that they were for the betterment of society and the community – not for his own wealth.^[16] He sought out to help others and viewed it as a challenge – and once solved was something that everyone should benefit from.
2. Franklin cultivated relationships throughout his life and tried to intertwine these networks to maximize effectiveness. Franklin successfully intertwined his domains throughout his life. He advocated for women's rights based on his relationship with his wife. He fought for abolition based on his life experiences and the relationships he cultivated with his slaves and others of color. He kept in constant touch with friends and acquaintances and used these relationships throughout to cross pollinate domains. He intermixed his professional and community relationships to build better institutions. He also used these skills and relations when he was brokering unity amongst factions at the Continental Congress or in negotiating terms for a treaty between the U.S. and France.
3. Failure in his personal life. It pained Franklin greatly that he became estranged from his son William. He also lamented that he had not been a good enough husband – indeed he had a reputation for philandering (though simultaneously maintained a reputation for being a good husband).^[17] It is telling that in over 400 quotes analyzed, only 3 dealt with family.^[18] Family unfortunately was a difficult sphere for Franklin. While in inventing and, to a somewhat lesser degree, to his writings and other work, he integrated family, his ability to truly integrate, appreciate, and balance his immediate family was always relegated to a lesser priority than finding harmony within his other spheres. While certainly this could be attributed to Franklin's own lesser emphasis upon this domain (which supports that he was in alignment) his writings indicate that he had many regrets in this sphere.^[19]
4. He wrote about things he considered important in all spheres. A further demonstration of his ability to cross-pollinate his domains were his writings. Franklin used his experiences in the community to write as Silence Dogood and as Poor Richard. He attributed his push for suffrage movement to his relationship with his wife.^[20] He wrote about things he saw within his own life – and these developed into many of Poor Richard's sayings. He integrated these writings into a book that he would publish – further combining his domains. Further, these publications would add to his ability to serve as a statesman and diplomat – as it would build his reputation. This, in sum, meant that he pursued what he saw as interesting and necessary while combining the different domains of his life. He took on projects that interested him and that he thought needed to be done while not being sure where they would lead or necessarily their success.

My Applications

In reviewing Franklin's life, I find that there are several notable elements that can be applied to my own. The most significant of these is his emphasis upon helping people. His work to take practical problems confronting people he knew, to view them as challenges to be conquered and then overcome them, to the betterment of others. He worked on those immediate things he saw and over time these small victories grew. Further, he used each iteration of an attempt to learn and build a better one. For example, he built several societies – first starting with Junto and then progressing to others – and always improved upon the previous “experiment”. Furthermore, his network from each of these endeavours continued to grow and he used these – by uniting and cultivating them – to improve himself and help serve others. Finally, even his personal failings give light to the dangers that the path Franklin chose may present.

For me, I think that Franklin's life serves as a lesson that great good can be achieved in focusing on the things right in front of you. By working with your different domains, uniting them, and helping them you can do a great amount of good. Further, your different domains can inform and strengthen you – instead of draining you. I think this is a key point in Total Leadership – reducing cognitive dissonance makes you more efficient. However, if you go beyond this and build upon the process to create reinforcing synergies amongst your domains you they – and you – become even stronger. Franklin's life testifies to this. His pitfall in his home sphere also serves as a lesson to me to not make the same mistake. While doing great things (and small things) one must not sacrifice themselves or what matters to them. I think that is what Franklin had the greatest trouble with and what I will endeavour to avoid in my own life.

[1] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/adams/peopleevents/p_franklin.html

[2]

Ibid.

[3] <http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/info/timeline.htm>

[4] <http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/info/index.htm>

[5] Ibid.

[6] http://www.benfranklin300.org/exhibition/_html/2_2/index.htm

[7] Ibid.

[8] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/adams/peopleevents/p_franklin.html

[9] <http://fi.edu/franklin/birthday/faq.html#10>

[10] Ibid.

[11] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/adams/peopleevents/p_franklin.html

[12] Ibid.

[13] <http://fi.edu/franklin/inventor/inventor.html>

[14] Ibid.

[15]

Ibid.

[16]

Ibid.

[17] Franklin,

Benjamin. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. 2nd Edition. Yale Press 1964.

[18] http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/289513.Benjamin_Franklin?page=7

[19] Franklin,

Benjamin. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. 2nd Edition. Yale Press 1964.

[20] Franklin,

Benjamin. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. 2nd Edition. Yale Press 1964.