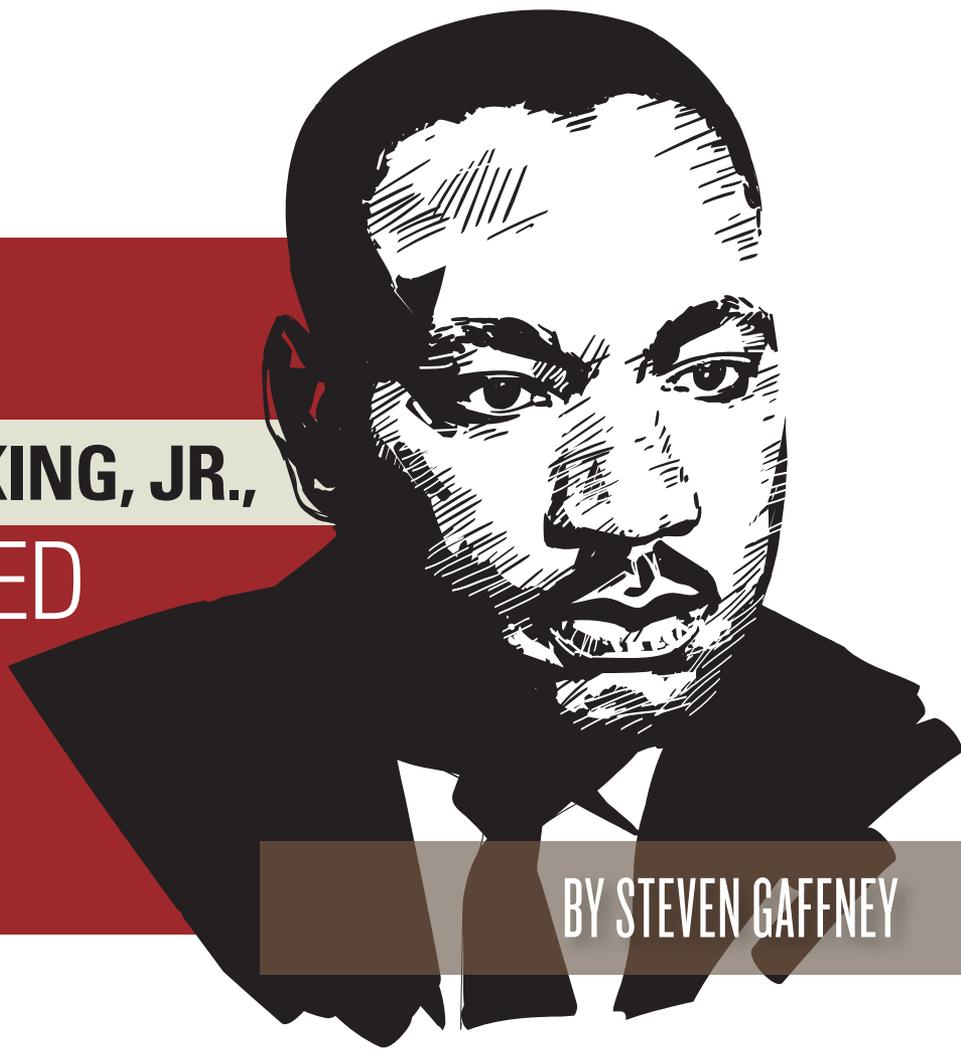


WHAT IF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., HAD COMPARED HIMSELF TO OTHERS?



BY STEVEN GAFFNEY

THE TRUE SECRET TO SUCCESS

Imagine a world in which Martin Luther King, Jr., had been nothing more than a preacher with a sizeable congregation, Bill Gates was nothing more than an effective manager at an IT firm, and Oprah Winfrey just a newscaster at a Baltimore television station. Suppose Warren Buffet was nothing more than a man who managed his money well in order to provide a nice life for his family. We probably wouldn't know their names, yet by most standards they would still be deemed successful.

I believe that true success is the degree to which we reach our full potential. By that standard, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and Warren Buffet could not be called successful if they did not achieve what we all now know they were capable of. If they had been satisfied with comparing themselves favorably with others, they may have not been inspired to achieve what they achieved. Where would our society be without the contributions they have made? What would the landscape of twenty-first-century America look like without them?

Fortunately, they did not suffer what many people suffer from – Comparison Success Obstruction™ (CSO). People with this affliction

compare themselves with others to gauge their own success. Those comparisons can sadly set us up for mediocrity. If Warren Buffet suffered from CSO, he could have taken a look at his neighbor and been satisfied with the idea of building a bigger house, purchasing a nicer car, and sending his children to better schools. Oprah Winfrey could have landed her job as a Baltimore newscaster, compared herself to friends and colleagues, and decided she was doing quite well just where she was.

Many organizations suffer from CSO. They even go so far as to benchmark their achievements against other organizations. Perhaps, yours does this too. While benchmarking can produce some good results, it can also chain your organization to the common results of others—restraining you from catapulting beyond the competition and producing breakthrough results.

Comparing ourselves to the competition begs the question – so what? So what if you can move widgets faster than Widget Movers Express? So what if you are the leader in a certain technology? So what if you are the highest in retention? Are those reasons to be content? So what?

Maybe your organization has untold “Martin Luther King, Jr.,” potential. Maybe there is a life-changing discovery or invention lurking within

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your organization — within the minds of your employees. Maybe it is within you! But this is unlikely to happen as long as you or others around you suffer from CSO.

I once heard an interview with John Wooden, the famous UCLA basketball coach who won seven straight NCAA titles and nine titles in eleven years. The interviewer asked Wooden for his keys to success, and Wooden said that after each game – regardless of the score -- he asked his players, did you play your best? Think about this. In professional sports, team dynasties result from an effective coach and a few outstanding players who are with the team year after year. But the make-up of teams in college basketball is constantly changing as new students join the team and others move on to graduate. But the changing roster didn't hinder Coach Wooden. He built a dynasty in part by asking the ever-changing faces on his team, did you play your best?

Imagine if we were asked that on a daily basis. What would your answer be? Is it time to step it up, push ourselves, regardless of what others say? I think so. Not because we have to, not because there is something wrong, but because we can. After all, isn't that what true success is all about?

That is why I believe we need to drop the judgments and comparisons with others. We need to stop looking behind us to see who is chasing us. Instead we need to run fast regardless of the others in the race and push ourselves to see what is possible.

This is what striving for true success is all about.

Are you playing your best, or are you settling for what you think you can get rather than going for what you truly want? What are you willing to do about it? After all, the only person you can control is yourself. You cannot necessarily control what others do, but you are fully responsible for the way you respond and the actions you take to achieve the results you really want. Attaining perfection may be hard, but making progress is easy.

WARNING: If you choose to stop suffering from CSO and strive for what you can become, brace yourself and make sure you enjoy the ride, because there is an ironic twist that will come your way. The twist is that successful people often don't think of themselves as particularly successful. If fact, the more successful they are, the more they recognize the gap between where they are and what they can become.

A while back, I saw a documentary about the incredible life and achievements of Martin Luther King, Jr. One of the many things that shocked me was that he was plagued by the thought that he had not yet done enough. Imagine that. As successful and accomplished as he was, he was not satisfied—not even close.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was chasing down a dream. He knew that there was always more to do. There was always more that he could expect of himself. He had a vision for the future and that vision was not limited by comparisons or others' expectations. True success is not about how we compare with others, but how we compare with what we truly can become.

Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and Warren Buffet aren't playing small either. They each have their own vision for the future, a vision that I would argue continues to expand as they achieve more and more. Who can they become? How about you? What dreams can you accomplish?

Here is a 6-Step Formula to Start You on Your Journey:

1. Recognize you may be suffering from CSO, and do something about it. Throw away the comparisons. They limit your potential.
2. Create a vision for the future that is not a reaction to the past or a comparison with others in the present. Spend some time reflecting on what you believe you can become. Dream. Brainstorm. Use what if? What if we had nothing stopping us? What if we could really accomplish our ideal product or service? What if we had the perfect economy?
3. Avoid dream crushers, vision smashers, and naysayers. Don't be hampered by low expectations – your own or anyone else's. Instead, search for people who dream big and believe in themselves and in you.
4. Execute the next step. No matter how big the vision, no matter how daunting the task, ask yourself, "What is the next step?" Then do it.
5. At the end of each day, reflect and ask yourself, "Did I play my best? What can I do better tomorrow?" This attitude is the key to long-term success.
6. Build your support network. Share this article with others. Pass it to others who have remarkable potential. The fewer people who suffer from CSO, the easier it is for you and others to accomplish breakthrough results.

While others are fixated on comparing themselves with others or preoccupied with looking over their shoulders to make sure no one will overtake them, keep challenging yourself and those around you with what you can become.

Maybe there is "Martin Luther King, Jr.-Bill Gates-Warren Buffet-Oprah Winfrey" potential in you and the people around you just waiting to be awakened and inspired. Think of the difference that that could make. It can begin now. It's up to you. 



Steven Gaffney has served as a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, influence and leadership and is one of the recognized authorities on the subject of honesty. He is the author of two ground-breaking books, *Just Be Honest: Authentic Communication Strategies that Get Results* and *Last a Lifetime* and *Honesty Works! Real-World Solutions to Common Problems at Work & Home*.