On cause and effect

I recently had a moment of realization on cause and effect relations. Like many others, I primarily related cause and effect theory to science and experiments and not so much to behavior or personal relations.

My moment of insight came from listening to an interview of Kurt Tepperwein. But let me first start by refreshing the basic principle of cause and effect.

The theory is rather simple and often referred to as the principle of causality.

The cause specifies why something is happening. What is happening is then the effect. So, in principle there is a direct relation between cause and effect with the cause directly determining the effect and preceding it in time.

While this sounds simple, we rarely apply this principle to our thoughts, behaviors, and actions. We sometimes even seem blind towards the effects we cause. However, over time, they manifest themselves and become our reality.

But what does this all mean in practice? Well, firstly it means that we determine outcomes in a far more profound way and further ahead than we believe. If we wake up in a bad mood or with negative thoughts, this is affecting the outcome of our future. We are planting seeds and will harvest them – whether positive or negative as in this example. Most likely our bad mood also influences the people around us and so triggers further negative reactions that back-fire.

But cause and effect also mean that we need to be crystal-clear on what we really want in life. And here is where I had my moment of realization. It is critical to be just as clear and specific with your targets in life as in business. The difference is that targets in business are mostly clear and often handed down to us. This may be annoying once in a while as we believe our influence on them is limited but we do get clear and hopefully SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Reasonable, Time-bound) targets to pursue.

With targets in life there in no higher authority at work that guides us or instructs us. We define our targets but often struggle to get clarity on what we want. How often do you hear colleagues, family or friends taking about what they do not want or like, rather then what they want? "I don't like my job", "My partner is driving me mad", "I want to do something else". All interesting remarks, but they reveal how clueless we often are when it comes to defining a clear target in life.

Imagine you would create a negative bucket list of places you don't want to visit. It won't help you in getting any closer to your next travel destination.

So do invest time in thinking about your real targets and don't stop at an abstract target as "I want to live a happy life" or "I want to be successful". Define those terms and make them clear. After all, happiness is not the same for you as it is to others.

And remember the cause and effect theory in all of that. It's just like Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "A man is what he thinks about all day long."