

Life Lessons from William Shakespeare



The works of Shakespeare have stayed meaningful for more than 400 years—and for good reason.

The English playwright's insights into human nature are unmatched in literature, and every one of his plays has many valuable lessons about human behavior.

Shakespeare is not only the world's most perceptive dramatist, but also probably the world's first therapist. *Important lessons from Shakespeare's plays...*

THE POWER OF PERSUASION

Marc Antony, the Roman politician, general and trusted friend of emperor Julius Caesar, appears in two of Shakespeare's plays.

In *Julius Caesar*, he is called upon by Caesar's assassins to speak at Caesar's funeral.

Their hope: That Marc Antony will drive home the point that Caesar was a tyrant who deserved his fate, something the angry crowd already believes.

Instead, Marc Antony cleverly turns the anti-Caesar crowd against Caesar's murderers.

When Shakespeare wrote Marc Antony's speech, he created a blueprint for winning over any audience. *Lessons in persuasion from Marc Antony's speech...*

• **Speak briefly.** Always keep important presentations concise—and effective. Work hard in advance to keep them short.

• **Begin on common ground.** Start by stressing the beliefs and desires you share with your audience. Without being condescending, indicate that you understand and sympathize with their needs.

• **State your purpose often.** Marc Antony persuaded the people that Caesar

loved them by emphasizing that Caesar was not power hungry and that those who slew him were murderers, not heroes.

• **Keep your demands to a minimum.** Make only one or two points in any presentation. Most people's attention spans are too short to absorb more.

Better: Imply that you have more information than you have been able to tell your audience. Your goal here is merely to spark your audience's imagination, not to satisfy it.

THE POWER OF MAKING OTHERS FEEL GOOD

One of Shakespeare's most likable characters is Falstaff, who appears in four of his plays. Though he is hardly perfect—always cast as a kindly liar, a drinker and overly boastful—he is above all fun-loving, loyal and often childlike. Shakespeare cast Falstaff in such a way that Falstaff makes everyone feel warm and even a little superior. *Lessons from Falstaff's likable personality...*

• **The art of pleasing is to be pleased.** Dazzling others with your accomplishments may seem like a way to win people over and achieve grander status. But you can actually achieve greater power and influence by mastering the ability to make others feel good.

• **Be truly interested in what others have to say.** Teach yourself to be visibly involved when others talk. Concentrate on their topics, and ask questions about their accomplishments and interests. Don't abruptly shift the focus of conversation. It can hurt the other's feelings.

• **Make the other person look good.** Create the impression that the other person

Bottom Line/Personal interviewed George Weinberg, PhD, a psychotherapist in private practice in New York.

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asked a good question or that he/she is interesting. Concentrate on what's being said, not on what you want to say.

• **Convey a sense of having infinite time—even when you don't have much.** If you are pressed for time, let the other person know early on. Then it is a fact. But if the other person senses your impatience from your hasty manner, negative feelings about you will result.

THE POWER OF DECISIVENESS

Hamlet is perhaps the best-known character in all modern literature. His relentless agonizing and inaction frustrates audiences, who feel sorry for him but wish he would take a stand.

Hamlet is the epitome of someone who cannot make up his mind. He is preoccupied with himself, and in the end loses his family, his kingdom and his life. We find the depth of his character fascinating, but many don't find him likable or admirable. *Lessons from Hamlet's indecision...*

• **Realize that most decisions are reversible.** If your decision was a bad one, it almost always can be changed—if not immediately, then over time. There are always valuable lessons to be learned along the way.

• **Avoid blaming others for your mistakes.** It's a habit that becomes addictive since it absolves you of any wrongdoing or responsibility. Blaming others also keeps you from taking action.

• **Start by making small, less-important decisions first.** The big ones will be easier later.

• **Do it—even if it means doing it badly.** It's more important to take a position than to put up the *perfect* defense against error. The first three tries might be done badly, but they will surely lead to a fourth, more successful try.

THE POWER OF SHOWING MERCY

It pays to forgive and forget. Portia, from *The Merchant of Venice*, is one of Shakespeare's most sympathetic characters. Though she isn't likable at the play's start, she redeems herself with the audience by successfully pleading for the life of her husband's friend, who cannot repay a debt. Her plea for mercy is among the best-known speeches in all of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare used the word "mercy" 94 times, and in nearly all his plays. A character's entire nature was often determined by whether he was guided

by mercy or not. Being without mercy could often pull a character down from greatness. *Lessons in showing mercy...*

• **When you show mercy toward others, you make friends forever.** By showing mercy, you are relieving people of the need to be perfect in your presence. You are telling them that they have room to err—or to look foolish. Such generosity is rarely forgotten. People *without* mercy become off-putting and make life-long enemies because of their coldness and lack of humanity.

• **Mercy is an easy road to a great sense of exhilaration and power.** Refrain from any act of power at another's expense—and see how you feel. Practice by forgiving a blunder by a loved one or colleague. You'll feel stronger and more self-confident in your judgment and wisdom.

• **Being merciful toward others will give you tremendous emotional ease and personal freedom.** By letting go of grudges, you lessen the risk of hypertension and other maladies that can end your life prematurely.

• **Mercy toward oneself is also important.** The person who is pitiless toward himself feels desperately insecure over one trivial fault after another.

Without feeling mercy toward yourself, you cannot feel self-love. The elation of empowerment that comes from forgiving yourself is, in itself, matchless. ■