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The Secret to Being the Best

(Version 2)

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The Secret to Being the Best

Wanna win? Wanna be the best? Wanna become number one at what you do? There is a way. It isn't easy, but it is simple. Here are several things to consider:

- (1) Never "graduate" from grunt work
- (2) Never rest on your laurels
- (3) Never stop learning
- (4) Outwork everyone around you
- (5) Be opinionated, but teachable, and always improving
- (6) Serve others
- (7) Be better at the end of the day than when it started

I happen to believe that a consistent application of the above rules will allow anyone with reasonable intelligence to be the best that they can be.

Never "graduate" from grunt work

It never ceases to amaze me how many people find certain kinds of work "beneath them." (When I encounter such a person who happens to be in my employ, I assist them in understanding that if certain kinds of work are beneath them, then in return, certain kinds of pay will also be beneath them.) No one I know wants to work with prima donnas, yet there seems to be no shortage of them in business. Equally disturbing are those who feel that they have already "done their time," or who have "not-my-job" syndrome. What a contrast this is to the executives I know who are willing to roll up their sleeves and "dig in" with their employees to finish the big task, or complete the necessary project. It has been said, "Those who don't understand what goes on in the trenches will never have the knowledge or experience necessary to win the war."

- *Have you "graduated" from grunt work?*

Never rest on your laurels

Interviewing middle-aged executives is always interesting. Perhaps one of the saddest experiences is chatting with a seasoned professional who once was "all that," but who now has decided to live off of his or her previous successes. Often, I will run across an executive who will say something like, "Please note the 17 years' experience that I have doing X, Y and Z." When presented with such a resume, I can't help but ask if the candidate truly has 17 years' worth of experience, or rather has 1 year of experience, repeated 17 times? Recently, I began working with a wonderful professional who has 30 years of experience in rich and varied fields. He is 100% engaged in the project we are working on together. I receive regular update communications from him. Over the weekend he sent me a strategic planning document for a business that we are just beginning to evaluate together. He didn't wait until we spoke about it - he wanted to get a head start. I don't question his commitment, because I can feel it. I don't have to wonder about his involvement, I can see it. Sure, he has a wonderful history. And like most of us, he can even be prone to ramble on a bit about his 30 years of work history. But... and this is the big key - he knows that his past accomplishments and his wonderful history are merely a foundation for the work he is currently doing, each and every day.

- *What have you done for your company lately?*

Never stop learning

When I hire someone, the number one thing I try to discern about the candidate is whether they possess personal integrity. (Honesty and character are not negotiable with me.) However, the second trait I try to evaluate in a candidate is what I like to call “intellectual curiosity.” To me, intellectual curiosity is one of the most important traits leading to success in life. Basically, it is an attitude that drives the individual to find out the “why” and “how” of things, rather than just the “what.” The most concise evaluation tool to discern this attitude is a simple question, “Tell me the most interesting book or article you read recently?” I’ve found that real winners are always learning, and always engaging their mind and intellect in new and interesting ways.

- *What did you learn today?*

Outwork everyone around you

The only place you’ll find “success” before “work” is in the dictionary. It is such a treat these days to come across someone who really knows how to work. The following poem sums it all up for me. It applies to all of the winners I’ve known.

The heights by great men, reached and kept,
Were not achieved by sudden flight.
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.

(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

Contrast that sentiment with those of your peers who watch the clock tick by, ecstatic for the five o’clock bell that will send them on their merry way home. I call these employees Fred Flintstones. Just like Fred, as soon as the clock strikes, they slide down their dinosaur and rush for the exits.

- *Were you productively engaged today? Did you earn your pay, and “then some?”*

Be opinionated, but teachable – and always improving

The world is full of people with weak spines or “not enough information.” I’ve come to believe that the ability to make decisions under uncertainty, and without complete data, is one of the hallmarks of successful leaders. But in order to be decisive, you’ve got to be able to form an opinion on an issue, and then be willing to stand up for it. Concurrently, you’ve got to be humble enough at any time, to change that opinion if the facts change or become clearer. It is this balance between self-confidence and humility that often distinguishes a successful person from a mediocre one. I love what an executive told me the other day, “I’ve always felt that it isn’t the right of my employees to challenge me... it is their obligation.”

Sometimes, I meet blowhards who feel that God has somehow made them incredibly smarter than the rest of us on earth, and whose mantra might as well be, “my way or the highway.” However, I have also met others who are so indecisive and spend so much time avoiding sticking their necks out that they never make a decision one way or another. Along with these weak, turtle-like politicians, I sometimes run into those who are paralyzed by the fear of making a wrong decision, and so they plod along for months, unable to find the perfect answer for an imperfect set of facts. These good folks never come to understand the simple truism, “Not to decide, is to decide.”

The hallmark of a truly teachable person (or company) is a willingness to measure performance and improve continuously. The entire proposition at our company, Mindshare, is built on a organization's willingness to ask customers and employees to give honest feedback, and then have the courage to make the needed changes. Similarly, the truly teachable individual views both positive and negative feedback as a "gift."

- *Do you have an opinion? Have you shared it? Are you measuring performance and improving?*

Serve others

The great philosopher and physician, Albert Schweitzer said,

"The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve."

I'm not sure anything I could write could really add anything to this statement, other than "Amen."

- *What have you done for others today?*

Be better at the end of the day than when it started

Finally, let me share a little secret that I've found useful when it comes to tackling big projects – such as changing your life. And that is this – take life one step at a time. I loved the movie, *What about Bob?* starring Bill Murray. He played a neurotic patient whose psychiatrist keeps telling him to take "baby steps." Rent the movie, it's funny... and the advice is sound. You don't need to conquer the world today, just make sure you're better at the end of the day than when you woke up. But, this takes discipline. It's like losing weight – I'm told the ideal is 1-2 pounds a week. It's like the old saying about how to eat an elephant...one bite at a time. The goal is to break down your life into daily improvements. In the end though, the key is to have a stick-to-it-ness that will test even the strongest discipline.

- *Do you have a plan for making small, but consistent improvements each day?*

This is how I see it.

About Richard D. Hanks and Mindshare

Richard D. Hanks is the President of **Mindshare Technologies**, a leading provider of real-time, automated customer and employee feedback solutions. His experience spans multiple industries and disciplines, including many years as an adjunct professor at Cornell. He is an author and frequent teacher/speaker at trade, academic, and professional gatherings. Mindshare's business monitoring tools help companies improve operational excellence and minimize customer attrition through personal customer involvement. Mindshare's proprietary survey technology captures the voice of the customer in real-time and immediately transforms it into actionable intelligence through powerful enterprise reporting. As a hosted system, Mindshare is affordable and flexible, with surveys and reports tailored to fit a company's individual needs. For more information please visit: www.mshare.net. To reach Rich directly, contact him at rhanks@mshare.net or (801) 263-2333.

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