



BUT STUCK

**ACCELERATE
BEYOND
BRILLIANCE**

RAJESH SETTY

CO-FOUNDER OF AUDVISOR, AND AUTHOR OF SIX FOOT WORLD

ADVANCE PRAISE

I run a popular program called Creativity and Personal Mastery and have a bunch of questions/statements that a prospect has to examine to determine if it is appropriate for them. The overwhelming majority resonate with the statement ‘Do you have a nagging sense that time is slipping by and you have accomplished only a fraction of what you are capable?’ In other words, Are You Stuck? We all are but we are frequently blind to how and where we are stuck and what to do about it.

Setty is a serial entrepreneur and has keen observation. Read this book to gain deep insights into what is holding you back. These can range from your faulty perspectives to expectations of others. In the final section he invites you to commit to getting unstuck as the first important step. Do so. This is the book to buy and read – not to keep on a shelf for ‘somed ay’.”

SRIKUMAR RAO // TED Speaker I Professor I Author of “Happiness at Work: Be Resilient, Motivated and Successful – No Matter What”

“Being smart won’t save you from the frustration of getting stuck, but this book will...”

DAN WALDSCHMIDT // best-selling author of EDGY Conversations: How Ordinary People Achieve Outrageous Success

Rajesh has brought insights both playful and practical to the very real challenges we all face in creating great work. His thoughts are clear and kind.”

TOM CHI // Founding Team Member of Google X

SMART, BUT STUCK

ACCELERATE BEYOND BRILLIANCE

RAJESH SETTY

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DEDICATION

To Opher Brayer who keeps nudging me to go beyond brilliance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book is rarely a solo act, and this one was no exception.

I am indebted to a lot of people who made this happen.

I thank the readers of my blog, especially those that engaged in conversations throughout the development of the book.

The very early (1-page) version of the “Unleash the Force (4CE)” was published in the “What Matters Now” book under the title “Enrichment.” I owe thanks to Seth Godin for including that piece.

I’m grateful for the team at AMEX Open Forum for publishing a few excerpts from this book very early on.

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- › Venkk Sastry
- › Satish Shenoy

Last, but not least of course, my wife Kavitha and my son Sumukh.

—**Rajesh Setty**

FOREWORD

Because I love how Rajesh Setty thinks—his “zeroth impression”¹ ranks among my favorite concepts ever—I was flattered when he asked me to write this.

And his title captured something I’d written about, too, after seeing so many brilliant people fail: Brilliance isn’t enough

So, what is it, beyond brilliance, that you need? You need to identify, and overcome, your stumbling blocks.

Fortunately for you, Rajesh has worked for decades in an area that must have the highest concentration of stumbling blocks in the world: America’s Silicon Valley. It’s a place packed with people whose SATs were perfect but whose careers are stalled. He decided to study them.

What tripped them up? How could they have avoided it? And what if I write a book that shares what I learned, and shows people how to identify, and overcome, their stumbling block?

Another great idea, Rajesh, and good for you. And lucky for you, the reader, for coming upon this very smart book.

Harry Beckwith III

Partner, Beckwith Partners

100 Best Business Books of All Time Honoree

2011 World’s Five Best Speakers Honoree

2004 Business Audio Book Of The Year

American Marketing Association Gold Effie

¹ We dive into the concept of the “zeroth impression” in chapter seven.

PREFACE

Anne Frank said it right: “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

That includes you.

Whatever it is that you are pursuing, one thing is for sure—you don’t want to settle for less. You’re not someone who is satisfied with merely getting by.

While on your journey this book caught your attention. I don’t know you personally, but it’s safe to assume that you know you’re smart, and you’re probably feeling stuck on the path to expressing your unique brilliance.

You are the kind of smart I am referring to if you:

- are capable of making a significant contribution to the world
- can make life more meaningful for the people around you, or...
- can more easily and quickly accomplish what your peers accomplish, at less cost.

Being stuck is knowing that you are not expressing your full potential in any one, or all, of the aforementioned ways.

It’s frustrating, understandably. You can clearly see your desired destination. You know it’s reachable, and that you’re not just dreaming about a pie-in-the-sky. You’re doing the things you think you should be doing, and following the path you think is right. There just seem to be unseen obstacles in your way.

Another way of putting this?

You may feel like you're going *nowhere*, instead of *somewhere*.

Let me point out from the start that I'm not simply referring to financial success or lack thereof, although financial success is often a byproduct of going somewhere when you choose it to be.

So you're smart and going nowhere because you're stuck. This means one or more of the following is happening:

- the gap between where you are and where you want to be, however you define living a good life, is widening.
- the gap between where you are and where you'd be if you were living up to your potential, is widening.
- the gap between where you are and where you should be in terms of the significant contribution you're meant to make to the world, is widening.

All of this makes you feel terrible because you know you have the brains to go somewhere, be someone, and do remarkable things.

It surprises you when you see other smart people who seem to be going nowhere (according to their own assessment), but it's a whole different story when it's you. It hurts...and worse yet? Is when you can't figure out why people who don't seem to be any smarter than you are leaving you in the dust on their way to somewhere meaningful.

This book will help you start figuring out how to start going somewhere meaningful too, to the places you're meant to be.

You have to get “unstuck” before you resume the journey to your pot of gold.

I’m not promising to make you any smarter—you already have enough smarts to accomplish your goals. My goal is to help you clear the obstacles in your way and get unstuck.

(Smart) + (UN-Stuck) = accelerating beyond brilliance.

I do cover both sides of the equation in this book. If you are already on the “beyond brilliance” side, you’ll be able to look through a new lens at some important challenges you might yet encounter on your future journey.

With this book, I hope to be a catalyst and accelerate your journey to beyond brilliance.

The information in this book has been field-tested. Over the last few years I’ve shared excerpts of this book via my blog and in my speaking and consulting engagements. The feedback has not only been encouraging and fulfilling, it’s convinced me that writing this book is the right thing to do.

I am delighted to invite you on this journey of going beyond brilliance, and I look forward to hearing your success story.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGES

"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated

derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

—CALVIN COOLIDGE

Todd Sattersten, who I am blessed to have as a friend and advisor, said it brilliantly in the introduction of a book he co-authored called "The 100 Best Business Books of All Time." He said, "Business books can change you, if you let them."

This book is no different. It took me a few years to do the research for his book, a year to write, rewrite and rewrite it again, and then another nine months to get it published.

Everyone has a choice in how they spend their time. You've chosen to spend anywhere between three to five hours of your precious time with me as we go through this journey together. It means a lot to me. I am delighted. I am honored. I am humbled. I understand the enormous responsibility that is placed on me to deliver the goods.

I knew that this was a challenge going into it. I took that seriously, and the result is in your hands. I know that the job is still incomplete.

You still have to read the book, right?

True, but that's not all. There's more.

You could read this book the way you'd read fiction, but I know that you want more out of this than the satisfaction of checking a book off your list. You want to make a difference in

yourself and then you want to make a difference in this world. You will agree with me that this cannot happen simply by reading the book. The rubber meets the road when you apply one or more of the lessons out on the field.

Honestly, it's more fun to practice on the field than simply digging into the book.

Think about it:

Do you stop at reading about swimming? Or do you want to swim?

Do you stop at reading about sky-diving? Or prefer to actually go sky-diving?

Do you stop at reading about a movie? Or, actually go to see that movie?

Clearly, knowing has value but *using* what you know has far higher value. With that in mind, there is an Acceleration Challenge at the end of each chapter. You might want to make a note somewhere, dog-ear that challenge page or simply add it to your “To Do” list. Use whatever system you want—but make it a point to revisit the challenges and complete them—as many as you can.

If you want to go one step further, feel free to share your new experiences wherever you are comfortable sharing— maybe on your blog or any social media outlet (you can use the hashtag #beyondbrilliance if you want!) or if you are the introvert type, you can just record it in your personal diary.

There is one more important thing I want to cover before we really dig in...

HOW TO FINISH READING THIS BOOK

I've bought a few hundred business books so far in my life, and received a few hundred more as gifts from other authors, publishers and publicists.

While I read at least one book a week, the number of books I've "half-read" far surpasses the number of books I've completed—by a wide margin.

During the early days of building Audvisor (www.audvisor.com), I had serious discussions with authors, publishers, behavioral analysts and a lot of other experts about this issue. It's been on my mind for years.

I asked: Why do we love to buy (with the intention to read!) so many books, only to leave them half-read?

During this informal research, I expected to hear the following, seemingly legitimate, excuses:

- **"I'm too busy."** You realize you don't really want to spend all that time to finish the book, so you browse, scan, and skip to the parts you think offer the most insights.
- **"Well, I'm always learning."** These days you have more ways than one to be constantly learning: podcasts, videos, blog posts and articles. You'll get around to the pile of books...eventually.
- **"I'm overwhelmed."** There's an overabundance of information available on any topic you want, it's coming at you from everywhere and it can overwhelm, not to mention, distract. Especially when you have to frequently stop

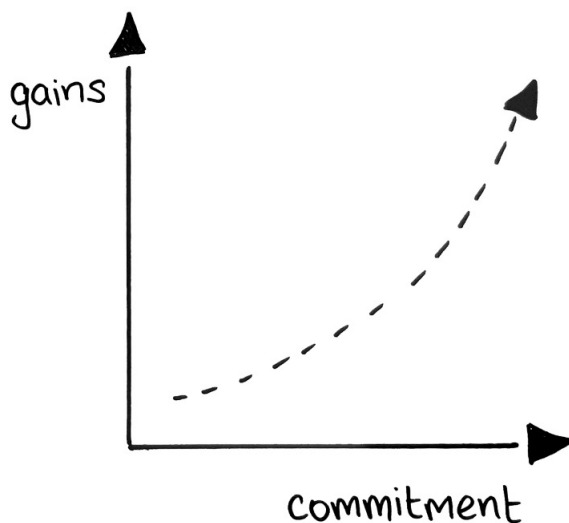
reading to pop onto the internet ‘real quick’ to look that topic/person/site up that the author mentions.

- **“Too much fluff!”** It’s disappointing when a book has more fluff than you expected, and some of us have very low tolerance for the fluff.
- **“Books? I’m a kid in a candy store.”** You’re in the midst of reading one book, but then you spot another that looks exciting. You can’t say no! You open it up and start digging in, only to find another book before you finish... again and so on. You’re reading too many books at once and end up finishing few.

Can you relate to any of the above?

I’m sure you can! Me too.

But while the above excuses played a reasonably big role, there were also the following three major factors at play. Here’s where we get more serious.



1. A demand for escalating commitment as we progress through a book:

Think about it.

The first chapter of any business book asks little or nothing from us. Oftentimes there's even a fairy-tale like story to give us a high-concept idea of what the book is all about. We can't wait to dig in further.

In the next two to three chapters, the book goes a bit deeper, but still, very little commitment or action is required of us. It's thought-provoking intellectual entertainment up to this point.

Moving forward, we begin to get into the core principles, and this is where the rubber meets the road. Our thinking is challenged. We're called to reflect upon or perhaps even completely reframe some of our views on the topic in question, and that's hard work!

But wait, isn't this why we bought the book in the first place? To reap the promised benefits and/or transformation?

Sure...except this is when resistance shows up.

It's no longer a fairy tale. It's impossible to continue as if we were reading a novel or some fluff. We're too smart for *that*. The only way we can justify the time we spend continuing to read further, is if we actually make a commitment to change.

And change is painful. It's can be time-consuming. It's also hard.

So what's the alternative? We pick up the next book and start reading, not realizing we've just committed to stay where we are.

2. The signal-to-noise ratio problem

This is an extension of the discussion of “fluff” above. A typical business book is 200-plus pages, and might have ten to fifteen major takeaways in the entire book. So let’s say it takes five hours to finish the book. Best case scenario is that the time required to simply *acquire* a takeaway is around 20 minutes. That’s not including the time it takes to apply any insights we gain. Many smart people want to, but we just don’t have that kind of time to invest.

3. Books require our full attention

If you love learning, there are several slices of time in your day where you might hit two birds with one stone thanks to a myriad of audio learning modalities available to us. We can listen and learn while working out, commuting, waiting for someone, or taking a morning walk, but we can’t actually read a book.

My humble advice is this: Awareness is half the battle. If you find yourself relating to the concepts in this book, but becoming uncomfortable or impatient, remember the concepts above and don’t rush yourself. Resist your resistance. It’s our natural tendency to get impatient and look for ways to solve problems as quickly as possible, but humans are complicated when it comes to change.

I’ve done my best to organize what I know and what I’ve learned in a way that will make for an easy read. I’ve tested and received feedback on the concepts I’m about to present by

publishing on my blog, on other websites, and by sharing them during my speaking engagements. I know they work, and it's my sincere wish for everyone to move beyond brilliance for the benefit of all.

Over to you now.

PART 1

Being Stuck—What's Blocking Your Brilliance?



"How does one become a butterfly? You must want to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar."

—TRINA PAULUS

There are lots of reasons for getting stuck. You can claim your “stuck” situation is unique and that no one else in the world has it and I’d agree. It can’t be any other way. There is no one else who is “you,” so your “stuck” part also has to be unique.

However...there *are* patterns that repeat themselves. I’ll go through these problem patterns and the reasons why they show up again and again. Where applicable, I’ll also share insights and outcomes from my research on why it’s hard to notice some of these patterns. I’ll share suggestions on how to escape the traps, which you will be able to customize according to your unique situation.

GRADUALLY...THEN SUDDENLY

"The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining."

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

In the book, *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway paints a scenario where one of the key characters, Mike Campbell, is asked, “How did you go bankrupt?” His response is “Gradually...then suddenly.” This is probably applicable to all of us at some point—you rarely fail “suddenly.” It happens

through a series of smaller everyday failures. The day you fail “suddenly” is just your realization of a culmination of the smaller ones.

In fact, “gradually...then suddenly” is a phenomenon that explains a lot of the individual and societal problems we’re grappling with.

It’s no different for how we suddenly find ourselves stuck.

Having had the privilege of working with very smart people for close to three decades, I can say I see smart people getting stuck all the time.

What about *less smart* people?

Don’t they also get stuck?

Yes, of course.

The difference between you and them, is that when smart people recognize that they are stuck, they figure it out. Well, most of the time. We will get to more details soon.

Less smart people will often believe themselves to be victims of circumstances beyond their control who can’t do much to change their stuck-ness. They choose to stay stuck, not even realizing it’s a choice.

But that’s not you, so let’s not even worry about the not-so-smart-and-stuck people right now, okay?

SEVEN KINDS OF BEING STUCK (INCLUDING ONE THAT’S GOOD)

Being stuck is a problem, but there is at least one situation in which it’s not necessarily all bad. In fact, it’s part of our

Here are the six kinds of getting stuck that need to be fixed,
and the last kind that needs to be encouraged.
Growth.

1. We're stuck outside the field

We're not on the field we really want to be playing on. We're stuck between our agenda and the agenda of the person who is paying us to do a job. In fact, our “stuck-ness” is costing us, but it's also costing the company (if we work for one) twice. First, because they aren't getting the value of their investment in us, and second, because of the opportunity cost incurred as a result.

Example: Five years ago, Joe wanted to start a business. Today, he still wants to start that new business. Ten years from now? Who knows—he may still be talking about starting that business without having made any *real* progress. Meanwhile, his job performance at work continues to suffer because he is torn between the present in which he's lost interest, and the future to which he has not fully committed.

2. We're stuck at the door

We are at the door. We know that the field we want to play on is on the other side. We have to open the door and walk through, except we're too busy fiddling with the door. We talk about getting in there and playing hard but we've yet to make the effort required. In other words, we have trouble with starting things.

Example: You hired a consultant to come in and make recommendations to fine tune the business. You had to do

some homework before you could make the changes and embark on the new journey. You were halfway through that homework when you got busy with other things. You don't start that new journey because your homework is not complete. You can't complete the homework because you are busy doing what you were doing before the consultant came. You are basically stuck at the door.

3. We're stuck at the center

We are somewhere near the center and we've been there for quite some time. Moving away from center involves taking risks and we don't like that. So we stay where it's safe and comfortable. It's a safe bet in the short-term, but it backfires in the long term because the landscape changes every few years: what's center today may no longer be on the map tomorrow.

Example: Things are going very well in your business. The trends are not. If you change what you're doing now, there will be a dip in revenue but you might avert a long-term threat. Plus, you don't want to admit it—but it's a lot of hard work to change. You think about the change almost everyday, but continue what you are doing. Until one day...

4. We're stuck in a fight

For whatever reason, we believe that for us to win, others have to lose—which means we get stuck in a bloody fight every now and then. If we work for someone else, this is another case in which we might lose twice too: on our

productivity and the productivity of the person we engaged in a fight.

Example: You're writing a book and decide to post a chapter excerpt on your blog. You get a comment that you don't like and start engaging with the person who made the comment in an effort to prove that you are right. You're so focused on the fight, you've forgotten about the book.

5. We're stuck in the weeds

We're on the path, and bravely moving along the edges of our comfort zone, but then we get stuck in the weeds—those totally unrelated and unnecessary details. It gets worse when we can't even acknowledge that we're in the weeds.

Example: You start doing some research on a new business opportunity. It leads to a survey, and one of the survey questions is related to the competition. So you decide to do further analyses and take a deep dive into the businesses of all of your competitors. You're both fascinated and worried. You begin to keep tabs on everything and anything they do. Meanwhile, you start running behind on your own business while your competition keeps running even further ahead of you. Now you work harder to find out how they're getting ahead...(you know where we are going with this.)

6. We're stuck at the wrong edges

We're far from center and beyond the edges of our comfort zone. We're stuck because we're in unfamiliar territory and we really have to stretch ourselves to get comfortable. It's no

use because we're outside of the wrong edges. Even if we were to get unstuck, we or our company won't benefit that much because we're in the wrong place.

Example: A wrong edge is anything you're doing that's new and unfamiliar, and that isn't leading you to a better place. It may be a wrong habit that you are acquiring, the wrong networking group you've joined, or it may simply be something you're super passionate about causing you to risk what you're already building. It's possible that your timing is off.

7. We're stuck at the right edges

This is golden. We're away from center, we've taken the risk and we're willing to be uncomfortable. We probably know we don't have much competence here but we are willing to do whatever it takes to acquire the competence and skills. This is where growth happens and we know it. We go to the edge and stretch. We tumble and fall but when we get up and go again, we're better than before.

Example: Your business is growing and your competitors are embracing social media in a big way. You're an introvert and you have trouble participating in social media of any kind. You're stuck, but you're not going to give up. You get a lot of help from friends and experts and *finally*, after a few months you're comfortable using social media. Your business continues to thrive. More importantly, you've grown by leaps and bounds.

So how do you know which kind of stuck you're in?

Ask yourself these questions:

- 1 Where are you going?
- 2 If you did reach the goal, would your “capacity” to make meaningful contributions to the world be significantly increased?
- 3 Would you be creating more value for those around you?
- 4 Would you feel that you’re using your gifts and talents to their fullest potential?
- 5 Would you be creating more opportunities to grow—for yourself and others?

If you are fairly confident in answering the first question, and answered “Yes” to everything else, congratulations. You’re getting stuck for good reason: you’re navigating the edges of your comfort zone.

Nobody is an expert at the edges of their comfort zone.

If you didn’t have an answer for question 1, and said “no” or “not sure” to any of the other questions, then we have work to do!

Thankfully you’ve taken the first step in solving your problem. Now you can stop running around in circles wasting your precious time and energy.

WATCH OUT FOR THE “QUICK-FIX” TRAP

You’re smart, you’re stuck, and here we are about to go into all the ways and reasons you might have gotten stuck. So as soon as you’ve got a glimpse into the reasons why you’re stuck you’ll naturally be tempted to get *unstuck* as quickly as possible.

Like...*now!*

Searching for a quick-fix to complex problems is a specialty of us smart people. We'll start slicing and dicing the problem every which way we can to find a better, easier, quicker solution.

You might even look for some "top ten" tips or articles on a blog or website. On second thought, you're not going to do that because you've already picked up this book, right?

I'd love to give you a pep talk and some encouragement, and tell you "How to Get Unstuck *now!*" Unfortunately, it's not that simple. A problem that has been created over the course of years isn't going to be solved in a few weeks or even a few months, and expecting the quick fix is a recipe for despair and disaster.

So now that you've picked up this book, I urge you once again to go all the way and make it count. Take a few extra minutes to complete the Acceleration Challenges and make a real difference in your life, or in the life of someone you care about.

1020



THE BEST WAY to put a
LEASH on your PROBLEM is
to UNLEASH the POWER
WITHIN. 🔌

www.napkinsights.com/napkin/1020

CHAPTER ONE

Stuck In Your Perspective



The first step to understanding our outer world, is to take a look at what's going on in our inner world. Perspective in short is your point of view—it is the lens with which you view the world.

TEN REASONS WE MIGHT BE STUCK

1. We're not lucky (enough)

Let me first say this: *Yes*, luck matters, so don't believe anyone who tells you otherwise. Luck alone may not get you where you want to be, but a little bit of luck will take you farther, faster than you dreamed—no matter how smart and hard-working you are.

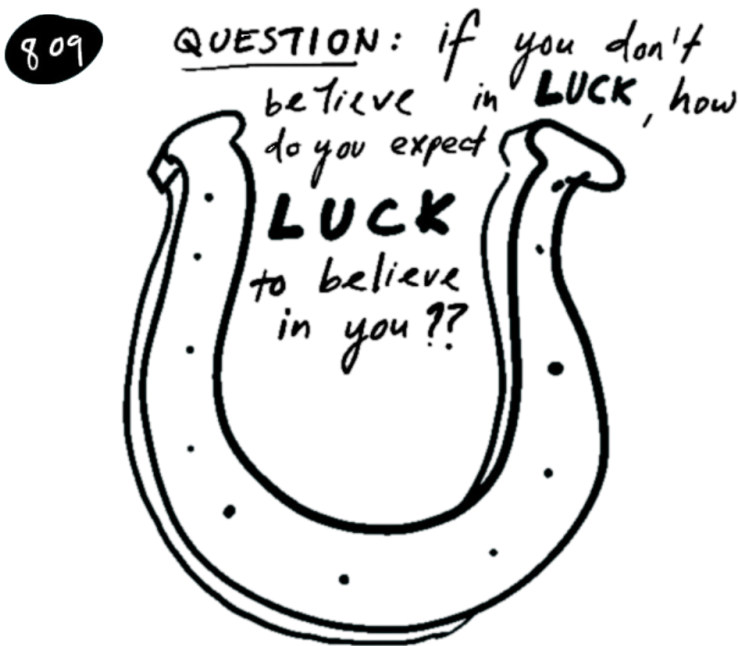
Having said this, you can neither make luck part of your strategy nor your excuses. You cannot sit and wait for it, or cook up a recipe for it.

What you can do is improve your chances of preparing for and meeting it. You can be open to new ideas, new encounters with people, and new experiences. You can explore the unfamiliar, keep a positive attitude, and challenge yourself to take risks. Basically, if you continue to operate only in the spaces that are familiar, your chances of getting lucky are pretty slim.

Qi Lu grew up in a very poor and remote Chinese village and eventually became a Vice President of Microsoft. Obviously he is very smart, and he worked hard, but he said luck is essential to success. The issue is that no one understands how it really works. Luck, he says, is like a bus

that will keep coming around to the bus stop. If you're not there with the right fare at the right moment, you'll never be on the bus no matter how many times it comes around.

So some of those other smart and successful people you see that seem "luckier" than you? That may be true. Realize that you might be able to do more to get luckier too.



www.napkinsights.com/napkin/809

2. We're used to the sandbox

Life in the sandbox begins very early. In fact, for most of us it starts with school, where if you got good grades you were considered smart.

School is a sandbox environment in which the penalty for making mistakes is very low. At worst, you get a lower grade and a slap to your ego.

In some schools and exam systems, memorization is given a huge premium—whoever can memorize the best is the smartest. It's not said that way, of course, but exams are often designed to test someone's memorization skill rather than what they've actually learned.

A marketplace is very different. It's not even close to a sandbox environment. The rules that worked in a school sandbox don't apply here. In fact, very few of those rules work in the marketplace.

It takes flexibility, awareness and deliberate effort to graduate from “sandbox smarts” to “marketplace smarts.”

3. Our appetite for risk is too low

Rules are safeguards and reduce risk. Your parents gave you rules to keep you safe from harm. In school, following the rules kept you safe from trouble or detention, and helped you get high grades.

In the marketplace, there aren't always hard rules, and where there are, following them to the dot may lead you to a mediocre life—at best.

Depending on rules will keep you in the center. Sure, you're safe, but there is no premium. While the edges are riskier, it's where your chances of catching a premium are high.

Consider this: The only way to stretch and grow is to move to the edges where you may slip and fall—risky indeed.

Or you can stay in the center and you might never get anywhere—*very* risky.

Of course, risk is still relative. What's risky for you may not look very risky to another. It's easy to gauge the impact of the premium you want. The real measure of your risk is to consider what's at stake if you go for it and don't receive the anticipated premium.

What's the impact of failing?

What do you lose?

When it comes to risk, only you can decide. In the marketplace, sometimes no one can tell you all the rules. Sometimes they change. And sometimes, you have to come up with your own.

4. Our past successes fool us

They say success begets success.

That's not entirely true.

Success begets success only when you're willing to adapt to new situations rapidly. So if you think that what made you successful in the past should continue to bring you success now and into the future, think again.

If you observe the fine print in many financial instruments, it clearly says, "past success is not a future indicator of success." It's just as true in real life. Whatever conditions existed during your successful past don't necessarily exist in the present, in which case applying the same strategies won't work. Be careful.

5. We get blinded by a sense of entitlement

Knowing you're smart and experiencing early successes can easily build up one's ego. When you don't keep your ego in check, it slowly transforms into entitlement. A sense of entitlement will fool you into thinking that what you want is owed or will be given to you, rather than requiring you to take action to earn it

The combination of entitlement and inaction is a deadly trap. Don't fall for it. Expect something for nothing—or almost nothing—and you will end up with nothing.

6. We're in evergreen “preparing” mode instead of taking action

You're trying to cross all your t's and dot all your i's. You're conducting your research and your due diligence and adamantly completing your preparation before you take the crucial steps that will actually move you forward.

Except the more you prepare, the more you find what you might be missing, the more unprepared you feel, and so the more you continue preparing.

Your extreme preparation may be masking perfectionistic tendencies, unrealistic expectations and/or your fear of failure, which can trap you in this never-ending loop and a severe case of analysis paralysis.

7. We miss the opportunities in front of us

Opportunities are rarely handed out on a silver platter, but you can take a situation and create one with the right perspective.

You might know the story of two shoe salesmen from different companies who end up on an island to scout for business. Both see that nobody on the island is wearing shoes. One salesman calls his company and says, “We have a problem. No one here wears shoes!” The other salesman calls with the message that, “We’ve hit the jackpot! Nobody here on this island wears shoes!”

Two salesmen, same situation. One sees a problem, the other sees opportunity.

There is a window of opportunity for everything, and it’s up to you to find and make the best of it.

No matter how smart you are, not having an open mind or getting stuck in the kind of analysis paralysis discussed above, will cost you.

8. Our relationship with failure needs fine-tuning

Nobody has the Midas touch, and being smart doesn’t give you an exception.

In other words, we all fail sooner or later.

Of course you don’t want to fail because you might fear that any failure will expose you as inadequate or foolish in some way.

Here’s a question for you: What are the chances you’ve been right about *every* single decision you’ve made?

You’re merely human (a smart one), so your answer can’t be 100 percent. First, you know some decisions have been wrong. Secondly even with those decisions we deem satisfactory, it’s always possible a different decision would have led to much better outcomes!

So to be safe, let's assume a 70/30 split where you get 70 percent of your decisions right, and 30 percent are wrong. You know why that's not failure? Because you acquire the wisdom and insights needed for 70 percent of your good decisions from the mistakes you make in the other 30 percent.

If your relationship with failure doesn't change, you'll find that you keep following the tried and tested safe routes. You'll learn little, and end up with predictable and (most probably) mediocre results.

Remember: We either succeed, or we learn.

9. We don't *know* we need help

Maybe you've operated in a sandbox environment where there isn't a big demand for teamwork. Instead, the focus is usually on individual accomplishments and standing out amongst the others. This has worked well for you as you're generally able to win as a solo act.

Unfortunately, marketplace dynamics are completely different. Success requires a stronger push and larger set of resources. These days, it's more than teamwork. It's about configuring the right ecosystem and structuring it in a way that's aligned to meet your goals and—at least partially—the goals of the other members in your ecosystem.

If this sounds complicated, you're right! This is the marketplace.

The first step towards creating or finding your ecosystem is knowing and accepting that you need help to succeed. Even

if you think you have all the skills to complete everything on your own, trying to do so is futile.

10. We don't get *good* help when we need it

It's common knowledge that knowing is not doing but doing is doing. Once you know and accept that you need help, it's not enough. A greater level of humility is needed to actually go and ask for it.

Once you ask for help, unfortunately, that may not be enough either. You also need to have established and nurtured relationships with the kind of people who have good help to offer, and want to help *you*.

Think about it. The kind of people from whom you need help are the kind of people who have plenty of opportunities in front of them, so your request for help is competing for their precious resources.

Can you provide them with an opportunity while asking for their help? Are you worthy and deserving of help, having offered to help and serve others with the skills you possess?

To summarize, the foundation required for others to be available around you who can offer good help, has to be laid long before you need it.

THE MID-LIFE STALL

Being stuck can seem more complicated when it hits you in middle age.

Tell me, were you one of those rising superstars when you first started your career? Probably. You knew you were damn smart, and you were going places in life.

You cruised along and went on to become reasonably successful by most standards, although your own assessment has always been a different story. Deep down you've known that you could do more, and there are others who know you well enough to see the gap between where you are and where you could be as well.

Then before you knew it, you were looking at your career as a 40 year old. That's when you hit a wall, and everything seemed to come to a screeching halt.

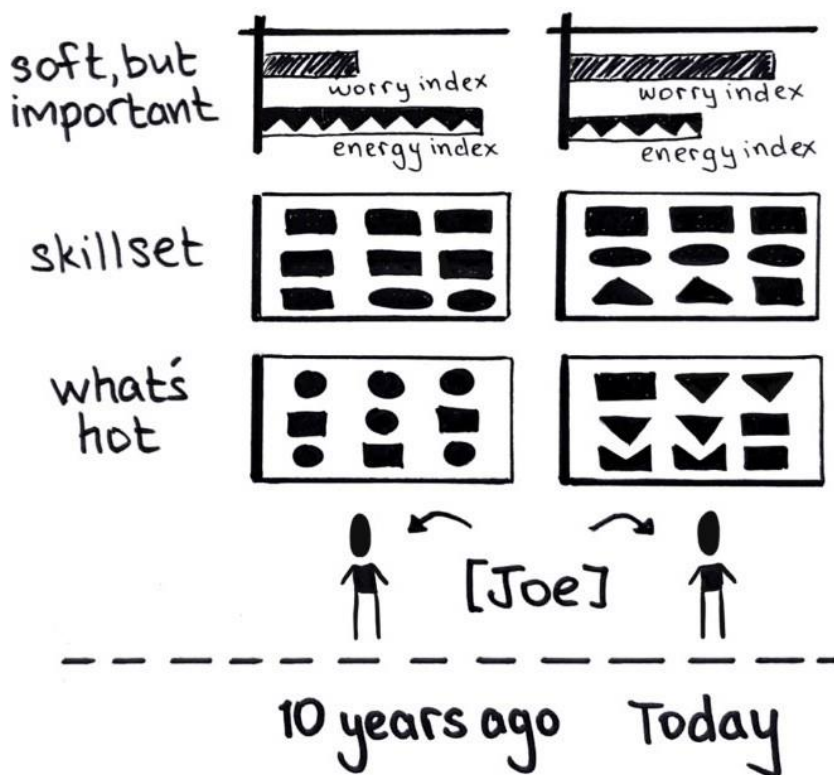
If you were asked what happened, you'll present a set of really convincing arguments for your present situation, and most people would find your arguments quite solid.

The most common age at which I've heard of smart people getting stuck, more than any other age, is right about forty. While that seems to be the magic number, yours may be plus or minus a few years.

I first wrote about this in my book "Beyond Code", but it's worth revisiting again.

Here is what I think happens.

The first 10–15 years of working life seem like progress for most people, though what is typically happening is a general upward adjustment of salary that the marketplace offers to pretty much anyone who is doing reasonably well. Exceptional people are getting a premium during this period, but the delta between exceptional and good performers is not big enough to catch anybody's attention.



It is also during this period that some of the greatest life changes are happening in the life of a professional—first job, marriage, kids, first home, and so on. Added to all this, what’s required to stay ahead in the marketplace is constantly changing. In short, there are big changes at work and big changes outside of work—there is change everywhere. Unless someone is consciously learning not just how to deal with change, but how to be a step ahead, activities that merely keep up with change will seem like progress.

There isn’t a premium for adapting to change. Adapting to change is a simple matter of survival. You adapt, or die.

If you want to stand out, you not only adapt to change, you find a way to thrive from change. That's where the premium is.

In our mini-research, we focused on several cases in which careers started off big and then began to taper. We also looked at careers that progressed brilliantly over a 15–20 year period, which is about the time it takes to arrive at middle age.

If you're at this stage, see if you can determine whether any of our findings resonate with you.

Stalled careers by this period were hugely influenced by six things:

- 1 Entering the road less traveled
- 2 Shining locally, but invisible globally
- 3 Limelight-induced inertia
- 4 Inability to re-invent ourselves at or above the rate of market change
- 5 Focusing on the short-term at the expense of long term investments
- 6 Serious lack of leverage

Let us dig deeper on each of the above findings.

1. Entering the road less traveled

In the early years of our careers we've pushed up to the next levels of the success pyramid within a few years, and as we move higher and higher, the available seats start dwindling. Sure, it's exciting that one of those increasingly dwindling and more coveted seats should be reserved for us.

What many forget, however, is that as we continue to excel, we find ourselves on roads less traveled with fewer traveling companions. It's rarely comfortable for anyone to take the road less traveled.

The reason for the unsaid anxiety is two-fold: a) we need to embrace the uncertainty in the new situation and b) we need to depart from what's familiar.

2. Shining locally, but invisible globally

While we were so busy and focused on our internal responsibilities within the company, we forgot about the world beyond. The inevitable result is that while we may be shining locally, globally, we're invisible.

We gain leverage from networking and establishing strong relationships with others in our industry who might be knowledgeable and influential, and who can help us or whom we might be able to help. Not only that, we become more valuable within our organization when we make it our responsibility to bring in fresh perspectives from the outside world.

3. Limelight-induced inertia

If I had to choose the biggest cause of a stalled career by mid-life, this is possibly the hardest to detect.

Limelight-induced inertia is what happens when we've made choices to stay where we are and continue doing what we're doing because it keeps us in the "success" limelight. In other words, we allow ourselves to get boxed into a place where we can move sideways for a long time, but in actuality,

we've hit a plateau and don't realize it. We're comfortable, and we'll stay comfortable until something or someone gives us a big shake-up. Unfortunately too many people don't experience that shake-up until it's too late.

4. Inability to re-invent ourselves at or above the rate of market change

Today's darlings turn out to be tomorrow's "also-rans" when a particular space no longer holds any appeal. In other words, being a hero today doesn't guarantee us hero status tomorrow.

Early hero status becomes a handicap if we've gotten comfortable with being a star in our area of expertise and continued to dig deeper and invest more as a result. In the short term, it was great because the space in which we were operating was hot. Then suddenly, it wasn't hot anymore (remember what we know about things happening "suddenly"). As a result, our star status came to mean very little.

5. Focusing on the short-term at the expense of long term investments

This one is closely related to how early hero status can be a handicap. Being hot and in demand can cause us to forget about other fundamentals of a solid foundation for success, such as, investing in our health, relationships, growth and personal brand. We may have been so busy doing what was required, that we forgot to upgrade our

“being.” We invested in our craft but forgot to invest in the architect behind the craft.

Again, in the short-term we don’t see the problem. It takes time to build a solid foundation of health, important relationships and a trusted personal brand. Over the years, however, the gap in strength between our foundation and the foundations of our peers who started early, can become the size of the grand canyon. By middle-age, it can feel impossible to jump that gap.

6. Serious lack of leverage

Great results are a combination of two main types of labor: direct and implicit.

The difference is subtle but important.

Direct labor is the act of picking up our phone and making a call to someone from whom we’re about to ask a favor. Perhaps we need advice on a project, buy-in for an investment, or validation for an idea. The cost of our direct labor is minutes added to our phone bill, and the time we invest out of our day.

Whether that phone call is a good investment of our time and direct effort, and the weight of that call to the person we’re calling, is determined by our implicit labor.

Implicit labor is the investment we’ve made into assets such as our personal brand, reputation, and the quality of our relationship with the person we called. In other words, the price for our implicit labor has already been paid (or not) over the previous few years.

Another way to think of the quality of our relationships is to consider that we have an emotional account balance with certain people when we serve, help, and are available to them. Have we made enough “deposits” before we ask for withdrawals?

If we haven’t built our foundational assets, all we have today is hope and our effort. We can make the call but it probably won’t be effective without sufficient leverage.

WE HAVE A CHOICE

There are more, but I chose to highlight the above six causes of mid-life career stalls because regardless of your age, you have control over how to handle them.

If you relate to any of the above situations, remember, there is nothing you can do about the past and it’s useless to beat yourself up. What you can do is begin shaping your future differently starting today.

Being smart is a great entry ticket to the games, but you still have to play well to win. If you haven’t been winning yet, it might be time to change your strategy.

WHY SMART PEOPLE FAIL TO HIGHLIGHT THEIR STRENGTHS

There are so many smart people who fail to make the most of their biggest strengths. Ever wonder why?

The answer: *There is an invisible weakness related to our biggest strengths.*

Actually, it's really a blind spot. A blind spot that causes us to not even notice our biggest strengths.

Easy for you but hard for others

You have strengths that you not only may not be using, but that you may not even realize you possess.

This happens because you do some things so effortlessly and easily, that it hardly even occurs to you that other smart people might not be able to do it at all, let alone do it so easily. In fact, it's so natural, easy and effortless to you that it could be said to be automatic and unconscious. It's just part of the background and you stop noticing it.

Your greatest strengths are precisely these things you do, and that you may not be noticing.

Our brains are wired to put “easy” things on auto-pilot.

When was the last time you noticed how you walk?

When was the last time you noticed how you talk?

You may not remember learning to walk or talk, but most of you can remember learning to drive. The very first time you drove a car, you noticed everything. You had to coordinate watching the road, changing gears, steering, turn signals, traffic signs, braking...It felt like so much to handle that you had to focus on every detail and movement, right?

Eventually, you stopped noticing how you drive. It became seamless. You forget you're doing anything required to drive safely. Your body just does what it's supposed to in response to external stimuli you encounter while driving. You may have

even had the experience of being lost in thought and arriving at your destination with no memory of what you saw or how many red lights there were along the way.

The same thing happens when you're operating from your greatest natural strengths. They're so much a part of you, and so automatic, that they easily go unnoticed.

So what's the problem, you ask?

The problem is that if we don't notice our most natural strengths and work on them, we won't be able to make them work *for us*. They become unused assets rather than true, growing assets. Meanwhile, we will focus instead on strengths that are more noticeable to us, but that may not be our *greatest* strengths.

Your highest potential can be achieved only when you focus on your greatest strengths, so it's sort of your duty to do yourself justice and give your natural strengths the attention they deserve.

The Proposed Solution

So, what's the solution?

Obviously, we can't build on something that's invisible to us. So, our first step is to make visible that which is invisible.

The way to begin is to start paying attention and training our minds to notice what we may not have been noticing. This may sound odd, but it's not that hard. Basically, we learn not to take anything for granted and *examine things* instead. What we notice and don't notice are both important. Here are a couple of examples to get us started:

When you go to a movie with someone and you both enjoy it, share exactly why you liked the movie with your friend. Then, ask your friend to share why he or she liked the movie. Even though you both liked the movie and have that in common, each of you may have totally different reasons why you liked it. You might notice and observe different aspects of the movie based on your life experiences, preferences, and interests.

The next time you're in a class or conference, take down some notes. Then ask four other people to share their notes and compare. It's highly likely that you'll discover insights that you missed. Not because you didn't hear them but because we all filter what we hear differently. What touched you may not have touched others and vice versa.

Once you start paying attention, you won't need anyone to tell you what your greatest strengths are. All you need is to get a hint or the slightest clue of what they are and you'll grab those strengths by the horns and start nurturing them, right? Make them true assets.

Learning to notice what we are not noticing is the first step towards uncovering our hidden strengths. Once we're operating from our greatest strengths, or what can be called our zone of genius, the demarcation between work and play starts to disappear.

Lastly, notice the requests for help that come from your network. Focus on those requests that have high-stakes attached to them. A high-stakes request is one where if they don't get good help either they will miss a significant

opportunity or they will incur a significant loss. When you see a pattern of these requests, you know where the marketplace is seeing your strengths even if you don't see them.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 1

Take Back Your Time

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 1: HARNESS THE POWER OF REFLECTION

"Our careers are linear in foresight and circuitous in hindsight."

—KATHLEEN MITCHELL

For most people, serious reflection and contemplation is reserved for the beginning of a new year, if ever. I hope this isn't the case for you. Reflection is definitely not something that you engage in once a year.

The last time I spoke to a group of smart people, one of them asked me the question, "How do we measure our own progress for the year? What are the metrics?"

The answer is that it requires reflection and you can do it anytime of the year. You just have to look back at the last twelve months of your life. There is no

one right answer or one right approach when it comes to self reflection.

There are two questions that I thought nail it down a bit. Here they are:

- 1 “What significant contributions have I made to the world in the last 12 months?”
- 2 “By how much has *my ability to make a difference in the world* increased in the last twelve months?”

Take this acceleration challenge and reflect on the last twelve months. Should you dare, share the results with someone that cares about you and ask them to comment. Ask that they give you some ideas on what you can do better or improve upon in the next twelve months.

Most important, don’t wait for 12 months to pass before you reflect on these questions again. Ask them repeatedly whenever you want to consider your progress. As your capacity to perform goes up, you don’t have to stick to a 12-month term. You can cut that down to six months, three months, one month or even one week. You are the best judge of how often to check your progress on your goals.

The first chapter was about the reasons we may be going nowhere. Honestly, if you are making valuable contributions (deliver) and acquiring the capacity (prepare to deliver in the future) to

continue to make valuable contributions, you will never be out of place. You will never feel that you are going nowhere. The reflection questions are just a simple way to test how well you are balancing on the “deliver” and “preparing to deliver” aspects of your life.

CHAPTER TWO

Stuck In The Workplace



Many smart people feel the frequency mis-match between themselves and the others around them.

The people around you just don't seem to get it, do they?

WHY SMART PEOPLE AREN'T APPRECIATED FOR THEIR WORK

"You become a star not because of your title; you become a star because you are adding star value to the company."

—N.R. NARAYANA MURTHY OF INFOSYS

Over the years I've heard many smart people complaining that they work hard, but that their hard work is unappreciated. You might feel like a victim of unrecognized hard work as well.

To be more specific, you might have experienced or said the following:

- "I did most of the work on that project, but my boss got all the credit!"
- "I work evenings, I work weekends and now my company is taking my long hours for granted. In fact, they almost seem to expect it!"
- "The people around me don't even care how hard or long I work."

Let's take a look at these while I outline some of the outcomes of my conversations, research, and reflections on how good hard work goes unappreciated.

Someone else takes credit for our hard work. How does this happen?

As I listened to people complain about this during my research, I did so with an open mind. I probed to get more details about their specific situation, and I suspended any prior biases I might have had on the issue.

Truth be told, I agree that in a few cases people were victimized and treated unfairly. Yet they continued employment with the company that took advantage of them. In some of those cases, they didn't have other viable choices and were somewhat stuck. One such example is applying for permanent residence in the United States through your employer, and not wanting to introduce a major hiccup into that process.

In most cases though, I found that those who complained that someone else was taking credit for their hard work had *one* over-arching reason for their situation, and it was their interpretation of "hard work."

Please see if you can identify some similarities in your own life or perhaps one of your smart-but-stuck employees in one or more of these scenarios.

We're working hard because we lack the skills for the job

No matter how smart you are, you're not going to have all the skills you need when you first start a job, and if you did, you'd probably be bored to death.

So imagine, it's your first job and you have to walk the extra mile to ensure that you develop the skills and knowledge required to complete the work expected of you. Your company does not benefit directly from you having to work harder or longer to update your skills. You working harder is not necessarily adding more *value* to your organization when you're simply doing what you must in order to get the job done.

There is an indirect benefit to the organization, sure, but they're investing resources in you while you expand your skills, which is to your benefit as well.

We're working hard because we lack competence in related skills

Not only do you have to have a competence in a certain skill set for a job, you also have to be competent in many related tasks in order to get the job done. In other words, having the skill set covers the matter of your breadth of knowledge, while being competent is about effective and precise execution overall.

Competence is not an all or nothing, black or white matter. There are four stages of competence.

1. Unconscious Incompetence

You neither understand nor know how to do something. In fact, you don't even recognize a deficit, and hence, have no desire to address it.

2. Conscious Incompetence

Though you don't understand or know how to do something, you recognize your deficit without yet addressing it.

3. Conscious Competence

You understand and know how to do something, but demonstrating your skill or knowledge in it takes a great deal of conscious focus and concentration.

4. Unconscious Competence

You have had so much practice with a skill that it's second nature. You can perform it easily and without any conscious focus or concentration. You may or may not be able to teach it to others depending on how or when you learned it.

Your ability to go deep on a topic can be considered a strength, but it can turn into a weakness if its blurring your vision. You may be working hard on what you're good at while avoiding any related skills or knowledge areas that you are also expected to be well versed and competent in.

An example of this would be as follows. A good CTO is someone who must be able to identify and understand new technologies and present their understanding to others. If a CTO only works in the domain of knowledge and skills required to identify and understand new technologies while ignoring what it takes to sharpen his or her presentation skills, it's a loss. Working hard or long hours on what you're good at doesn't compensate for your lack of competence in other areas.

We're confusing time spent and value created

Industrial age thinking has brought about this general notion that whoever spends more time on a job contributes the most value. Makes sense if you're a factory worker. If your job is to produce the most possible widgets, you need to work the machines longer because the longer you work, the more widgets you produce for your company.

Today, we are living in the knowledge economy and the rules have *completely* changed. Since computers and machines can do a ton of work, value has shifted from “doing” better, to “thinking” better, in a big way.

It's no longer about the amount of time spent on the job. We can spend a ton of time creating zero value, eroding value, or even creating a major headache for someone else who is trying to create value.

We say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and that applies to “value” as well. “Value” is typically in the eyes of the person willing to pay.

We not only have to invest time and energy in our craft, but ensure that the employer or customer comes away with a positive assessment of the value created by our investment of time and energy.

And, who is responsible for ensuring that assessment? Not the employer or customer.

It is up to us to ensure that the value we created is recognized as having helped them achieve their goals.

We might be discounting the value of others' experience

There is one general but thousands of foot soldiers. When the battle is won, the general gets the credit. When the battle is lost, the general will be blamed. Foot soldiers are very important but they are replaceable. Generals are more important and not easily replaceable. When you're a foot soldier, you're free to think that you did the work and somebody else (the General) got the credit.

It's so easy to forget that generals have paid their dues earlier, and for a *long* time before they reached their position. It's that experience that helps them better interpret situations and tell foot soldiers what to do. No matter how hard a soldier works, he's not seeing or interpreting the bigger picture as well as the general.

So if you're working hard every day and seeing someone that isn't working as hard as you (like, for example, your boss) it's easy to conclude that your boss is getting an easy ride, making you work hard while taking all the credit.

We all know of "bad" bosses, but not nearly all bosses are bad. Bosses have more often paid their dues and are now putting their experience to work.

That counts.

Actually, that really counts a lot.

We forget that commodity stuff doesn't command a premium

You can put in a lot of hard work producing commodity output.

Your output is valued as per-market standards.

You can earn great money but only until your employer finds someone else that can produce the same output for less (consider outsourcing, offshoring or both) Sooner or later, market forces will create buyers who pay the 'right' price for the output—advantageous to the buyer but perhaps not so much you, the smart person.

When you're easily replaceable your hard work counts for little. If you're what Seth Godin calls a linchpin—someone who is indispensable—you will be paid a premium for your work.

Being indispensable is hard, and merely being brilliant doesn't cut it.

We may not be telling the right story about our work

When you complete a job, most people don't see the job you completed so much as hear a story about the work being completed. If you don't take responsibility for telling the right story about your work, others will create their own versions which may or may not be advantageous to you.

You may have thought that your job was complete when the work was complete, but that's rarely the case. It's only

complete when the people assessing your work hear the right story behind it. Don't leave it to chance, instead, be sure to thoughtfully and carefully tell your story in a way that doesn't come across as boastful.

We may have too much humility or too little pride

You ought to take pride in your work, and yet be humble. Lack of pride and too much humility will hurt you. You must strike the right balance between pride and humility, which isn't easy. But the alternative is a recipe for future misery.

We may be thinking that the employer is responsible for our career growth

For those who think the employer is obligated to take care of their growth, think again.

Employers care, of course. They care about their employees to the extent that their larger concerns are served. They cannot possibly worry about taking care of the careers of all of their employees. Hence, they focus on the growth of only those employees who make themselves valuable and indispensable. These are the people your employer will not want to lose, or worse, lose to their competitor.

It's unfair to you and your employer to delegate any responsibility for your career trajectory to anyone but yourself.

Smart people are already getting a salary for their contribution and the employer provides the framework to grow. That's the most they can do. The rest is up to us. We can

get cracking and flourish or stay on the sidelines and watch others.

Our personal brand may be too dependent on affiliation with an employer

This can happen if you're working for a big brand. You're proud of your affiliation, and so you may have a tendency to confuse your *affiliation with the brand*, and your own personal brand.

Your affiliation doesn't automatically entitle you to anything. Every employee in your organization has the same power that the affiliation provides, and while affiliations help, they are not a substitute for the valuable and meaningful contributions you make. That is where your real power lies.

We may be confusing brilliant storytelling and bragging

You may think that doing your work is enough and that it should speak for itself. Why should you have to talk or brag about it in order for people to appreciate it?

Brilliant storytelling and bragging are not the same thing. Storytelling is an art. Bragging is a desperate attempt for attention.

Brilliant storytelling is helping people interpret what they see, properly. Bragging is interrupting for personal gain.

Brilliant storytelling will elevate the person to whom you're telling the story, while bragging serves only to elevate yourself.

Brilliant storytelling will encapsulate and sell the need, helping another see the value of fulfilling that need. Bragging says what you did is important regardless of whether a need can be fulfilled.

In short, if you are feeling victimized *and* it is clear that someone else is responsible for it, you have to evaluate whether you want to continue being associated with the person, organization or employer. If you are feeling victimized and after reading the above realize it may be your own doing you have your work cut out—take responsibility and make the necessary changes, then go out and make things happen.

WHY SMART PEOPLE ARE TAKEN FOR GRANTED

Short answer: We're taken for granted because we give others permission to do so.

There are many ways in which people can feel taken for granted. In our particular context I'm referring to the feeling of having been shortchanged or given the short end of the stick. Or it may be when others assume that things would have been just fine without our help, and treat us as though we didn't matter much in the given context.

Let's look at a hypothetical scenario.

Someone makes a request for you to do something for them. You fulfill the request, in record time, way faster than anyone else would have. You go the extra mile and beyond the call of duty.

You naturally think that the person who made the request will be delighted with the work you've done for them. If they are, case closed.

What about when there is no delight, or recognition of the effort, efficiency and care you put into the request?

Two things are possible.

- 1 The person who made the request is incapable of properly assessing the value of your help, or;
- 2 The person who made the request has actually *chosen* to downplay the value of your help.

Now let's delve a bit deeper.

Case 1: The person who made the request is incapable of properly assessing the value of your help.

How might this come to be?

Either they don't have the background knowledge and experience to understand the value of your help, or they are used to thinking of value in terms of time spent. In other words, they are used to paying someone by the hour, rather than by the value of the work that's done.

Either way, you're at a disadvantage. You can choose to go and convince that someone of the value you delivered. You may not enjoy such a confrontation or want to engage, however, so you accept the arrangement. In accepting it, you've just set the bar lower for the actual value of the work you bring to the table.

In other words, you lost twice. You accepted how you were treated, and lowered your value.

Case 2: The person who made the request has chosen to downplay the value of your help

In this scenario, the requestor *deliberately* wants to undermine the value of your help. He or she is intelligent enough to make a good assessment of the effort and value in your help. He or she may think that acknowledging the value of your help means they'd have to upgrade your compensation in some way, which would be a disadvantage to them. So, he or she chooses to behave as if the work was not of great value.

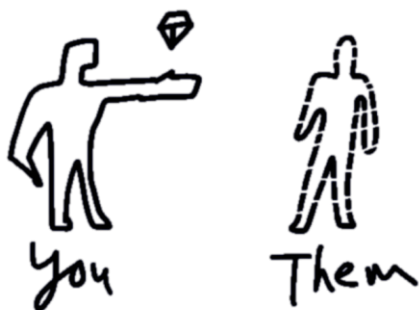
It is even more difficult to convince someone of your value in this case. Why? Because this person does not want to be convinced. He or she is now pretending to not understand the value. Ever heard about how difficult it is to wake up a person who is pretending to be asleep?

It hurts a lot to know the value of what we have delivered, and yet, be unable to sell it.

It's possible that others are the main cause of the problem, but since we rarely have control over changing others, let's not focus on that part for now.

The truth is, we have a big chunk of the responsibility for our situation *and* we can do something about it. So, let's get to the bottom of this.

965



The deceptively simple winning formula is to create so much value, that the other person will feel incomplete if he or she does not reciprocate!

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Sometimes we focus on our craft and forget to focus on how to sell the value of our craft. We can blame it on others and get frustrated, or we can start investing in ourselves and learn how to sell.

Feeling victimized or getting frustrated is easy. When we choose victimhood, we'll have plenty of opportunities to be a victim for the rest of our lives.

Learning to sell the value of what you bring to the table is hard. What makes it harder is that you might consider the selling of your craft, as opposed to the performing of it, an opportunity cost. You might think that you could have just been working and spending time on improving your craft.

Instead, you have to move away from your comfort zone and do what you're not the expert in—selling.

Don't ever forget that investing in learning how to sell yourself and your craft is as important as investing in taking your craft to the next level.

WHY SMART PEOPLE THINK THEY DESERVE BETTER AT WORK

"If you want the title, please be willing to take the job that comes with it."

—TIM SANDERS

It starts with your boss, or someone else who is higher in the organizational hierarchy than you. You watch what they do and you just can't believe it.

Some decisions your boss makes are very obvious.

Some decisions your boss makes are what any employee could easily do.

Sometimes when your boss speaks it sounds like he doesn't have a full handle on things at all.

Sometimes you wonder how your boss even reached the career position he or she is in...how is it possible?

You seem more intelligent and more capable in so many different ways. It doesn't make any sense. There is no logic here. Maybe it's luck, and that very well may be the answer.

You pay attention and begin to observe your boss and others in the upper hierarchy to find clues about what it is that

they do differently that makes them stand apart. A few months later, you haven't found anything that jumps out, and so now things take a turn.

Not only do you think these people don't deserve to be where they are, but that you deserve to be in a better place. After all, you have more talent, more insight, and you're more competent than what you've seen demonstrated by them.

There's been an injustice, and you've been given the short end of the stick. Not fair.

At least that's what you think.

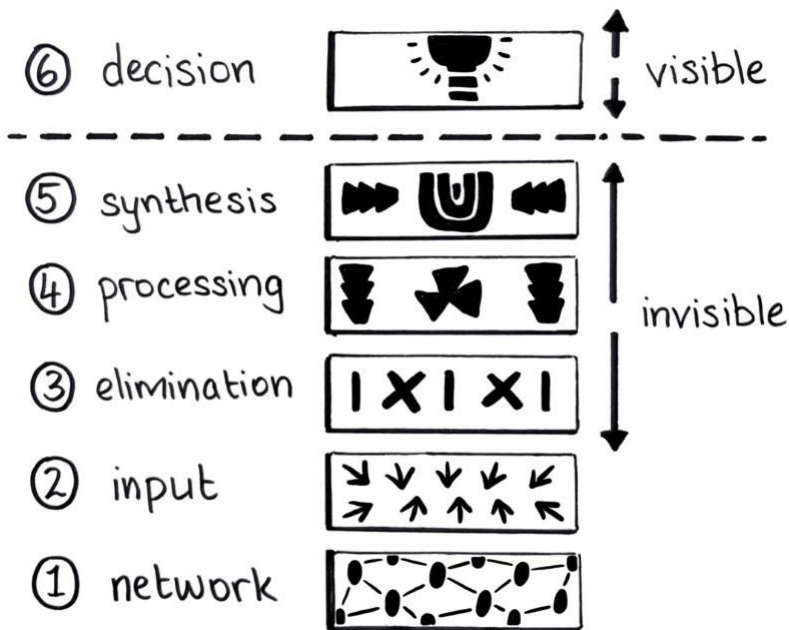
Agreed.

Here's an explanation.

You watch your boss in action and you make a quick assessment of the action, it's value, it's purpose and the general design of that action. That is what you can see. What you don't see are the underlying (mostly invisible) processes that created the decision for that action.

Just before taking that action, a series of steps have to take place—sometimes these steps are taken quickly and sometimes a single step may take weeks or months to conclude. Watching from the outside, you may never know what really went on behind the scenes of an external action. The schematic below digs a bit deeper into this. The highlighted components are in no way complete but do provide an idea of what goes on prior to the arrival of a decision, and observable action.

1. NETWORK: Networks have a huge influence on the thinking of any leader, and so certainly play a part in the



behind-the-scenes aspect of any decisions or actions. The quality of a leaders network and conversations with members of the network over the course of years will determine a leaders level of awareness and the quality of decisions he or she makes.

2. INPUT: While the network can provide a big chunk of the input, other sources include but are not limited to books read, events and conferences attended or spoken at, and past life and career experiences. Most important with respect to all of these sources of input is the quality of a leaders observational skills and reflections upon everything available to them.

3. ELIMINATION: The ability to discern relevant signals from noise. The more unnecessary stuff (noise) a leader can remove, the more necessary stuff (signal) they can focus on and consider in any decisions.

4. PROCESSING OR ASSEMBLY: This is like playing a game of Legos.

You have a number of pieces and you can build a number of things. Whoever can determine a wide variety of possibilities quickly will have a huge competitive advantage.

5. SYNTHESIS: This involves coming up with the right combination of available pieces and customizing them to fit the current situation.

6. DECISION: Completing the synthesis will result in the “lightbulb” moment which appears as a decision to the external world.

What you see and observe is the final output of the above steps culminating in the decision. To you, it seems like you could repeat the decision, and since you’re smart that very well may be true.

But rather than trying to copy decisions, try to become the person who can *produce* high quality decisions. Once you are ready, a better position will automatically come up sooner or later.

The same logic applies to many other situations outside your work too. You might feel someone else in your network is

successful because they seem to get lucky all the time. If you peel down the layers, you will see that there was much more than luck at play.

What is visible are actions and decisions. What is invisible is everything else that led to those actions and decisions.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 2

Take Back Your Time

Here is a hypothetical example I use often in my speaking engagements. Remember, this is fictional.

Imagine that one of your friends John asks you for a favor. He has a problem. He's supposed to receive an important package at the local library on one of the Saturdays in February. Unfortunately, he is traveling on business for the whole month, and won't be able to receive the package. He has three other friends who have signed up to wait for the package on the first three Saturdays. In case, the package does not arrive in the first three Saturdays, he needs your help to wait at the library for just the fourth Saturday. John says there is a 75 percent chance that the package will be delivered during one of the first three Saturdays—meaning there is only a slight chance that you may be required to spend the entire fourth Saturday of February waiting in the library. He wants to know whether you can help him.

Most probably you would sign up to help John.

A couple of days later, John comes back to you and he wants to make a change to his request for help. Apparently, he's found a company called "Package Receivers LLC" who take up these kinds of jobs. John decided to sign up for their service instead of inconveniencing his friends. That's the good news. The bad news is that John has to pay \$400 to these folks. He wants to know whether you would pay \$100 (your share) as you had offered to help him earlier. You politely decline.

Think about this for a second. You had offered to give him about ten hours of your time.

Let's say you would have productively used about five of those ten hours. This means you sort of would have squandered five hours. You're now being asked to instead pay \$100—about \$20 per hour—to get those five hours back. And you declined.

I know your mind is now screaming with the logic of why this story doesn't make sense. You may be right, but the point I want to make is simple—most of us are willing to squander time, and we safeguard money at the expense of time. Money can be earned back but time once lost can never be earned back. This is the sorry state of our relationship with time and money.

What are the consequences of this problem?

Your relationship with time and money influences a *lot* of your decisions—those decisions where you have to choose whether to do something yourself, or to delegate to another.

To-do is easy—you do it yourself and it seems like you will save money.

To delegate is hard—you have to explain the work to someone else (costs time) and then you have to pay (costs money) to do it. It seems like you lose twice with delegation.

But this is flawed logic.

Very flawed.

In the first case, doing something will take away your time that could have been used to do something else. The moment you are engaged in anything, the opportunity cost of not being able to do something else is always introduced.

In the second case, although it seems like delegating involves high costs at first, the longer term cost declines. Delegation is the first step required for scaling.

With that in mind, here is your acceleration challenge.

- 1 Find some work that you have *not* delegated before.
- 2 Try to find a professional free agent (freelancer) and delegate it. It will cost you some money but it will save you time.
- 3 With that new-found time, start a project that you've been putting off for too long because you didn't have time.

Share your learning with someone you care. Get feedback and adapt for the next iteration.

CHAPTER THREE

Stuck in Unrealistic Expectations



You know that in order to win, you have to give.

The dilemma is often about when to start giving back if you are still struggling to find enough time to reach your own goals.

Of course the answer is...*now*.

Sure, looking at things from where you stand, there's a *long* way to go to realize your dreams.

Consider, however, that whatever your level of success, in whatever way you measure it, there are always hundreds of thousands (probably millions) of people out there who aren't where you are yet, but would like to be. So as far as they're concerned, you've made it, and you most definitely have something to give back. In fact, it's only fair.

WHY SMART PEOPLE DON'T HELP ENOUGH

Most of you are generally capable of helping others. Sometimes you do, and sometimes you don't.

Many people have shared with me their frustrations about not getting a response to a request for help from someone they've reached out to. They complain that it would have taken "just five minutes" for this expert to help them, and yet they chose not to.

There are a wide variety of assumptions that are then made about the person who ignored, dismissed, or rejected request for help.

- They're not the helpful type
- They don't have a caring heart

- › Okay, so maybe they are just too busy
- › They're selfish

You may be making these assumptions about someone you reached out to for help, or, someone is making them about you.

We could go on and on about the real reasons requests for help go unfulfilled, but the truth is that we all have our own frustrations. We don't want to be labeled heartless or self-indulgent or uncaring, but with all the requests for help that keep coming, sometimes ignoring such requests is unavoidable.

Whether you're asking for help or on the receiving end of a request for help, it's worth digging in further on this topic.

Smart people are also human beings—we cannot scale

Bits scale.

Atoms don't.

On the same day in 2010, two social media stars Chris Brogan² and Jason Falls³ (Article: Some social media housekeeping around the Explorer) opened their hearts and shared why it was difficult to continue to engage the way they were engaging.

² Article: "Redrawing" from his blog 3-19-2010 <https://chrisbrogan.com/redrawing/>

³ Article: "Some Social Media Housekeeping Around the Explorer" from his blog 3-19-2010 <https://socialmediaexplorer.com/social-media-marketing/some-social-media-housekeeping-around-the-explorer/>

Here is what Chris said:

“If I just manage my inbox, that’s about ten hours of work a day (600 new mails divided by one minute each). If I spend time on Twitter, on Third Tribe, on Facebook, on my blog (in the comments), that’s another three hours. If I take two phone calls or do a webinar, that’s another two hours.

“We’re up to fifteen hours before even doing production of anything (no blogging/writing/creating for clients).”

Here is what Jason said:

“I’m also going to be less active in responding to every comment. I’ll still do a good job of answering questions and the like, but have to budget my time to do so once a day rather than continuously. Clients pay my bills. I can’t camp out on comments all the time. I’m not ignoring you, but need to control the commitment a bit.”

Not every smart person’s situation will be similar to that faced by Chris and Jason, but you get the point.

It’s not “just five minutes”

There may be dozens of requests that individually take five minutes, but if all are responded to, they could collectively take 24 hours or more.

Remember the standard security announcement in any airplane: “If the air pressure drops and the oxygen masks are lowered, please put your own mask on before you help others put on their masks.”

Smart people get requests for help from others precisely because they’ve devoted a lot of time to create or produce

something of value. The more time they spend helping, the less time they have to continue producing.

So, it's not selfish to take care of yourself before you tend to others. Everyone has a life to lead, and none of us can give from an empty cup. You can't become an expert unless you create time for your own work and projects.

Too many requests for 1:1 help put a dent in leverage

Many smart people share a *lot* and a large number of them are helpful on various social media platforms. Since they are giving you a ton of time for “free” already, it may be tempting to think that they can simply give you a *little bit more* time, individually. Just remember that as they move to help anyone 1:1, smart people start losing leverage. Unless you can prove to them that it is worth building a relationship with you.

You, as a smart person from whom a request is made, are not an exception here. You won't have the magic bullet to solve this dilemma. If you are on a path to make a big difference, you will have no choice but to decline several 1:1 requests for help—unless it makes sense for you in the grand scheme of things.

It really depends on the amount of attention the request deserves from you.

One of the fundamental tenets of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) is that “the meaning of your communication is in its response.”

This may seem rude but if the request was worthy of being ignored, chances are that a smart person will ignore it. If someone makes a meaningless pitch or request, it's hard to provide a meaningful response.

Everyone can see when a meaningless request has been made of them. But we rarely acknowledge that we ourselves *might* also make requests that are:

- › meaningless
- › insensitive to the amount of time the other person may need to devote
- › totally one-sided
- › inappropriately timed

Most of us out there are not thinking about how to design our request in a way that creates a win-win for everyone.

We're too busy or preoccupied with what we need and forget to think about the effort or opportunity cost involved for the person we hope will fulfill our request.

So if you're smart and respected, you'll be at the receiving end of many meaningless requests. That's life. If you don't learn how to handle them well, you'll run out of bandwidth to attend to the truly meaningful requests.

Most requests require a balance in the emotional bank account

Most people who request 1:1 time for help don't realize (or acknowledge) the fact that equal investments of time from two people will result in unequal returns on investment for

the two people involved. This is especially true when there is a clear line between receiver and giver.

Sometimes you can get lucky. You make a request and it's fulfilled even though you didn't have a relationship with the person. In most cases, it won't work. You have to build a relationship long before you make a request. If you remember the popular banking metaphor, you have to make a deposit before you can make a withdrawal.

If you think about it, that's really the way most of the things in life work—you have to sow before you reap, you have to train for months before you can run a marathon, you have to practice for years before you can perform in a concert. You have to pay the price, before you win the prize. We can go on and on but the point is simple and it's the same with relationships. It takes years to build one.

Again, it's the same if the shoe is on the other foot. If someone makes a request from you and hasn't taken the time to build a relationship with you, it should be difficult for you to justify investing your time in fulfilling the request.

It may not be meaningful *enough* in the current scheme of things

This one has two aspects to it.

The first aspect is timing.

The second aspect is all about relative and alternate opportunities available to put your time to work.

The impact of fulfilling a request may not be big enough compared to the alternate opportunities you have on your

hand. Since you only have 24 hours in a day, and you have to make choices about where to invest that time most meaningfully, a request may not have made the cut.

As I said earlier, it works both ways. People are reaching out to you for help because you are smart and they need your help. You will reach out to people who are smarter than you because you are not sufficient all on your own.

To blame and criticize people who don't help you is pretty useless. Rarely can you change how those people behaved, or improve your chances of getting help from someone like them in the future. You don't improve by focusing on others. You improve by focusing on what you can do to get better.

Knowing the above should help you fine-tune your own requests for intros.

THREE THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE MAKING REQUESTS FOR INTROS

First, let us clear up a myth.

It may be true that you may have only six degrees of separation from anyone else in the world. So, theoretically speaking, if you want to reach *anyone* all you have to do is find the right six-degree chain and voila, he or she will be right in front of you.

It rarely happens, and it's just not how these things work.

LinkedIn has made it easier to overcome the boundaries a bit. For starters, you can definitely see who is in your extended network. Again, your power mostly ends right there. Just

because you can now see who is connected to whom does not entitle you to be connected to anyone.

A new relationship or a new connection still needs to be invested in and earned. That has not changed.

So, before you ask for the next introduction to someone you want to meet, think about these three things. To make it easy, let's assume that you are asking your friend John to introduce you to Bob.

1. Trust

First, John should have enough trust in you to introduce you to anyone. If John is your friend, and he knows and trusts you, you already have the required *entry ticket*, so to speak.

On the other hand, imagine that someone you don't know reaches out to you on LinkedIn. You look at their profile and everything seems good, so you accept the connection request thinking you will get to know the person and build a relationship based on your mutual interests. To your surprise, within ten minutes, you receive a request from this new connection, for you to introduce them to someone else in your network. You're stumped, and just shake your head

There is a second level of trust that is about your competence or expertise. If you are asking John for an introduction to Bob because you'd like to get some help or higher expertise, John should trust that you have the knowledge and skills that would make it worthwhile for Bob to spend time with you.

Here is what I mean: You trust your childhood friend with respect to a lot of things, but perhaps not as an entrepreneur because you believe that he has yet to prove himself in this arena. You get an email from him asking for an introduction to one of your friends who is a big name in the venture world. Now you're in a dilemma.

A third level of trust comes into consideration where there is a project in question. John should strongly believe that your project has merit. It is also your responsibility to sell the concept of this project to John first.

2. Timing

As in many things in life, timing becomes very important when it comes to requesting introductions.

Your project is super important and you just *know* in your heart that as soon as John brings this to Bob's attention, Bob will be delighted to get to know you and want to meet with you immediately.

It's all in your mind.

You don't know Bob and what is going on in his life. Among all the available opportunities that Bob could pursue, who knows where your project would stack up! Granted, what you know about Bob from your online and offline research might allow you to make an educated guess, and your friend John might be able to shed some light on more particulars if he shares a strong enough bond with Bob. Still, there are no guarantees that you or your project will be a priority for Bob.

The thing about timing that gets tricky is that there is an element of luck involved in it. You can't control the luck of timing, but you can't dismiss its existence either.

One thing you can do about timing is goes back to an old adage: “you must dig your well before you are thirsty.” Get it? In this context, digging your well is making sure you focus on building relationships before you need them. This leads to the next item—thoughtfulness.

3. Thoughtfulness

Thoughtfulness is about showing *real* concern for the needs and feelings of other people.

This goes to the heart of crafting a request. Forget about solely thinking about what's in it for you. If you're thoughtful, you'll want to discover the mutual benefit to both you and Bob, of meeting and starting a dialogue. Taking it even further, you'll try to find out how it might be a huge win for Bob to accept your proposal to meet.

As you start thinking about this, you have to remember that Bob has many options to invest his time, energy and mindshare, and your project happens to be just *one* of them.

There is no simple litmus test for thoughtfulness. It is your job to keep working on crafting the request until you are very sure that it's a no-brainer for Bob. It should be a request that John would feel proud to present to Bob. If the request is such that John considers this an opportunity because *he* happens to be the one presenting it to Bob, then you have won *big*.

534



No one really cares about your
project especially IF caring about
your project takes away their capacity
to care for their OWN projects!

THOUGHTFULNESS

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Note: When I am talking about crafting the request, I am not referring to the narrative part of the request. A good narrative is necessary but not sufficient. At the foundation of the request is an opportunity and that opportunity is what needs to be carefully crafted to make it meaningful to both John and Bob.

WHY SMART PEOPLE DON'T SHARE ENOUGH

If you are rich, people expect that you share your wealth.

If you are smart, people expect that you share your knowledge.

However much you share, there will always be people who think you're not sharing *enough*, and they'll make up all kinds of assumptions. They might say that:

- › You don't have time
- › You're selfish
- › You just don't care
- › You don't have enough incentive

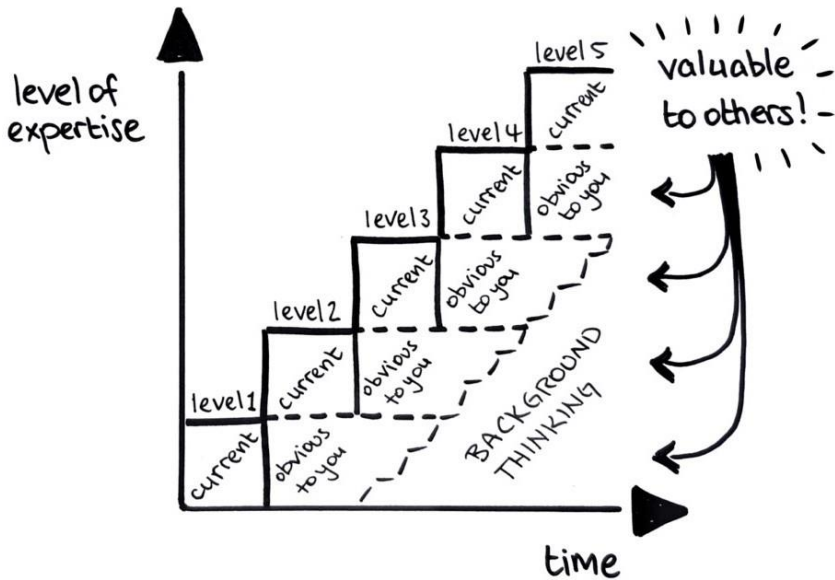
Some of these may be true, but I wanted to get to the bottom of the lose-lose problem. You take the time to share, but you're still penalized for not sharing enough. I was perplexed about this and over a period of several weeks

I asked many smart people to talk to me, and to help me understand what's going on here.

Here is what seems to happen. You want to give and share as best you can. But as you learn more, you realize that you need to learn a whole lot more before you can really know what you're talking about and start sharing. So you continue learning some more, and realize that there is still so much more to learn before you can share.

What you forget is that most of the expertise that you already have is either becoming obvious to you, or becoming a part of your automatic, background thinking. What you know is now common knowledge to you, so you mistakenly assume it must be for others as well. Hence, you feel that there is nothing special enough for you to share.

Take a look at the following schematic. On the X-axis is the continuum of time as you build your expertise on a topic. On the Y-axis, is your level of expertise on that topic.



Think about your own passionate topic where you are an expert.

- a. You start at level 1. Things are new and exciting and since you are passionate you realize how much you don't know, and you are hungry for knowledge.
- b. You are in level 2. You are at a new level of expertise. The earlier level (Level 1) seems obvious and common.
- c. You are in level 3. You are again at a new level of expertise. The immediate previous level (Level 2) knowledge is now obvious and common. The levels below that (in this case Level 1) is a part of your background thinking. Remember

that what's in your background thinking is almost invisible to you. You have that knowledge but you don't think about it.

- d. You are in level 4—a new level of expertise. Level 3 knowledge is obvious and everything below that is in your “background thinking.”

You can go on. You feel that you are not ready to share the knowledge at your current level, and that there is no point in sharing what's obvious. And, what's in your “background thinking” has become a part of you. So it's invisible so there is no possibility of sharing that.

So, what are you missing?

Two things:

- 1 The point that what is obvious to you is not obvious to many other people who are not at the same level of expertise. It's absolutely worth sharing what you know with them.
- 2 Not noticing what's in your “background thinking.” It may be in your background thinking, or common knowledge to you, but it's not at all for everyone else. So, once you notice the ‘common knowledge’ you have, you can easily package and share it.

Honestly, it's true that most smart people don't share enough. They could definitely do more. If you are one of them, it is never too late to start.

WHY MANY SMART PEOPLE ARE NOT VERY SOCIAL

I'm guessing you and I have both met enough smart people

who are not social. You yourself might be in this category.

And while “social” has many meanings, what I am referring to is what we call social at the fundamental level—to invest ongoing time and energy in conversations with people that fall under a broad spectrum of relationships (from strangers to close friends.) Social media simply happens to be a more efficient (may not be more effective all the time) medium for some of those conversations.

I went on a journey to explore reasons that smart people aren’t social. Some of the reasons are obvious but some would definitely surprise you.

Before we go there, let us look at the smart/social landscape. If we put them all in a graph, we can slot people into four quadrants namely:

Not Smart and Not Social: These people are invisible. Except for people that have relationships with them, no one would know they’re missing.

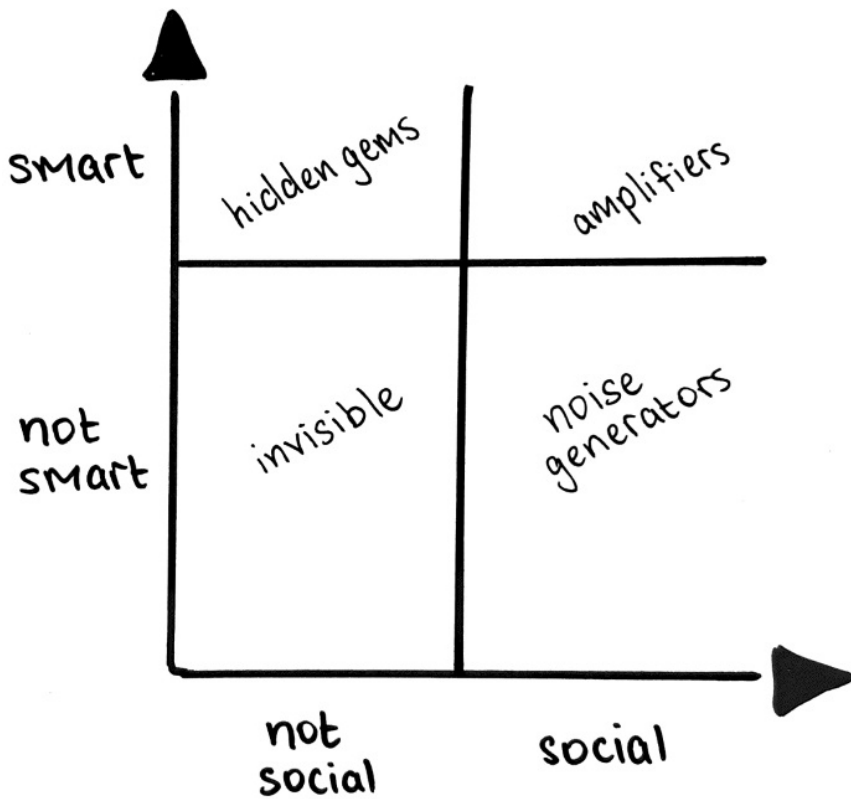
Smart and Social: These are noise generators. With the barrier to entry for any social media tool being so low, they talk a lot but the value of what they say is questionable.

Smart but Not Social: These are Hidden Gems. I have to be careful here as there are many people in this category that are not “hidden.” Their work is so valuable that others will amplify it for them.

Smart and Social: These are Amplifiers. They bring a lot of value and being social, they know how to amplify their value.

Our focus here is on number three—Hidden Gems.

So why are these smart people not so social? Here are some explanations I received.



1. “I haven’t felt the need to be social”

Many people I spoke to told me they haven’t felt the need to be social butterflies. They’d rather create and nurture deep relationships with a close-knit small group than spread their energy more superficially. They are social in their own limited circle but not the way others expect them to be. If you have to choose between quality and quantity, you should go for quality when it comes to building relationships.

2. “I’m super busy”

Some expressed that they are so busy with current projects that they don’t have *any* time to engage with new people. That is not to say that they don’t meet new people—but it usually happens via one-to-one introductions through their trusted sources.

3. “I don’t believe the ROI story...completely”

They don’t believe the general explanation of an ROI from socializing. Their logic is that the general ROI explanation assumes that one doesn’t have a better use for the time invested in socializing. These people say that the alternatives for spending that time, for example, inventing something new, or writing a book are equally or more powerful.

4. “I’m not easy to put in a box”

This is more of a problem for the others who are interacting with smart people. Human beings have a need to “box” other people—it gives them the comfort of knowing who they’re dealing with. Many smart people (ex: polymaths) are not easily “box”able—which makes it more difficult for them to socialize.

5. Signal discovery is expensive in the social world

Time is precious for “hidden gems” and for some of them, time is more precious than money. Investing time is very costly to them, so they expect to get a better ROI (return on

investment for an interaction.) Unfortunately, many places where people hang out are filled with noise and these people have no interest in investing their time to “discover” the valuable signals from the social world.

Hidden gems understand that there are other “gems” out there like themselves, and that socializing might help them discover other peers. They’re just not convinced that it’s worth the possibly large investment of their time.

6. They believe that amplification will be automatic if the contribution is valuable enough

One advantage of being social is the reach and amplification of your work that comes with it. Many people that belong to the above category were of the opinion that if their work were truly valuable, it would automatically get amplified.

When I countered by giving the example of Apple products still being marketed heavily, the response was that they are not against marketing, but that they first need to take the time to create something marketing-worthy. One of them said that it is best to spend 90 percent of his time creating and 10 percent marketing, than to do it the other way round.

7. Big frequency mismatches frustrate them

In a classroom, a teacher has to deal with students of all levels of intelligence. He or she needs to have the patience to construct the message so that (hopefully) *all* the students will understand it. The teacher is happy to accommodate this and

adjust his or her communication. That is not the case with these smart people. They have no interest in, or time to engage where there is a *big* frequency mismatch.

Think about your own situation if you are under any pressure from others about not being social enough. The explanations above may not transform you into a social butterfly, but could put you at peace.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 3

Activate the “Gifting” Mindset

Everyone has heard the phrase, “Do you want some fries with that?”

This refers to the standard up-sell offer from McDonalds. You buy a burger (or almost anything) and while your order is being rung up, you hear:

“Do you want some fries with that?”

The offer is compelling and it works. Most people take the offer and McDonalds wins.

Now, let’s look back at our lives.

You will get an opportunity to up-sell all the time, every time someone makes a simple transaction with you. A brilliant up-sell might get some appreciation for marketing brilliance but that’s not what will make someone memorable.

Imagine that we change the game a bit—let’s say you forget about the opportunity to sell or up-sell. Instead, you just decide for the rest of your life to look for opportunity to give gifts.

In simple terms, a gift is something that might:

- › Help someone be better than who he or she is
- › Help someone get closer to their goals
- › Help someone have more capacity to contribute
- › Help someone have more capacity to take care of things they care about
- › Connect them to someone that will increase their capacity in the future
- › Help someone make more meaning out of their lives

Now, suppose you were able to do that for the rest of your life—with almost everyone that you touch...

Do you think your own life will be more meaningful?

You bet!

Then, why not start today? It

is easier said than done.

First, you need a “mindset” of gift-giving that is *on* all the time. It takes time to develop that.

Second, you need “capacity” to give gifts. Based on all of our histories, we all have some of it but it is a life-long process to build this key asset.

Third, you need to be “growing” so that your gifts are more powerful with time.

and

Lastly, there has to be a healthy balance of taking care of your concerns and taking care of the concerns of others. Just because you have the mindset of “gift giving,” there is no need to sacrifice yourself or your dreams.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stuck In Communication Breakdowns



This chapter is all about criticism and communication. We'll talk about others accusing us of being too critical and our inability to take criticism from others. Ultimately, it's about where smart people encounter a lot of challenges in communicating well.

Let's start with why being smart makes us likely to be so critical.

SEVEN REASONS SMART PEOPLE CRITICIZE OTHERS

People around us know we're smart. A lot of them might also think we're extremely critical. Some might go so far as to say that discussing their plans or ideas with us is a downright pain.

The moment someone shares their idea or opinion, we find the holes and literally rip their idea apart. If encouragement is what they were looking for, they're probably not going to find it with us. So eventually people stop discussing ideas with us because the only guarantee is immediate criticism.

Of course we've encountered the same type of critical person and been on the receiving end of having our ideas shredded. We know they're being too critical and note that they have a problem, but fail to notice the problem when it's ourselves.

I have wondered why smart people can be extremely critical. If we choose, we could be more positive and add value to an idea in some way. We could encourage those who bring

their ideas to us. Instead, we often end up killing the idea in one shot.

This became one of the topics for my mini-research and here are my findings. Some of the reasons for our critical behavior may be as follows:

1. “We are just being realistic”

We may think that we are just being realistic. We want to help and whip the other person into shape before they get hurt, right? Yes, we agree that we could be nicer and more tactful, but we also strongly believe that being nice may not drive home the point we’re trying to make.

2. “It’s just our style and personality”

This is our style and who we are—it’s hard for us to change our ways now. We belong to one of the categories:

- 1 We don’t seem to have a problem with our abrasive style
- 2 We’re aware that this *is* a problem and are working on changing our attitude.

3. “Really?”

We are surprised that we come across as “extremely critical.” We see it as just having a heart-to-heart conversation.

4. “But we care more”

We care more than others. Our caring can come across as being critical, but if we didn’t care we would have not

participated in the discussion in the first place. Once we were in deep discussion, we removed all the stops. Things got carried away a bit and that was just how we expressed our caring. We are disappointed that it came across as criticism.

5. “We got carried away by passion”

We’re passionate on that topic. We also have strong opinions on how things should be or how things should work. With that combination, it’s not hard to get carried away.

6. “We’re just being honest”

As far as we’re concerned, honesty is the best policy and we’re not into sugarcoating. We wish the focus was on the message—which is most important—and not the delivery, which is just the container. We feel it’s unfair to penalize honesty.

While all of the above make sense, there is actually another (important) hidden reason for being critical, and this is it:

7. Criticizing others is a side-effect of our constant need for approval

We may be the kind of people who need the on-going approval and validation of the world for how smart we are. The keyword is “on-going”—we’re not satisfied with validation here and there. We need it again and again and again.

There are two ways of getting that validation—the long-haul route and the “instant gratification” route.

The long-haul route requires real accomplishments to elicit a “wow” from our audience, and real accomplishments take time. If they didn’t take long, they’d be easy to come by and unworthy of a “wow.” If anyone could do it, it’s no big deal.

Being smart may shave off some time from what it takes to create something remarkable but there is no magic here. It *does* take a long time to create worthy accomplishments. It’s also worth noting that no one has the “midas touch,” which is to say, that all our hard work could go unrecognized and our efforts go to waste if our project doesn’t make it.

The “instant gratification” route seems easy. It only takes a few minutes to try to show that someone else isn’t as smart as we are. Simply criticize and rip apart their “smart idea.” If we can prove in a matter of seconds that their “smart idea” wasn’t actually so smart, we appear smarter.

The “instant gratification” method is our shortcut to getting the validation we crave. It’s a way of garnering an ego boost with far less effort than the long term route would require. Once we start getting those ego boosts, it’s easy to get used to them and want more until soon, criticizing others becomes second nature. It’s a trap in which we don’t realize we’re caught until the damage is done.

WHY SMART PEOPLE ARE UNABLE TO HANDLE CRITICISM

We all know that taking criticism is hard. It’s hard for me and likely hard for you too. If not done right both parties

lose, and hardly anyone does it right. For all I know, reading the previous section might have made you uncomfortable and some of you might have been thinking “That’s not me...that’s not me at all” throughout the last section.

The number one defense against criticism is that the person offering the critique is unqualified to do so. It’s a fast duck and escape. Just shoot the messenger if we don’t like the message.

Yes, it’s annoying sometimes when people who “think they are smart” start tearing apart our logic and making a mess. That’s in an extreme case, but most times it’s definitely worth looking at the message before we shoot the messenger.



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Think about it:

*We may not be chefs but when we go to a restaurant we probably comment on how the food tastes.

- › We may not be pilots, but surely we have something to say if the pilot crash-lands the plane.
- › We may not know how to direct a movie but it won't stop us from commenting on how a movie was made.
- › We may not know how to write a book, but we will have a critique of the one we're reading (including this one).

There are countless examples and situations in which we're the consumer rather than the creator of a product or experience, and yet, are perfectly qualified to have and share an opinion.

The same goes for what we create. The consumer of our creation has the right to critique it. The next time you hear a critique, rather than debating, disconnect the message and the messenger for a second and simply focus on the message. If you don't fight it, you may learn something meaningful (Okay, except the oddball comments. Just ignore those).

WHY SMART PEOPLE HAVE TROUBLE COMMUNICATING WELL

"Agossip is one who talks to you about others; a bore is one who talks to you about himself; and a brilliant conversationalist is one who talks to you about yourself."

—LISA KIRK

The core of the criticism problem is a communication problem. In this section, we will discuss why many smart people have trouble communicating their ideas.

When we're smart, we're brilliant in our head first. What I mean is that we may have a problem communicating our brilliance to others. Whether we're pitching something to the boss, trying to get a buy-in from our co-workers or making a case for a product or service with prospects, we may be losing our listeners half-way. This can be quite frustrating.

One cop-out explanation is to say that people around us aren't smart enough to get what we're saying. Unfortunately, in nine out of ten cases this explanation won't fly.

If we start believing this, however, our confirmation bias⁴ will ensure that we collect enough proof to support our assessment. A good reason to blame others for our communication problems is the convenience it provides. It places the burden of making sense of what we're saying on the listener, while we dodge the responsibility of learning to communicate better.

Here are a few things to think about when it comes to communication breakdowns.

1. Being smart does not automatically make us good communicators

We're smart in our field of work. That does not automatically make us smart in the field of communication. Sure, we can figure a few things out on-the-go, but it's never the same as investing in learning how to communicate well. Communication is a skill. It involves two things—transmission and reception. A good communicator takes full responsibility for both.

⁴From Science Daily see "Confirmation bias" at https://www.sciencedaily.com/terms/confirmation_bias.htm

2. We may just be poor listeners

Why is it hard for many smart people to listen well?

Because:

- a. We're busy with our own thing—too many fun things going on to pay attention to what someone else is saying. In other words, we have no time to listen.
and/or
- b. What others are talking about is not of immediate interest to us.

What does listening well have to do with being able to communicate our ideas?

Everything.

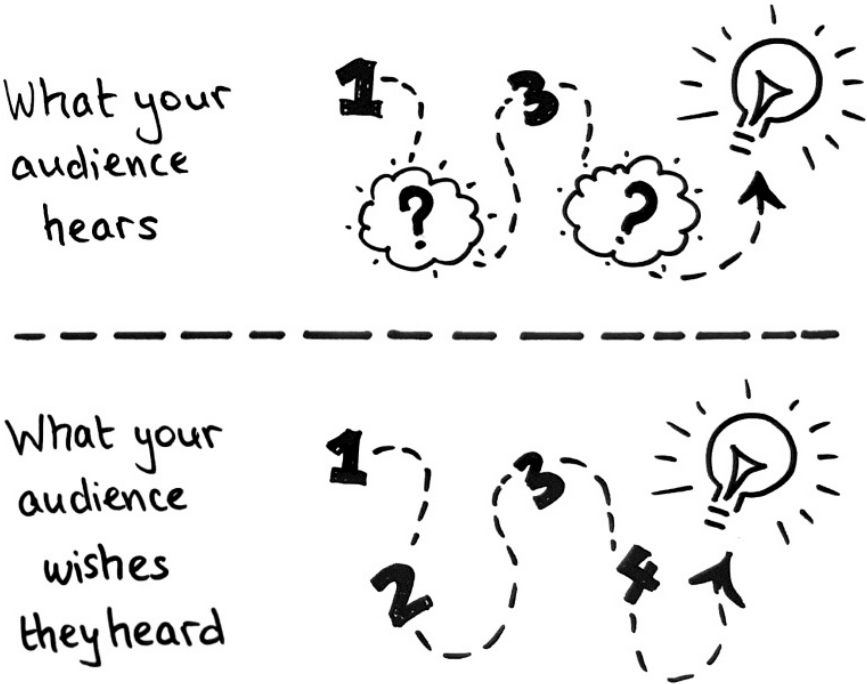
Skipping the listening side of communication means less knowledge about the person we're communicating with. We need to listen well so that we can find out what's important to them. Otherwise we miss the opportunity of being able to frame what we want to share in a way that our listener will find relevant and interesting.

3. We may be skipping the “obvious” details

We have thought long, well, and hard about our idea and it's crystal clear in our mind. When we start outlining it to others we skip a few of the core elements—not intentionally, but because we figure why mention the “obvious” and risk annoying our audience, right?

Smart people do this a lot, and this is a biggie because unless someone else points this out to us, we might

never discover that this is the reason for some of our communication breakdowns.



For us, the information we’re conveying is complete. When in fact, we’re skipping some important elements and losing listeners along the way.

Meanwhile, our listener is challenged to a rapid “fill-in-the-blanks” puzzle. The listener can see the enthusiasm and hear the passion we’re conveying. There is no question about that. But our articulation of the idea leaves them with holes that need filling in.

Of course the listener has a choice to ask for more details and make more attempts to understand. In theory that’s

what should happen, but in reality it doesn't. The listener is busy too and it's probably convenient to simply non-committally appreciate our idea.

Besides, the way we so passionately convey our idea may make the listener feel that he or she *should* have understood, and asking for more details might make them feel self-conscious about whether we might question their intelligence.

4. We may be using a weapon of communication destruction: jargon

Recently someone I know pitched me an idea. In the first 90 seconds, he used four acronyms and at least two words I'm sure I thought were not English. I was busier trying to decode the puzzle than understanding the idea.

By the time I figured out what he was saying by googling a few terms, he'd moved on. The train had left the station.

Jargons provides shortcuts when discussing something with our cohorts but outside of our circle, people may have no clue what we're saying. We've lost them at first base.

WHY SMART PEOPLE DON'T GET BUY-IN FOR THEIR IDEAS

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

—AFRICAN PROVERB

We want to get onto bigger and better projects.

We can't do them alone (this is true whether in an entrepreneurial or corporate setting).

We want to get buy-in from others to make things happen.

Unfortunately, we are not always able to achieve that.

Here are some reasons we may not be getting buy-in for an idea, in no particular order.

We might have forgotten everything required to execute an idea

In the grand scheme, an idea is only a small part of the game. There is a lot more to executing an idea than merely presenting it. The listener (especially if he or she is the boss whose approval is needed) is thinking about “all the other things” that need to happen to make our idea a reality. If the listener doesn't hear a well-thought-out execution plan or doesn't believe we can create one, there's a good chance they'll dismiss the idea and move on.

Sometimes the best thing would be to make the idea somebody else's and give them full credit. This requires “letting go of the ego *and* credit” and it's not easy.

WE MIGHT HAVE FORGOTTEN THE IMPORTANCE OF TIMING

They say nobody can stop an idea whose time has come. I don't know about that, but the world is filled with people who are ready and willing to stop an idea whose time has *not* come.

We might have a brilliant idea but if the timing is wrong, it's going nowhere.

Our history shows a lack of follow-through

Last but not least, our past history of failing to follow through may come back to haunt us. We may have presented a dozen ideas and stopped there. We might not have followed through with any of them for various reasons including the most common reason which is that we were busy chasing the next idea that seemed more promising.

With that kind of a past, we've lost the listener before we even begin narrating our next idea. In the mind of the listener, this is just one more in a string of many ideas that will bite the dust in no time. So why bother listening?

We may *not* be communicating well enough

We talked about this in the previous section. People buy into the story they are told. If our story is not communicated well, there is nothing exciting to buy into. Granted, the vision may be clear in our head, but if we haven't taken the time to craft a clear and compelling story to the audience, all bets are off.

Buy-in requires future mindshare commitment

Buying-in to a concept is not an on-the-spot activity but a promise for future time, energy and mindshare investment. Sometimes we forget that we're not just asking for a "Yes" to

our idea now, but for a “Yes” to a long-term commitment. Not everyone is ready to make that kind of commitment. Solution? If we begin with a smaller, more digestible ask, we can always expand the scope of it later.

We didn’t address the proper belief filter

Before we get buy-in to our ideas, our audience has to believe our story. So it helps to realize that every person passes new ideas through their own belief filters. One person’s belief filter may include a simple smell-test of future potential, after which they’re fine to move to the next stage. On the other extreme, someone’s belief filter may require an elaborate investigation of proof points on our claims. There is a broad spectrum out there of how people view the world. What we need to present to one end of the spectrum is different from what we need to present to the other. If we tell the same story to everyone, we shouldn’t be baffled when only a few people ‘get it.’

Our story requires no participation from the audience

Our stories are good for us, but we need to think about where our listeners fit into them. If we want their buy-in, we need to tell a story that involves them or else it’s a lost cause. We don’t expect them to do the work of figuring it out on their own.

Our proposition is flawed and others are too polite to point it out

We present an idea and there are nods of agreement. At least, that's how we interpret the nods, but in reality, our proposition is flawed and our audience doesn't want to bother with or expend the energy to debate us. It's low-cost for them to just indicate agreement while they move on to other things. If we take politeness for support, and fail to ask for clarity we'll never understand why the buy-in didn't materialize. We need to make sure we're clear. Asking for clarity may give us short-term pain but it's better than long-term misery.

We didn't present a positive possibility for the future as a result of buying-in

As we covered before, buying-in to an idea is a serious investment of resources now and in the future. It makes sense to invest resources if your listener sees the possibility for a future return on their investment. Remembering that the listener likely has many available alternate opportunities to invest their resources, and that we are competing with those. It's our job to establish the value of our idea and communicate it well.

We have to get buy-in for ourselves first

This is probably the biggest and most overlooked reason for a failure to get buy-in. People work with people first, and our listeners are no different. If we have not given

others enough reasons to buy into us first, there is no point in presenting an idea as an opportunity. It won't even be considered.

In summary, our smartness helps but does not give us a passport to get buy-in to our ideas. We need to work on ourselves *and* our ideas to make them compelling.

WHY SMART PEOPLE DON'T GET THE SUPPORT THEY DESERVE

The first step is to get buy-in (a promise or commitment for future mindshare and energy investment). The next step is to gain ongoing support.

You may have experienced what's illustrated here (or even seen someone else go through this situation).

You are on to something big and need a *lot* of help but even people who have known you for a while are not actively supporting you in your quest. They seem to listen to everything and say encouraging words about your adventure but when it comes to taking action, they shy away.

You very well know that without ongoing support from other smart people, you will probably fail in the execution.

It bothers you because you've known these people for a *long* time, and you'd totally expect their 100 percent support. They, of all people, should understand your potential and lend a hand.

What could be wrong?

As part of my research, I talked to dozens of people who have been through this situation. My quest was to find a

pattern and use that understanding to see how smart people can get unstuck when they are faced with such a situation.

While I could find a number of possible reasons, none of them were as strong as what I call the burden of the story gap. Let me share this in detail below and follow that up with a few ideas to relieve yourself of that burden.

The Burden Of The Story Gap

There is a difference between

- a. Your true potential
- b. Your potential as perceived by your core group

Pick a time a few years ago when both (a) and (b) were approximately at the same level. For our example, let's take a snapshot of a time five years ago. Your core group of friends have probably watched you from close quarters and have seen you accomplish things. It was *not* difficult for them to assess your potential based on the results you produced.

But, there was a limitation.

What they could not see was what you were doing when you weren't around them. They didn't see the investment you were making in yourself to grow and become better.

Everyone grows but you decided to invest disproportionately more in yourself than what is usual for the average professional. So naturally, your growth trajectory is above that of average professionals.

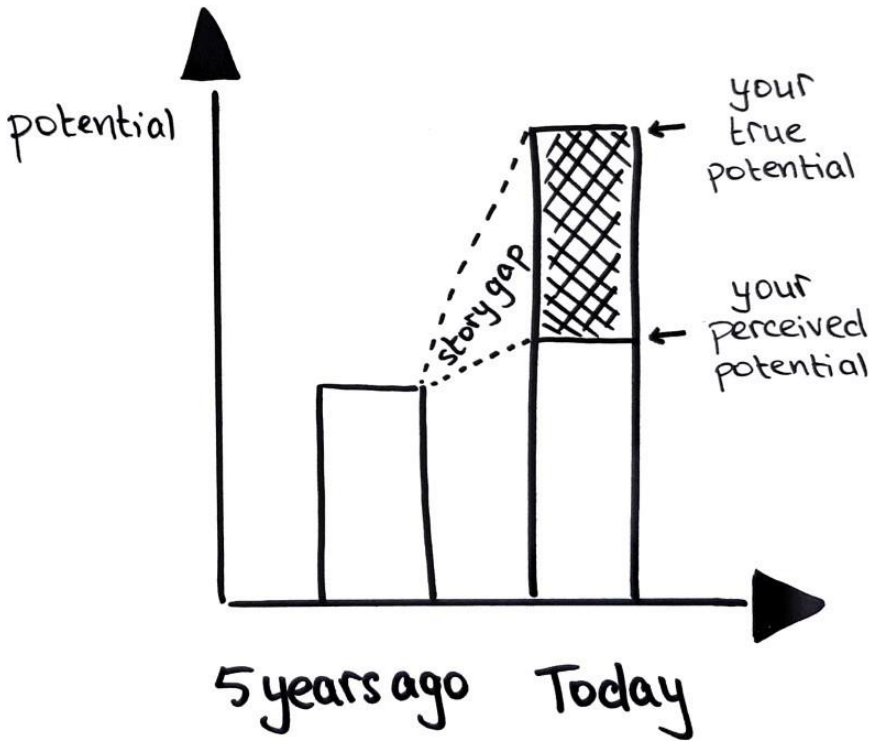
In a span of few years, your potential is at a level that's vastly superior to that of other professionals.

You know it and you can feel it.

But...

There is a gap.

It's the story gap between your true potential and your potential as perceived by your core group.



It seems normal for your core group to assume you're on the standard growth path because that's what's seen in your peers, and you don't yet have superior accomplishments to prove them otherwise. You have the competence, capacity and drive to go above and beyond, but

that's where you need the help of others. Without superior accomplishments, others don't see enough reasons to believe that you are indeed *different* and invest in you. It's a catch-22 situation.

As long as there is a story gap, you will get support for projects that others believe you could achieve with the potential they perceive in you, and not those that you know you can achieve with your true potential.

What can you do now?

Simply stated, you need to bridge the story gap for them start seeing your true potential.

Here are some ways to get started:

1. Record progressive micro and mini-accomplishments along the way

Your ambitions may be sky-high but you get there step by step, via micro and mini accomplishments along the way. Preparation is very important but you have to provide a way for people find out and observe that you are on a superior trajectory of growth as compared to others.

2. Extend valuable help to others

An act of valuable help is not only good for the receiver, but the giver as well. Whatever skills you are using to provide others with valuable help, are skills you have the opportunity to strengthen. When you provide help and support time and time again, you win both in the short-term and the long-term

3. Tell your story via lessons learned

This is about not simply telling your story, but sharing the lessons learned on a meaningful quest. Simply telling your story is akin to tooting your own horn. On the other hand, if you extract the lessons from your various quests and experiences, your story becomes a gift and an education for those that are thinking of following similar paths.

Remember that those that have known you for a long time have a certain view about you and only *you* and *your contributions* can bridge the story gap.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 4

Embrace Grace

Criticism is part of life. If we're doing anything significant, there will always be some criticism from someone, some day.

Why?

For the simple reason that we can't please everyone.

An easy thing to do is to handle criticism with grace.

Here is an example of how Amitabh Bachchan (who needs no introduction if you know anything about Bollywood) handled criticism from another superb Bollywood actor Naseeruddin Shah.

Here it is, in his own words (on his blog):⁵

“A question came my way during the reading of the latest Filmfare. When told to comment on Naseeruddin Shah’s remark on how I had become a victim of my starhood and forgotten how to act

⁵I made very minor edits for the sake of readability. Emphasis is mine.

(that he had preferred me in my earlier ventures due to the simplicity of playing characters who were closer to the earth).

“I replied that when an actor of Naseeruddin’s stature speaks, you just listen head down and quietly with your hands behind your back.”

We can all learn a lot from the above incident.

If we can make a commitment to ourselves that we will handle criticism with grace, it will save us from a lot of heartache.

CHAPTER FIVE

Stuck While Solving Problems



"If you can find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere."

—FRANK A. CLARK

WHY SMART PEOPLE ARE OBLIVIOUS TO THEIR STUPID ACTIONS

We may be the source of our own complications.

Have you ever seen a smart person do something stupid knowing that they were completely oblivious to their stupidity?

Regardless of how smart we are, none of us is immune to doing stupid things.

Over the course of six weeks, I asked a bunch of smart people about the stupid things they now know they've done, and why they think they did them. I got dozens of interesting answers. Here are some of them:

- "Didn't seem stupid when I did it."
- "Error in judgment, shouldn't have happened."
- "The smart things I do more than compensate for the stupid things I do."
- "Well, time will tell if it was really stupid."
- "I'm a risk taker—unlike others."
- "Mistakes happen to everyone. I'm human after all."
- "I'm not alone in this, am I?"
- "I move faster than most people, and fast movers slip and fall sometimes."
- "I don't know what happened."
- "It was silly, I know. I just move on..."

- > “Ah...those were the days.”
- > “Hey—you live and learn.”

You and I aren’t evergreen heroes who will never do something stupid. If you recently did, it’s likely not the first nor the last time. Unless you do something so stupid that there is no point of return, it’s really not a big deal. You’ll usually recover quickly and be okay...until the next time.

The real problem arises when we are oblivious to our stupidity. We continue down the wrong path, committing one stupid action after another rather than making any corrective attempts, and wind up at a point where it’s very difficult to recover. The telltale sign that we’re on this path is when we shun accountability quickly divert blame to someone or something else (e.g. our boss, our spouse, changes in the law, bad luck) when things aren’t going the way we planned.

#271



Re-Labeling
stupidity
with any
self-esteem boosting
terminology such as 'being-
unreasonable' does not
diminish the damage caused
by it!

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So how does this happen to smart people? In many cases, it's usually a series of events that begin long before the real act of stupidity.

1. We begin defying normal boundaries in the wrong direction

We test the boundaries by breaching them just a little beyond normal limits.

A trivial example: if everyone comes to the office at nine, and it's okay to be late by up to an hour, we show up at ten thirty. We might get away with it because we're smart and make up for what could be seen as a lack of discipline with super duper skills.

2. We give our repeated deviations a positive spin

We continue to breach the normal boundaries. Far from admitting that this might be detrimental in any way to our job or how others might see us, we give our breaches and rule breaking a positive spin with justifications that others can't easily refute (e.g: I'm an out-of-the-box thinker, creative people are always different, etc.)

3. We start believing our own story

Giving a positive spin to our "deviant" actions was how we were getting away with them. Real problems emerge when we start truly believing that we're not at fault for any of the negative consequences of our deviant actions. Others around us might be too polite to call us out or say anything, and if

nobody is making a ruckus about our “deviant” actions, then they must be okay.

4. We increase the deviations and repeat steps one to three

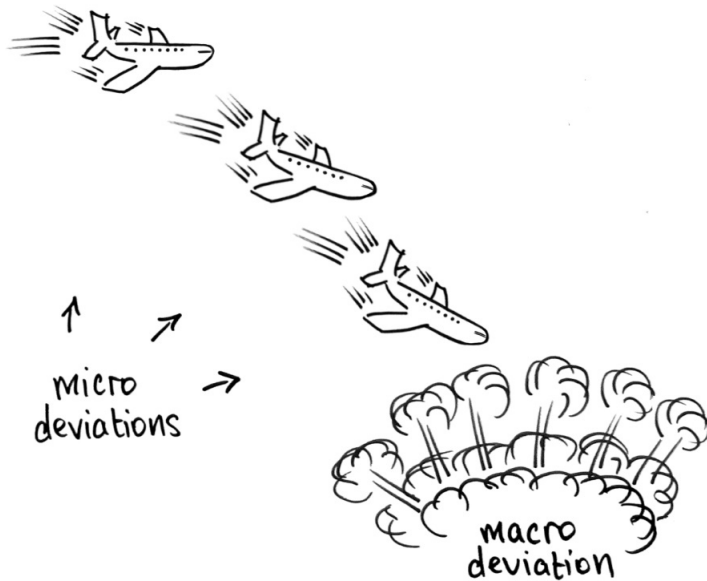
Unfortunately, repeated deviations, like anything we repeat, eventually become our “normal” routine, at least in our mind. The world still notices our deviations but won’t call us out, and in the early stages of a fast-growth career, these things don’t matter much.

5. We forget to notice that our accomplishments are not commensurate with our smartness

This is an important point. If our accomplishments are in fact commensurate with our smartness (in a manner that others can vouch for) then we can continue to get away with our “deviant” actions because valuable accomplishments in most cases will trump noticeable aberrations.

6. We create a mess with a macro deviation

Then, what was going to happen sooner or later happens: the stupid act. Because of the way we kept incrementally breaching boundaries in the wrong direction, we failed to notice that these deviations were adding up over a period of time. Our progressive and collective micro deviations have resulted in a macro deviation that sticks out like a sore thumb.



This is when someone confronts us as it's also clear to them now that our accomplishments are not enough to make up for our smartness, or to account for the long leash we'd been given. The party had to end one day.

What can we do?

This is a case where prevention is definitely better than the cure.

The easiest thing is to *always* have someone else on our side (a mentor or confidant). That someone must:

- › Be competent *and* very candid with us.
- › Be one who can identify and call us out on micro-deviations along the way.
- › Be a person we trust to have our back, and to whom we won't try to justify our actions when receiving feedback.

The last point is important.

Everyone feels that his or her problems and challenges are more complex than others. The tendency to defend ourselves or make excuses when we receive critical feedback or get called out is a given, but defending ourselves too aggressively can really complicate our issues.

Let's dive into this.

WHY SMART PEOPLE AGGRESSIVELY DEFEND THEIR ACTIONS

Have you seen any smart people aggressively defending their actions, sometimes to their own detriment?

The big question: Have *you* ever defended yourself or your actions too aggressively?

I was recently at a pitch session where one of the founders gave a sub-optimal pitch and in turn, received sub-optimal ratings for his pitch. His first reaction was to claim that the judges didn't know the space well enough to judge him. In other words, he was right and the judges were wrong. This person really believed in what he said.

When your first impulse is to jump on the defensive you close any avenues of improving yourself.

If you automatically believe you are *right* and "they" are *wrong*, there is nothing to improve, right?

I see this phenomenon all the time and I've been guilty myself several times. Perhaps you can relate.

Why do you think this happens?

Here are some reasons (in no particular order) and I am sure you can add a few more:

We want to avoid short-term pain

Our need to defend arises only when there is an opposing point of view. In our mind, not defending our point is to agree that it is wrong. Admitting we were wrong will create short-term pain that we want to avoid, badly.

We cringe at any future pain associated with change

We're smart and we can see ten steps ahead. Not defending would also mean that we're required to make changes to our viewpoints in the near future. That is pain waiting in the wings for us. We want to avoid that future pain so our best defense against change is to defend our point of view.

We want to “win” that game

Sometimes defending ourselves is a matter of wanting to win the “game” of who is smartest and we want to win.

We end up trying to win even at the expense of actually “losing” in the long run.

We make it (unnecessarily) personal

What another is opposing is our point of view.

For whatever reason, the line between who we are and our point of view blurs and we make it personal.

Once we make it personal, it goes downhill very fast. In our mind first, but then outwardly as well.

We start focusing on the messenger

This is similar to taking things personally (where we thought the focus was on us) but here we start focusing on whether the messenger is qualified to give us an opposing point of view. Our judgment about the message gets filtered through our personal assessment of the competence and credibility of the messenger. Now, how do we get out of this?

It is a two-step process:

1. Acknowledge

The first step is to acknowledge that you may be caught in a trap.

2. Stop taking yourself so seriously:

Checking your ego at the door is a (very) good thing.

But the real question you should be asking yourself is...

WHY SMART PEOPLE DON'T SOLVE THEIR REAL PROBLEMS

Have you faced this situation before? You were stuck with a problem for a long time and one day somehow, in the process of solving a completely different problem, the other one you'd been working on automatically vanished.

If you have faced this situation, you're not alone. Getting stuck in this way is standard for many smart people.

How do I know this?

From my consulting and research projects.

The pattern

At work, I am blessed in many ways. Every single day I get to meet with many smart people. These conversations are deep, engaging, insightful, and last but not least, stretch my imagination and creativity.

My consultations with some of these smart people is usually to brainstorm and help them come up with new possibilities to get out of a stuck state. Interestingly, many smart people won't ever admit they're stuck. Some even worry that doing so might cause others to deem them not so smart after all. As I've covered before, getting stuck is also a result of moving to the edges, away from your comfort zone and actually stretching yourself to grow. So, in that respect, *getting* stuck is not a bad thing. It's *choosing to stay* stuck that's bad.

During these consulting and brainstorming sessions with smart people there is a pattern. More often than not, we end up solving a different problem than the problem they've come to discuss with me in the first place.

Did they know about the core problem?

You bet they did.

So, why did they move away from solving that core problem?

Well, it happens to almost every smart person, maybe even you. Let's dig deeper into this.

The problem behind the problem

First, the good news. You're not stuck because you didn't know what the real (or core) problem was. You were able to notice and define the core problem quite quickly. It's what happened immediately afterwards that is the source of getting stuck on its solution.

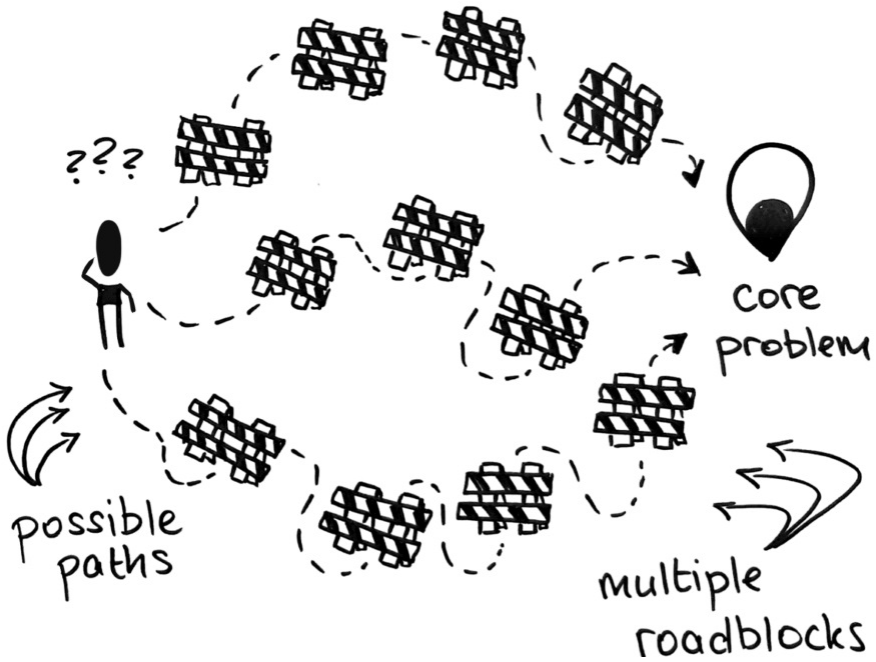
Here is how it goes: You encounter a problem. You find a solution for it. You take the path required for that solution and encounter a roadblock. You find a solution for that roadblock. You keep going this way until you encounter a roadblock where external forces that you have limited control over are at play. Now you feel victimized and are "stuck" on a totally different problem.

So what happened to the core problem?

"What problem?" you ask.

The core problem has fallen to the background and the new roadblock has become bigger. After a while, you even forgot what the core problem was and why you were trying to solve it. Then, one day (usually after a long time) someone or something triggers (more accurately, jolts) you to wake up and take stock of your life. You notice the "core" problem again, and that changes everything.

Right now, at this moment you may be focusing on the derivative at the expense of the core. Shift back to trying to solve the core problem, and suddenly the world will look different.



The proposal

Now that you're more aware of this pattern, what do you do when someone close to you is a victim of this problem? Smart people have smart friends, so it's likely you will want to share what you learn with others, right?

First, remember that it's not easy to point out what a smart person seems to have forgotten. It might hurt their ego and the first thing people do when something hurts their ego is to defend themselves or their position. Then we are in another useless rat hole.

What has worked very well for me with my consulting clients is the kid-glove approach. I say something like this:

“John, the clean slate approach has worked very well for me in the past. When I find myself in a stuck state, I go to my mentors with the thought that I really don’t know the answer to my question. This helps me be open to whatever comes up in our discussion. So, if you don’t mind, for the next 45 minutes or so, let’s assume that you don’t know the solution to your situation. Actually you do, we both know that, but let’s assume for 45 minutes that you really don’t. Then let’s see what comes out of our discussion. Fair?”

Most often, this will lower any guards and create an openness to listening and brainstorming. By the end of the discussion, if we have identified the core problem that is the cause of the symptoms that they came to discuss, we’ve done our job.

Why Smart People are Better at Solving Others’ Problems

I’m sure you’ve met them. Many smart people can solve other people’s problems very easily but they can’t solve their own problems. As my friend Stuart Scott would say, most people have brilliant “outsight” and all they lack is some “insight.”

What is it that makes it harder to solve one’s own problems? It’s one thing if we don’t have the capacity to solve our problems. We’re not talking about that category of people. We’re talking about those of us who have a demonstrated ability to solve problems presented by others, and yet are mysteriously challenged when it comes to solving the very same problems in our own lives.

During the course of my research I think I finally have some findings that might shed some light on this dilemma.

First some background information:

Problems are part of life. In fact, in some way, they are life. It's how you look at problems that makes the difference. Sometimes not getting that first sale is a problem. Problems can also be looked at as a challenge or even an opportunity to grow and learn. Whichever way you look at them, to overcome whatever you are faced with, you need a few things.

To start with, you need skill sets, resources like time or money, and sometimes you need a lot of people who are willing to help you overcome problems.

It's also important to mention that all problems come with constraints that put some boundaries on how you can handle them.

Now, let us look at the two scenarios:

1. Solving others' problems

When a problem gets presented, all the constraints associated with that problem may not be presented. Maybe the person having the problem has a confidence or a self-esteem problem. Maybe one of his family members isn't doing well, and worry is affecting his mental or emotional state. Maybe he has knee pain. When he presents the problem at hand, he may not think to list out all these constraints that surround him or his problem. So the smart person listening to his problem has a larger canvas upon which to paint a solution. The smart person sees fewer constraints than the

person who is facing the problem—which makes the problem look a bit easier.

2. Solving your own problem

When a problem shows up in your life, it's not just the problem you see, but all of the constraints surrounding and operating around you. Which makes the problem look way more complicated than when you look at it as a standalone problem. You, or any smart person, has the same canvas to paint a solution but the canvas is torn in places, and dirty in a few other places (more constraints)—suddenly making the problem way more complicated to paint a solution for.

So, as smart people facing this problem, what can we do?

Here are some places we might start:

3. We can stop over-analyzing our constraints

Most constraints grow bigger in our minds than they really are. Our confidence problem may not be as big as we think and our public speaking skills may not be as bad as we think.

4. We can get help

Yes, we know that if we think long and hard, we can solve our problem ourselves. But we can also be humble and go to someone that we trust, so that they can see our problem without all the baggage we're carrying around with it. Even if it means paying an expert, it's well worth it to get another perspective on our problem.

5. We can change our relationship with failure

We don't want to fail. No one does, but smart people *really* don't want to deal with failure. When we have a chronic fear of failure, we may end up not taking *any* action. Success requires taking some risks, and a willingness to get uncomfortable and sometimes fail. Edges are not very safe. But they are also where amazing things can happen and excellence sometimes requires traveling on the edges.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 5

Make an Appointment to Think!

"Thinking is hard work, which is why so few people do it."

—HENRY FORD

When I talk about it some people get offended. It's as if I am making an assessment that they are *not* thinking and I am the *only* one that is thinking. I have to clarify to them that we are *all* victims of this wonderful trap that forces us to "think on the go."

Meaning, too often we have to think while we are engaged in doing something else. Our society and work structures won't let us set aside some time to *just think*.

In general, nobody does it. Everyone is multitasking. We don't want to be the odd one out, so we fall into the same trap.

In order to make a change, try to carry out this exercise this week:

Make an appointment with yourself for about an hour. Switch off all communication devices (cellphone, blackberry, email and internet) and think about a topic that matters most to you in the near future. For now, don't worry about the outcome. It doesn't matter. The key is to replace the "thinking on the go" habit with a deliberate thinking habit.

On a lighter note, I ask people these questions:

- › Have you ever run so fast that your legs were hurting?
- › Have you worked out for so long that your body was aching?
- › Have you written so much that your hands were hurting?
- › Have you eaten so much that your tummy started hurting?

Most often, people say "Yes" to more than one of the above questions, which leads me to my next and one final question:

- › Have you ever thought so much that your head started hurting?

"Thinking Hour" when you finish your first one.

Have fun and share what you came up with during your thinking hour with people that care. Don't forget to make the next appointment with yourself for your

CHAPTER SIX

Stuck Because Changes Hard



*"The reasonable man adapts himself to the world;
the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the
world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on
the unreasonable man."*

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

It may be safe and you very well may be busy at the center.
But there is rarely any magic there.

THE MAGIC HAPPENS AT THE EDGES

A knife's sharpness is at its edges. Your keys are useless pieces of metal without edges and a pen with a broken tip is garbage. In fact, you'll write your next email with the *tips* of your fingers.

You get the point, right? In most cases, edges are what make things happen and where they happen. Edges matter.

At the center you follow what's trendy. At the edges, you are the trendsetter.

At the center you adhere to the rules. At the edges, you make new rules.

At the center lies what's common. At the edges, you explore the uncommon.

At the center, you're with what's already known. At the edges, you expand and grow into the unknown.

At the center, you comply. At the edges, you lead.

At the center, you try to conquer. At the edges, you actually contribute.

At the center, you feel safe but you're not going anywhere. At the edges there are risks, but they come with a whole world full of possibilities.

You can choose to play it safe in the center and blend in, but the person who takes the risk of moving towards the edges is the one who ends up on center stage.

When it comes to distinguishing yourself, the edges are where it's at. That's where people get noticed.

So let's see...what will take you to the edge?

A small percentage of people will be attracted to the edges and go off to explore. They're wired for it. So let's leave them aside, and if that's you too, more power to you. Congratulations!

For the majority of us though, it's going to take some sort of trigger or crisis to get us moving towards the edges. The trigger can be an unexpected big event (being fired or laid off, for example) or a simple conversation.

As you're reading this, take a moment to observe what is going on in your mind. When I spoke about moving towards the edges in one of my talks, people confessed that it didn't take long for them to begin feeling uncomfortable while listening. Please don't resist anything. Edges are uncomfortable by definition. While uncomfortable, they needn't be something to dread. If we are open, amazing things can happen.

As I mentioned, the trigger that gets you to move away from center and towards the edges can be something dramatic, but it doesn't have to be. I am thankful to have had many conversations that pushed me to an edge, and they

weren't confrontational or unpleasant. In fact, sometimes I didn't even realize in the moment that I was being pushed to an edge.

Let me give you a quick example of one such conversation, so you understand what I mean.

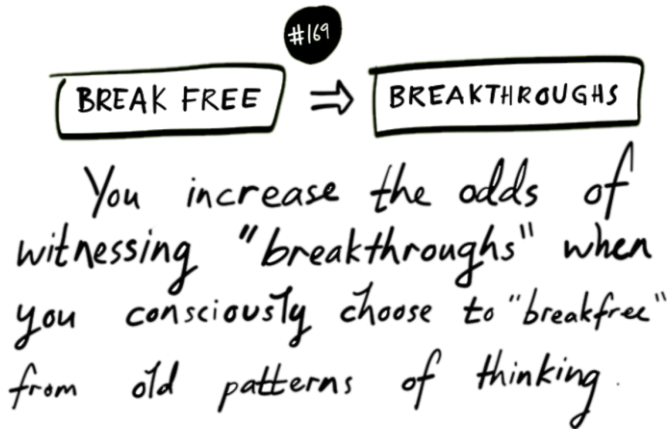
A few years ago, Dan Roam (Author of "Back of the Napkin") and I were attending a great conference organized by 800-CEO-READ.⁶ At that time, Dan's book about solving problems through pictures and drawing wasn't published yet. As humble as Dan was, anyone talking to him for a few minutes could figure out that he was a super smart person.

As the two of us were engaged in a conversation Dan talked to me about "Back of the Napkin." It sounded interesting, but at the time I hated drawing and told him that even if someone put a gun to my head, there was no way I could learn how to draw. Dan just smiled and said everyone could learn to draw and that it was easy. Of course I was skeptical, but in the next few minutes Dan showed me he wasn't joking. He taught me how to begin drawing. He was also kind enough to give me a galley copy of his book, which I devoured on the plane ride back home.

That was it—a ten minute conversation that changed my life completely. My views on visual thinking were transformed in a mere ten minutes, and as of today the number of illustrations I've created to express my ideas through my blog or social media may be in the hundreds. I continue to learn

⁶They've changed their name to "Porchlight Books" and they're dedicated to supporting authors and publishers. <https://www.porchlightbooks.com>

and experiment and I am thankful to Dan for that “edge” conversation. I am thankful to God for making me a person who is open to new possibilities.



www.napkinsights.com/napkin/169

You might remember such conversations from your past. I’m sure they helped you and made you better than you were before. The more of those conversations you’ve had, the more you’ve traveled on the edges. The more you’ve traveled along the edges, the more you’ve stretched and the more you’ve grown.

What would happen if you proactively planned your travels towards the edges?

What if you structured your life to be exposed to the edges again and again?

That’s precisely what I have tried to create with this book, a series of triggers to push you towards the edges. If you’re uncomfortable while reading, it’s by design.

Rather than avoiding the edges, start getting comfortable with them. You owe it to yourself and your loved ones.

WHY SMART PEOPLE DON'T TAKE ACTION

"I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving. We must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it—but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor"

—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES (1809–1894)

By “action” I mean those actions that will lift you to a whole new level in life and business. Actions that will get you to the edges, and actions that will continue to move you while you are at the edges.

Something has always haunted me whenever I’ve encountered it, and it’s smart people who seem resigned to doing good things, when they could be doing *great* things. It’s easy for me to see the gap between what they’re working towards and what I know they *could* be working towards.

With some of them, I become close and openly share my observations. Honestly, it’s usually not news to them. They know and are aware of the fact that they’re not living up to their full potential. Some say they’ll make a change soon.

Over the years I kept thinking about this gap and wondering why smart people would be doing good work when they're capable of doing great work. Why would anyone limit themselves to making a difference for a dozen people when they could be making a difference for thousands of people?

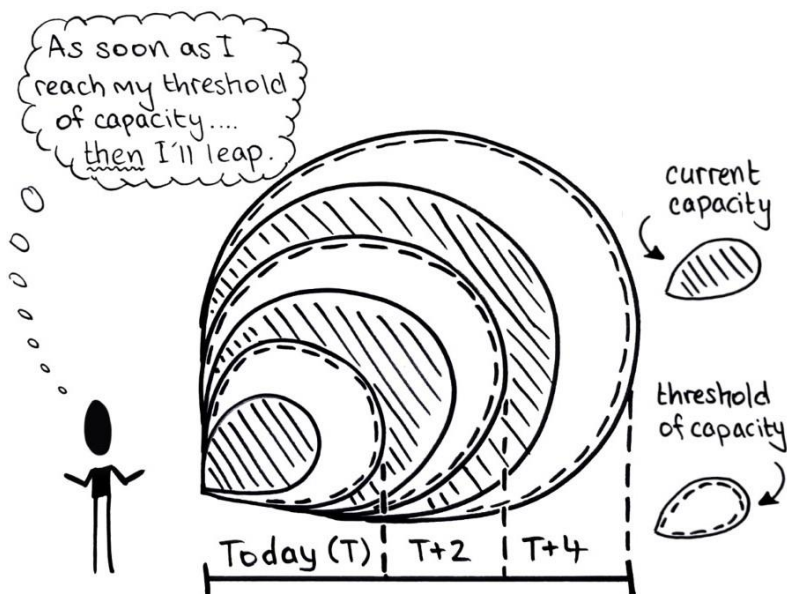
I want to pose the same question to you too. Why have you not made that move?

Do any of the following ring true?:

- › You've been waiting for the right opportunity
- › You've had obligations to fulfill before you take on big challenges
- › You've had personal or family reasons outside of work
- › Simply put, until recently you've been happy with what you've been doing
- › You've questioned or haven't been aware of your true potential
- › You've become comfortable and haven't wanted to deal with change

All of these are valid reasons, but while they do seem to make sense, I wasn't satisfied with any one or even a combination of them. Last month, when I was reviewing my notes from a few meetings over the years, a larger and more complex explanation became clear to me.

Let me explain it the best way I can and see if it fits your situation too. Here it is in summary:



You want to make a big difference, but you don't think you're quite ready to take the plunge required to live your dream. It might involve having to raise the stakes by quitting your job, committing resources, investing money into something, or joining a movement, but you want to be really ready first.

As you're holding off, preparing and learning how to be "really ready" to commit to your dream, you keep discovering other things that have to happen before you can raise the stakes. Meanwhile, the longer you prepare and wait to be ready, the more obligations and responsibilities appear in your life, making it more complicated for you to be able to take the plunge or raise the stakes.

So on one end, you keep discovering that there is so much more to know to be "really ready" and on the other end, it's

becoming harder and harder to take any drastic actions that would propel you forward and immerse you in the work you're meant to do.

Let us look at this in a bit more detail

Whenever you decide to pursue an idea, the step before you take any action is to first build your “capacity to take action.” A smart person knows this, and that is exactly why you rightfully set out to learn more and prepare.

In the beginning, you envision a certain “threshold of capacity” you must reach before you can take any serious action. Your efforts to build your capacity may include, for example, learning a set of skills such as marketing or sales. You might start seeking capital or strong connections with key people. You quickly identify the gap between “your current capacity” and the “threshold of capacity” required for you to take action.

You continue to work and do more to build up your capacity. Maybe you enroll in an MBA program. You keep moving and taking action, but it's always towards building your capacity so that *one day* you are ready to take the plunge.

Eventually, you realize that the threshold of capacity you've been working towards and that you envisioned would be sufficient in order for you to take the plunge, is higher than you estimated. Not only is there still a gap between where you are and where you need to be, the gap seems even bigger than when you began. You tell yourself you need to work harder.

Over the next few years, you aggressively work on increasing your personal capacity and as you learn more about

yourself and the world around you, the threshold of capacity you must reach once again increases.

You are continually preparing and getting ready to take the plunge towards your dream.

While you continue to grow your capacity, you've ensured that you remain safe. There are no high stakes involved. No big risks, and nothing to lose (at least in the short-term) by not taking any serious action towards your big goal. In fact, you've been doing quite well in your current job and endeavors.

You've been above average by any of the usual standards, and you haven't had a really good reason to make any significant changes or rock the boat.

But of course, you do want to change. And you will. Just as soon as your personal capacity matches the "threshold of capacity" you've deemed sufficient to take the plunge.

Unfortunately, it's our own smartness that contributes to the ever-changing and continuously shifting threshold of capacity we think we must reach in order to take the plunge.

WHY SMART PEOPLE HAVE TROUBLE MAKING CHANGES

"In the power to change yourself is the power to change the world around you."

—ANWAR SADAT

Why don't we change even when we know change is good for us?

Change is hard. It's hard whether you're smart or not, but it is harder if you're smart.

What kind of change are we talking about here?

In this context, I'm talking about doing things that are new and different than anything you've done before. For example, if you're good at sales and looking at selling a different product, that's not the kind of change I'm talking about. The fundamental skills required have a lot of overlap whether you sell shoes or timeshares. If in addition to sales, you were tasked with marketing, you'd have to make the kind of changes I'm talking about.

Change is a process of reinvention that we'll either embrace or be forced to embrace. This was *not* a requirement around two decades ago when the rate at which external forces changed wasn't close to the breathtaking pace we experience today. Technology and globalization—and the ability to outsource nearly anything—have changed everything. This means one thing—the speed with which we are able to reinvent ourselves has to match the pace of change experienced in the world. How else can we remain in sync or on top?

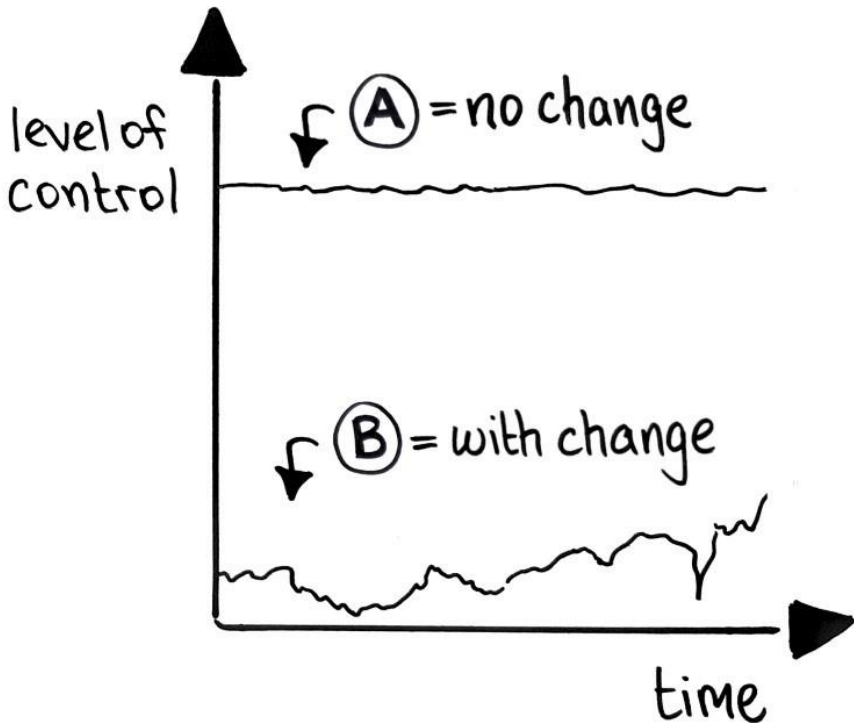
The good part is that most smart people know this. Not only do you know that you need to make some changes, you also know that you have to do it now. If I were to talk to you one-on-one, you'd probably tell me exactly what changes you need to make along with your plan for how. Yet still, you aren't making the changes. Why?

You might have a bunch of reasons, but what we're talking about is resistance to change. My research on this topic leads

me to one conclusion—we don't change because change causes a short term loss of control over outcomes.

Let me explain that a bit.

The following graph will show two curves.



The “A” curve represents the amount of control you have in the short term when you continue to do what you’ve been doing. As you can see it’s high because you know what you’re doing and you’re good at it. Notice that I am talking about the short term here. The amount of control you have over short term outcomes may mean nothing for the long term. Even if the long term outcome of continuing to do what you’re

doing is leading you to disaster, you may end up not changing because you're too busy fine-tuning your actions to continue getting immediate short-term gains.

The “B” curve shows the level of control you have over the short term when you make changes. As you can see, it's not such a smooth ride anymore. It takes time to attain mastery or even a comfortable level of proficiency when you're learning new skills and engaging in unfamiliar tasks. Until such mastery is attained, you don't have as much control.

At a certain threshold, smart people jump ship from curve “B” to curve “A” where they can confidently produce better short term results, even if these better short term results are at the expense of producing mediocre long term results.

What can you do to get out of this situation?

First, unlike the popular belief that you should declare your intentions to the world so that the world will hold you accountable, I suggest you *keep your intentions or plans to yourself* until such time that you are confident that the changes you make will produce reasonably good short term results. Then by all means fill everyone in, and be sure to get some external support to maintain course.

Second, be sure to *set reasonable short term goals*, taking into account the fact that you're an amateur whenever you're doing something new and it takes time to get better. Your goals should stretch you, but not be so out of reach that you become discouraged and give up.

Third, *hire a teacher or mentor to help you*. Just because you're smart in one thing, doesn't mean you're smart in

everything. A little bit of good help goes a long way in making the whole process of mastering new things smoother.

WARNING: IT'S TEMPTING TO TAKE THE SHORTCUTS

"Strategy is about stretching limited resources to fit ambitious aspirations"

—C. K. PRAHLAD, CO-AUTHOR OF "COMPETING FOR THE FUTURE" AND MANY MORE BOOKS

Shortcut (noun): shorter alternative route

In the right place and at the right time, shortcuts are great. Your friend tells you about an alternative route home that's shorter. Great. You save time and you might even save money.

Most of the shortcuts we take aren't the good kind though. They're the kind taken when we hope to avoid spending the increased time, money, thought, and hard work required when doing things the right (longer) way. Shortcuts of these kind are typically one or more of the following as well:

- › More entertaining
- › Easy
- › Too good to be true
- › Illogical
- › Have odds that aren't in our favor (and we know it)
- › Promise uncommon returns
- › May seem to have worked on occasion (there are always exceptions)

But wait. If we're intelligent enough to know when shortcuts are easier but don't make a lot of sense, why do we try them anyway? Simply because our perception is that the cost of taking certain shortcuts is less than the costs we might incur along the longer route, and we can always move on if the shortcut doesn't pay off.

We figure whatever investment we make in trying the shortcut can be written off, which makes it a minimal loss. We know we don't have to announce to the world that we're taking a shortcut, so if it doesn't work, no one has to know. If it works, however, we win huge returns for a smaller investment of resources.

So, what's the harm?

The harm is that it's easy to miss that the real costs of taking a shortcut are much higher than our perceived costs.

Let me explain.

When we engage in any kind of work, we derive two kinds of benefits—direct and indirect. Our direct benefits are those that are evident and seen by everyone. The indirect benefits we gain are less tangible but possibly more important, and one of those is the increase in our capacity for future action.

You may remember from chapter two that unconscious competence is when we become so skilled at something that it no longer takes effort or thought to do it. Of course, it takes working at something for a long time to get to the level of unconscious competence, but it's time worth spending for valuable skills.

Think about it. Everyone (including you) are born with limited capacity. Over the years, each one of us develops different capacities depending on where we place our focus, attention and practice. Some of us become engineers, others become singers. Someone else becomes a mountaineer. Yet another becomes all three of these because he can.

But none of this “becoming” happens overnight. It takes time.

If you invest in the right activities, slowly and steadily, you become more valuable to the marketplace. Over several years, when you continue investing in and practicing the right activities, the marketplace will bestow a premium on you. This is the less tangible and indirect benefit you gain.

On the other hand, take a shortcut and you lose twice. First, because the odds are against you and shortcuts rarely succeed. Second, every investment in a shortcut robs you of an opportunity to build capacity for the future.

In short:

The real cost of a shortcut is the loss of an opportunity to become better for the future. If a shortcut sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 6

Revisiting “One Hundred Percent”

This was in 1986. I was one of the 400,000 plus students who had just finished taking the first major board exam. We had to wait a few weeks before the results were announced, but when they finally were, I was delighted to find out that my score placed me at a rank of 20th in my state. I entered the exams from a town called Hassan and the last time someone had secured a notable rank there was a few years prior.

I'd gotten a great score, but it wasn't *one hundred percent*.

The same year on November 1st there was a big event in Bangalore where all the top rank holders were invited to meet the Chief Minister of the State. Amongst us was Arun Hiremath (who later became my classmate and friend in Engineering). Arun placed first for my state, and yet, even he hadn't secured a score of one hundred percent.

Long story short⁷—I continued to secure high ranks in the next three board exams and meet other rank holders from those exams. At no time neither myself, nor any of these others ever secured one hundred percent marks.

I've kept in contact with many of these bright people, and all of them are doing well in their careers—in spite of marks that were less than one hundred percent!

So, what's my real point?

No one and nothing is perfect, nor is perfection a pre-requisite to doing well.

Let me now switch the context to lifelong learning.

I meet people almost every week who've just completed one training or another to develop themselves. The trainings range from improving general life skills (meditation, relationships, communication, etc.) to more specific professional skills (public speaking, leadership, teamwork, etc.). They're very enthusiastic about how this one training program is going to totally change

⁷ If you are curious, and prefer the long story, you can read a detailed account of my teenage years at <http://www.rajeshsetty.com/about/the-story-so-far/as-a-teenager/>

who they are for good. A few weeks later, the charm wears off and a few months later they rarely remember anything from the course.

Of course, many of them have very intelligent explanations for why they stopped practicing what they learned.

One common excuse is that they find something about the course that they didn't like.

Examples include:

- 1 The teacher's answer to a couple of questions wasn't very convincing
- 2 I had a philosophical disagreement about something in the course
- 3 I didn't like that the teacher spent time marketing a more advanced course at the end of this one
- 4 I didn't buy into a couple of the concepts outlined in this course
- 5 I could go on but the underlying theme here is that they weren't *one hundred percent* satisfied with the course after all.

Basing your actions on anything having to be one hundred percent is not just a recipe for failure, it's a recipe for disaster.

Some of these same people are pretty comfortable about not executing on their commitments or projects with one hundred percent perfection, while expecting others to perform at that level.

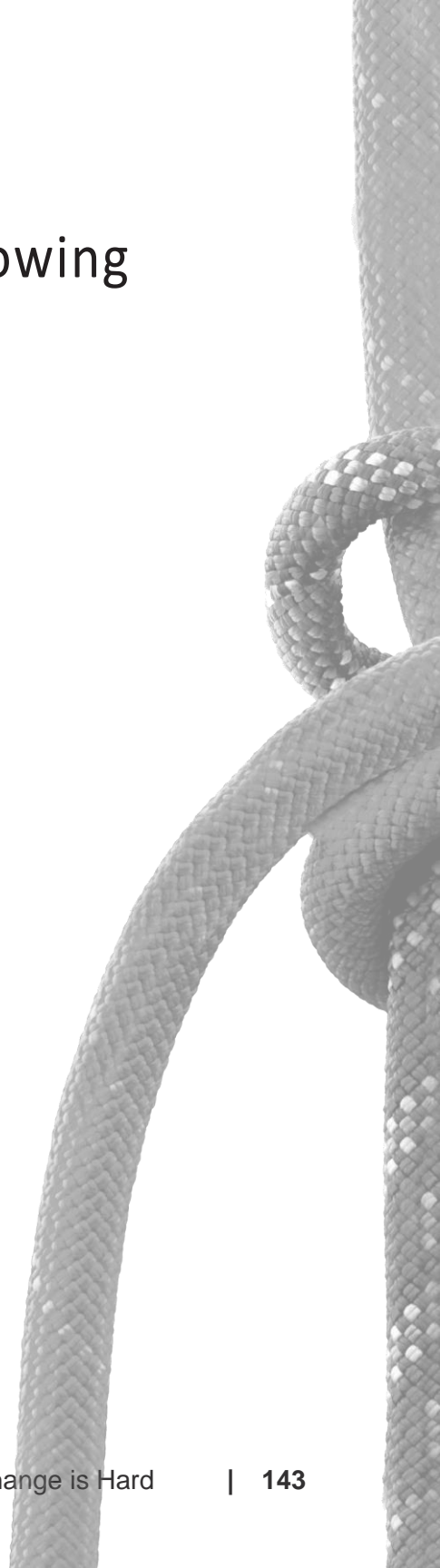
They have one rule for themselves and another rule for others.

Think about your own case. How many things have you dropped or stopped because they did not deliver one hundred percent?

Which of those things might you restart today?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stuck While Following And Leading



WHY SMART PEOPLE NEED TO WATCH OUT FOR BAD ADVICE

I attended a conference once where a serial entrepreneur was sharing his advice. Those in the audience were employees of high tech companies who wanted to be entrepreneurs. The speaker shared things that were counterintuitive and helpful, but a lot of what was shared was just plain bad advice.

This speaker was very passionate and totally believed in what he was sharing, which was everything that had truly worked for him. I'm sure his intention was to help others rather than hurt them. The problem? He shared what worked for his specific situation as if it was what would generally work in the world.

I do hope that everyone in the audience took his advice with care, realizing that they may be in a different life stage and place than where the speaker was. It was clear to me that what worked for the speaker and his specific situation would not necessarily work for them, and I hope they understood that too.

The above was one example of a smart person giving bad advice, and there is plenty of bad advice out there.

How do we avoid falling for, or stay on the lookout for bad advice? Well first we might want to consider some of the means and ways that even smart people might engage in dispensing bad advice.

WHY SOME SMART PEOPLE GIVE BAD ADVICE

1. They have a vested interest

So unfortunate, but true. In some cases, experts have a vested interest in making you believe their advice is valuable and that what worked for them will work for you. Why? Pure business. They create or address the fear, desires or greed in you, and they're typically selling a solution to resolve these feelings. They hope you will sign up for a course, consulting, subscription service, etc.

2. They generalize the specifics generously

Some people engage in sweeping generalizations—they start telling you how the world really works, how customers really behave, *the* process for hiring superstars etc. What they're doing is taking their own specific truth and telling you it's "The Truth." They forget that what worked yesterday may not work today, and that what worked in one set of circumstances (theirs) may not result in the same level of success with a different set of circumstances (yours).

3. They skip important details (especially the ones that are obvious to them)

When someone is asked for advice, there is an implicit acknowledgement of their accomplishments. Just as important if not more so, is the indirect acknowledgment of the particular skills or strengths they possess that contributed to their success.

Remember the earlier section where I explained why smart people don't capitalize on their biggest strengths? They can't because they're too often blind to them. Our strengths are invisible to us when they come naturally, or when we practice to the point that we use them without any conscious effort or awareness. What this means is that when someone is dispensing advice, they'll often forget the specific strengths and skills they've practiced or possess that played a huge part in their success. So the details related to how to gain said skills and strengths might be missing—not because they lack importance, but because they're taken for granted and too obvious to the person dispensing advice about their success.

4. They obscure reality to boost their image

Mark Pincus (founder of Zynga) once spoke at Startup@Berkeley about his early startup days. One of the stories he shared was about how he once made people download a toolbar called Zwinky, which was malware disguised as software, just to get revenues. As you can imagine, it wasn't taken well. The story doesn't really make Mark look good, but he chose to share it anyway because of the valuable lessons he learned and wanted to pass on. Not everyone will do this.

Most people would prefer not to share things that would potentially shine a negative light on themselves. On the contrary, they might even re-write some of their stories to create a better image of themselves, making up some imaginary cause and effect stories that don't reflect reality.

That means the advice is just plain bad. We learn a lot from our mistakes and failures.

5. They forget the time-lag factor

Sometimes they forget to incorporate the factor of time lag. They share what works for them now, in their present circumstances and capacities, forgetting that they might have acted differently and used different approaches a few years before. Whenever you're reading or listening to advice, apply a time lag and adjust it to reflect your current situation and capacity. Don't keep trying to do things that might work a few years from now when your situations and capacity are different.

6. They are counter-intuitive for the sake of being counterintuitive

What is the best way to get attention? Say something counter-intuitive. If the talk of the town is yin, they say yang. If the trend is to zig, they say the way to go is zag. When the world is going slow, they proclaim "go fast!" and when everyone is in a rush, they insist you slow down. Being accomplished and dispensing counter-intuitive advice is a fast way to get attention but it's not enough. Doing the counter-intuitive thing alone has not helped anyone.

7. They are accomplished and arrogant. Whatever they say is valuable.

Or at least that's how some people think. I have seen this first-hand when highly accomplished and successful people

come to talk at events without much preparation. Their reasoning is that their “wealth of experience” is enough to draw upon. They’ll start speaking, become disorganized or mess up badly, but rarely get the real feedback as to how badly they performed. The lack of real feedback gives them a feeling that everything is just fine and they continue on a slippery slope after that.

8. They are smart but not articulate

There are *many* smart people but only a *small* subset of them are good teachers. Good teachers make complex things simple, and easy to understand and digest. Teaching is a skill that comes with practice. Yes, for a very small percentage of people it comes naturally, but for most others it’s the result of a *lot* of hard work. Not all smart people have invested in developing these skills and it shows up on the stage.

9. Then...there’s the luck factor

There is a general feeling that “accomplishments” = “smartness.” While this is true, we all know that some people made it because they were just plain lucky. Of course, those lucky people won’t give a lot of credit to luck for their accomplishments. It only becomes obvious when they start sharing what they did to get where they got. Minus luck, their strategies would have been flawed but they don’t know that.

The bottom line? Whenever you encounter any advice—think about it for a minute and ponder it before accepting it as gospel. And...now you also know how not to give bad advice either.

WHY SMART PEOPLE MAY NOT MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

I'm sure you've observed this in your own life. You're about to meet someone for the first time, someone your friends have told you is very smart. Naturally, you've googled this person and learned a bit more. So off you go to the meeting with high expectations, and the meeting is great, but by the end of it, your viewpoint about the person has changed a bit. For whatever reason, your high expectations were not met.

On the other hand, let's say you are the smart person that someone else is looking forward to meeting, with similar high expectations. You may have wondered what you might do in order to leave a lasting impression on them. So, how do you live up to, or better yet, exceed the expectations of the other person?

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Your first impression is hugely influenced by
your zeroth impression!

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Let us dive deep into this topic.

In this day and age, what precedes anyone's first impression of you is their zeroth impression.

A zeroth impression is what someone thinks of you before you even make your first impression. Google and other resources make it easy for anyone to form a zeroth impression about anyone. So the zeroth impression sets a baseline of expectations. If the zeroth impression about you is that you are a “rockstar”, the baseline becomes “rockstar.” If the zeroth impression about you is that you're a newbie, the expectations fit a newbie. It's not right or wrong, it just is. People will come to meet you with a certain baseline impression and expectation.

If all else fails, some expectations could be based on certain stereotypes in the mind of the other person. For example: If your background is in computing or engineering, they might expect a “no-fun boring geek” or a kindred “rational” spirit, depending on who they are.

Let's take the two approaches—one that doesn't help you make a good first impression (Approach A) and one that helps you create memorable moments (Approach B).

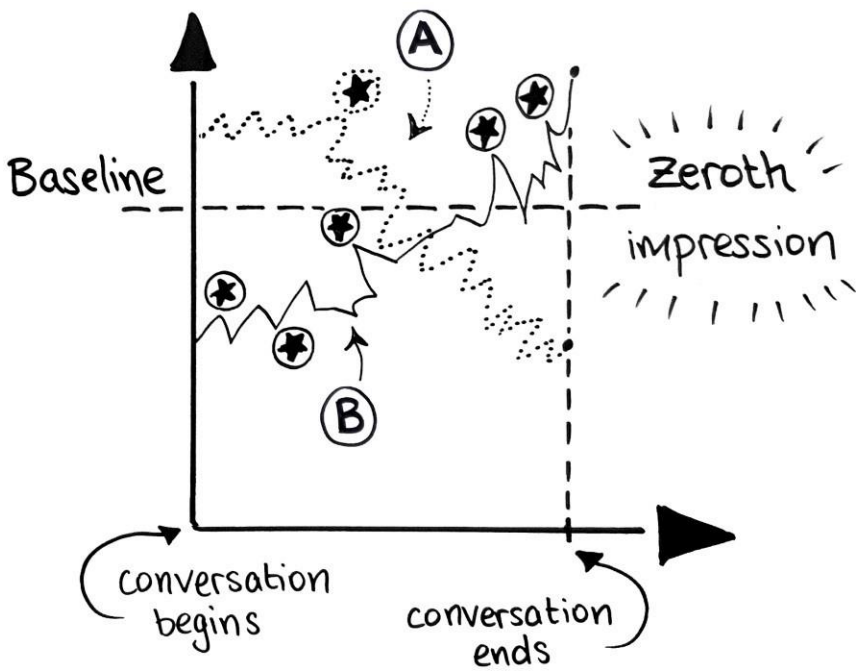
Approach A: Falling below zeroth

You start the meeting on a high, with your best foot forward. Your intro is stellar and raises the bar even higher than the baseline.

In the first half of the conversation, you cover most of your high points and impress the other person. Half way through the meeting, you run out of topics to connect on, and the conversation moves to a point where you start treading below the baseline. By the time the conversation ends, you are far below the baseline.

Meanwhile while you're so focused on the impression you're making during the conversation, you only manage to touch on topics that the other person deeply cares about once or twice (notice *one* star in the timeline)

The result: the other person is glad he met with you but it was not the meeting he or she was looking for.



Approach B: Exceeding zeroth

In this approach you start off the meeting well below the baseline. Actually, you start the meeting listening to the other person—curious and wanting to learn more about the other person. You’ve made it a point to understand what the person deeply cares about (as much as you can).

Honestly, you don’t have to worry about dropping below the baseline because in the first few minutes, the other person wants to believe that you’re at the baseline—whatever his or her expectations are (validating his own beliefs and zeroth impression). Plus, since you are totally engaging them by talking about what matters most to them, they don’t have time to think about you.

As the conversation proceeds, you’re making it all about *them* (notice *multiple* stars in the timeline) and wherever appropriate, you insert your high points only as far as they are relevant to what they care about. Basically, you ensure a good return on their investment for the interaction they’ve engaged in with you. If this was the last conversation the two of you were going to have, they’ve received a lot of value from just this one meeting.

By design or by practice, what you’ve done is left them with a great first impression of you that is much higher than what their zeroth impression was—bringing out the “Niagra Factor” you see on the graph.

The truth is, what they remember about you isn’t so much about your person as it is about how you made them feel—

about themselves—by the end of the conversation. No matter how smart you are, others will care about you only as much as you show you care about them.

I will leave you with a brilliant quote by Lisa Kirk that sums it up quite nicely:

“A gossip is one who talks to you about others; a bore is one who talks to you about himself; and a brilliant conversationalist is one who talks to you about yourself.”

WHY SMART PEOPLE FAIL TO LEAD

You have seen these people—the best of the best in the lot. Then they get promoted to leadership positions and all hell breaks loose. Not only are they frustrated, but they also royally frustrate their followers.

Here are seven reasons why this might be happening, and it could easily happen to the best of us.

1. The ingredients and the recipe for future success is different

As Marshall Goldsmith highlights in his wonderful book “What Got You Here Won’t Get You There”, we can’t use the same skills that got us to a leadership position to succeed *in* the leadership position.

To be a superstar performer, we needed to have certain skills. We demonstrated our skills and produced the results too. We got promoted to be a leader. But, to be a superstar leader, we need a very different set of skills. It’s not negotiable or optional.

As a superstar performer we felt like a master, but as soon as we become a leader, we're back to being a student again. We may not be comfortable with this change, for a while.

2. We enjoy fishing so much that we forget to teach our people how to fish

We all know the phrase, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

But, what if you, the leader loves to fish? If someone is hungry, you go fishing and give them the fish. It works because it solves their short-term hunger but it will never help them become self-sufficient. If it works very well, all it teaches your followers is to keep coming back to you whenever they are hungry.

We got our leadership position by being a really good problem solver, which we love doing. It's easy to forget that one of our goals must be to help our followers become really good problem solvers as well. If a problem arises and we jump to solve it, when will our other team members and followers learn to build their problem-solving muscles?

3. We tend to forget the law of the lid

John Maxwell, the leadership guru, talks about a concept he calls "the law of the lid." To paraphrase him, sometimes leaders have a metaphorical lid that sets limits on the growth of their followers.

After I read about the law of the lid, I became conscious of this concept. As I met with leaders during my travels, I noticed

that many leaders didn't notice the lids they had placed that limited the growth of their followers. It was supervision gone amok. They had interesting labels for those lids but ultimately they were hurting their followers.

What can we do? If we've placed any lids that limit the growth of our followers, it's time to lift them forever.

4. It takes time to transition from individual glory to team glory

Individual glory is what we might have been used to, but team glory is what is expected of us when we become a leaders. I'm not suggesting you didn't believe in teamwork before, but at some point you had to focus on how to stand out from the crowd in order to become a leader. Now, being a leader requires you to make the mental switch of focusing on how to make your whole team—not just you—shine, which may not be easy, and takes time.

5. We are uncomfortable without the spotlight

We might have been superstar performers which came with a perk: a spotlight that was always shining. As leaders, we're no longer in the spotlight but are given control of one, to shine on one or more of our team members. To shine the spotlight on others, we have to be willing to move out of the spotlight ourselves, and we may not be comfortable living outside the spotlight.

What we need to keep in mind is that learning to shine the spotlight on others is part of our own growth. Someone

put us in the spotlight and helped us grow into superstar performers—now it's our job to pay it forward.

6. Our comparisons lack the time lag factor

When we started on our journey, we were not the absolute best at what we do, right? It took us a few years to gain mastery. Yet when we become leaders, we sometimes expect people to perform at the level of mastery we possess. We forget that others are on the same path we travelled, and that they too may require a few years of development to become great. In other words, we judge others' performance forgetting to take into account the obvious time lag involved.

To escape this trap, we can always remember our own growth path and the time it required to get where we are. With that in mind, we can consider how we might accelerate that growth path for our followers.

7. We forget the ultimate scorecard

The key measure of our success as leaders can be seen by looking at what happens in the lives and careers of those who've followed our lead. It's not what we achieve that matters. It's whether we've inspired the people we lead to unleash their highest potential and transform. When the people we lead grow and become stronger, our organization *will* also grow—without a doubt.

As smart achievers, our scorecard is often about us. As smart leaders, our scorecard is all about the people we lead.

Always remember the old saying: “People don’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care.”

HOW GOOD BOSSES HELP SMART PEOPLE GET SMARTER

How does a smart person get smarter?

It’s not an easy question to answer.

For questions like this, we might be tempted to take an escape route by saying that we can’t define “smartness” in absolute terms, so it’s a waste of time. Worse yet, we might take the approach of saying “everyone is smart in their own way”, so why bother?

To avoid any confusion, here is my take on how smart people get smarter:

If a person progressively increases his or her capacity for contribution, *and* the cost they incur for their contribution decreases over a period of time, the person is getting smarter.

You’re smart, and here are seven ways your boss can help you get smarter (or if you are the boss, here is an expectation list from those smart people you are leading).

Here are some qualities to look for in a good boss, or to strive for if you are the boss.

1. A good boss paints you the big picture

Let’s look at what happens if your boss shuts you out from seeing the big picture. You are left to operate in your own

shell. Your sphere of influence is automatically limited by the size of the shell you are placed in. It's hard to come up with out of the box ideas if you're forced to operate from within a box.

On the other hand, a big picture will instantly provide you a bigger canvas to play with. If you want to walk the extra mile, you know in which direction to walk (in a way that's meaningful to the cause of the project)

2. A good boss expects more of you than you expect from yourself

Consider the following a “magical loop” for growth.

- a. You expect more of yourself than anyone around you does. (Courtesy: Michael Jordan.)
- b. Your boss expects more from you than you expect from yourself.

Put the above two together and you form a magical loop that will (within no time) propel you to greatness.

3. A good boss believes in you even when there is not enough proof

Progress is made when you start treading in the right uncharted territories. Let's say your boss is willing to take a leap of faith and believe that you can tread these uncharted territories. She is willing to take the risk, so that you can take the risk. The stakes are high for her because if you fail, she (and the company) is footing the bill for your failure.

Every time your boss takes a chance on you, you owe it to her and to yourself to stretch and grow, and most importantly, deliver.

4. A good boss will create situations that stretch you

This was 1998. I still remember the time when I was asked to lead a project on Sales Force Automation in Paris. The problem? Until then I had never managed a sales force automation project. I told my boss that I had no experience in managing such a project. My boss said, with Zen-like calmness, “I think you can do it and besides, it takes more than eight hours to fly to Paris. All the books and manuals are available...”

That was definitely a situation that stretched me. Not only did I use my flight time to study, I also spent almost the entire night in Paris reading and preparing.

Looking back, I know that what happened was a good thing—it became clear to me that we all have a higher capacity and capability to do more than what we generally do on a daily basis.

Your boss has many opportunities to create situations that will stretch you. At that particular moment, you might hate him, but in the future you’ll almost always thank him for creating those situations.

5. A good boss offers the right amount of help (but not until it’s absolutely needed)

On one end, your boss might give you a lot of help to the extent that her help becomes a crutch for you. On the

other end, your boss may offer no help, to the extent that she becomes an annoyance.

Good bosses know the balance. They know when they should withhold help (because they know that you can stretch and deliver on your own) and when their helping hand is necessary.

In almost all cases they know that their job is not to fill in the gaps that you can, and should, fill yourself.

6. A good boss cares deeply

Your boss can rarely fake caring. You're smart, and you'll see right through it. A good boss cares deeply—way beyond what is required from a boss.

One simple way bosses demonstrate caring is by being curious about what you care deeply about. If your boss has never asked or bothered to find out what you care about, there is very little chance that he cares deeply about you.

When anyone cares deeply about you, you have no choice but to care for them as well. So if you know that your boss cares deeply about you, you *will* walk that extra mile for him. In the process, you'll lift yourself up for your own good.

7. A good boss forgives failure

I am not talking about serial failures—serial failures warrant a firing.

But nobody wins *all* the time. You're not an exception. If you have a boss that won't forgive failure, you are in trouble—in the short and long-term. In the short-term you're in trouble

because absent forgiveness, there are definitely consequences for failure. In the long-term you're in trouble though because you'll do everything to avoid another failure—including avoiding risks you should be taking for the good of the company, and your own good.

Here is a quote to reflect upon:

"A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader, a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves."

—AUTHOR UNKNOWN

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 7

Extend theCanvas

It's hard sometimes to choose a gift. You want to get the right thing that's within your budget. If you don't know the person well, you struggle in one way, and if you know the person very well, you struggle in another way.

At the beginning of a new year, gift exchanges are going on everywhere. So you want your gift to stand out and be several things at once.

Thoughtful: a gift that shows you care.

Relevant: It's meaningful to the recipient.

Timely: It's something they can use now.

Special: It's memorable and stands out from the crowd.

You want this all to be within your budget. And everybody else searching for the perfect gift is thinking along the same lines.

So, why not change the criteria a bit and see what happens? Think of a gift that will "extend the canvas" of the recipient. Let me explain.

We all have a canvas for life, on which we create our “art”, which is our contribution to the world. Our mental canvas limits the scope of what we can do. This is our playground and whatever we do will be on this playground.

Without realizing it, you have boundaries for your canvas. Over time, these boundaries become real and you can’t see beyond them. Extending the canvas even a bit increases the richness in our lives as it opens up new worlds of possibilities.

When V. Suresh hired me as a journalist for a local newspaper in 1983, I was 13. It was a big leap of faith on his part because journalism was not even remotely on my canvas.

The opportunity changed my life in more ways than I could imagine. It was more than a chance to write for the newspaper. Over the next four years, it gave me a platform from which to think, form an opinion, and take my stand on issues. All of that has helped me tremendously as an entrepreneur.

As I shared earlier in the book, I met Dan Roam, author of *Back of the Napkin*, a few years ago at an 800-CEO-Read event. We were talking about drawing, and I told him I was bad at drawing. I

believed that I could never draw, ever. Dan said that everyone could draw and showed me a few simple techniques.

By the end of that meeting, Dan had successfully extended my canvas. So much so, that I started a site called Sparktastic. I created ThinkBook, a hybrid luxury notebook and business book. More recently, I partnered with my friend Ming to create Napkinsights.⁸

Others have extended my canvas several times in my life, and those were the biggest gifts I have ever received.

Think about the people that you care for. Take a few moments for each person, and try to see the size and shape of the canvas that they are currently working with. Think about how to help them extend their canvas. Often, they are unconsciously staying within boundaries that may be invisible to them.

What gifts can you give that will help them open their eyes to adjacent areas of their canvas? Your gift could be a book or the entrance fee to a course, a visit to a place that they have never been

⁸ You can see all the “Napkinsights” at <https://www.napkinsights.com> and judge my drawings for yourself!

or a thoughtful introduction to someone. You might buy them a ticket to a museum or simply have a heart-to-heart conversation about a topic that you both care about.

Extending someone's canvas is the best way to make your gift count. It's worth the time you spend thinking about it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stuck With Missed Opportunities



WHY SMART PEOPLE MISS FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

First, let us clarify.

A future opportunity is exactly what it sounds like—an opportunity that's available in the future. The next part is understood, but worth saying: such opportunities are *not* available right now.

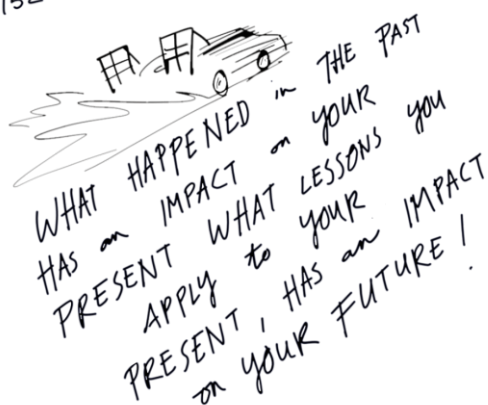
So how do we know someone is missing a future opportunity?

There is no way to know for sure.

But for my research, I used a bit of extrapolation. I observed whether someone was missing an opportunity *now*, and asked if they could have done something in the past that would have prepared them to grab the opportunity in question.

I found a pattern and concluded that if they didn't change their mindset now, they would again miss future opportunities.

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WHAT HAPPENED in THE PAST
HAS an IMPACT on YOUR
PRESENT WHAT LESSONS you
APPLY to your
PRESENT, HAS an IMPACT
on your FUTURE!

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Now, let us get to the main point.

In general, an opportunity—be it current or in the future—is created for you by other people, unless you just happen to find treasure while gardening in your backyard. What I mean is, even when you do most of the work yourself, you need an ecosystem of support in order to amplify what you’ve done.

The ecosystem and the chase for power

The smart people I talked to were very clear about where and with whom they spent their time. They preferred to be around the people in their ecosystem who could help amplify the projects they were involved with. What this means, is that their main focus is on people that are at equal or higher levels of power to themselves. Let’s assume this is your preference too.

An ecosystem generally balances out such that everyone in the ecosystem is comparable in the amount of power each has, unless there is someone who has other desirable attributes that make them an exception.

The point is, most of the other people in your network are trying to rub shoulders with people of same or higher power—it’s constant and never ending. It’s also hard work because there are so many of you vying for the limited amount of mindshare available amongst the people who have more power.

It takes a lot of energy to continue going after something that’s in high demand with a limited supply.

The missed opportunities

Meanwhile, there are people trying to get your attention who are lower in the power spectrum. If we're honest, we might consider spending time with these people an opportunity cost. After all, time is precious and we don't want to miss out on doing something that can advance our relationships with people higher up in the power chain.

Ignoring and not serving people lower in the power spectrum can lead to big missed opportunities.

Worse than ignoring those that are just lower in the power spectrum, is refusing to spend time with those who:

- a. are in need
- b. are in our network
- c. are not explicitly asking us for help
- d. would benefit a great deal from our strengths
- e. are in need of the kind of help that would be easy for us to fulfill

Fast forward to the future

In less than ten years, major career shifts happen in the lives of people around us, including those that could have received our help. We didn't offer it, and fortunately for them at the time, we weren't the only person who could help. Now, their heartfelt loyalty is to those that helped them when they most needed it, and believed in them when nobody else did. Their loyalty and obligation is reserved for those who gave

them the gift of higher capacity when they most needed it. They will have a desire to serve and give back to those who became the wind beneath their wings when their wings were just forming.

Meanwhile, we're continually growing and seeking bigger adventures too. This is where we need the greatest amount of help and a boost of our own reach and capacity. I'm talking about the kind of help that money can't buy—the mindshare of those that are helping *not* because we might pay them but because they really want to. There is no price that we could pay to get that kind of commitment and willingness to serve from others.

The sad part is, along the way we may have now realized that we could have offered that kind of help to others, but we didn't. We got carried away in our own journey. This works in the short-term, only to create a serious loyalty-deficit in the future. It creates a void that can never be filled with any kind of short-term tactics.

Worse, there is no shortcut to fix damage done over the long-term.

The alternate route is not picture perfect

You heard that right—if we had chosen an alternate path, it would not be picture perfect. Such is the nature of any network that of those who've received our help, only a small percentage will truly reciprocate.

But you know, that small percentage of good people will give us enough of a capacity boost to make it worth all of our investment in them, and more.

What can we do today?

Well, the first step is to commit to being a lifelong student because without our capacity to provide good help to others, we have nothing to start with.

Second, we can commit to providing whatever genuine and valuable help we can while blossoming into our full potential.

Third, we can stop to smell the roses and look around for people that need our help, but aren't reaching out to us. We can make their day—at least for some of them—by positively surprising them.

Fourth, we can practice instant immersion, especially when we care for others. There is no fun in engaging in half-hearted giving.

Fifth, we can take the long-term route. Remembering that in this realm, short cuts definitely cost us more, and take more time from us.

WHY SMART PEOPLE AVOID TAKING RISKS

You might know a smart person (or a few) who should be taking certain risks and isn't. You've seen their potential, and perhaps wonder what's going on. Let's face it, maybe the person not taking risks...is you.

Let me give you a bit of back story to lay the foundation for what I am going to say:

We have a fundamental need for validation

This was in 1988.

I was happy to have made that final push.

I secured second place in the state of Karnataka in the Class XII public exams. This was an outcome that ended up shaping my life in a big way. It wasn't about the external admiration and fame that followed, which I had a fair share of. The biggest change was internal—I had proof that with enough discipline and preparation I could achieve something significant. My belief in myself was reinforced.

I observed something else that was interesting.

Along with the admiration and well wishes for my future, there were some other reactions and words as well.

“It's great that you secured that rank. I wish I'd spent as much time preparing for the exam—I probably could have ranked in top places too.”

I'm sure it was possible, but while smartness was required for such a score, what was paramount was *discipline* and *preparation*.

“Congratulations. I am 49 points behind you, so I'm in 50th place for the state. I can live with that for now.”

Unfortunately, this logic is flawed. With that kind of logic, the person who scored one point out of a possible 600 could claim to be in 599th place for the state. Considering there

were about 15 people who shared the first 10 places, about 180 people who missed 10th place by one point, and about 1200 people who missed it by two points, someone who was 49 points lower in score likely ranked below about 250,000 people who did better.

I could continue with examples of the kinds of reactions I received, but what matters is that at the time I really wondered why people would even make such silly comments. I couldn't find an answer, and it remained an unanswered question for me, for years. Then about ten years ago, I engaged in a deep study of philosophy that shed some light for me. With some new knowledge in my pocket, I discussed the above topic with other smart people. I received an answer which was so revealing, and once I understood it, I realized I'd fallen into the same trap multiple times.

Here was the big revelation:

It's human nature to use every opportunity to validate our own smartness to ourselves.

So, going back to the examples I gave above, those comments had nothing to do with me—it was others' need to try to validate their smartness.

This is the revelation that also provided me with a surprising clue to the issue of readily avoiding risks.

More about risk

A risk is no longer a risk if the outcome is certain. Risk involves not only uncertainty, but also putting something personal at stake. This means that not getting the desired

outcome will also produce some sort of an undesirable situation for you.

I have seen enough smart people avoiding risks they are capable of taking. In fact, we could say that it's only if you take certain risks that you'll have an opportunity to use all your smartness for a good cause.

Yet, we readily avoid risk.

I've asked people for their reasons, and they won't give just one. Instead, they'll give *many* very valid reasons that they and everyone else can believe.

If you are one of those smart people avoiding risks that you should be taking, reflect and dig deeper. Find out your own real reasons. Like I mentioned before, most of what shows up will be valid and believable even to you.

Now, add this element to the decision making mix.

When we don't take risks, we have plenty of valid reasons, but we can also always tell ourselves, "I would have succeeded had I taken that risk, but I chose not to pursue that path." It is the perfect way to feel good about how smart we are, without taking any real action. It's validating our smartness without actually succeeding at what we might have been able to accomplish.

Of course success is not guaranteed, but we can assume it was within our reach because we're smart, after all.

Actually taking the risky path has the exact opposite effect. There are all the problems and challenges that we already knew about, and those that show up later. If we fail, our smartness could be invalidated...by ourselves! That is a *big* risk.

I am not suggesting that other reasons for avoiding risk are not valid. I'm simply saying that our need to validate our smarts could take over and blind us.

What can we do?

More than anything, we can be aware of the “need for self-validation of smartness” as a first step in understanding our risk tolerance.

We might check whether any insecurity, fear of failure, or need to validate our smartness to ourselves is hijacking the whole process of our risk and reward evaluation for a particular path.

Next time we face an important decision, we might stop and reflect with this new awareness. It might very well change the decision.

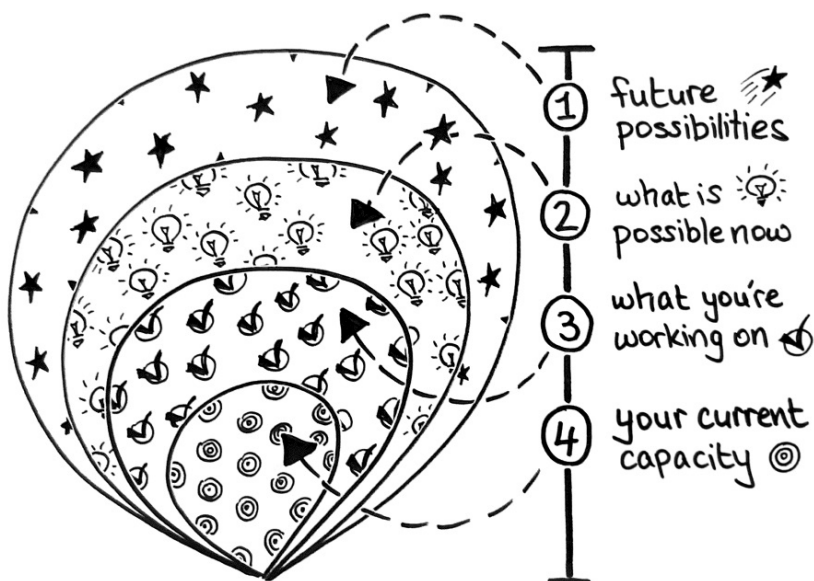
WHY SMART PEOPLE APPEAR SELFISH

I've met many smart people, and you have too, and after one conversation with them you get a feeling that they seem too selfish. The conversation is all about them. Who they are, what they're working on and how they're going to do what they're doing. Sometimes, you feel odd even continuing the conversation. It's as if you're an audience to a speech. Finally, you might give up and just wait for it to end.

Why do so many smart people come across this way, and how do we ensure we're not like them?

(Remember that my focus here is on those that only *appear* selfish. There are a bunch of smart people who *are* in fact selfish, and we don't want to deal with them.)

The following image will provide one explanation.



The image represents what might occupy the mindspace of a smart person—right now.

- 1 Circle number four (the largest circle) represents what you're thinking are possibilities in the foreseeable future. You know that some of these things take time, and that you're not ready yet. They're your dreams.
- 2 Circle three is smaller, and represents what's possible *now*. With the right resources, you know that you can make all the items in this circle happen. These are your possibilities.
- 3 Circle two is even smaller than circle three and this represents all the projects that you're currently endeavoring and working on.
- 4 Circle one represents your actual capacity, and what you can definitely accomplish with your current capacity. As you can see, your current projects (circle two) are beyond

your current capacity, but it's not always a bad thing to stretch a bit as that's part of growth. Blindly stretching, however, will hurt you.

So it's natural that your conversation focus will be about what's on your mind, and you'll navigate between the three outer circles—current projects, current possibilities and future dreams. While there is a conversation happening externally, there is also an internal conversation happening inside you, that's all about the implementation details of the current and future projects—what needs to happen in order to move the needle.

Obviously, with so many internal dialogues going through your mind, others might feel that you're totally preoccupied. Stretching this a bit, you might come across as selfish.

This can be a problem, since meeting and creating relationships with people who want to continually engage in conversations with you is obviously one of the keys to finding opportunities.

What can we do?

As people who have done brain and mind research will tell you—we can't simply remove bad habits. It's far more helpful to focus on replacing one way of doing something, with another way of doing it.

Here is at least one idea to consider when leaders are in conversation.

Firstly, we can set an agenda and focus completely on our agenda items. Then, the moment we make measurable progress on what's on the table, we can feel free to talk about other projects, possibilities and dreams. Even if we have a strong urge to go back to our other projects, possibilities and dreams, we'd be well served to resist it and get the focus back on to what's on the agenda.

If we want to make sure that we're not stuck in a conversation with someone who is only interested in their projects, once again, one solution is to set an agenda beforehand. Once measurable progress is made on that agenda, we can be sure to give an opportunity for the other person to discuss their projects, possibilities and dreams.

Any time we sign up to engage with or have a conversation with someone, it's our responsibility to clear mindspace and pay attention to the person on the other side of the conversation. Simply learning to be more mindful and conscious solves half the problem.

WHY SMART PEOPLE DO NOTHING WITH GOOD ADVICE

Some smart people think they know everything and aren't even looking for advice. We're not talking to them (and they're probably not reading this book). Then there are a vast majority of us who are open to good advice, but then don't do anything with it.

I knew this happened all the time but didn't know why. The question had been bothering me for a while so I finally went in search of an answer.

There are many reasons for not doing anything with good advice, and here are the most common:

1. Our ego interrupted us

If the good advice is in line with what we were already thinking, everything is great. We'll use it. If the advice isn't congruent with what we were already thinking, our ego comes online and questions if we could be wrong. Do we choose our own thinking or borrowed thinking?

Sometimes our own ego wins even if it ends up costing us a win.

2. We didn't have time to process the advice completely

This happens when we have many things going on all at once. We'd calculated the pros and cons of our own approach in great detail. Now the new advice needs to be processed in detail to evaluate its pros and cons. We planned on making this detailed evaluation before making a final decision but we ran out of time in the middle of dozens of projects.

3. We practiced selective listening

Some of us are masters of selective listening. If someone asks us what advice we received, we have our own version and interpretation of it, which is completely turned around

in a way that's convenient for us. So as far as we're concerned, we did implement the advice, only it was the version of it we created, not the original.

4. We felt forced to take advice

Some of us don't, or didn't implement advice given because we felt forced to take it. We were never interested in listening to advice, however good it was. We never needed it, so we don't take it. In fact, we only met with someone to get advice as a favor to the person who insisted we do so.

5. We want to prove things on our own

We strongly believe in our approach and we want to prove to ourselves and others that what we know *works!* Taking a different approach means we're giving someone else an opportunity to prove something.

6. It got too personal

Our projects and approach are very personal to us sometimes—so personal that we unconsciously oppose any alternate approach at all.

7. The act of asking advice was an insurance policy

This is the emperor of all reasons.

We were seeking advice only as an insurance policy to reduce the impact of the fall in case we fail. It didn't matter much what the advice was, all we were looking for was a cushion. If we asked for advice, we can now include a list of

advisors to bear some “responsibility” for whatever didn’t go our way. If everything succeeds, however, we’ll be in the limelight and it will be our choice whether to give credit to those who advised us.

If we are getting advice from someone, we need to make sure that we have a real openness to receiving it. Not only will it help us, but it’s also respectful to the person that is taking the time to share their wisdom and advice.

WHY SMART PEOPLE MAKE BAD DECISIONS

Really, nobody wants to make a bad decision.

Yet, everyone makes their fair share of bad decisions in their life.

Rationally speaking, smarter people should make fewer bad decisions. But, if we look back at our own lives or the lives of other smart people we know, that’s just not the case. We have our fair share of bad decisions—perhaps almost the same as any other person.

Something seems wrong. There doesn’t seem to be a premium nor any immunity offered to smart people for their decision making.

Digging deeper, there are many reasons smart people make bad decisions.

1. Over-confidence

We’re over-confident about our ability to make good decisions. Even if we don’t have all the facts, we’re over-

confident about our ability to get the facts to make a good decision. Obviously, this may work sometimes. It doesn't work all the time. We fall flat on our faces when we stretch our confidence too far.

What makes this worse is when our confidence grows with every decision we get right, yet we find something other than ourselves to blame for every decision we didn't get right.

2. Defending mediocre decisions

Every day we make a minor mistake here and there, the kind that others don't notice and that doesn't move the needle one way or the other. We quickly and easily course correct and move on. When we make a mistake or a less than perfect—shall we say mediocre—decision that others can see, however, things change. The best thing to do would be to own it, and then course correct. Instead, sometimes we defend our mistake or decision—just to save face. We try to use our creativity or smartness to prove we are right. This can lead to the beginning of a vicious cycle in which we apply one band-aid over another in a continual effort to prove that we were right and all will end well. Very soon, the system cannot handle that many band-aids, and it fails. So, instead of paying the price for making a mediocre decision and correcting it early, we end up paying a higher price for what ends up being a giant mistake.

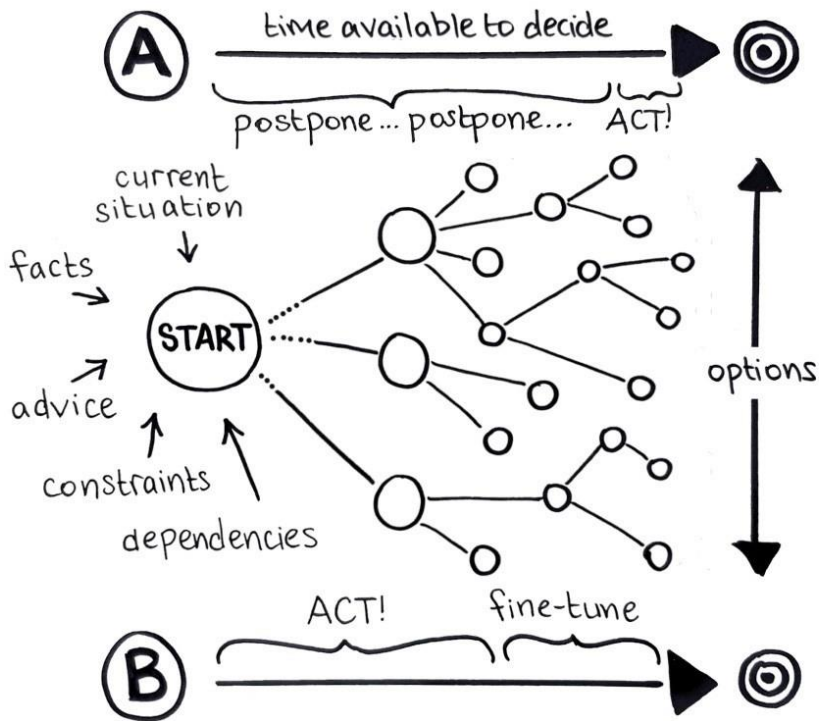
The next reason is a derivative of the above two problems.

3. Overwhelmed in the last mile

This is one of the less noticeable reasons we make bad decisions. Typically, bigger decisions have a longer lead time. If we use the time available to think through everything and possibly even get additional advice, we might make a better decision. But it's either our over-confidence or the fact that we're really busy that we postpone making a decision for a *very* long time.

Of course, a deadline is a deadline and we get very close to the date when we have to make that decision. We roll up our sleeves, and get to work on everything required to make a good decision. Time is running out and we start evaluating our options one by one. Except, every option has consequences, and hence, even more options appear to us in further steps. Soon we have a sea of options and possibilities, and we want to process all of those options before we can make the best decision.

Meanwhile, because time is running out, we are eventually *forced* to make a decision. We don't want to admit to anyone that we didn't have enough time to weigh all of the options and make the best decision, so we make a decision anyway—a sub-optimal one. Immediately afterwards we're in the limelight and rather than changing our decision or buying time, we waste time rationalizing the decision that we just made. Even if someone close tries to help us, we are in no mood to listen as going back on our decision would mean accepting our mistakes or limitations. That's the last thing we want to do.



So, what should we do if we want to avoid this trap?

We have options, but if I had to choose one, it's to artificially shrink the available time we have to make any key decision. In other words, advance the deadline. We might still encounter all the challenges I've mentioned above, but at least we'll have more time on our hands to fine tune the decision and make it better.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 8

Embrace the Power of a Simple Challenge

I have witnessed the power of participating in a simple challenge multiple times in my life. Let me share two such incidents to set the stage.

The first one was to get back into writing fiction. My first four books were works of fiction—the last was published in 1987. After a long hiatus, I started writing again in 2005, and published three non-fiction books over four years. Fiction was on my mind, but I was waiting for the right time. As we all know, waiting for the right time never works.

Then in October 2009, I heard about NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month), and was instantly drawn to the idea. When you sign up for NaNoWriMo, you pledge to write a complete novel of 50,000 words or more in the month of November

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. I signed up immediately. It wasn't easy, but by the end of it, I'd completed my work of

fiction (it's not published yet). In fact, I completed it four days before the challenge ended. I met a lot of people in the NaNoWriMo network during this exercise with strikingly similar experiences. There were so many people who had put off writing their novel until they signed up for NaNoWriMo, and ended up taming the beast for good.

In 2010, there were a whopping 200,500 NaNoWriMo participants, and 37,500 winners. Would these 37,500 people have written a novel—within a month—without participating in a challenge like NaNoWriMo? It's possible, but highly unlikely.

The second challenge was more recent—#Trust30 is an online initiative from The Domino Project. The challenge, as described on the site, is as follows:

“#Trust30 is an online initiative and 30-day writing challenge that encourages you to look within and trust yourself. Use this as an opportunity to reflect on your now, and to create direction for your future. 30 prompts from inspiring thought-leaders will guide you on your writing journey.”

I took the pledge along with hundreds of people online and started writing mini sagas—stories that are written in exactly 50 words. I had written 73 of them over the last five years and one of my goals was to get to 100. I have to admit

that I'd felt stuck at 73. But something magical happened over the next 27 days as I wrote a mini saga each day and reached my goal.

There are examples of such challenges in many areas. Another popular one is a challenge to build a startup. Startup Weekend challenges take place all over the world. Startup challenges happen over the course of a weekend, and have produced a number of actual startups. According to the statistics on their site, 36 percent of the startups launched in a challenge were going strong even after the 54-hour startup weekend.

Some companies have made challenges the backbone of their business model. 99designs conducts design challenges, and Top Coder hosts programming challenges. These businesses are helping their clients benefit from the creativity and motivation that's unleashed during a challenge.

Now, how do you put the power of a simple challenge to work for you? Easy! By participating in one. Your next step is to find such a challenge in an area that matters most to you, and sign up for it with all your heart. If you can't find one that fits your need, create one either with a few like-minded people, or simply commit on your own. Start small, and as you start winning, raise the stakes. It's worth a try.

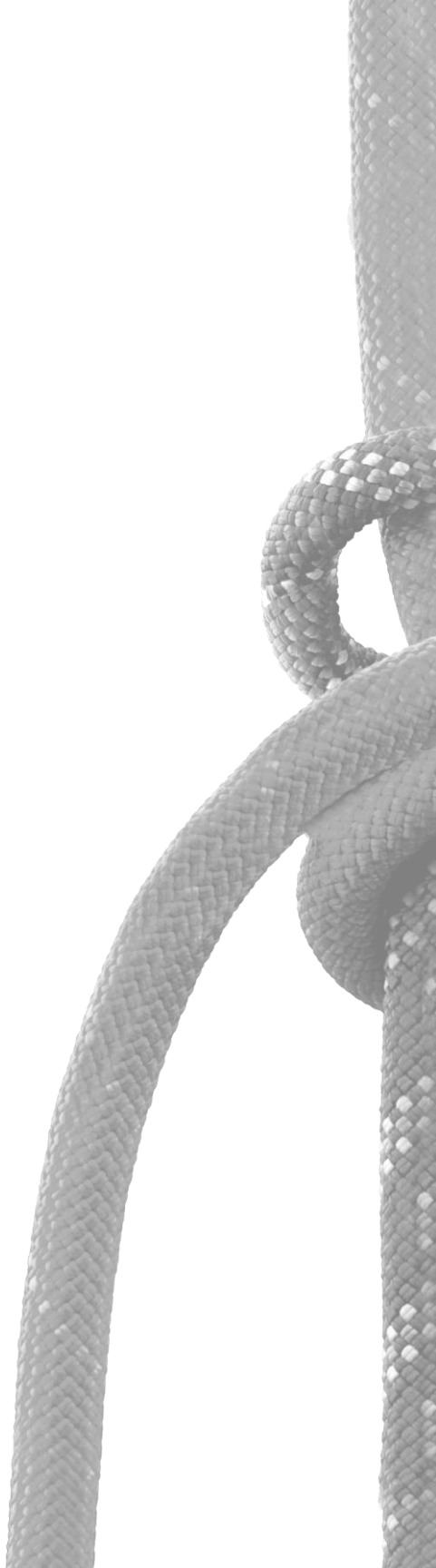
PART 2

Unstuck—Going Beyond Brilliance



CHAPTER NINE

Get Ready!



*"Most people have the will to win,
few have the will to prepare to win."*

—BOBBY KNIGHT

Once you recognize you're stuck and have at your disposal some valuable insights and tools on how to get unstuck, you're ready to take steps beyond where you've ever been, and towards leading the life you want.

Let's explore a few ideas on how to get ready to unleash your full potential (now that you are unstuck).

EMBRACE THE POWER OF SILENCE

"It is not enough to be busy; so are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?"

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

I attended Todd Sattersten's BizBookLab event⁹ in Portland in late 2010. There was an in-depth discussion on the power and strategic importance of silence. All of us strongly believed that silence is heard.

The discussion took me down memory lane to the early days of my first startup in the United States. I learned a lot during these days and one of the biggest lessons was becoming comfortable with silence.

During those early days:

⁹Todd Sattersten is the ex-President of 800-CEO-READ, and currently a publisher at Bard Press.

- I would cringe when there was a long silence after a proposal was submitted.
- I would cringe when there was a long silence after an offer was made to a star employee.
- I would cringe during the long silence between the launch of a marketing campaign, and the time we'd start seeing some substantial leads.
- I would cringe if there was a long silence from the time we re-launched our website to the time we started getting some positive responses on the re-launch.

Basically, silence was scary, uncomfortable and something I avoided as much as possible. I could not let space exist in any part of a process. I strived hard to fill the voids. Worse yet, the more I tried to avoid silences or spaces, the more problems would arise. For example, I'd follow up with prospects more than necessary, which would give them the impression that I was desperate, rather than eager, to do business with them. Some prospects started to get a feeling that I was heavily dependent on a deal with them for my survival. Once a prospect has that feeling, they're reluctant to engage in any transactions.

It seems that most of us are trapped by what I call an addiction to Newton's Third Law.¹⁰ The law is that action and reaction are equal and opposite. True. But we forget that in many situations, there is a time lag. Most of the marketing out there is about how you can “get this” or “get that”—instantly.

¹⁰ You can read more about Newton's Third Law at <http://rajeshsetty.com/2005/02/21/addicted-to-newtons-third-law/>

If you don't have the money, no problem, simply swipe your credit card and make your dream come true "Now!" Drink this shake and lose 10 pounds "Now!" It does seem attractive.

Over the years though, I learned that most things take time. That's the way nature works and we just have to get used to it. Being able to endure silence or "gaps" is a *big* part of the plan in many endeavors. While Newton's law works great in the physical realm, when it comes to humans and life, the reaction or consequences of our actions will show up—eventually. There is usually silence or a void between action and reaction. And those silences and gaps are sometimes essential. Music wouldn't be music if there were no silence between the notes.



www.napkinsights.com/napkin/82

The biggest benefit of getting used to silence is a reduction in the level of stress and anxiety we'll experience. We all know that a transaction requires urgency on both sides. If we're selling something, clearly there is going to be urgency on our end. Our urgency, however, isn't sufficient to induce urgency on the buyer's end. In the buying cycle, silence is everywhere—from the time the buyer discovered a need, to the time they became aware that we have a solution. Then there is a gap between the time our solution is explored and the time it takes to find and compare others solutions to ours. Finally, there are the gaps that happen during the negotiation of a win-win agreement, and the eventual closing of a deal.

We can shrink the gaps in a number of ways but unless we have godlike powers we can't eliminate them completely. Our discomfort in sitting with silence or any displays of impatience with the gaps will show up as others' discomfort in working with us. Then we'll wonder why we didn't get the deal we hoped for.

I wish I could give some tips and tricks that I used to get comfortable with silence but it really was as simple as learning how to accept, and eventually embrace, silences or gaps with open arms. Once I managed that, it became automatic and was factored into all my plans. Once silence was part of the plan, there was no special treatment required to deal with it.

Factor the silences and gaps into your plans. It will make a world of difference!

(RE)POSITIONING IS YOURS; PERCEPTION IS THEIRS

"What do you want to contribute?"

—PETER DRUCKER

The “unstuck” world is new and exciting and if you are putting in the right effort you are a different person inside- out. However, the world may not have seen the updated version of you yet, so as far as they’re concerned, you’re still the older version.

It’s true that you can’t control how people perceive you—but you absolutely can control how you position yourself to be perceived. The biggest source of feedback available to you about your positioning is from a perception audit—a quick poll of how people actually perceive you.

How do we do that? Well for starters, we can listen!

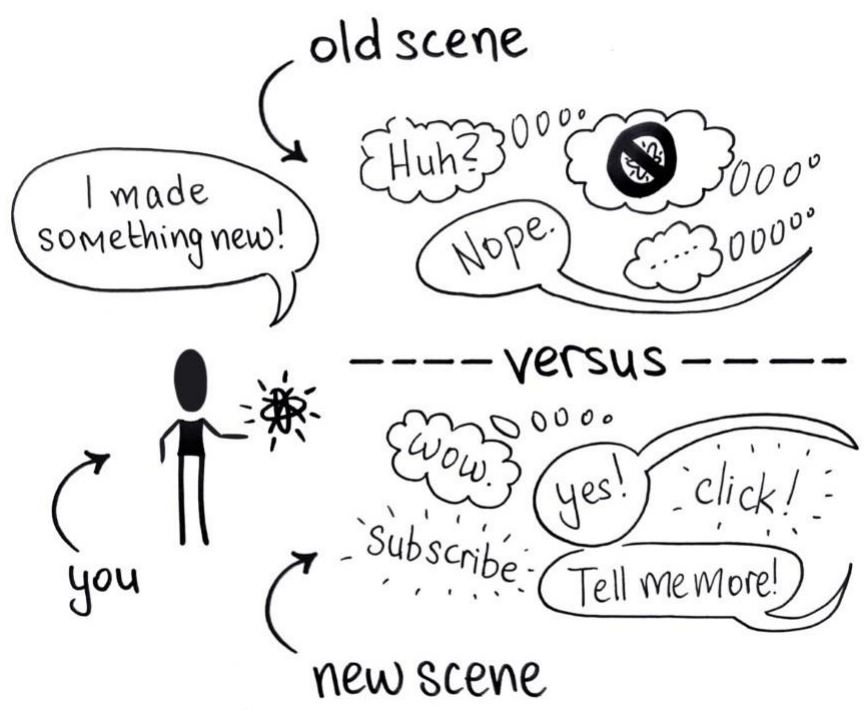
Honestly, it’s so easy in our world to do this right now. All we have to do is to keep our eyes and ears open. For example, a quick look at the dozens of lists that I’ve been added to on Twitter gives me an idea of how people perceive me. I can agree or disagree with them, but everything I’ve done or said has resulted in a set of perceptions—for now.

Before we go about how to change perceptions, there is *one* way we cannot change someone’s perceptions of us—and that is by asking them to change it.

Perceptions are created by others’ assessments. Even when people hear what we tell them, they’ll still sometimes

hear what they want to hear—based on our past history, our accomplishments, our actions and our intentions to start with.

With that in mind, here is a quick outline of how you might go about this task.



1. Change the conversations

If you are switching from being a technology person to a marketer, then your conversations have to move towards and focus on marketing as well.

2. Change who you are having conversations with

The old network already has a biased opinion about who you are and what you bring to the table. You get to change your scene.

3. Reframe earlier experiences

Your previous experience doesn't have to be extra baggage especially if you can reframe it to highlight how it serves as a foundation or a launch pad for your new endeavors. In the above situation, make a case about why you are unique in blending your old and new experiences.

4. Create valuable assets in the new space

You can talk however loud you want but your work will speak louder. Rather than telling others that you have a new life, show them by creating assets that will give them a reason to change their assessments of you.

5. Go the distance

Changing perceptions is more like running a marathon than participating in a sprint. People are jaded from listening to hollow claims. They have heard a lot of promises about so many things—only to see such claims fizzle out very quickly. If you make a premature announcement about your new life, most people are skeptical. Many think that this must be another “flavor of the day” initiative from you. But when you

go the distance and show them, people slowly start believing what they see.

6. Invest to accomplish

It seems simple but it's not. It's a chicken-or-egg situation. You don't get a project to work in the new world until you have the experience and you don't get the experience until you get a project to work on. So it's complicated. But you can break the cycle by "investing to accomplish." This might mean you start offering your services for free to help someone on a project (in the new space) to gain experience. You will have to work twice as hard but it will be well worth the time spent.

And, last but not least:

7. Believe in your new avatar

If you don't *fully* believe in your new avatar, people will see through you to the old. The changes have to first happen in your mind, and only then will they translate into your actions. If it does not happen in your mind, your actions will always be diluted or watered down.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO ALONE!

*"We are all Angels,
With only one wing.
We can only fly
While embracing each other."*

—LUCIANO DI CRESCENZCO

I am fascinated by, and love watching homes being built. On my way to work there are several opportunities for me to do this. Sometimes I just park my car and watch people at work. They build quite fast. Where there was nothing but plain ground a few weeks ago, I can see a beautiful home today. Think about the process at a high level for a second.

- 1 Someone identifies a location, and decides to build a home.
- 2 An architect is hired to design the home
- 3 Once the design is approved, a contractor is hired—who will take care of the project from then on.
- 4 The contractor then gets a ton of people involved—carpenters, plumbers, electricians, painters and more.
- 5 Once the home is up and the exterior is completed, an interior decorator may be hired to beautify the inside of the home.

A home building project is not to be undertaken alone. Sounds obvious, right? The right people have to come in at the right time. You don't want an electrician to come before the architect. He can come, but he won't be of much use.

You also have to make sure you hire an interior decorator at the right time. You can get one involved in the project alongside the architect, but the real work begins only after the home is built. If you're the owner of the home, you're still doing a lot of work and making a lot of decisions (after all, it's your home) but not all the work is done by you. It would be ridiculous to think of building the home completely by yourself.

So now, let's think about your life, which is a never ending building project during which you're making a lot of decisions and doing a lot of work. It is equally ridiculous to assume that you must do everything by yourself. You need to get a lot of people involved in your life project. For your home, you want the best architect you can afford. If your home is important, imagine how much more important your life should be. If you don't have really good people on your side, how can you expect phenomenal results from your life?

Yes, the temptation is to do things by ourselves either because we can do them, or we are determined to show we can. But working with a great team on our side to design and execute on our life project provides leverage at a whole new level.

The one thing to remember though, is that in order to gain that kind of leverage, we too should be ready to play a significant part in the design and execution of other people's life projects!

The big difference in the above analogy between a home project and your life as the project, is that the results are tangible when you build a home. You get a new home! (Thanks to "Ravi," Ravishankar Gundlapalli for the tip.)

When you're building your life, the result is "who you become" and not "what you get." Who you become as a person borders on the edge of the tangible-intangible scale. The tangibles appear eventually, but they are only there indirectly because of who you've become.

The most important thing to remember is that we don't have to travel alone on the most important journey of our lives!

RECIPROCATION AND THE HELP MATRIX

There are two options on your journey. One option is to have simple goals. Goals that you can achieve easily. Goals that won't make a big difference in your life or in the lives of others. Goals that really don't matter.

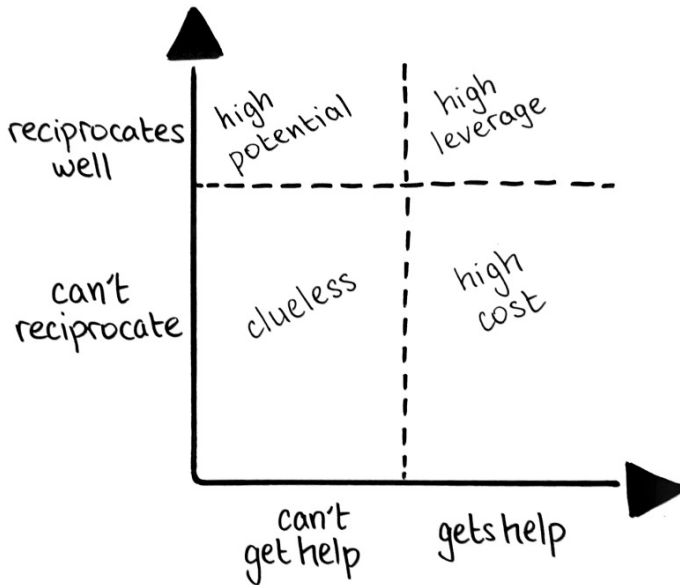
The next option is to have big goals—goals that can change you and more importantly—goals that can change the world around you for the better.

When you choose big goals, you need help. How do you get it?

In simple terms, here are some tips:

- 1 Build an identity big enough that people are willing and open to help you. Building an identity is a lifetime process—you can start it anytime but I don't think it ever ends.
- 2 Help others early and often while growing your career. In fact, helping others is also a lifetime process. A sub-set of people will reciprocate your help.
- 3 Engage in activities that will help multiple people at once. Imagine you complete a task and ten, a hundred or a thousand people benefit from it. That's leverage like no other.
- 4 Ask for help. But before you do, remember that most times you have to earn the right to ask for it. Nobody is entitled to help, and you don't want to expect it to appear automatically—except perhaps from those with whom you have emotional bonds or relationships.

Help is really a two way street. Take a look at this help matrix. There are four quadrants.



- 1 Clueless: If we're stuck in this quadrant, not only can we not get help, we don't have the power to reciprocate if we ever did get it. We need serious help!
- 2 High Cost: In this quadrant, we get a lot of help but can't reciprocate. We know how to convince others to help us, at least the first time, and probably only one time. Once others realize it costs too much to help us and that we don't reciprocate, they'll slowly move away.
- 3 High Potential: This quadrant is where we have the ability to help and reciprocate. This quadrant is full of smart people who can return favors easily but don't want to accept favors. Why? Because we don't want to feel guilty

or indebted in case we can't return a favor. *Or*, because we, like many smart people, often think we can do everything by ourselves.

- 4 High Leverage: This is the winning quadrant to be in, and only a small percentage of smart people fit here. We know we need help. We're happy to receive it, and we're happy to reciprocate to the extent we can. We can never go wrong here.

DECODE THE SECRET ADVANTAGE

"The individual who wants to reach the top in business must appreciate the might and force of habit. He must be quick to break those habits that can break him—and hasten to adopt those practices that will become the habits that help him achieve the success he desires."

—J. PAUL GETTY

You are unique. That in itself doesn't make you special, because everyone else is unique too. However, you can invest your time and energy in taking what makes you unique and using it as your strength. To do this, you first have to discover your secret advantage.

Everyone has a secret advantage. Whether everyone uses it to make the most of their life is a different story entirely. I am going to share an article I wrote about the secret advantage Indian professionals working in the U.S. have—just to make a

point—and then I will make another point afterwards.

I strongly believe that professionals from India have a secret advantage. It's something they acquire in the process of growing up there.

Let me explain...

Most Indian-born professionals working in the US come from middle-class families. If their parents were employed in public sector jobs back home, they grew up having to move to a new town or city in India every few years. So, by the time one graduated from high school, he or she would have been through a few different schools in different geographic locations. This means one had to adapt to new teachers, new friends, new environments, new neighbors, new practices and new cultures very quickly. In short, one had to learn to adapt quickly to new situations.

Indian parents have always exerted a lot of influence on what their child chooses to study in school. A typical question they ask their kids as they enter middle school (or even earlier sometimes) is, "So what do you want to become? An engineer or a doctor?" It's as if the kid has only two choices. Parents want their kids to perform well and will do everything to motivate them. From a young age, the standards are set high.

Academic performance is important, and expected. Grades are one of the key metrics and Indian society will judge a kid (and sometimes the quality of parenting) based on his or her grades. Kids typically don't want to put their parents in an awkward position—where the parents have to explain to their friends why their kids did not perform well in school. In other

words, there is a lot of societal pressure for parents to ensure that their children do well and succeed.

In school in India, students have to study a lot of subjects to complete their graduation requirements.

Take a look at a typical high school syllabus:

- › Mathematics—Arithmetic, Algebra and Geometry;
- › Science—Physics, Chemistry and Biology;
- › Social Studies—History, Civics, Geography; and
- › Languages—Kannada, English and Hindi.

Students not only read all these subjects, they are also involved in many extra-curricular activities. Because everybody is doing it, the course load does not seem complex. They learn how to jump from one topic to another quickly. They learn how to push themselves. In other words, they learn to deal with complexity very early.

Students have to take an entrance test (called the Common Entrance Test) to get into an engineering or medical school. Everyone wants to be accepted into a good school and get a scholarship—with reduced tuition/fees or perhaps even no tuition/fees. To achieve those things, one has to rank within the top 5,000 out of a few hundred thousand people who take that exam.

Competition is intense simply because of the number of people competing—it's mind-bogglingly big. It's hard to distinguish yourself amongst hundreds of thousands of competitors. Everyone learns to embrace competition.

Personally, my defining moment in life was when I wrote my first novel. I was ten years old. You might think this was a crazy childhood project. My parents were stunned when I announced this project to them. Yet, I completed my novel. The crazier thing was that I wanted to get the book published by a publisher. I started on my journey with enthusiasm. I was a young man who wanted his dream to become reality. For the next three years, I faced rejection everywhere.

I don't have the exact count, but I probably received about one hundred and sixty rejections. The lessons learned earlier in my life had sort of prepared me to face these rejections. But then, one day, someone said "yes." That single "yes" was all that I needed. My first book was published by a well-known publisher, when I was thirteen. I learned to deal with rejection early, and this experience also taught me to never give up quickly. There was always another way to try.

It gets simpler. Growing up in India teaches everyone to ask for help without feeling guilty. Everyone needs help there. When you need to travel to some place, you will need help. When you need to deal with a government agency, you will need help. When you need anything—whether it's simple or complex, you will need help. It becomes a part of life's pattern there.

I could go on. Almost every Indian who came to this country can share similar experiences and lessons learned. The combination of the lessons above creates the secret advantage that Indians have.

If I had to summarize it in one sentence:

Our secret advantage is the unconscious competence our culture gifts us, to adapt and deal with complexity and adversity.

There are so many Indian entrepreneurs here, and this secret advantage gives them a tangible edge in business. Sadly, for a large majority of Indians who are here—the secret advantage remains a secret—meaning they don’t see it. Some choose not to use it. Others don’t know how to use it.

Compared to India, life in the USA is simple. Since we are tuned to deal with greater complexity (by practice), the simplicity here provides us spare capacity that can be used creatively. We can decide to use it or squander it. The choice is ours. Of course, few people use it, and most squander it. I hope that more people will realize the power of this secret advantage and use their untapped capacity to create more wonders.

Now, coming to the point I want to make for you, the reader, regardless of your background.

Think about your own situation—where you were born, how you were brought up, the schools you attended, the friends you had while growing up, your teachers, your parents, your siblings—the entire ecosystem is hard to replicate and most often will present you a secret advantage that only you have. Why? Simply because *your* ecosystem, the one that you lived and grew up in, can never be replicated. The wisdom is now in decoding that secret advantage and putting it to use as your real advantage.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 9

Build a Case to Make a Case

You need to first build a case to make a case. What I mean by this, is that you need to first raise awareness about the issue or opportunity important to you, so that someone is open to listening to you when you're actually ready to make your case.

It's possible you have faced this situation before. You strongly believed in something and made a compelling case to get approval (perhaps from your supervisor), but you were instantly turned down. You'd thought through every single aspect of the project or issue, and you were ready to share details, but for whatever reason, the person you needed approval from didn't see things the way you did.

There are many reasons for not getting buy-in for your ideas but if you don't build a case before you make the case, another person simply won't be open and excited about listening to you make your case.

How do you know you have successfully built a case to make a case?

You know it when someone is eagerly awaiting someone to show up with a convincing solution. This person is aware of the issue or opportunity, and wants something to be done about it.

How do you achieve this?

A few days (or weeks or months) before you make the actual case, you start talking about things surrounding an issue or opportunity. You present data/evidence/trends related to the topic in regular intervals, and demonstrate why this topic is relevant to the person to whom you need to make a case. It might start off as a one-way street for a long time before the other person starts to engage in deep conversations related to the topic.

When these conversations reach a critical mass, the stage is set for you to make the actual case.

Things take time¹¹ and that is just the way it is. If the case you want to make is important to you and others, the time investment to build the case is well worth it.

¹¹ You can read my thoughts on “Things take time”, or what I call “The 3T Rule”, here <http://www.rajeshsetty.com/2005/11/26/ways-to-distinguish-yourself-67-understand-the-3t-rule/>

Your challenge is to think about something you want to change. You need to build a case for others to buy into the change. Now outline a plan that will help you make that case over time.

Some questions to help you outline the plan:

- 1 What conversations need to take place long before any conversations happen that relate to the changes you want to make?
- 2 Who should be involved in discussing the change you are envisaging?
- 3 What events should happen that might influence or move others towards the change you are thinking about?
- 4 What evidence should the decision makers see, that might convince them that the changes are beneficial or necessary?
- 5 How can you make all of this happen?

CHAPTER TEN

Unleash The Force



"Success means using your knowledge and experience to satisfy yourself. Significance means using your knowledge and experience to change the lives of others"

—BOB BUFORD

Now, let's focus on the most important keyword of your life: *Enrichment!*

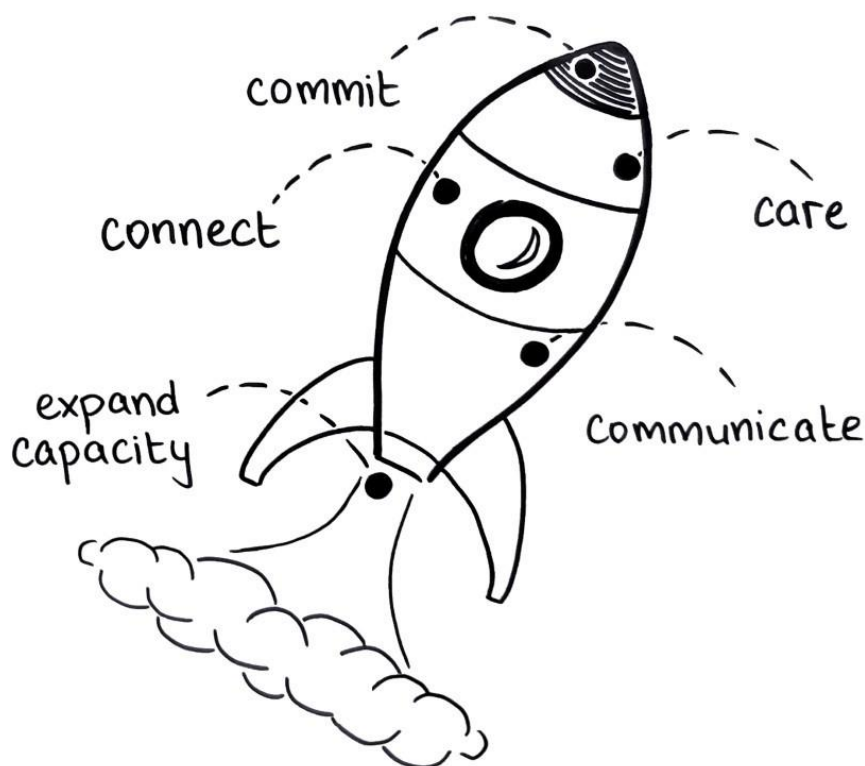
We are all on a quest—a quest to add more meaning into our lives. And it's through choosing to enrich others' lives that we add meaning to not just our own lives, but to others as well.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FORCE, OR 4CE

I've created an approach I like to call the 4CE, that proposes a proactive approach for your continuing journey in getting unstuck and accelerating beyond brilliance.

- 1 **Commit:** Commit to lifetime relationships that transcend events, companies, causes and geographic boundaries.
- 2 **Care:** Care about the concerns of others as if they were your own.
- 3 **Connect:** Aim to connect to one another those who will benefit and enrich each other's lives in equal measure.
- 4 **Communicate:** Communicate candidly. Tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear.
- 5 **Expand Capacity:** Aim to expand the capacity of others to enable them to give and receive more from their lives.

All of these elements of the 4CE require a specific kind of posture and mindset, which is why we'll explore what each one looks like in the everyday of our lives.

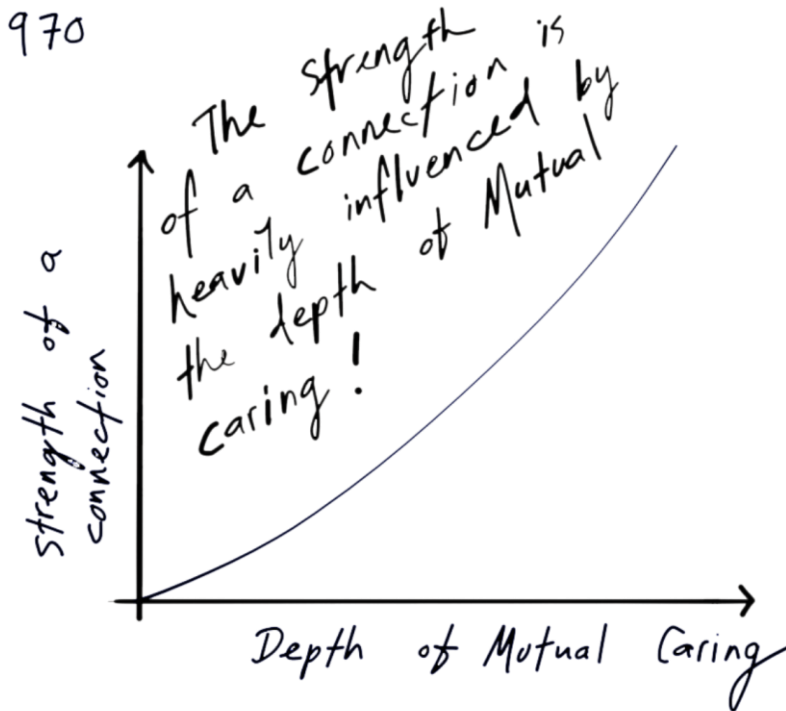


FORCE 1: COMMIT

"There is a magnet in your heart that will attract true friends. That magnet is unselfishness, thinking of others first ... when you learn to live for others, they will live for you."

—PARAMAHANSA YOGANANDA

The practice of building long-term relationships is swiftly becoming a rarity. Everyone talks about it because it's the right thing to do. Yet very few people practice building long-term relationships because there is a big cost associated with the practice.



www.napkinsights.com/napkin/970

Talk is cheap. To say you are interested in building long-term relationships is one thing. To be the person building long-term relationships is a whole other thing. It's the difference between night and day. Talk costs very little. Doing is a lifetime investment.

A lesson from link exchange requests

A big lesson about building relationships comes from a surprising place: link exchange requests.

If you have a website with even a Google page rank of 3, you would have received some sort of link exchange request. A typical link exchange request looks something like this.

Dear [target website owner,]

My name is Link Hunter and I manage and operate the recently re-launched website <http://www.www.MyWebsiteNeedsLinks.com.com>. Our site caters to the luxury real estate community in the United States and Canada. Our site contains luxury home listings in every Canadian Province and US state as well as several other countries. As one of the premier destinations online for luxury real estate we would like to exchange links with websites such as yours.

If you are interested in having your website listed in our partners directory please link back to our site using one of the following text links:

1. **Luxury Homes**—Visit the internet's destination for luxury homes and real estate.
2. **Luxury Home Listings**—Visit the internet's

#1 destination for luxury real estate. Find info on luxury homes in your area.

3. **Luxury Real Estate**—Looking for your dream home. Visit Luxury Home Web to find luxury homes for sale or rent in your area.

To select from a larger variety of text links and banners please visit our partners exchange page at: <http://www.www.MyWebsiteNeedsLinks.com.com/partners/exchange.html>

We are limiting our site to a maximum of 100 partners so you can be sure you will have good visibility.

Once you have provided a link to our site simply fill in our automated web form on the page above and we will add your site to our directory.

Link Hunter

<http://www.MyWebsiteNeedsLinks.com>

Now, let us look at this from a Link Hunter's perspective. The deal is simple—they will send you a link in exchange for you providing the same. So it must be a fair transaction.

So, why do so many people get annoyed when they get a link exchange request?

Because the link exchange requestor is playing with a faulty assumption, that being, that similar actions on both sides will also create similar impacts for both.

In other words, it looks like an invitation to a win-win relationship when in fact, it is mostly one-sided.

Depending on what their website is about, the value of the link they provide won't be equal to the value of the link they are getting back—although the actions are the same. The varying impact of these actions makes this a totally unfair transaction.

Hence the problem.

Now, that was just a simple link exchange scenario. Unfortunately this happens all the time in real life too. In the name of creating win-win relationships, people propose business arrangements that are equal in *action* but totally lopsided in *impact*. Then they wonder why people are not able to “get” it and why their relationship building efforts fail. Aim to be fair, and if you're going to err, let it be on the side of giving and serving more.

So, here is the final comment:

Even if we are not engaging in lopsided offers and practices, we should be alert to others who (knowingly or unknowingly) propose lopsided so called “win-win” relationships. The worst would be to engage in these practices knowing that it's unfair to the *other* party.

If you have read this far into this book, it's highly unlikely that you're amongst those who are only interested in WIIFM (What's In It For Me) but the fact that there are others who belong to that club is something worth remembering and

watching out for. What not to do is equally as important as learning what to do.

Shredding the context

Most of the relationships in our lives are created within a particular context. We have friends from school, friends from college, friends from work (various companies), friends from the charitable organization that we belong to, friends from various clubs and so on.

Some of your friendships might begin in one context and extend to others and eventually into your more expanded life.

It's a different world out there if you can shred all context for a while and focus only on the real human being you are connecting with. It's far richer to view the world without any barriers or borders of context.

Imagine you do this for the rest of your life. You will, of course, be aware of and observe the context within which you meet people, and even engage in ways appropriate for that particular context. But when it comes to looking at the relationship, drop the constraints of context and you'll suddenly find that you begin knowing more of a person. The more you see of others, the more you begin to realize how similar and truly connected you are—as human beings.

Dropping the “invisible” conditions

Just like we operate within the constraints of context, we also operate with invisible conditions when it comes to

relationships. In other words, the relationship is good as long as the other person operates within certain conditions and boundaries. If he or she crosses one of those invisible lines, the relationship is over.

The tricky part of invisible conditions, obviously, is that they're not visible. Most people will put so many conditions, expectations and criteria on a relationship that they can't make any relationship work.

If we can figure out what our invisible conditions are for a relationship and can bring them out in the open, then we might determine whether we can relax them a bit. We understand that others are human just like us and we're just not always consistent day in and day out. We have great days and off days. I like to remember a quote from Plato and I recommend you always remember it too: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

One way to automatically relax any invisible conditions is to simply extend the timeline of your relationships.

Extending the timeline

Your assessment of another person will change the very second you consider your relationship with them as one that will last for a lifetime. In that moment, any thought or suggestion of short term gains will fly out the window. A lifetime relationship means you can both count on each other for the rest of your lives.

With only 24 hours in a day, there are a limited number of

lifetime relationships you can truly give your attention to, of course. However, merely thinking about a relationship as one that will last a lifetime doesn't take much time at all. It's the shift in mindset that makes all the difference.

When two people commit to joining hands to make a difference in each other's lives, they expand their own capacities and make a bigger difference in the world. It's not easy to do this, and most people won't. Which is precisely the reason you should try.

FORCE 2: CARE

"To give real service, you must add something which cannot be bought or measured with money."

—SIR M. VISVESVARAYYA

We can go on about the philosophy of caring but let's get to the practical side of things. You have cared for someone and others have cared for you. Think about situations where you felt cared for. Think about all the people you have personally cared for and served.

Caring is going the extra mile

Here is a quick example of caring.

Around the year 2003, I was still with the first company I'd founded in the US and we were looking to move into a bigger office space. I asked my friends for some referrals for good commercial real estate brokers. One of my friends told me to contact "Jeff." When I asked the name of the company this Jeff

worked for, interestingly, he didn't know and he seemingly didn't care. He was simply confident that Jeff would take good care of me and handed me his number.

Long story short, working with Jeff Ramirez (who is with Cornish and Carry) was a pleasant experience from day one. We could see that he really cared. He asked a lot of questions about our business and what our needs were for the new office space.

After a couple of meetings, we felt that Jeff had a complete understanding of our business and our needs. Within the next couple of weeks, he showed us three office spaces and not surprisingly, our management team liked all the three of them. Talk about hit rate—he had 100 percent. This wouldn't have been possible if he didn't care.

Jeff is now a good friend with whom I wouldn't hesitate to do business again, nor refer to someone else.

Caring as if you're taking care of your own doesn't require big sacrifices. It can be as simple as giving everything you've got when you're doing your job. That's what Jeff did and he left a lasting impression on all of us.

Caring is being thoughtful

Here is a story on being thoughtful courtesy of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, Kannan Ayyar:

Around a time when an ice cream sundae cost far less than it does today, a 10 year old boy entered a hotel coffee shop and sat at a table. When a waitress put a glass of water in front of him, the boy asked “How much is an ice cream sundae?”

“Fifty cents,” replied the waitress. The little boy pulled his hand out of his pocket and studied the coins. “How much is a dish of plain ice cream?” he inquired. Some people were now waiting for a table and the waitress was a bit impatient. “Thirty-five cents,” she said brusquely. The little boy again counted the coins. “I’ll have the plain ice cream,” he said. The waitress brought the ice cream, put the bill on the table and walked away. The boy finished the ice cream, paid the cashier and departed. When the waitress came back, she began wiping down the table and then swallowed hard at what she saw. There, placed neatly beside the empty dish, were two nickels and five pennies—her tip.

Like I said before, you don’t have to make big sacrifices to be thoughtful.

I was in Kansas City for a speaking engagement. I’d checked into a Hamptons Inn the night before. The stay was great, and the staff were courteous. But that’s table stakes for a good hospitality business.

The morning after my speaking engagement I had an early meeting and checked out of the hotel. Right there at the counter were a bunch of to-go breakfast bags, each containing a muffin, cereal bar, apple and bottle of water.

I saw at least two other people before me picking up a bag for the road, so I did too. I was so happy that I didn’t have to skip breakfast.

It’s really not hard to be thoughtful and stand out. Packing a breakfast for people on the run is a small step that leaves a big impression.

Caring is offering help when it is most needed

It seems like there is a simple solution to the help problem.

A lot of people in the world want help. A lot of people in the world can provide help.

So why not match everyone that needs help with everyone that can provide help? Wouldn't a "help matchmaker" resolve a lot?

Everyone wishes it was that easy!

Here are some basic problems with the scenario

Let's take the category of those who could receive help. They can be categorized into many buckets.

Here are some of them:

- › Those who don't know they need help
- › Those who refuse to get help
- › Those who know they need help but are too shy to ask for it
- › Those who know they need help but can't pay for it
- › Those who are arrogant
- › Those who know they need help and feel entitled to it
- › Those who are clueless
- › Those who don't want to believe that even they need help
- › Those who *simply can't* accept help from others

Now let us look at the category of those who could give help. They can be categorized into many buckets. Here are some of them:

- › Those who don't know they have the capacity to help
- › Those who don't think they are ready to help (yet)

- › Those who are *very* busy
- › Those who get so many requests for help that they don't know where to start
- › Those who don't know how to help
- › Those who have given up helping because of experiences with ungrateful people
- › Those who are clueless
- › Those who can't believe that they even have help to offer
- › Those who don't want to help others

The big one is simple—those who could help may not be *caring* enough to offer the help to others.

Summary: Some people want help and some others have help to offer. But matchmaking these two kinds of people is difficult.

In reality, I think the two categories of people are:

- a. Those who *want to* help and
- b. Those who *want more* help

Yes, simply put, those are the two categories. Why? Because everyone needs help.

If you're in the category where you want more help, then you have to get it from people who want to help. Yet, they may not want to help you unless fulfilling your request for help moves them toward fulfilling their own need for help.

So next time you want more help and you have to get it, you'd be well served to ensure that the person who is giving you help needs help themselves. It can be as simple as you adequately compensating the other person, so that they can hire some help.

Now, if you don't have something to offer back to the other person who is providing help, it's time to go back to the drawing board and start thinking!

FORCE 3: CONNECT

"Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."

—OPRAH WINFREY

Meeting a person who will expand your capacity to do more good in the world will change your life forever. Unfortunately, you don't meet such people everyday. Even if you did, not everyone has the time and attention to invest in what you are doing or where you are going.

Things change a bit when you're able to reciprocate and give back to those who've made a big difference in your life. Give and receive is always better than just receiving. Even better is to create a system that will help a larger number of people receive help without it costing you a fortune.

Such a system exists. It's called becoming a connector. If you can learn the art of connecting others, you make your network a thriving ecosystem.

How do we do that?

The system itself is simple but it takes a ton of discipline to put it into practice.

The first step is to know what matters most to someone. Let's say John is part of your network and you feel you know him reasonably well. This doesn't necessarily mean you know what matters most to John, however. You find out what matters most to someone when you intentionally and attentively listen for it, since people generally speak about topics that matter most to them.

So let's assume that you find out what matters most to John. If you want to make a real difference for him, figure out how you can contribute something that matters most to him. You probably could, but there is a limit to how much you can contribute to John while also contributing to others in your network. If, however, you can grow and become better yourself while putting your resources to work for the benefit of John, you benefit twice and solve your scaling problem. It's called smart connecting.

This is how it works. Start with John, for example. Quickly go through the list of people in your network who you think might be able to create a positive impact on the projects and issues that matter most to John.

Let's assume that there are three people who might fit the bill. Now, please do the following two tests.

- 1 **Reciprocation Test:** Will John be able to make a positive impact on what matters most to any of these three people?
- 2 **Timing Test:** You know all of these people and what's happening right now in their lives. Knowing that, ask yourself, is the timing right for new introductions?

After these two tests, you will figure out who is most qualified to be connected to John. All you need to do is to *connect them and disengage*. Both are important. Make the connection via a simple email or a phone call. Present some information and context for connecting them and how they might contribute to what matters most to the other.

Disengaging is very important as you will end up in the same scaling problem that we discussed earlier if you don't. Trying to coordinate meetings between two people is hard already. Trying to do it with three people is harder.

You can do this all day long if you continue to care enough about what matters most to people in your network. Keep practicing this and soon you will do this without exerting any effort.

Every time you strategically and thoughtfully connect two people, you've changed the course of their lives forever. Would these people have connected without your intervention? Perhaps, eventually. But you took the initiative to make it happen sooner than if they might have casually bumped into each other.

Do this consistently and very soon your network will transform into a thriving ecosystem full of opportunities and support.

Now imagine taking an even further step of teaching people in your network the art of strategically and thoughtfully connecting people. Even if a fraction of them embrace this art and start acting on it, the ecosystem grows and expands by leaps and bounds.

FORCE 4: COMMUNICATE

Let's talk about you first. Imagine a scenario in which you're going after an idea and talking about it with your friends. You want to get validation for your idea, of course.

Honestly, we're typically in a kind of fantasy mode when it comes to our ideas. Something comes to you in a lightbulb moment and you think it's the truth. You might also think you have hit upon something that *nobody* else in the world has. You check in with your friends and while some of them are enthusiastic about your idea, others say nothing. You might assume that silence implies their agreement with what you are saying.

Long story short, much later and after much effort and expended resources, you realize that your idea is going nowhere. You wish one of your close friends had stepped forward and talked some sense into you earlier.

It's easy to blame others, but what about ourselves? When the roles are reversed, do we have what it takes to communicate what should be communicated? To be fair, most people don't. If we are like most people, we can likely identify with one of the following excuses for not doing so:

- We think it's not our role
- We think the other person may not take it well
- We think the timing is not right
- We don't have that kind of relationship with the other person
- We just would rather not say something negative
- We worry that it might change our relationship with the other person forever

- › We don't have the time to deal with any consequences that might arise.
- › We figure someone else will tell them sooner or later
- › We don't think the other person thinks we're smart enough to critique their idea
- › We don't have the courage to do it
- › We don't know how
- › We will definitely do it—someday. But not today.
- › It's on our agenda but not our top priority yet

The list goes on. I didn't make up all these excuses. These were shared with me by various people when I engaged them with an exercise during my speaking engagements.

I am guilty of this myself because it's easy *not* to do it (another excuse, if you didn't observe it already) and it is more convenient to just skip it.

It's your responsibility

Whether you like it or not, it's your responsibility in a relationship to say what another person should hear rather than sugarcoating or sidestepping. Sugarcoating is insulting the intelligence of the other person. It's fake and it assumes the other person won't figure it out. By sidestepping or avoiding what needs to be said, all you're doing is postponing the other person's frustration. And if you turn out to be right, you've contributed to them paying a higher price for their mistake, with interest, since they might also miss out on better opportunities.

Granted, the decision on a course of action is ultimately up to the other person, but that shouldn't influence your decision of whether or not to provide honest feedback. Isn't that what you expect from a close relationship? Do unto others as you would want done unto you.

Can you handle the feedback on your feedback?

The real reason many people don't give honest feedback is that they fear feedback on their feedback. As you can guess, this is a problem that's more complex for smart people, as we all take as much pride in the quality of our feedback as we do in our ideas.

Once you give feedback, you own it. You really want the other person to agree with you and take your suggestions. If they don't, you feel that you've been told you're wrong, and you don't like being wrong! Rather than worrying about their idea, now you worry about the feedback you've given. At an extreme, more than wanting your feedback to help, you'll begin focusing on ensuring that your feedback was right and that *you* were right.

This can get very stressful. It might even hurt you and the relationship that you have with the other person.

So, what do you do? You decide you just won't go there. Why tread on territory that is murky and unknown? You might as well play it safe...at least that's what you think.

It's not safe to be safe

Remember that one day you will regret not saying what you should have said. When that day comes, unfortunately,

there is no way of rewinding the clock and going back to fix things. The time is *now*!

It's safe for you to stay on the sidelines. You can say you're there for people, but you're not really there if you're withholding. And is it really safe for *them* that you are staying on the sidelines?

We know the answer. We just need to do the right thing.

FORCE 5: EXPAND CAPACITY

"The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention."

—OSCAR WILDE

When people say they don't have enough ideas to execute, they often mean that they don't have enough capacity to execute on the ideas that they do have.

A big gift you can give someone is to help them expand their capacity to make something happen, move them closer to their dreams, or increase their time to pursue something they've been postponing. You can give them the power to live a more meaningful life.

When you expand someone's capacity they can do something that they have not done before. A few examples to consider

A friend is looking for a job. Forwarding his resume would help him, but if you teach him how to market himself better, so that jobs come looking for him, you've expanded his capacity.

A friend is wanting to start a company. Brainstorming with him on his startup idea would help him (depending on how much value you add in the brainstorming session). But, if you could help him find a set of people who would be excited to co-found his startup (and possibly work just for stock) then you are expanding his or her capacity.

A friend is looking to write a book. Helping him refine the idea for his book would help him. But, if you take the time to dig deeper and really understand why he or she is wanting to write the book, *and* work with him to help move him towards his ultimate goals, you are expanding his capacity.

To simplify, whenever you are on a quest to expand someone's capacity, you might think of how your association with them could provide one or more of the following:

- 1 They will have more time at their disposal
- 2 They can execute on their projects faster
- 3 They can take on more projects than before
- 4 They will have more fun working on their projects
- 5 They will find it easier to receive good help for their projects
- 6 They will get more support for their projects from the people they know as well as others who will be exposed to their projects
- 7 They will be more confident in themselves and want to try projects that will stretch them
- 8 They will see possibilities that they have never seen before
- 9 Last, but not least:
- 10 They get higher-quality requests for help from people they respect.

If I had to choose *one* item alone, the last one is the greatest contributor to and benefit of expanded capacity. You grow by fulfilling requests from you and the external world. The quality of work you get to do depends on the quality of requests you fulfill for others. When you are responsible for expanding someone's capacity, others around that person will notice, and start asking for their help, and your help as well. You grow, they grow, you help others grow, everyone grows. It's a virtuous cycle.

SEIZE THE DAY!

*"To everything there is a season,
a time for every purpose under the sun.
A time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
a time to kill and a time to heal...
a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance ...
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to lose and a time to seek;
a time to rend and a time to sew;
a time to keep silent and a time to speak;
a time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace."*

—ECCLESIASTES 3: 1–8

BELONGING TO THE REMARKABLE-DOERS CLUB

There are two kinds of clubs. There is the kind where the rules of admission are clearly posted so you know whether you're eligible to become a member or not, and apply accordingly. The town country club might be one example. Then there is the unofficial kind of club. The only people who know it exists are the members, and people close to the members. Rules of membership are vague, and entry is usually gained by some sort of relationship with, or initiation by an existing and respected member.

These unofficial “clubs” exist in the entertainment industry, venture capital industry, The Network of Angels, publishing industry and pretty much everywhere there is opportunity to strongly influence others and make an impact.

Being in the Silicon Valley, I get to observe many of these clubs—sometimes from within and sometimes from the sidelines. Other times, I hear about them from others who are in those clubs.

I am not against these types of clubs. As people gain more power and influence, demand for their time increases. There is no way for them to scale if they don't put restrictions on where, how much and with whom they will interact. Soon, these restrictions become unwritten rules of a club.

Membership in a club is typically egalitarian and hence the advantages are pretty clear. Just a few of these benefits

are expanded reach, access to people with high-quality ideas and knowledge for brainstorming, an extended network, and exclusive deals not available outside of the club.

When you're just starting out in an industry, it's unlikely that you'd be ready to fit into any of these clubs, which you probably know is a huge competitive disadvantage for you. This puts you between a rock and a hard place—you badly want to belong to the club that members want to keep you away from, only because they know you're not ready.

What can you do to address this dilemma?

In a nutshell, you do everything in your capacity to create something remarkable. Not once but over and over again. If you focus your attention on contributing and serving as much and as best you can, rather than on getting noticed, you'll automatically find yourself getting noticed—eventually.

Here are the stories of a few people who demonstrated how to get something done even when the odds were against them, and even when they didn't belong to any inner circles or clubs.

Salman Khan of Khan Academy is a one-man education army. Rather than worrying about who gets credit or commercial gains, he started recording and releasing videos covering areas ranging from solving equations to collateralized debt obligation (CDO), the instrument that was one of the stars of the recent financial collapse. He released not one or two videos, but hundreds of them. The result was 1700+ videos on YouTube now offered under Open Source (BSD) license to anyone who wants to extend and amplify the project.

All of you know J.K. Rowling, the creator of the Harry Potter series of books. She started writing the first Harry Potter book in 1990 and it took years for her to complete it. During these six years, Rowling lost her mother, got divorced from an abusive spouse, struggled as a single parent with her young daughter Jessica, and went through bouts of depression but never gave up on her dream. She completed the book after six years. Most of the book was written in longhand and later typed on a second-hand typewriter. She found a literary agency (Christopher Little Literary Agency) to represent her after initial rejection letters. However, things were not easy even after that. The agency pitched the book to twelve publishers and it got rejected by all twelve of them. Finally in 2007, Bloomsbury picked up the book for an advance of 1500 pounds. The rest is history. No club, no problem—she had a masterpiece and she was willing to give more than seven years of her life to work on it.

Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez made waves with their independent film “The Blair Witch Project.” With a production budget of less than \$25,000, they created a hit independent film that won the Independent Spirit John Cassavetes Award. Adding to that, they engaged in some super creative marketing on the internet (again a low-budget initiative) where they made it look like the film was based on true events. The result: a roaring commercial success that even led to a sequel soon after.

Again, in the above cases, you can see that people didn’t have all the resources that you might think would be required

to reach their goals and dreams. None of them belonged to elite clubs (official or unofficial) but that didn't stop them from pursuing their goals and putting in whatever effort was required for the project.

YOUR MOMENT IS HERE AND NOW!

"Real generosity toward the future consists in giving all to what is present."

—ALBERT CAMUS

One weekend my family and I were excited to watch the movie "Unstoppable," starring Denzel Washington and Chris Pine. In case you haven't seen it, don't worry, I'm not going to give you any spoilers. I'll tell you just enough to make my point.

Frank (Washington) and Will (Pine) are two working class guys who are forced to face a dangerous situation—that of a half-mile-long runaway train (filled with hazardous materials) going more than fifty miles an hour. Basically, it's a story about ordinary people finding themselves in a dangerous situation, and transforming into extraordinary people.

What's most exciting is that Frank Barnes and Will Colson are real people, and this story was inspired by true events.

Let's quickly look at this from a story narrative perspective.

- We have the reluctant heroes (a heroic archetype described by Joseph Campbell) Frank Barnes and Will Colson, who must take the plunge.

- › There is the inciting incident (an event or a situation that sets things in motion) which is the beast (in this plot, the runaway train) getting out of control.
- › Frank and Will (the reluctant heroes) are faced with a runaway train situation (inciting incident) and transform into extraordinary people.

The thing is, Frank and Will already had what it took to be extraordinary, but the moment (inciting incident) is what brought forth their extraordinary capabilities, or, the ‘real’ Frank and Will.

Frank and Will are examples. There are numerous real-life stories where ordinary people face challenges head on and find themselves becoming extraordinary.

Here is another one—a real story.

Landing on the Hudson

It was 3.26pm on January 16, 2009. US Airways Flight 1549 carrying 148 passengers took off from New York’s La Guardia Airport heading to Charlotte, North Carolina. In command was Chelsey Sullenberger, a former US Air Force fighter pilot with 29 years of commercial flying experience. This was a routine flight for him. At least, for the first 90 seconds.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang from a flock of geese hitting the plane and things unraveled quickly. One engine was down. Then the other was on fire. It was serious. Air traffic control responded and said the nearest airport was New Jersey and they had to get there quick. When Sullenberger

realized that they were not going to make it to the NJ airport, he had only seconds to think of an alternative.

Sullenberger's mind was racing against time and the closest "runway" he could think of was the Hudson River. He notified all the passengers and asked them to be prepared for a crash landing. Over the next few minutes, people watched with bated breath as Sullenberger masterfully navigated the plane to a safe landing on the river. Every single person on the plane—a total of 155 people (that includes 5 members from the crew and 2 pilots) survived. It was indeed a miracle.

Sullenberger was the last person to get off the plane, and before he did, he completed two walk-throughs of the entire plane to ensure that nobody was left behind.

And just like that, Chelsey Sullenberger became a national hero.

Think for a second about your own life. You may be a small business owner, a consultant, an employee in a large organization, a startup founder or a government employee. In the eyes of the world, you may be considered a cog in a wheel, an ordinary person, someone who is getting by. However, deep inside you, you know that you have what it takes to be extraordinary. You know that transformation won't come easy. Maybe you haven't been given the opportunity to flourish. Maybe you're waiting for the right moment to bring forth everything you've got.

Honestly, that moment will come once in a blue moon. In fact, for all you know it might already have passed by you many times while you were too busy with the ordinary stuff to notice.

Those moments rarely come with your name stamped on them, and they may look different to what you expect. If you're not paying attention, the fact that they're dressed differently might confuse you.

In the case of Frank and Will, they both had a choice to walk away from a terrible situation. Nobody coerced them to become extraordinary. In fact, people at the top suggested they back off. Nevertheless, Frank and Will pursued and the rest is history (and, one hell of a movie too).

In the case of Sullenberger, he had seconds to decide the best course of action. He took the challenge and emerged victorious, becoming a national hero in the process.

So here is a thought experiment: What if you manufactured the urgency to act as if the right moment had already arrived? What if you brought forth everything you had—harnessed all your skills, resources and your network— as if the time was now?

Do you think it would make a difference?

I don't know but it's definitely worth a shot.

ACCELERATION CHALLENGE 10

Say “Yes” to Something New

Richard Branson’s book “Screw It, Let’s Do It” should be required reading not just for entrepreneurs but for everyone.

I especially think every entrepreneur or entrepreneur wannabe should read it. The very first page of the first chapter “Just Do It” highlights the way Sir Richard Branson views an opportunity.

Rather than paraphrasing, here is a quick excerpt from the first chapter, “Just Do It”:

When I first discovered that my nickname among some members of staff at Virgin was “Dr. Yes,” I was amused. Obviously, it had come about because my automatic response to a question, a request, or a problem is more likely to be positive than negative. I have always tried to find more reasons to do something if it seems like a good idea than not to do it.

My motto really is, “Screw it, let’s do it!”

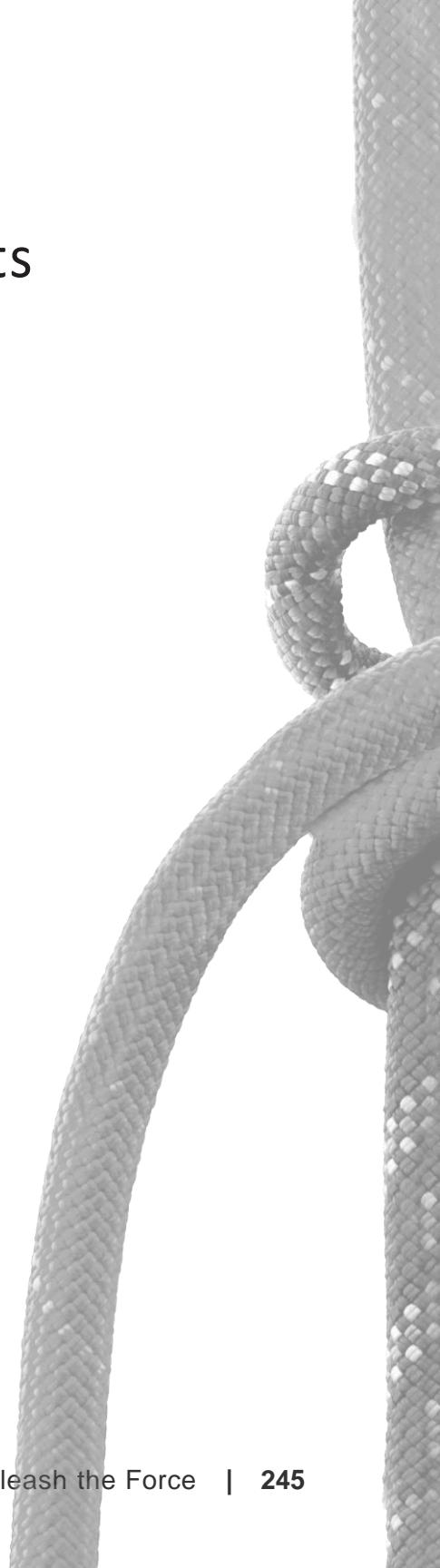
I know many people say “no” or “let me think about it” as an almost Pavlovian response when asked a question, whether it’s about something small and

insignificant or big and revolutionary. Perhaps they are over-cautious, or suspicious of new ideas, or simply need time to think. But that's not my way of going about things. If something is a good idea, my way is to say "Yes, I'll consider it"—and then to work out how to make it happen. Of course, I don't say yes to everything. But what is worse, making the occasional mistake or having a closed mind and missing opportunities?

Can you say "Yes" to something that you would have normally said "No" to? Why don't you try it now?

PART 3

Closing Thoughts



We're nearing the end. It's good to finish a book and move on to the next one. But remember that "knowing is not doing, but doing is doing." If you want to make the most of what you've learned here (or in any book) there are a few things that you can do.

- 1 **Use what you learned:** That means taking action on something you learned. It's the first step. Repeatedly doing something is what creates a habit.
- 2 **Review what you learned:** You will forget. I will forget. We all forget. It is good to review what you've learned every now and then, so that it stays in the forefront of your mind and takes root. Interestingly, you will notice that every time you review, you get additional insights from the same material—not because the material is changed but because *you* have changed. As you continue to grow, you can absorb more and more.
- 3 **Teach what you've learned:** If there is a super secret to learning, this is it—teaching what you've learned. Find someone—anyone—that you think can benefit from what you've learned and teach them. Teaching is the best way to cement and expand upon what you've learned.

In short, you need to act, and act until the new habit or behavior becomes second nature. Act until you don't even realize you're "acting."

As you act, always remember these points:

- › Understand why *some* smart people fall hard from the top
- › Be aware of your own potential blind spots

- › Don't overwork a network
- › Create the ultimate lasting impression
- › Celebrate!

We'll address each point in turn, beginning with the first.

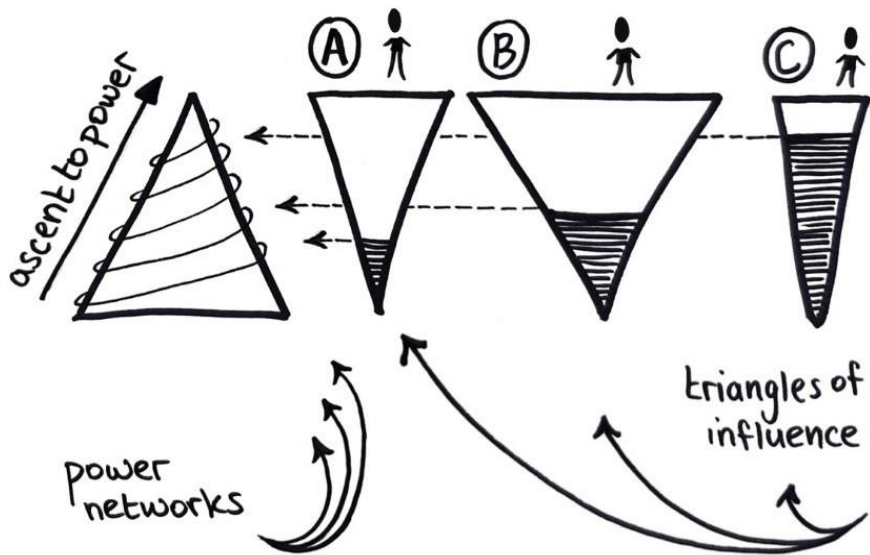
Know Why Smart People Fall Hard From The Top

Why do smart people fall from the top? You can simply brush this off and call it *statistics*. But it's a topic worth exploring a bit more. Here is what I can share based on a series of interviews and reflections.

Spheres Of Influence

First things first. If you are that smart person on an ascent to more power and increased capacity to contribute, you will keep moving with networks of people who have similar power and capacities to contribute. These networks can include people who are growing with you as well as new people You met along the path to higher power. The first triangle represents your growth. As you can see, there are less people with similar capacity and power as you move higher up.

Every person in a network also has their own sphere of influence, which expands as they grow. Such a sphere of Influence is shown by an inverted triangle next to your circle of ascent. As you can see, the triangles are of various sizes—meaning your influence may not grow at the same rate as someone else who has the same kind of power.



You start at the bottom of the power triangle where there are a *lot* of people like you. Irrespective of whatever “triangle of influence” you pick, at the bottom, you have a narrow circle of influence. As you move up the power triangle, there are less people (compared to before) but you can see on the “triangle of influence” that your influence is expanding and reaching more people. Finally, at the top of your power triangle, your influence is widespread.

It is the same kind of play for others that you meet on your journey to the top.

The need for a powerful ecosystem at the top

As you grow, you will have more power and capacity but you will also need more power and capacity in the ecosystem

around you. You will rarely be able to take on bigger projects without an amazing ecosystem to support you.

In fact, you will probably reach a plateau sooner rather than later without an amazing ecosystem to support you. In the early stages of your career, it's *you* that matters. In the later stages of your career, *you + your ecosystem* matter.

One silent problem: losing networks along the way

As we grow, there will be occasions where we might be able to accelerate our journey to the top by:

- › taking advantage of one of our peers
- › taking credit when it's not due
- › *Not* giving credit when it's due
- › taking someone for granted
- › taking advantage of the situation by throwing someone under the bus

The above are shortcuts and they might be tempting. But take one of those and typically we'll damage a relationship with consequences that last a lifetime. Early in our career, we lose a relationship and that's all. Later in our career, we lose one relationship, but it could cost us a network. That cost can be huge depending on what relationship we compromised. If that person had a big sphere of influence our loss is bigger.

The problem compounds when one of the above shortcuts gets us through to the next stage of growth without major damage. We start to take for granted that we

can take advantage of others, just ‘slightly’, and continue growing. Well, the above schematic shows the network we might lose depending on the person we took advantage of on our way to the top, and each person’s sphere of influence. Every network we lose adds up, and can have a huge negative impact on us.

The ultimate price: a collapsing house of cards

All wild parties have to come to an end one day or another. Building our success without building a super strong ecosystem is like building a house of cards.

The first sign of trouble that we have a weak ecosystem comes when we face any kind of problem. People who were pretending to have our back start bailing out. Since they were pretending so well, we might not even have suspected that they were actors. Then there are the people around us who are not actors, but will simply avoid anything that looks like trouble. They won’t have our back either. And what about the people who have other obligations? They’ll say it’s just too hard or they don’t have time to support us during challenging times. So we’re facing a problem, our ecosystem isn’t helping, and add to all this, that our ego perhaps won’t allow us to believe this is happening to us. “Forget help, it’s just a temporary blip!” we think. What happens? The whole house of cards comes down.

A wafer-thin ecosystem is dangerous. Don’t let your ego tell you this can’t happen to you.

BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN POTENTIAL BLIND SPOTS

Blind spots are a problem for everyone—and smart people aren't immune to them. We don't recognize our own, and sometimes even suffer because of other's blind spots.

While everyone pays a price for missing a blind spot, I think smart people pay a bigger price because they refuse to acknowledge or look for those blind spots until they've paid a heavy price.

I have picked seven blind spots to consider. These aren't all of them, but they're a good start. See if any of these could be you.

1. Being humble at the expense of being proud

We don't want to come across as boastful or as a show off, and we want to embrace humility. In fact, we take humility to such a level that we forget to be proud of what we do bring to the table. Unless someone else shines a light on us, we might end up getting shortchanged.

2. Being nice at the expense of being honest

Someone comes to us for feedback on a topic that they're actually the expert about. We think they're full of it, and going off track, but we want to be nice. So we sugar coat our feedback. We might think we've helped someone, but we've actually hurt them. In an effort to spare their ego today, which is a small price to pay, we've possibly cost them a lot more than a blow to their ego.

3. Being critical at the expense of being thoughtful

This is the opposite of what I discussed above. Here, when someone asks us for feedback, we shred to pieces what's put in front of us. We criticize the idea and the person and everything else. We demonstrate our knowledge and justify our criticism, but we've crossed a line. We've proved a point, but the damage to the human being in front of us might be beyond repair.

4. Being short-term focused at the expense of personal growth

Having a short term focus can lead to missed growth opportunities. The problem gets compounded if we start winning with short-term approaches, which can lead to an addiction of sorts. Over the years, we collect a series of short-term wins with little change or expansion in our capacity to perform when it matters most. This could ultimately lead to our downfall.

Note: A longer route does not automatically guarantee growth or the expansion of our capacity expansion. One has to choose the right projects to work on.

5. Being confident at the expense of being open

Confidence comes naturally to us because of our mastery on a certain topic. In most cases, confidence is a good thing as it will help us take risks that most others won't. But...confidence comes with its own potential baggage. Too much confidence

can make us closed-minded and cause us to develop selective hearing. We'll gladly hear feedback that supports our thinking, while any feedback that doesn't support or challenges our thinking will be discarded without due processing. Beware.

6. Going fast at the expense of moving in the right direction

Average people move at a certain pace making it easy for them to backtrack when something goes wrong. On the other hand, smart people can cover long distances very quickly.

If we're going in the right direction, it's all well and good. Problems begin when we're moving in the wrong direction. Being confident (see number 5) means we move fast, covering a lot more ground in a short time. Pretty soon, we've covered so much ground that we might continue going the wrong direction rather than backtracking.

7. Making money at the expense of making meaning

When it comes to money, some people enter a virtuous cycle of making money, leading to more opportunities to make more money. Then they make even more money leading to even more opportunities to make more money. They get entry to exclusive clubs that most people don't even know exist, which opens up further opportunities to win big. The point is that this cycle can keep them very busy with money, so much so, that they postpone making meaning—until it's too late.

DON'T OVERWORK YOUR NETWORK

"There are two types of people in the world. Those who come in the room and say, 'Well, here I am!' and those who come into the room and say 'Ah, there you are!'"

—FREDERICK COLLINS, WRITER

We talked a lot about networks and building relationships. With everything that is happening in the world, the focus is on how to get the most out of our networks. This is the right question to ask but if we stretch it a bit we might overwork our networks and cause trouble for ourselves. Here are ten ideas, in no particular order, on how *not* to overwork your network.

- 1 **Don't take permission for granted:** Don't add people in your network to your mailing lists without asking their permission. Just because you have their email address does not mean that they want to hear from you via newsletters.
- 2 **Don't take someone's time for granted:** Don't introduce new people to anyone without asking permission from both parties. Typically one person wants to meet another to receive something from them, and the other may not have the bandwidth to give that "something."
- 3 **Don't have unreasonable expectations of your network:** People in your network have their own lives and jobs which usually take precedence over your needs and concerns.

- 4 **Don't expect to receive first:** Givers get but not immediately. Expecting without giving is like trying to withdraw from a bank account before making a deposit.
- 5 **Don't introduce more noise into your network:** People don't have time to deal with current noise levels. The last thing they want is new noise.
- 6 **Don't take your network for granted:** It's the same thing—you don't want your network to take you for granted, so why do you think the other way will work?
- 7 **Remember the golden rule:** You knowing someone is not the same thing as them knowing you.
 - 8 **Put yourself in another's shoes before making any request:** Your requests seem very simple and easy to fulfill. But what if they have too many such simple and easy to fulfill requests from others as well? Be sensitive.
- 9 **Don't make meaningless requests:** Consider the question: "How would fulfilling my request be meaningful for this person?" If you can't come up with a good answer, it might be time to go back to the drawing board and re-design your request for help.
- 10 **Don't play games with your network:** Sooner or later, your network will know your true intent. And, those intentions better be *good*.

Lastly, remember that you have license to make a request in the short-term if you have built a relationship over the long-term.

CREATE THE ULTIMATE LASTING IMPRESSION

How do you know you are making it? No, not in terms of money or financial success.. how do you know if you are making a significant contribution in the lives of others? How about by creating the ultimate lasting impression?

You might ask, what is the ultimate lasting impression and how does one create that?

There isn't a single answer to this but for me, this one comes close:

You have created a lasting impression if people that matter most to you miss you in their past.

Let me explain a bit more. What I will say is based on these two facts.

- 1 We all live once. Taking a cricket metaphor, I'd say you get one inning in life. Do whatever you want, you can't get back the time that has already passed.
- 2 We meet various people at various stages of our lives—they may be new friends, business partners, teachers, mentors, coaches or anyone that ends up mattering to our lives. Until we meet them for the first time, they don't exist for us.

Some of these people make a true lasting impression in our lives. Since we may have met them later in life and they're so great, we feel cheated—we really wish they'd been a part of our past! We imagine how much better our lives would have been if only we'd known them before.

Are you one of those people that makes others miss you in their past? If not, what can you do today and for the rest of your life that will take you to that stage?

Remember that there are no tricks or tactics to reach there. You just have to *be* the person who is making that kind of *difference* in the lives of others.

CELEBRATE!

High-performing people are always driving themselves to increased excellence. You take on projects that challenge you, and lean into the difficulties with enthusiasm.

Because you do take on sizable initiatives, in that moment that you finish a project at hand, you may be thinking that you:

Want to celebrate.

Want to take a well-deserved break.

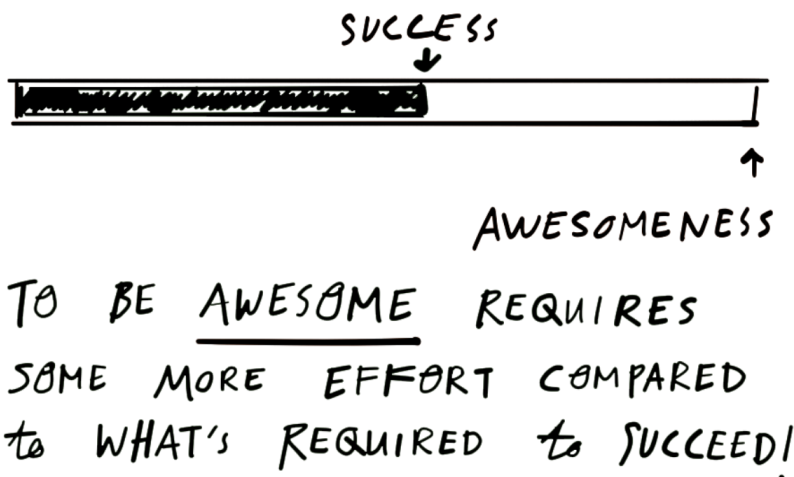
Want to go off the grid for a while.

Want to just not do anything and relax a bit.

The problem with waiting for major projects to be completed before we celebrate is that there is no time in your life where you can get a clean exit from one project and move on to the next.

An alternative perspective might involve regarding all of life as a series of projects. That was the opening premise of my first book called “Beyond Code” (the foreword was by one of my heroes, Tom Peters).

We are always working on *at least* two projects—one personal and one professional—if we are lucky. Typically,



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it's more than two. The size and scope of these projects are different but they are right there.

(Note: Ultra-successful people who have achieved autonomy don't fall into this category. They are exceptions.)

If you think about it, most of your life is spent on projects (until you achieve autonomy) and occasionally you get spurts of time where you are in-between projects.

The "in-between-project time" is tiny compared to the "project-in-progress time." If you are waiting for the "in-between-project time" to celebrate, you are missing out on the opportunity to celebrate for most of your life. That would be sad.

What if you view *engaging in your core projects* as a celebration of life? That's where you spend most of your life, after all, so why not celebrate it?

If, for some reason your projects are not worth celebrating, then why engage in them in the first place?

May your next projects be “celebration projects,” meaning you are celebrating while you are on those projects. You have the power to choose those next projects.

Good luck!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rajesh Setty is a serial entrepreneur, author and teacher based in Silicon Valley.

Raj has co-founded multiple technology companies in United States and in India. He has also written and published over a dozen books with his first book being published at the age of thirteen. His latest book project is called the ThinkBook series of books <www.gothinkbook.com>—a collection of journal-style notebooks that will make people think and grow.

Rajesh has taught over a thousand budding entrepreneurs on how to bring their ideas to life.

More about him at: <www.rajeshsetty.com/about/>

