

Shape Shifter

In the beginning were the pants (hers) and the bumps. How Sara Blakely made Spanx big business **CT**



REVIEW



Muppet Magician

Jim Henson turned puppetry and shtick into a new kind of entertainment for kids. A biography **CB**

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Saturday/Sunday, October 12 - 13, 2013 | **C1**

FAIL

YOUR WAY TO
SUCCESS



START

Forget passion. Goals are for losers. **Scott Adams** reveals his secret to climbing to the top: Suffer defeat. Lots and lots of defeat.

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IF YOU'RE already as successful as you want to be, both personally and professionally, congratulations! Here's the not-so-good news: All you are likely to get from this article is a semientertaining tale about a guy who failed his way to success. But you might also notice some familiar patterns in my story that will give you confirmation (or confirmation bias) that your own success wasn't entirely luck.

If you're just starting your journey toward success—however you define it—or you're wondering what you've been doing wrong until now, you might find some novel ideas here. Maybe the combination of what

you know plus what I think I know will be enough to keep you out of the wood chipper.

Let me start with some tips on what not to do. Beware of advice about successful people and their methods. For starters, no two situations are alike. Your dreams of creating a dry-cleaning empire won't be helped by knowing that Thomas Edison liked to take naps. Secondly, biographers never have access to the internal thoughts of successful people. If a biographer says Henry Ford invented the assembly line to impress women, that's probably a guess.

But the most dangerous case of all is when successful people directly give advice. For example, you often hear them say that you should "follow your passion." That sounds perfectly reasonable the first time you hear it. Passion will presumably give you high energy, high resistance to rejection and high determination. Passionate people are more persuasive, too. Those are all good things, right?

Here's the counterargument: When I was a commercial loan officer for a large bank, my boss taught us that you should never make a loan to someone who is following his

passion. For example, you don't want to give money to a sports enthusiast who is starting a sports store to pursue his passion for all things sporty. That guy is a bad bet, passion and all. He's in business for the wrong reason.

My boss, who had been a commercial lender for over 30 years, said that the best loan customer is someone who has no passion whatsoever, just a desire to work hard at something that looks good on a spreadsheet. Maybe the loan customer wants to start a dry-cleaning store or invest in a fast-food franchise—boring stuff. That's the person you bet on. You want the grinder, not the guy who loves his job.

Success is entirely accessible, even if you happen to be a huge screw-up 95% of the time.

For most people, it's easy to be passionate about things that are working out, and that distorts our impression of the importance of passion. I've been involved in several dozen business ventures over the course of my life, and each one made me excited at the start. You might even call it passion.

The ones that didn't work out—and that would be most of them—slowly drained my passion as they failed. The few that worked became more exciting as they succeeded. For example, when I invested in a restaurant with an operating partner, my passion was sky high. And on day one, when there was a line of customers down the block, I was even more passionate. In later years, as the business got pummeled, my passion evolved into frustration and annoyance.

On the other hand, Dilbert started out as just one of many get-rich schemes I was willing to try. When it started to look

as if it might be a success, my passion for cartooning increased because I realized it could be my golden ticket. In hindsight, it looks as if the projects that I was most passionate about were also the ones that worked. But objectively, my passion level moved with my success. Success caused passion more than passion caused success.

So forget about passion. And while you're at it, forget about goals, too.

Just after college, I took my first airplane trip, destination California, in search of a job. I was seated next to a businessman who was probably in his early 60s. I suppose I looked like an odd duck with my serious demeanor, bad haircut and cheap suit, clearly out of my element. I asked what he did for a living, and he told me he was the CEO of a company that made screws. He offered me some career advice. He said that every time he got a new job, he immediately started looking for a better one. For him, job seeking was not something one did when necessary. It was a continuing process.

This makes perfect sense if you do the math. Chances are that the best job for you won't become available at precisely the time you declare yourself ready. Your best bet, he explained, was to always be looking for a better deal. The better deal has its own schedule. I believe the way he explained it is that your job is not your job; your job is to find a better job.

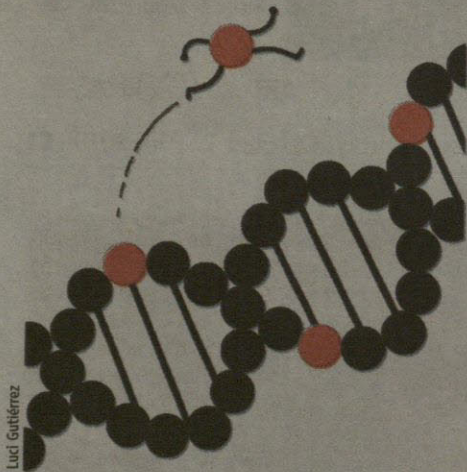
This was my first exposure to the idea that one should have a system instead of a goal. The system was to continually look for better options.

Throughout my career I've had my antennae up, looking

Please turn to the next page

Mr. Adams is the creator of Dilbert. Adapted from his book "How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big," to be published by Portfolio, a member of Penguin Group (USA), on Oct. 22.

REVIEW



The Secret Of Success: Failure

Continued from the prior page

for examples of people who use systems as opposed to goals. In most cases, as far as I can tell, the people who use systems do better. The systems-driven people have found a way to look at the familiar in new and more useful ways.

To put it bluntly, goals are for losers. That's literally true most of the time. For example, if your goal is to lose 10 pounds, you will spend every moment until you reach the goal—if you reach it at all—feeling as if you were short of your goal. In other words, goal-oriented people exist in a state of nearly continuous failure that they hope will be temporary.

If you achieve your goal, you celebrate and feel terrific, but only until you realize that you just lost the thing that gave you purpose and direction. Your options are to feel empty and useless, perhaps enjoying the spoils of your success until they bore you, or to set new goals and re-enter the cycle of permanent presuccess failure.

I have a friend who is a gifted salesman. He could have sold anything, from houses to toasters. The field he chose (which I won't reveal because he wouldn't appreciate the sudden flood of competition) allows him to sell a service that almost always auto-renews. In other words, he can sell his service once and enjoy ongoing commissions until the customer dies or goes out of business. His biggest problem in life is that he keeps trading his boat for a larger one, and that's a lot of work.

Observers call him lucky. What I see is a man who accurately identified his skill set and chose a system that vastly increased his odds of getting "lucky." In fact, his system is so solid that it could withstand quite a bit of bad luck without buckling. How much passion does this fellow have for his chosen field? Answer: zero. What he has is a spectacular system, and that beats passion every time.

There is plenty of luck to go around; you just need to keep your hand raised until it's your turn.

I'm not satisfied knowing that I'll be mentally prepared to find some future cow turd. I want to shovel that turd onto my garden and hope the cow returns every week so I never have to buy fertilizer again. Failure is a resource that can be managed.

Before launching Dilbert, and after, I failed at a long series of day jobs and entrepreneurial adventures. Here are just a few of the worst ones. I include them because successful people generally gloss over their most aromatic failures, and it leaves the impression that they have some magic you don't.

When you're done reading this list, you won't have that delusion about me, and that's the point. Success is entirely accessible, even if you happen to be a huge screw-up 95% of the time.

My failures:

Velcro Rosin Bag Invention: In the 1970s, tennis players sometimes used rosin bags to keep their racket hands less sweaty. In college, I built a prototype of a rosin bag that attached to a Velcro strip on tennis shorts so it would always be available when needed. My lawyer told me it wasn't patentworthy because it was simply a combination of two existing products. I approached some sporting-goods companies and got nothing but form-letter rejections. I dropped the idea.

But in the process I learned a valuable lesson: Good ideas have no value because the world already has too many of them. The market rewards execution, not ideas. From that point on, I concentrated on ideas that I could execute. I was already failing toward success, but I didn't yet know it.

Gopher Offer: During my banking career, in my late 20s, I caught the attention of a senior vice president at the bank. Apparently my b.s. skills in meetings were impressive. He offered me a job as his gopher/assistant with the vague assurance that I would meet important executives during the normal course of my work, which would make it easy for him to strap a rocket to my backside—as the saying roughly went—and launch me up the corporate ladder.

On the downside, the challenge would be to survive his less-than-polite management style and do his bidding for a few years. I declined his offer because I was already managing a small group of people, so becoming a gopher seemed like a step backward. I believe the

senior vice president's exact characterization of my decision was "[expletive] STUPID!!!" He hired one of my co-workers for the job instead, and in a few years that fellow became one of the youngest vice presidents in the bank's history.

I worked for Crocker National Bank in San Francisco for about eight years, starting at the very bottom and working my way up to lower management. During the course of my

MIND & MATTER:
ROBERT M. SAPOLSKY

Genes Often Get Shuffled in Our DNA Deck



DEBATES about parent/child similarities are in the air. Many Yankees fans attribute this year's poor showing to Hal Steinbrenner not having inherited his father's check-writing impulse when it comes to buying talent. Critics compare the writing style of this year's best-selling novelist Joe Hill (i.e., Joseph Hillstrom King) with that of his father, Stephen King. And across the Atlantic, Brits continue to weigh in as to which parent the newborn Prince George most resembles (beyond his currently being hair-challenged like his balding father).

Once born, we typically share some part of our environment with at least one of our biological parents. But we receive all of our genes from them. The fertilized egg that eventually became you had the unique genome made from the two of them combining. Heritability is remarkable—every cell

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Once born, we typically share some part of our environment with at least one of our biological parents. But we receive all of our genes from them. The fertilized egg that eventually became you had the unique genome made from the two of them combining. Heritability is remarkable—every cell generated in your body is commanded by the DNA sequence that you inherited, your personal Code of Codes.

Or maybe not. It turns out that stretches of DNA can jump around, that your cells are actually a mosaic of different DNA sequences.

The discovery of “jumping genes” (aka “transposable genetic elements” or “transposons”) was an epic achievement, a demonstration of the tenacity that science can require. In the 1940s, the plant geneticist Barbara McClintock noted patterns of variability in traits in maize that couldn’t be explained by classical genetics. Brilliantly, she saw that the only explanation for this cell-by-cell variability was that stretches of DNA could move around. She was, for the most part, met with derision and skepticism for decades, until molecular biology confirmed that she was right. The octogenarian McClintock was lauded, became a feminist icon and, finally, was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1983.

So stretches of DNA can be copied in particular cells and then pasted elsewhere, producing a novel DNA sequence. Such transpositional events rarely produce a great outcome. Consider such an event in a hypothetical stretch of DNA coding for an in-

Bacteria and immune systems have gene-transposition arms races.

struction: “Secrete insulin when blood sugar levels rise.” Thanks to a transposition, this becomes: “Secrete insulin when blood *sun-suligar* levels rise.” It has become gibberish.

But sometimes, transposons generate something truly novel: “After fertilization, the egg migrates to the uterine wall and un-

man who accurately identified his skill set and chose a system that vastly increased his odds of getting “lucky.” In fact, his system is so solid that it could withstand quite a bit of bad luck without buckling. How much passion does this fellow have for his chosen field? Answer: zero. What he has is a spectacular system, and that beats passion every time.

As for my own system, when I graduated from college, I outlined my entrepreneurial plan. The idea was to create something that had value and—this next part is the key—I wanted the product to be something that was easy to reproduce in unlimited quantities. I didn’t want to sell my time, at least not directly, because that model has an upward limit. And I didn’t want to build my own automobile factory, for example, because cars are not easy to reproduce. I wanted to create, invent, write, or otherwise concoct something widely desired that would be easy to reproduce.

My system of creating something the public wants and reproducing it in large quantities nearly guaranteed a string of failures. By design, all of my efforts were long shots. Had I been goal-oriented instead of system-oriented, I imagine I would have given up after the first several failures. It would have felt like banging my head against a brick wall.

But being systems-oriented, I felt myself growing more capable every day, no matter the fate of the project that I happened to be working on. And every day during those years I woke up with the same thought, literally, as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and slapped the alarm clock off.

Today’s the day.

If you drill down on any success story, you always discover that luck was a huge part of it. You can’t control luck, but you can move from a game with bad odds to one with better odds. You can make it easier for luck to find you. The most useful thing you can do is stay in the game. If your current get-rich project fails, take what you learned and try something else. Keep repeating until something lucky happens. The universe has plenty of luck to go around; you just need to keep your hand raised until it’s your turn. It helps to see failure as a road and not a wall.

I’m an optimist by nature, or perhaps by upbringing—it’s hard to know where one leaves off and the other begins—but whatever the cause, I’ve long seen failure as a tool, not an outcome. I believe that viewing the world in that way can be useful for you too.

Nietzsche famously said, “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” It sounds clever, but it’s a loser philosophy. I don’t want my failures to simply make me stronger, which I interpret as making me better able to survive future challenges. (To be fair to Nietzsche, he probably meant the word “stronger” to include anything that makes you more capable. I’d ask him to clarify, but ironically he ran out of things that didn’t kill him.)

Becoming stronger is obviously a good thing, but it’s only barely optimistic. I do want my failures to make me stronger, of course, but I also want to become smarter, more talented, better networked, healthier and more energized. If I find a cow turd on my front steps,

There is plenty of luck to go around; you just need to keep your hand raised until it’s your turn.

overview of banking, finance, technology, contracts, management and a dozen other useful skills. I wouldn’t have done it any differently.

Webvan: In the dot-com era, a startup called Webvan promised to revolutionize grocery delivery. You could order grocery-store items over the Internet, and one of Webvan’s trucks would load your order at the company’s modern distribution hub and set out to service all the customers in your area.

I figured Webvan would do for groceries what Amazon had done for books. It was a rare opportunity to get in on the ground floor. I bought a bunch of Webvan stock and felt good about myself. When the stock plunged, I bought some more. I repeated that process several times, each time licking my lips as I acquired ever-larger blocks of the stock at prices I knew to be a steal.

When the company announced that it had achieved positive cash flow at one of its several hubs, I knew that I was onto something. If it worked in one hub, the model was proved, and it would surely work at others. I bought more stock. Now I owned approximately, well, a boatload.

A few weeks later, Webvan went out of business. Investing in Webvan wasn’t the dumbest thing I’ve ever done, but it’s a contender. The loss wasn’t enough to change my lifestyle. But boy, did it sting psychologically. In my partial defense, I knew it was a gamble, not an investment per se.

What I learned from that experience is that there is no such thing as useful information that comes from a company’s management. Now I diversify and let the lying get smoothed out by all the other variables in my investments.

These failures are just a sampling. I’m delighted to admit that I’ve failed at more challenges than anyone I know.

As for you, I’d like to think that reading this will set you on the path of your own magnificent screw-ups and cavernous disappointments. You’re welcome! And if I forgot to mention it earlier, that’s exactly where you want to be: steeped to your eyebrows in failure.

It’s a good place to be because failure is where success likes to hide in plain sight. Everything you want out of life is in that huge, bubbling vat of failure. The trick is to get the good stuff out.

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But sometimes, transposons generate something truly novel: "After fertilization, the egg migrates to the uterine wall and undergoes implantation," becomes: "After fertilization, the eggplant migrates to the uterine wall and undergoes implantation." That doesn't happen every day.

Transpositions can be a real boon to an organism. It wasn't by chance that transposons were first discovered in plants, where they are plentiful. If something challenging happens in the environment, animals can run away.

But plants have to deal with these problems, which can induce a shuffling of the DNA that might produce something novel and save the plant's keister. Meanwhile, bacteria and immune systems have gene-transposition arms races, with the former shuffling genes to come up with means to evade immune systems and the latter shuffling to get the means to destroy novel bacteria.

Transpositions also occur in the brain. Fred Gage and Alysson Muotri of the Salk Institute and colleagues first showed that human transposons are activated in stem cells in the brain around the time they are becoming neurons. In other words, when you make a new neuron, that old boring DNA sequence that you inherited isn't good enough. Thus, the brain is a mosaic of neurons with different DNA sequences.

And recent work by Paola Perratt of the University of Massachusetts and colleagues shows that transpositional events occur in the neurons that form new memories in fruit flies. Think about that: Every time we evolve such that their neurons are not from the strict genetic inheritance.

What does this mean? It's a likely fact that... one shouldn't... idea of strict...

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Scott Adams

MAYBE NEXT TIME WE DON'T FOLLOW OUR PASSION.