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Introduction

We are living in a time when many of us are under pressure. At the same time we are striving towards a successful career, an active lifestyle and some personal happiness. Our greatest wish is to live according to our passions, and to realize our dreams as quickly as possible. For many of us this proves difficult, because we are being pulled this way and that by all kinds of external influences. Sound familiar?

By setting out my ‘internal logic’ concretely here in writing, I hope to offer you an inventory of tools that have served to make me happier over the years. My wish is for everybody who reads this book to try out the exercises in practice and thereby internalize all or part of this inventory, generating greater success and satisfaction than is currently the case.

Practical information

You are a young, talented professional and have big plans for your future life and career. However, you may be wrestling with the problem of how to get the most out of your practical experience as fast as possible. You are unsure of which role suits you best – would you like to become a manager at a large, well-known company, or would you rather start your own business? One thing is certain: you are a young dynamo full of drive and ambition.

The question is whether you know yourself well enough to make the proper choices that will suit you best. You are searching for a solid basis that you can combine with self-awareness to help you stand out, as well as the means to embrace your strengths and quickly build on your success without sacrificing your quality of life. If this all seems familiar to you, then this book was written for you.

This book offers a range of resources, perspectives and working methods that you can continue to apply for many years to shape your career, regardless of your profession either now or in the future. These resources are tried-and-tested, as I have been putting them into practice myself for years.

But this does not mean that that everything I write will be effective, or even work, in all situations. It is important for you to continue to relate everything you read to your own circumstances.

All of the strategies described in this book were developed through a process of trial and error, adaptation and perfection. Your case will be no different, but what I do hope is that by reading this book, you can accelerate your learning curve considerably and learn from the mistakes that I have already made. My aim is for you to take ten years to develop an attitude and a set of skills that it took me thirty years to acquire.

The lessons in this book are learned not only through knowledge of my “best practices”, but through concrete experiences (both positive and negative). As soon as you feel confident to undertake more active experimentation, you will gain more experiences (both positive and negative) and start learning faster! From a learning perspective, there simply can be no negative experiences.

This does not mean that you can avoid making mistakes – mistakes are just another way of learning. This book may even help you develop the courage to make more mistakes, with the aim of allowing your talent to reach full maturity. The motto here is:

“Fail fast to learn fast”

We are living in a time when people must be resilient, and where you must go out in search of the information that is relevant to you, based on the goals that you have set for yourself. In other words: from now on, try to assume responsibility for your own happiness and success. Reading this book, completing the exercises and putting what you have learned into practice will allow you to take concrete steps towards this goal.

Who should read this book?

This book was written for school-leavers at the start of their careers, or for those who have already been working for a few years. It is for those who are young (or young at heart, at least) and full of energy and ambitions.

I have limited the scope of this book to young, talented professionals. In my experience it is this group in particular who are at risk of a “burnout”, as they have the tendency to put too much on their plate. If you have trouble saying “no”, you could create serious problems for yourself within a very short time.

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You

This chapter is all about you. The reason I want to focus on you is because it is impossible to live outside yourself, and because you (your mind and body) are the motor that you will use to shape your future life and career. So be sure to supply your motor with the right fuel, carry out regular maintenance, make sure it is properly calibrated and ensure effective capacity management – because overloads lead to damage, which would be a great shame. You only have one motor, after all.

The nice thing about your own motor is that it is self-learning, and can increase its own capacity and power throughout its lifespan. The way you run your motor, or your “motor-management style”, can also be improved over time, for example by making smarter choices, seizing opportunities and building confidence, which will ultimately enable you to outdo yourself. Try to remain true to yourself during this process, as only then will you be in command of your full potential and able to excel, while maintaining a balanced life.

Deliberate, active engagement with the concepts and techniques that I describe for you will give you greater control of your life and career. This chapter also presents some concrete exercises that I sincerely recommend you try out. Reading books is fun, but genuine change and growth demands a pro-active attitude. Action holds the key!

The learning process

The real learning does not begin until you have finished studying. Most of the skills important to real life are not learned at school, but in a practical setting, even though modern education is becoming more and more competency-based. It is about how you decide to shape yourself in the years to come.

From now on, you will need to make both personal and professional decisions that will greatly influence the course of your life and your level of happiness. So it is important to take your time to consider these decisions, to get feedback on them from people close to you whom you trust, and – perhaps most importantly – to follow your passion and your heart in making them. That means: do not simply follow the money.

You can never fail in making such a choice – you can only learn, just as you can learn from making mistakes. The trick is to avoid the obvious mistakes by being open to learning from other people’s experiences.

Only by making your own, fully independent mistakes can you be the architect of your own life, and develop the resilience to be both successful and happy at the same time. So: know what you want, and make choices with your heart and with full conviction. The next chapter offers a more in-depth discussion of “pro-active behavior”. For now it is enough to keep in mind that making your own choices and living by them is an example of pro-active behavior.

Motto:

“Outside your comfort zone,
that’s where the magic happens”

In this day and age, it is almost a given that we will be confronted with stressful situations. You don’t need to be a scaredy-cat to be afraid of the pressure society puts on us.

My experience has taught me that putting off dealing with these fears is no help at all – this way they only keep coming back, gaining in strength each time. Imagine for a moment that you are afraid of giving presentations in front of groups. The only way to overcome this fear is to start giving presentations in front of groups, and after a few times you will find out that it wasn’t that bad after all.

Pressure from society is not the only element at play: the disconnect between who you think you should be and who you really are can also cause a lot of tension. So remain genuine and true to yourself. Do not pretend to be any more or less than you really are.

Accept the experience and development of fears as unavoidable – the important thing is how you deal with them. Facing your fears and enduring them physically is precisely how you can experience the power of this emotion. Only those able to deal with their fears will be capable of reaching the coveted top positions. The most effective way to face your fears is to confront the very thing that you are afraid of!

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You and your environment

Just as you are saddled with yourself for the rest of your life, there is no way to avoid the environment in which you live. You are always living in “an environment”, be it a personal or business one. Your success is therefore determined to a large extent by how you interact with your environment. It is not your environment that determines your fate: you write your own destiny through mature interaction with your surroundings, and by seeking out environments in which you can thrive.

And so I would like to start this chapter by arguing for (pro-)active behavior, because only this way can you push your life and career in the direction that you yourself want to go in. Waiting on the sidelines is not an option if you wish to reap success and happiness in life!

Your environment will not always be as ideal or accommodating as you would like. One thing I will say: although my life has never been boring, it has taught me resilience. And it is my sincere wish to pass on these lessons in resilience to you, because the more resilient you are, the better you are able to withstand hard times.

Once you start demonstrating active behavior and increasing your resilience, you will get a better grip on how to achieve your goals, and the easier it will be to get the results you want. This has an energizing effect, and the nice thing about being energized is that you start to radiate it almost automatically. This will increase your appeal to your environment, and put you in a position to take the next steps to success. Your self-confidence will grow, which in itself is a solid foundation for even more active behavior.

This may involve groups of people who are important to you, environmental sensitivity, a critical perspective and daring to enter into confrontations – not to cause trouble, but in order to generate clarity and create the conditions for you to perform at your best.

I believe this also means a safe and clean workplace, so that you can make optimal use of the time available and limit long trips to a minimum – unless you enjoy travel, of course. In addition to your physical environment, you also have a social environment in which you must try to remain in control of the changes. The age of job security is

over, and – as crazy as it sounds – accepting this fact will make you more resilient and more comfortable with uncertainty.

If you work in a corporate environment, you will usually have a manager who directs and assesses you regularly (unless you are self-employed or an executive). Until you become an executive, it is sensible to train yourself in dealing effectively with your manager. Your manager can make or break your career (at least in the short term), so the best thing to do is to invest in a good relationship with your manager, based on active behavior.

Young, talented professionals can never learn enough, and your environment is precisely what will offer you many opportunities for development. One technique is to view your environment as a kind of “observation lab”. Critically observe the environment in which you work, try to understand what is happening around you and investigate why things happen the way they do.

Find people (your teachers/mentors) that you feel you can learn from. Just like learning to deal with your manager, you can also develop faster by learning to communicate effectively with your teacher or counsellor. This person may be a formal mentor or career coach affiliated with the organization in which you work, or it could simply be someone who enjoys teaching you new skills.

Active behavior

Before explaining what I mean by active behavior and how it can help, first I would like to talk about passive behavior. People who exhibit passive behavior do the following: they wait and see, want to be asked first, put things off, imagine all kinds of difficulties, think in terms of bottlenecks and problems, like to blame other people, are mistrustful, make no decisions, hope and wait for things to blow over, keep dreaming, complain, have a negative attitude, make themselves dependent on others, cover themselves, worry and brood, are reserved, see few possibilities, defend their position, do not share their knowledge, stick doggedly to their job description, and criticize and complicate things. They do not get the most out of life. Truth be told, they live as thoughtless zombies devoid of will, and allow life to wash over them. Or worse: they have their lives lived for them, and drown in the daily grind.

4

Ten success factors

In this chapter, I present the ten factors that have helped me to be successful. Mastering these success factors takes practice, and most of all discipline. I therefore provide a checklist at the end of each section, so that you can monitor your progress regarding their application.

If you are not yet able to analyze yourself and define your own factors for success, do not worry. I am happy to let you “borrow” mine for a while.

Feel free to use them, provided they help you to accelerate your career and boost your success until you have reached the point (say, after five or ten years) when you can formulate and bequeath your own list to the next generation, based on a process of self-reflection. This is how I developed the factors below, i.e. through self-reflection and by asking myself the right questions at the right time.

1. Smile at yourself

To me, smiling at myself means that I am satisfied with my life and the way I have lived it until now. It gives me the right fundamental attitude that allows me to cope more effectively with the annoying aspects of life. It enables me to put things into perspective, increases my resilience and it also releases my inner youthful curiosity, giving me the mental freedom to absorb new information and learn new skills. I have noticed that being able to smile at myself and those around me (including my clients and co-workers) also has a noticeably more energizing effect.

A smile a day keeps the stress away.

In addition to being applicable at the individual level, much of what I write can also be applied to a group as a whole. Taking the “smile at yourself” example and projecting it onto an entire group, how would it relate to an entire organization? My theory is that the majority of an organization’s population would feel at home, content and secure within the organization and happy to be a part of the group.

If this collective, positive feeling is absent, something is fundamentally wrong and the energy within the organization will be primarily negative and directed inwardly. This is lost energy, and it will also hamper the development of positive energy that can be directed to the outside world and the organization’s customers/clients.

Distrust will grow within the organization's walls, giving rise to more and more restrictive regulations, making the employees feel increasingly unhappy. Employees will start bending the rules in order to fulfil the organization's strict measurement guidelines, which will only raise levels of distrust.

The formula is short, sweet yet very confronting:

- 1** Are you still smiling at yourself? No? Drop the social performance and regain your balance;
- 2** Do you still feel like you have enough freedom to feel, think and act? No? Drop the social performance and regain your balance;
- 3** Are you at the limits of your capacity for longer than a moment's worry? Yes? Drop the social performance and regain your balance.

If after answering the questions above, you reach the conclusion that you need to work harder to reach a balance, do not despair: the next chapter describes methods for getting more in touch with yourself.

5 Learning to understand yourself

This book came to be because somebody once asked me, “Ben, what is your secret?” My response to this question made me realize that the answer was too long to get through during a single lunch or coaching meeting. I also thought that you might benefit from the answer I had to give.

My next step was to consider what I thought would be useful information to pass on to you. I considered why you might find each topic might be relevant, and how I approach them myself as an experienced professional. This brought me into a “flow”, and sometimes even a trance as I listened to music from the Buddha Bar, sought my inner peace and heard what my subconscious had to tell me.

Essentially I have distilled and described the “internal logic” that came to me during these moments, which I now present to you via this book. If you really want to get the most out of this book, I would advise you also to get in touch with yourself in the same way that allowed me to write it. That is the reason for writing this final chapter, so that you can practice opening up a dialogue with yourself.

Proverb from Afghanistan:

Fast answers come from intellect.

Slow answers come from wisdom.

Compared to previous chapters, this chapter contains a relatively large number of exercises aimed at helping you get to know yourself better. Do the ones that appeal to you most, based on your current learning needs, and skip the ones you don’t have time for or do not (yet) need to do. Anything goes. The exercises can be repeated, or completed the next time you read the book.

Tip: Turn these exercises into a game. Do them as part of a group, e.g. with some of your school friends. Compare your results, and evaluate what you have all learned from the exercises together.

Exercise 47

Goal: Revising the material to get more in touch with yourself.

Go through chapters 2-4 once more, and at the end of each paragraph consider the following:

Do I agree with these statements? If not, why not?

With every piece of information I offer you, try to form an idea of how you would put it into practice.

How do you feel when you imagine it? Does it seem easy to you, or do you feel anxious or some kind of internal barrier? If so, try to describe the fear or barrier as concretely as possible.
