

COMMIT to Achieving Success and Always Be Passionate

Sam Walton often went to work at or before 4:00 in the morning so that he could review the previous day's sales reports before the rest of his executive team arrived!

Sam Walton built the largest and most successful company the world has ever known, and it took a lifetime to do it. His great accomplishments were achieved because of his ability to maintain a singularity of focus and his ability to get others motivated to help him achieve his dream. Think about the challenges facing an entrepreneur like Sam Walton in those early days, out in the middle of nowhere in the Ozark Mountains, where he opened his first store. It was 1962 when he founded Wal-Mart, and the first thing his suppliers told him was that his rural retailing strategies wouldn't work. Bankers didn't want to help him with loans when he needed them, believing his venture was destined to fail. Other retailers, who scoffed at Sam Walton's ideas for rural retailing, were quick to point out to him there wasn't enough business in rural America to support a discount retailing venture. Some of the local folks around northwestern Arkansas must have thought Mr. Sam was downright crazy to build such big stores in small-town America. But in the end he proved them all wrong, and it was Mr. Sam, not his competitors, who had the last laugh!

Mr. Sam may have written his first success secret for achieving remarkable results, "*COMMIT to achieving success and always be passionate,*" based on his experiences in those early days when he first started Wal-Mart. What he lacked in knowledge, skills, and ability he was able to overcome with his never-say-die determination. His willpower and can-do attitude, coupled with his passion to succeed, made the difference, early on, during some pretty tough times. Whether he was born a leader or circumstances made him become a great leader, the cards he was dealt in the early days of his entrepreneurial career dictated that he lead by example. His belief in his dream, his work ethic, and his sheer passion made believers out of the early associates (the Wal-Mart name for employees) who helped Sam Walton get his business off the ground. His enthusiasm

for the discount retailing business was infectious, causing those around him to share a similar passion. Mr. Sam would be the first to tell you that it was his associates who were the primary reason Wal-Mart survived those early and difficult first years.

Commitment and passion are two of the most important ingredients necessary for anyone striving to achieve success. It also helps to have a clearly defined vision or goal. Whether you're trying to run a business, raise a family, get a college scholarship, play a musical instrument, or excel in sports, every one of us has to make a personal commitment to achieving success. When the going gets tough, and it always does, it is an individual's passion for his or her goals that gets tested, and often it is that steadfast commitment to succeeding that makes the difference between winning and losing, passing or failing, and success or failure.

J.C. Penney, one of America's retailing pioneers, once said, "Give me someone with no goals and I'll give you a stock clerk. Give me a stock clerk with a goal and I'll give you someone who will make history." Penney's description of the importance of goals to achieving success aptly fits one of his most famous former protégés, Sam Walton. Starting at the bottom and working his way up, Sam Walton learned his craft the hard way by doing every job in a retail store and he learned, under the tutelage of people like J.C. Penney, what it took to be successful. "Golden Rule Penney," as he was called, taught Sam Walton many important lessons about how to treat people that Mr. Sam internalized and which he later passed on to others throughout his life. Sam Walton believed that regardless of the task he was given, if it was worth doing it was worth doing right. He strove to do every job, even the least desirable ones, to the best of his ability. Leading by his own example is just one of the reasons Mr. Sam was so respected and revered by the managers and associates who worked in his company.

In recent years, I've interviewed college seniors for their first jobs following graduation and it has surprised me how many of them stated they wanted to "start at the top!" Of course, that's not possible because it takes years of experience to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to lead an organization effectively. The years of working every kind of job and learning a profession from the bottom up ensure that leaders build their careers on a rock solid foundation of experience. That's what Sam Walton did throughout his career. There wasn't a job in a retail store that Sam Walton hadn't experienced personally. By the way, every one of us who worked with Sam Walton was aware of the fact that he knew more about the inner workings of the business than any of us. His knowledge of the business gave him tremendous credibility, and it also gave those who worked for him confidence in his decision-making ability as a leader.

Mr. Sam had goals and dreams to which he was solidly committed. As a lifelong student he readily accepted guidance, new ideas, and training from others with more experience. He lived his life by setting goals and achieving them, ultimately stair-stepping his way to the very top of the business world. Sam Walton was an example of that stock clerk described by J.C. Penney who made history by committing himself to setting and achieving goals. What was interesting about Mr. Sam's goal orientation is that he approached his business goals sort of like a sports challenge or some kind of contest. He liked to set "stretch" goals so they weren't easy to reach, but at the same time he pursued them with the same enthusiasm and enjoyment he had experienced in sports. He liked to stretch for his personal goals, and he liked to set stretch goals for others in his company. He was motivated to achieve and used goals as a rallying point for everyone around him. He shared his goals with others and had a unique ability as

a leader to gain commitment and generate enthusiasm among his associates. Once he got his army of associates committed to achieve a goal, it was truly amazing what his team of average people could accomplish.

Mr. Sam was known for his ability to get above-average performance from a group of average people. Said another way, he had a knack for getting “more from less” from teams of people. By discovering how to achieve “team synergy,” he was able to tap into the power of groups of people working together as a team, which is one of the great secrets to how Mr. Sam achieved such unbelievable results at Wal-Mart. Sam Walton believed that in business and sports, it is teams of committed people working together towards a common goal that win, not individuals working separately.

Mr. Sam was more than a little embarrassed when he confessed that there wasn't a day that went by in his adult life that he didn't ponder some aspect of his business. In his quiet moments, he was constantly “noodling” the product mix or how to display products to sell more at a higher velocity or thinking of ways to improve customer service. I can picture him sitting there, on a Sunday afternoon “relaxing” on his porch swing at his home, legal pad and pen in hand, enjoying the mental exercise of how to improve product distribution, reduce costs, improve associate relations, or lower prices. Although he was a family man, he was also a merchant who was committed to doing whatever was necessary to make his business successful.

Sam Walton built Wal-Mart and Sam's Club with his singularity of focus. He created a vision, set goals, and got others excited about achieving those goals. He was a passionate and committed leader who inspired a similar level of passion and commitment in others. Throughout his life he heard many a naysayer telling him

that this idea he had or that idea he had wasn't going to work. Sometimes those naysayers were right, but more often than not it was Mr. Sam who proved them wrong. He remained determined and committed to his dream of making Wal-Mart the best company in retail until the day he died. One of the most important lessons each of us can learn from Sam Walton is that if you are willing to focus on your goals and personally remain committed to do whatever is necessary to achieve them, you will be successful.

I read an interesting story written by the motivational expert Earl Nightingale called *The Strangest Secret*. In that story he describes the key to success in business and in life. When I deliver speeches domestically and internationally I often ask my audiences to raise their hand if they are interested in knowing what The Strangest Secret is? Almost everyone in the audience enthusiastically raises their hand, and here is what I share with them. The key to being successful at whatever you want to accomplish in life is "What you think about most of the time is what you become." If you think about achieving your goals and put your time, energy, and effort behind achieving them, what you think about most of the time is what you will become.

If you have a goal to be the best athlete, medical professional, parent, or business leader, take the time to figure out how to overcome the obstacles, and are willing to learn the necessary skills you need to achieve that goal, you will in all likelihood become successful. If you want to become a great golfer, you have to think and dream about becoming a great player and you've got to practice, practice, and practice some more. If you want to become a great doctor, you have to focus your energies on becoming the best in your profession. If your goal is to raise well-adjusted children, you have to focus on nurturing your kids. If you are Sam Walton and you want to build the greatest retail organization in the history of

the world, you have to think about achieving that goal morning, noon, and night. That's exactly what Sam Walton did to make Wal-Mart so successful. Always remember, what you think about most of the time is what you will become. I personally think Earl Nightingale's *The Strangest Secret* should really be called life's *Greatest Success Secret*. Think about what might be achieved in our society if parents and educators taught every school-age child this lesson. Just imagine what might be accomplished by those children when they become adults!

The success achieved by Sam Walton didn't come easily, and he was by no means an overnight success. He learned his craft the hard way over his entire lifetime by committing himself to painstakingly learn every aspect of his business. He was a generalist not a specialist, and he valued people who were willing to roll up their sleeves to do whatever it took to move the business forward. He expected his home office corporate associates from every department to have a broad and comprehensive understanding of the business and a specific point of view on the real issues affecting the company's success. He required everyone who worked at Wal-Mart to think and act like a retail merchant. Mr. Sam expected everyone around him to share the same focus, passion, and commitment for retailing that he did.

He valued team results more than individual results. His professed philosophy at Wal-Mart for winning in business was "teams win, not individuals!" Interestingly enough, because of Mr. Sam's charismatic leadership, the vast majority of his associates shared his "Teams win" philosophy and his associates enthusiastically worked together to beat Wal-Mart's competition.

Often the leaders of organizations have difficulty getting others to share their enthusiasm for achieving organizational goals. Athletic coaches, church leaders, and business leaders experience

the same kinds of challenges as they attempt to get their team, their flock, or their company to share their excitement for achieving goals. Sometimes this happens because those leaders have set goals in a vacuum without involving the entire team. People lack enthusiasm for goals that they perceive as unrealistic so it is important to get people involved in the goal-setting process so that they perceive the final performance targets as achievable. One of the ways Sam Walton gained commitment from his team was by getting everyone involved in providing input as the goals were being set. In the process, he gained their commitment or what Mr. Sam referred to as “ownership.” He figured out that people who are involved in setting goals have a tendency to set goals higher than their leaders would have set them, and because of that feeling of ownership they do whatever is necessary to achieve them.

Sam Walton had three very important cultural goals for the associates who worked for his company. The first is that he strove to hire the best-quality people that he could possibly find. Second, he was committed to providing the best training and development for his associates. Finally, he wanted his stores to be the best places to work. Because of the limited pool of people available to work in his retail stores, Sam Walton often hired inexperienced people who demonstrated enthusiasm, a good attitude, and good interpersonal skills. He proved you can take unskilled people with potential and teach them what they need to know to do their jobs.

It wasn't unusual for Mr. Sam to shift people around into new jobs, for which they had no prior experience, in order to facilitate cross-training. Keep in mind that the people he hired in the early days were right off the farms of northwestern Arkansas, eastern Oklahoma, southeastern Kansas, and southern Missouri. Like Mr. Sam, they were common, ordinary people with an uncommon commitment to succeed. By giving them a job and an opportunity,

his early associates proved they were equal to his trust, and they reciprocated by giving him their undying loyalty. Mr. Sam's inspirational leadership remains the standard by which other Wal-Mart and Sam's Club leaders are measured to this day.

I was shocked and surprised when I first joined Wal-Mart to realize that a large number of associates were hired from the farm communities around northwestern Arkansas. Most did not have the college education that is a standard prerequisite for getting hired at other large corporations. Mr. Sam would hire the inexperienced and place them in highly responsible professional positions across every functional area in his home office. Mr. Sam liked the idea of growing his own people by allowing them to learn on the job. It was quite normal for him to hire or promote people into professional positions for which they had no experience. The thing I found the most astounding was how Sam Walton turned a team of average people into high performers. I asked one of Wal-Mart's former store managers to explain this strategy to me and here is what he told me:

Mr. Sam had a way of taking average people and turning them into above average performers. I think that is reflected in the fact that you have so many people that come on board that are just "average Joes" off the street and then look at them 7, 8, or 10 years later and see what they are doing with the company. It comes from, I think, basics. First of all you make them partners and you share as much information with them as you possibly can. You operate on the premise that everybody wants to be successful. So your job as a store manager, assistant manager or department manager is not to browbeat somebody and beat them up, your job is to operate on the premise that they want to be successful; what do I need to do to help them to be successful. If somebody is falling short, Wal-Mart doesn't write them off and get rid of them and say

bring me somebody else. Wal-Mart's leaders say wait a minute, this associate wants to do a good job and something is keeping them from doing a good job and what is it? They ask what roadblock is in the way, what hurdle can I help them get over so that they can do a good job? Wal-Mart will exhaust that train of thought before they will ever let anybody go. That's what Wal-Mart's coaching process is all about; it's not a discipline process, it's a process of making someone successful. When you have that mentality where you are treated like a partner and the entire focus of the organization is to help you to be successful, I really think it changes the dynamics of the people part of the business.

To this day, the company's leaders inspire ordinary people around the world to achieve at very high levels. The fact that the company has been so wildly successful with this staffing strategy is one of the greatest testaments to Sam Walton's leadership philosophies. I've worked for other companies and none of them intentionally go out of their way to hire average or ordinary people; in fact, almost all company leaders will proudly tell you that they hire above-average or extraordinary people. Unfortunately, the result of their efforts in many cases is a group of highly paid, above-average employees who are performing at average levels; they "get less from more." One of the great secrets of Wal-Mart's success is its ability to take average people with good attitudes, teach them the skills they need to turn them into high performers, and in the end "get more from less."

Mr. Sam liked promoting inexperienced people from within and giving them a chance to succeed with the full knowledge that he was throwing them in over their heads; he called it "picking 'em green." Mr. Sam's belief in people created a self-fulfilling prophecy of success. His staffing strategy was one part inspiration and one

part perspiration. His trust and belief in people provided all the inspiration they needed. The perspiration came from their fear of failure and their fear of possibly letting Mr. Sam down, which drove them to do whatever it took to succeed. What they lacked in knowledge, skills, and ability they made up for in passion, long hours, and hard work. To this day, Mr. Sam's staffing legacy continues around the world, with an estimated 75 percent of all management positions at Wal-Mart being filled via promoting associates from within who have demonstrated a good attitude, people skills, and work ethic.

With so many inexperienced people getting promoted into leadership positions you'd be right if you assumed that some of them failed. When they didn't succeed. Sam Walton did something unusual in businesses today; he would move them back into a lower position with less responsibility. Having worked in human resources for over 25 years, I had been trained to believe that demoting employees to lower positions and lower pay levels is a recipe for disaster. In society there is a negative stigma attached to demotions. It's a sign of failure and an indication that the individual who was demoted just wasn't good enough. That's not the case at Wal-Mart. Out of necessity, Mr. Sam was forced to promote people to higher levels of responsibility before they were ready. It happened every day and still happens every day around the world. Most of the time those who were "picked green" were so passionate and committed to succeed that they were able to make up for their shortcomings and do what was necessary to become successful. Sometimes those promoted too early would fail and would have to "step down" (a Wal-Mart term for a demotion), but 8 or 9 out of 10 times those who were promoted from within did succeed.

I met associates at the Wal-Mart home office who had been promoted several times and then demoted, more than once! At

Wal-Mart, unlike most corporations, there is no badge of dishonor, shame, or stigma attached to being demoted or “stepping down.” Everyone seemed to understand that when you promote so many “green” associates, every once in a while someone won’t be equal to the challenge and will have to step down. The thing that amazes me is how seldom demotions actually occurred, and I think that’s because, as Mr. Sam put it, “Our people want to win so badly they just go out there and they get it done, even though some believe they can’t succeed.”

I think Mr. Sam figured out that people are hungry for responsibility and want to prove to themselves and others that they are equal to the challenge. He realized that everyone has withheld potential and if a leader will simply give people a chance to succeed, they will do whatever is necessary to prove they can be successful. Human nature is such that most people want the chance to prove they are capable of handling more responsibility. Once Mr. Sam gave people leadership responsibilities, I believe some of those who were promoted actually drove themselves to succeed because they didn’t want to let him down.

There is a lesson all leaders can learn from Mr. Sam’s experiences in promoting people from within at Wal-Mart: Give people responsibility before you think they are ready. If an individual has good people skills and a strong work ethic and demonstrates a willingness to learn, why not give them a chance to develop their leadership skills in a position of greater authority? As a leader, you’ll find that people will rarely let you down if you give them a chance to achieve their full potential. Sometimes an experienced individual who has done it all before won’t do as good a job over the long haul as a less experienced individual who is promoted to greater responsibilities and is hungry to prove that he or she is equal to the challenge.

One of the reasons Mr. Sam had so many successes when he promoted inexperienced people was because he created a positive self-fulfilling prophecy; in other words, he believed in people more than they believed in themselves. By doing so he provided the backbone or support many people seem to need to reach their full potential. I think Sam Walton believed in the potential of ordinary people more than they believed in their own ability. His approach was really quite simple. Find people with a good attitude and they'll do what they have to do to be successful. He didn't care if the people he promoted were old, young, male, female, black, brown, or white. It didn't matter to Mr. Sam because he was promoting talented people who he sensed had raw potential and who were passionate. He tapped into a pool of dedicated people who had drive and a good outlook because he knew he could teach them everything else. He acted as a catalyst and he inspired them to accomplish more than they thought could. His inspiration gave them all the confidence they needed to achieve. As was always the case with Mr. Sam, he didn't take credit when those he promoted were successful, but instead he attributed the success of his associates to their own strong desire to be successful and to win.

Leaders at most organizations don't move people into a new leadership role as aggressively as Mr. Sam did, and many of them will tell you that at their organization promoting inexperienced people just won't work. Mr. Sam often challenged the conventional wisdom of "the way things are done" in the world. Leaders at other organizations have rejected some of his best ideas and have held to the tried and true, more conventional leadership methods. Mr. Sam believed the greatest opportunities are often found by trying new and unconventional ways of doing things and by rejecting conventional wisdom. He enjoyed blazing new trails and he believed that's where you find the competitive advantage. In reality, the only

reason Wal-Mart's cross-training and picking 'em green strategies won't work in other organizations is because of the self-fulfilling belief on the part of their leaders that they won't! As in this staffing example, Mr. Sam was a "paradigm buster."

A paradigm is a commonly held belief that people use as a filter for evaluating new information. In life a paradigm is often the tried and true way of doing things; it's the conventional wisdom or the way everybody else does it. We all have paradigms or commonly held beliefs in every area and aspect of our lives. Sometimes those paradigms enable us to succeed and other times they disable us, hold us back, and relegate us to mediocrity.

As an illustration, here's an example of a simple geographic paradigm shared by many people. If I told you Reno, Nevada, is west of San Diego, California, I think many would agree that this is not true. Your geographic paradigm tells you that anything west of San Diego is out in the ocean. But the fact is that Reno, Nevada, is west of San Diego, California. When confronted with information like this that challenges our existing beliefs or paradigms, many people will reject the new information even when they intellectually know the new information is true. Some will go to an atlas or globe more to prove that their belief is the correct one than to verify that the new information is accurate. Even when the facts have been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, some will become confused or perplexed by new information that is contrary to their existing beliefs. In some cases, individuals will reject the new factual information outright.

Paradigms are powerful because they represent our perceptions of reality, and sometimes people cling to their perceptions even when they know they are wrong. This is one of the reasons that change is so difficult for people to accept. Sam Walton embraced change as a welcomed friend, and he truly was a

paradigm buster who was committed to challenging the conventional wisdom. The last thing you'd ever want to tell Sam Walton, as the reason he should do something a certain way, was because that's the way everyone else does it. Faced with this logic, you could bet Mr. Sam would go in the opposite direction and try to find his own different and unique "Wal-Mart Way."

I learned a valuable lesson from Mr. Sam that every leader needs to know about the acceptance of change by people. When getting people to understand the reasons behind the change, don't focus on getting them to agree with the change. The reality is that it's not necessary for everyone faced with a change to agree with the change, but they do need to understand the reasons behind the change and commit to implementing it. When a leader seeks to get people to understand the reasons behind the change and stops trying to gain agreement, change occurs more rapidly. Organizationally, people can agree to disagree with a change, but they must understand the change and adapt to it or face the consequences. Mr. Sam was a master communicator, and this is the approach I saw him use successfully when he was faced with implementing small and large changes of direction.

Early on, Mr. Sam established a set of values to which he remained committed throughout his career. He valued things like growth and development of his associates, service to his customers, treating people the way he would want to be treated, quality in everything he did, professionalism and ethics in his actions, competitiveness and a will to win, continuous learning, and continuous productivity improvement. I was reminded of one or more of these beliefs every time I was around Mr. Sam.

I remember watching and listening to him interact with college interns who were working for the company during the summer, and I was struck by the sincerity of his interest in their education,

careers, and families. It was clear to me that he treated people the way that he himself wanted to be treated. He maintained those same Golden Rule values from the time he started Wal-Mart until the end of his life. Wal-Mart's leaders remain committed to these same values to this day. Over the years, I have found myself using many of Mr. Sam's Golden Rule values in my own work and personal life.

Mr. Sam valued the people around him. For this reason he believed in going out of his way to interact with his associates, customers, suppliers, and Wal-Mart's shareholders. Because he was a pilot, Mr. Sam flew out in his own plane almost every week of the year to visit people in his stores. I remember trying to set up a meeting with Mr. Sam and being warned by his administrative assistant that he was tough to pin down for scheduled meetings because he might decide to jump in his plane and fly out to the stores with little or no prior notice. When the company was smaller, he set a goal to personally visit every single store every year; this goal quickly became unachievable as the number of store locations grew into the thousands. He was famous for arriving at a store unannounced and for walking around talking to customers and associates, who found him both approachable and easy to talk to.

Sam Walton picked up many of his best ideas from his competitors by visiting their stores as he flew around the country and observing firsthand their customer service, product selection, and merchandising practices. In the early days, he'd often set up meetings with the presidents of other retail companies to discuss the strategies that he had already observed on his visits to their stores. He was an innovator, but he wasn't afraid to imitate the successful strategies of others. In fact, his ultimate success was a result of a lifetime of imitation and innovation. He was an incessant learner who was never satisfied with business as usual. Good

was never good enough for Sam Walton because he was always in search of a better way.

There was little luck involved in his creation of Wal-Mart; his success was one part vision, one part singularity of focus, and one part hard work. His quest for success represented a lifelong commitment to achieving excellence. Mr. Sam would be the first to admit that Wal-Mart's success far exceeded any expectation he had for the business. His goal was never to make Wal-Mart the biggest company in the world; his dream was to make it the best. He always told everyone that Wal-Mart's success was more a result of the efforts and contributions of his associates rather than anything he himself had done. In the final analysis, Wal-Mart's success can be directly attributed to its founder and those early associates who were committed to his rural discount retailing strategy, something that had never been done before. Mr. Sam's willingness to keep going in those difficult early years, under withering criticism, is a testament to his unwavering commitment, passion, and vision. His fanaticism for Wal-Mart inspired others around him to share his dream.

Robert Greenleaf, a noted management expert, said, "Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Much more than a dreamer is required to bring it to reality; but the dream must be there first." Sam Walton had a dream of turning Wal-Mart into the best retailing establishment in the world and that's precisely what it has become. Along the way he also became the most successful merchant the world has ever seen. He did it the hard way by painstakingly outthinking, outworking, outplanning, and outexecuting his competitors. In the process, his company became the best retailer in America and the biggest company on earth. Over the years, Sam Walton received a variety of awards and recognition, but being

named “America’s Most Successful Merchant,” in a Fortune magazine cover story was one of his career highlights.

As I’ve read about and studied successful people, such as entrepreneurs, company founders, business leaders, athletic coaches, educators, political leaders, and religious leaders, I’ve found they all seem to share this same singularity of focus. They have an idea or a dream and they are passionate about it. They are willing to do whatever is necessary to make that dream come true. They remain committed even when their ideas fly in the face of conventional wisdom. They develop an uncanny ability to focus, even when they are told by others that their ideas won’t work; they remain committed to their dreams when most would have walked away. It is that same commitment that separates the great coach, minister, or educator from the not so good, the best accountants from the average accountants, the great sales and service people from the poor ones, the high-performing hourly wage employee who makes a difference from the one who just goes through the motions, and the great nurses or the best students or the terrific government workers from the ones who obviously don’t care. Commitment is a choice. You’re not born with it; everyone has an equal opportunity to make a commitment to achieve their full potential and to be the best that they can be.

As an example, I remember sitting in Carnegie Music Hall watching my daughter, Heather, play viola in the symphony orchestra. As I sat there, I reminisced about all the years of private lessons she had to endure and the personal sacrifices she made to allow her to become a talented musician. She dedicated herself to hours and hours of practice. She was committed to her dreams, and the result was the opportunity to perform before large audiences in great concert halls. As I watched and listened that day, I realized that her great accomplishment in music was a direct result of her vision, self-sacrifice, discipline, and dedication. Luck

wasn't a contributing factor. Her hard work and commitment to her goals had provided her with the opportunity to achieve great things musically, at the highest level. It's that same kind of passionate determination that is required to succeed in any worthwhile endeavor.

Every day that Sam Walton's leadership team steps onto the competitive playing field they do so with that same kind of passion and commitment. They know they will do what's necessary to outperform the competition. I feel that often the difference between success and failure in sports, business, and in life is starting with the commitment and belief that you will be successful in the first place. Mr. Sam's beliefs about achieving success are captured nicely in this quote by Calvin Coolidge: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men 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." Mr. Sam lived his life this way and he taught his associates to make a difference each and every day.

Regardless of what you want to achieve in life your ultimate success or failure will be influenced by your beliefs and attitudes as you begin. If you think you'll succeed, you probably will, and if you think you'll fail, you will probably fail. There is power in positive thinking and you have to start with the end in mind, believing you will be successful. Positive thoughts lead to positive outcomes, and negative thoughts lead to negative outcomes; it's as simple as that. There was never a doubt in Sam Walton's mind that he would be successful no matter what he did. Challenge yourself to be the best you can be and always maintain a positive outlook and you'll find yourself accomplishing more than you ever thought possible.

The spirit in which Sam Walton conveyed his leadership values to the rest of his team is best exemplified when he said:

Our method of success, as I see it, is Action with a capital A, and a lot of hard work mixed in. We've said it through the years: Do it. Try it. Fix it. Not a bad approach and it works. There are a lot of people out there who have some great ideas, but nothing in the world is cheaper than a good idea without any action behind it. We must be action-oriented doers. It's a whole lot more fun, and accomplishes so much more.

Just like Sam Walton's success, the single most important element to your success is to do something every day that moves you in the direction of your goals. The longest journey begins with the first step, and once you finally commit yourself you must keep taking steps in the direction of your goal. Success is not a result of a serendipitous event, chance, or luck. It is a product of your never-ending hard work and erring on the side of action. The key to success I learned from Sam Walton is to do something each and every day to move yourself in the direction of achieving your goals. If you'll break your goals down into a logical progression of steps, it makes focusing on achievement of the overall goal much easier. I heard it put this way: "Inch by inch everything's a cinch, but yard by yard everything is hard!" There is also a feeling of satisfaction along the way as you stair-step your way to accomplishing your goal.

You make yourself successful by having a good idea, focusing on bringing it to fruition, and then staying the course. Regardless of what you do in life, the same lessons about hard work and commitment hold true for everyone. The success formula is quite simple: stick to what you believe, take calculated risks, focus on your goals, and do something every day to make your goals reality. If you maintain this level of commitment, what you think about most of the time is what you will become.

Let me give you an example. When I was a freshman in college, I tried out for the soccer team. My goal was simply to make the

team. I remember that there were many freshmen trying to make the team that year and that I was going to need to set myself apart if I hoped to get one of the few slots available to freshmen that year.

My strategy from day one was to outwork and outperform my fellow competitors. Here's what I did. At the beginning of every practice our coach, who was a real stickler for fitness, made us run 10 laps around the field as a warm-up. The distance was about 2½ miles. I decided from the very first practice that I would run those laps harder than anyone else. Picture 25 players jogging those laps clumped together and one player running those laps and breaking away from the pack. That was me. Each day my goal was to run fast enough to lap the entire team before I completed the 10 laps. My coach took notice from the very first practice. I continued to lap the team at every practice and when the coach later announced which freshmen had made the team, I was one of them. Not only did I make the team but I was named one of the starters in every game my freshman year. The next season the coach named me captain of the team. My commitment to making the team is truly an example of what I thought about most of the time is what I had become. Success in business and in life is about attitude and choices. You can make the choice to be the best, or you can choose to be part of the pack. The choice is yours.

Let me share a story with you about Sam Walton's commitment to success. When I headed Wal-Mart's home office "people division" staff, as the Director of Human Resources, I had a chance to experience Mr. Sam's leadership and work ethic firsthand. One Sunday morning, I arrived at the home office bright and early to conduct a job interview with an out-of-town recruit who I had just picked up from the Bentonville Quality Inn, where he was staying. As we made our way into the executive office area, for his first interview at 7:00 A.M., we passed by Mr. Sam's office and much to

my surprise, there he was at his desk. After dropping the recruit off for his first interview, I went back to see what Sam Walton was up to; I asked him what he was doing at his office on a Sunday morning at 7:00 A.M., and then I asked him what time he had arrived. As it turns out, Sam Walton had shown up for work that Sunday morning at 4:00 A.M., and the reason he was there stunned me. He said that by arriving at work so early in the morning he was able to get *real work* done. During the week, he was thrust into a whirlwind of meetings and store visits, leaving him little time to get his thoughts organized to think of ways to improve the business. He lamented that as the company had become more and more successful, he had less and less time to himself. He had also become a bit of a celebrity in his own right and was pestered for autographs and pictures everywhere he went. He said he enjoyed the opportunity for private, uninterrupted time before the rest of the staff arrived each morning to gather his thoughts for the day ahead. Mr. Sam said that he would come to work most days of the week at 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. to get a head start on everybody else by reviewing the sales reports from the previous day.

Wal-Mart's executives weren't sleeping in either; some of them started arriving for work as early as 5:00 A.M. The work ethic of Wal-Mart's management is one of the company's great competitive advantages. Think about this: While East Coast retail executives were still sleeping, Sam Walton was at his desk working each and every day. As the rest of his executives were arriving at 5:00 A.M., CST, most East Coast executives were just getting out of bed. By the time most of the executives of Wal-Mart's competitors reach their offices and get their first cup of coffee of the day at 9:00 A.M. EST, the Bentonville managers have already been working at their desks or have been in meetings for two, three, or possibly four hours. As West Coast retailers are leaving their offices at 5:00 P.M.

PST, some of those same Bentonville executives are still working and will continue working until 8:00 or 9:00 P.M. CST. The commitment and sacrifice Wal-Mart's leaders make on behalf of their beloved company is like none other I have ever seen. Many of the company's home office executives and its managers in the distribution centers and stores work a 75- to 90-hour work week and more! With a global operation crossing every time zone on the planet, the pressure to execute around the world pushes committed leaders to "take one for the team" by working whatever hours are necessary just to keep up with the volume of work. The commitment Wal-Mart's leaders have today is the same commitment Sam Walton had over 40 years ago when he opened his first store.

I would experience this work ethic firsthand at Wal-Mart's Bentonville home office. I would arrive for work at 7:00 in the morning and because I arrived so "late," I was forced to park 8 or 10 rows back in the parking lot. As I'd walk into the building, I'd pass the cars of those who had arrived earlier than I had. I'd often see the same vehicles in the rows closest to the building. Of course, Mr. Sam's pickup truck was there in the row closest to the building. Most of those same cars were still there when I'd leave at 6:30 or 7:00 at night. The work ethic of the people I met at Wal-Mart was unlike any I had ever experienced before or since.

The work ethic of Sam Walton is legendary. His philosophy for success was, "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man (or woman) healthy wealthy and wise!" I later adopted the same strategy in my own life and I often get up at 4:00 in the morning to begin my work day. I find working in the early morning is a great way to get out ahead of my work for the day with no interruptions. If it worked for Mr. Sam, I figured it would work for me. The people who work at Wal-Mart share Mr. Sam's work ethic. When I worked there I noted that the company's managers were

willing to work whatever hours were necessary to get their work done. I never worked for a company that had as much work to get done as there is at Wal-Mart. I can tell you that there was never a day I can remember when I left in the evening with all my work done. It was impossible to get it all done, and I think that was part of Mr. Sam's plan to keep all of us challenged every day! I can tell you that working under that kind of work load is stressful for those of us who like to get everything done, every day.

Like all of Sam Walton's 10 rules, "COMMIT to achieving success and always be passionate" is still aggressively practiced by Wal-Mart's leaders. Current executives admit they still arrive at work at 6:00 or 6:30 A.M. each day, many still travel to the stores every week of the year, and they still conduct Saturday morning strategy and tactics meetings attended by all of the top leaders of the company. They still shop their own stores, and they shop the stores of their competitors. In their enthusiasm to compete and win, they continue to live Mr. Sam's example by outworking the competition.

I have been asked over the years, by people who were interested in going to work for Wal-Mart, if I thought they should go to work there. I tell them, "If you are a team player who is willing to work harder than you have ever worked before and are willing to dedicate yourself to the success of the company, you won't find another organization that offers more opportunity." But I also point out that if they do go to work at Wal-Mart, maintaining a balance between working there and one's personal life is the most difficult issue an individual or family will face. The incredible commitment required to work for Wal-Mart is not for everyone, but I tell them that they will never work with a more dedicated team of people. Most who go to work for the company adapt to its aggressive culture, but some simply can't.

Prior to joining Wal-Mart I had worked for other demanding companies, including a publishing business owned by my wife's

family. I had been born with a strong work ethic so I thought adapting to Wal-Mart's aggressive work standards would be an easy transition, but it wasn't. The time commitment demanded by Sam Walton was truly extraordinary. He led by his own example, and the rest of the leadership team willingly followed. I worked harder and longer hours than I had ever worked before. Because of Mr. Sam's lean staffing strategies I was stretched and challenged to achieve more than I thought was possible, but with the help of those around me I figured out, just like everybody else, how to get the most important tasks completed each day.

Now that you have a sense of Sam Walton's philosophies, let me ask you a question. Are you willing to pay the price in time, energy, and effort and make the personal sacrifices necessary to be successful? The fact is that you have to be committed if you expect to achieve your goals or if you expect others around you to share your commitment. As a leader, if you are willing to lead by example, you will send a powerful message about your work ethic, standards, and commitment. "What you do speaks much louder than what you say." At Wal-Mart, Sam Walton called it "walking the talk."

Sam Walton never asked anyone to do anything that he wasn't willing and able to do himself. He believed that you have to set high standards for your own performance if you expect to hold others to high standards. By demonstrating his willingness to work long hours and travel to his stores and distribution centers to speak with customers and associates directly, he sent powerful cultural expectation messages to everyone on his team. The standards he lived by have become the standards by which current and future generations of Wal-Mart leaders are measured.

Along the way, Mr. Sam threw himself into his work 100 percent. The decisions he made required personal sacrifice, including time away from his wife and children. The support of his wife Helen was pivotal to his ability to focus on the business. He was fortunate to

have a wife like Helen Walton who was willing to raise the family, thus giving him the freedom he needed to pursue his dreams. The company that Sam Walton built would not be what it is today without the emotional support provided to him by Helen Walton.

Not everyone has a spouse who is willing to make the sacrifices and provide the support for his or her dreams to the degree Helen Walton did for Sam Walton. In the early days, she was instrumental in securing financing from her father at a time when Mr. Sam had difficulty getting cash from banks. Sam Walton may be the founding father of Wal-Mart, but it is Helen Walton who supported him throughout his career, giving him the opportunity he needed to focus his energy on making Wal-Mart such a great success; without her support, who knows what could or would have happened?

As in Sam Walton's personal example, achieving success in business or in any other walk of life requires paying the price. There is no easy path to success. If you aren't willing to work hard or if you're not willing to put in the hours necessary to be successful, you'll find the path to achieving your goals extremely difficult. Unfortunately, hard work alone is no guarantee. Like Sam Walton you have to have a good idea, believe in it wholeheartedly, and doggedly pursue it. That's the Sam Walton and Wal-Mart way. You can have the best idea or business concept ever imagined, but without the effort behind it nothing will happen. There's a perfect phrase comprised of 10 two-letter words which I think summarizes the way Sam Walton viewed his personal commitment to achieving his dreams: If it is to be it is up to me!

Read and reread this phrase and internalize it into your own personal success strategy for your work and for your life. I believe it is so important to success that I have repeated this phrase to my son Paul, my daughter Heather, and my nephews Ross and RJ over the years in the hope that they will internalize and embrace this

philosophy themselves as they face the challenges ahead. Contained within this phrase is one of the most important and powerful lessons to achieving the proper level of personal commitment in everything you do—athletically, educationally, emotionally, socially, or spiritually—not just in pursuit of your business or career. Whenever you are looking for the answer to solve your problems, often that answer rests within you. Do something each and every day to move a step closer toward the achievement of your goals. No matter what you want to accomplish, you can do it if you'll personally embrace the belief “If it is to be it is up to me!”

Sam Walton always had a positive can-do attitude; it was as if he viewed the world through rose-colored glasses. He created his own positive self-fulfilling prophecies by believing that you reap what you sow. If you think in negative terms, you will get negative results; if you think in positive terms, you will more than likely get positive results. Mr. Sam didn't have much patience for pessimistic people who acted like they were defeated before they ever got started. He believed that those who say they can't do something are actually saying, “I won't try.” Mr. Sam was optimism personified, and he was confident he could achieve anything he set his mind to. His formula for success was belief plus effort equals results. He believed negativity and lack of belief, coupled with a lack of effort, was the sure path to failure. In Sam Walton's world, people who think that way “need to get out of the way of those who are doing it!” Winston Churchill captured the essence of Mr. Sam's belief when he said, “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” Sam Walton, the eternal optimist, was quick to correct those who used the term “problem” in describing a challenge they were facing by telling them the Wal-Mart and Sam Walton Way is to refer to “problems” as “opportunities.”

Sam Walton was a continuous learner who believed in continuously improving every area of his operation. I believe his dedication to the pursuit of excellence may stem from his experiences playing football in high school and college. To become the best you can be in any athletic endeavor, you have to focus, work out, practice specific skills, and often even modify your diet. You have to be willing to dedicate yourself to achieving excellence. In a word, success takes discipline. To become a peak performer, you have to train your body and train your mind. You have to find and create your own competitive edge as you overcome any God-given limitations you may have, or leverage the gifts you've received. In terms of sports, Sam Walton wasn't a big man, but he dedicated himself to being the best that he could be, and by working hard he willed himself to become a great athlete. Mr. Sam was one of the most competitive people you'll ever meet, and he encouraged that same desire in Wal-Mart's executives, managers, and associates to compete and win.

Early on in his career, Mr. Sam could probably have been accused of working hard and not smart. When faced with a challenge, he believed in erring on the side of action rather than inaction. What he was missing in knowledge and strategy he'd make up in hard work and execution. Fortunately, he hired great strategists and planners once he got the business off the ground. Most small business owners can relate to Sam Walton's bent towards action. Like Mr. Sam, that "ready, shoot, aim" approach is how many people run their businesses and their lives; when in doubt, they err on the side of action and do something to move forward. Lacking a clearly defined strategy, many people use that approach throughout their lives and in the end they wonder why they haven't accomplished more. If you are one of those people who lack a plan, take the time to write your goals down on paper and

you'll find your chances of accomplishing them will increase. If you don't, you're living the definition of business insanity, which is doing things the way you've always done them and expecting a different and better result.

As a leader, how do you get others to embrace the same level of commitment that you have? Sam Walton had the unique ability, as a leader, to get others to buy into his Wal-Mart Way of doing things. His executive team adopted his philosophies when he was still alive, and they have continued to follow Mr. Sam's example to this day. At Wal-Mart, you are either on the team and committed to the goals of the company, or you are not. It's black or white. You can't straddle the commitment line at Wal-Mart; you either have both feet in and you are fully engaged and committed, or you have both feet out and you need to leave the company to pursue your own interests. Half-hearted commitment or having one foot in and one foot out doesn't cut it at the world's largest company.

Sam Walton developed several interesting ways to sort out those who were truly committed from those who were not; for the uncommitted or those who shirked responsibility, there was no place to hide. To be a partner on Sam Walton's team, you had to think like a retail merchant, provide superior customer service, treat people right, and travel out to the stores. Every manager at the home office is required to work a 5½-day work week all year long, including attending the company's famous Saturday morning meetings. That, in itself, takes a tremendous amount of personal commitment. At these meetings, company leaders discuss fresh market intelligence gathered that week from across the world. Regardless of one's job or department, every leader hears the same information and each gets the chance to provide input into the strategies and tactics. Any associate who does not have a point of view on how to improve service to the customer or on

other aspects of the operation is clearly disengaged, which is a pretty good indication at Wal-Mart that you aren't committed.

Sam Walton believed in leading by example. I still remember walking past Mr. Sam's office in the final months of his life and seeing him laying flat on his back in a hospital-type bed while continuing to work. There he was taking chemotherapy treatments, with his pen poised and scribbling notes on his legal pad, continuing to the very end to try to think of a better way of doing things. It was shocking to see him continuing to work in his weakened state. I was inspired by the fact that his company, his work, and his associates were that important to him. That image of him lying in that hospital bed in his office working right to the very end is forever burned into my memory. This may seem extreme to some, but that's how committed Sam Walton was to his dreams.

If you want to achieve your full potential, live each and every day with enthusiasm and purpose. Have goals for your career and for your life. The good news is that what you lack in knowledge, skills, and ability can be overcome through sheer determination to succeed. Believe in yourself and believe in your dreams. Remember these inspirational words from Mr. Sam, as you commit to your personal success: "It is not easy when you strive to be the best, but in the long run, it is worth it!"