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## The Quest to Become the Best

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Success is a journey, not a destination.

— BEN SWEETLAND

**F**rom the locker room to the boardroom, the practice field to the field of life, and the highlight reels to the business deals, the best are those who excel, succeed, and win both personally and professionally. They share a common set of traits and characteristics laced with passion and persistence that drives their success and fuels their inextinguishable flame. The best never stop striving for something far greater than the goals they have already reached. They never rest on their laurels, and they aim beyond the finish line. The finish line represents an end in sight, but the best see far beyond it to new possibilities. They understand the rapidity of change, and no matter how good they are, they always see room to improve.

What that tells us is that a critical core of a strong foundation, work ethic, intellect, persistence, and attention to details promotes a standard of excellence. Those who succeed

in becoming the best work for every inch of success and accomplishment. An inch can be the difference in winning a game or losing it, and it is the same in business. The inches add up to the difference between where you are and where you want to be.

It is not luck or coincidence when you see a Major League Baseball (MLB) player hit a game-winning home run that sails over the outfield wall, a PGA golfer sinking the tournament-winning putt on the eighteenth hole, a coach leading his team to a world championship, or a CEO build a successful and profitable company out of his garage. These accomplishments are the result of diligent practice, dedication, and the hard work and determination it takes to get to the next level. The people who achieve these feats value hard work, are constantly fine-tuning their skills, and recover from adversity quickly. Their results come from consistently working hard at their trade.

### **Defining Your Own Version of Extraordinary**

People who are the best in their field are relentless in their journey to become extraordinary. They have a strong desire to excel and succeed at what they do—selling, negotiating, hitting, kicking, throwing, or hosting. Why? They are competitive and love to win. And they want to win over and over again.

Through managing and working with the best, I have observed strong and experienced people fall from greatness, and I have seen newcomers rise to the pinnacle of record-breaking success. Although everyone has a unique path to achieving greatness, their stories, many of which I share in this book, are inspirational. We have all been told to try our

hardest and do our best, and we all have our own definition of greatness. But it is possible to outperform even your own expectations and redefine your personal greatness to something more than you ever imagined. It is only by changing the way you think about success that you can fully embark on the quest to become the best.

In order to redefine your idea of personal greatness, begin by considering these questions:

- Why do you want to be the best?
- What does “being the best” mean to you in a year? Or in five years?
- How can you become the best?

Answering these questions will help you start your journey to becoming the best. The answers to some of these questions will come from within. Only you can decide why you want to be the best or what your inspiration is to improve and grow personally and professionally. But the stories surrounding the go-getters and game changers in this book will help you answer the question pertaining to how you can make it happen. Each of them has worked hard to become the best, and their insight and experiences will help you reach heights you have only imagined thus far.

Before you can hone your skills and refine your abilities, you have to build a strong foundation, so let's focus on the foundation that the best share. Through my work with successful executives and athletes, I have learned that all people who achieve extraordinary success in their field carry a set of similar qualities that enables them to put the rest in place. And

the good news is that it's possible to learn from the best and apply their lessons in your own life and career. With a full understanding of these skills and characteristics, you will be able to grow into a successful businessperson, coach, community leader, entrepreneur, authority, doctor, lawyer, or future leader of your generation and generations to come.

We'll start this book by taking a look at what makes the best the best.

### The Best Kick It Up a Notch

Being great means finding the top, and then kicking it up one or more levels. If you want to achieve greatness, you can't

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see ceilings, obstacles, or limitations as roadblocks. The best do not allow themselves to feel safe and comfortable; rather, they use every day as an opportunity to become a trailblazer and redefine success and

the cutting edge. The most successful people in this world, no matter what area they are in, have a unique outlook on how they run their business, manage their employees, carve out niches, and manage their careers. Tom Izzo, head basketball coach of the Michigan State Spartans, missed an important free throw during his youth, and as a result, his team lost the game. To this day, Tom often finds time in his schedule to shoot and make fifty free throws a day. This kind of grit and intensity

translate to success on the court and in his profession. Tom is now among the elite in his industry: he has won a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship, six Big Ten regular season titles, and two Big Ten tournament titles.<sup>1</sup>

Tom's dedication to being the best was clear in his behavior after his team won the national championship in 2000. Once the horn sounded the end of the game, he was cutting down the net, doing a media conference, and celebrating with his team and fellow coaches for hours. But he didn't bask in the victory for very long. The next morning he was already strategizing ways to persuade a recruit to come to Michigan State the next year. Tom could have relaxed and celebrated his success for a while, but he knew that if he was not focused on success in the future, his competitors would be. Kicking it up a notch means having a sense of urgency. Tom clearly has that.

Tony Conway, founder and owner of A Legendary Event, an award-winning special events company, said, "To be successful in business you need to have a taste for the unexpected . . . and an unending desire to make people happy." Tony has flourished and prospered as one of the leaders in the catering industry because he has a vision that few others have. He believes in the power of making people happy and that the most important part of his job is to create lasting and memorable experiences for his clients. His driving desire to be a groundbreaker in his industry is demonstrated in his attitude toward every event he puts on, and he has over twenty-five hundred of them every year. He believes that every guest who attends one of his events plays a vital role in his success. If he impresses each of them with his attention to detail and unexpected surprises, he will have one more sales rep pushing

his product to the consumer industry—and that adds up to twenty-five thousand sales representatives around the country every year, who multiply the talents of his fifty employees in his company. He attends as many of his own events as possible.<sup>2</sup>

Tony has taken the concept of entertaining others to an entirely new level. He says that he separates his company from others by focusing his time and energy on making sure that the memories of the party will live forever in the minds of the guests. He meticulously studies every detail that goes into his events to ensure they are innovative and unmatched by anyone else in the industry. From something as small as the color schemes of a tablecloth to ensuring the band has the playlist that his client requested, no task is too big or too small for his attention. Understanding and anticipating what his customers want and need, sometimes even before they do, is the next level for him. Tony does that not only by being in the trenches himself but teaching others to see things the way he sees them, to solve problems the way he might, and to attend to his clients with the same vigor and passion that he does minute by minute. Tony surely would not be able to instill this level of customer service into his staff by sitting in a corner office on the top floor of a high-rise building. Tony exemplifies what I mean by going the extra mile, kicking it up a notch, and blowing the competition out of the water every day.

The best kick their momentum into high gear after they reach a milestone, as Tom did by starting his recruiting process the morning after his team won the national championship. They don't relax and pat themselves on the back when they accomplish something. When everyone else takes a break, they move forward. Once they have a taste of success, they want more

and more and will work hard to get it. There is always more to be done, ways to improve, and higher goals to reach.

The best do not take their accomplishments for granted. They work hard to reach high levels of success, take great pride in their achievements, and find enormous pleasure in their triumphs. They hold on to the qualities that got them where they are and continue to build on their strong foundation.

### **The Best Adapt and Are Flexible**

Game changers know that there are numerous routes to get to any destination, and sometimes they have to deviate from their planned path to achieve their desired results. Without the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, it is impossible to reach greatness. If you cannot be flexible when you encounter problems or difficulties that stand between you and your goal, you will never reach them. This is why the best make sure to adapt whenever the tide may turn.

When Roger Staubach, professional football player, Hall of Famer and Super Bowl Most Valuable Player quarterback, began Purcell High School in Silverton, Ohio, his coach, Jim McCarthy, immediately put Roger in the position of quarterback even though he previously had played various positions and had little experience as a quarterback. Nevertheless, he welcomed the opportunity. When asked why he made the change, McCarthy said that Roger's teammates listened to him, and the quarterback position would fit his strengths perfectly. Roger adapted to the position and excelled in it, and in the process, he learned at a young age that being flexible in life yields a number of advantages. Rather than fight the change to

quarterback, he embraced it, and it led to a prosperous career as one of the best quarterbacks in National Football League (NFL) history. From a position change in football, to the jump from college football to the NFL, and the drastic change from retired NFL player to successful businessman, Roger has always been able to adapt.

It would have been easy for Roger to retire when his NFL playing days came to an end; he had, after all, been a football player his entire life. Instead he chose to adapt to the business world, and he built a business much like he had built a successful career as a football player: through hard work, dedication, and determination. In 1982, he founded the Staubach Company, a real estate development firm that he built from the ground up and sold in 2008 to Jones Lang LaSalle for several hundred million dollars. And he had a positive impact on a lot of lives along the way.<sup>3</sup>

In business as in the rest of life, things do not always go exactly how you plan. Detours and obstacles can close roads and force you to explore other paths. If you remain flexible and open, you will find endless opportunities to improve your life.

### **The Best Act As If They Have Been There Before**

The best embrace success with anticipation. When they succeed, it appears as if they knew it was going to happen all along, whether or not they did. This reaction and attitude is part of what makes game changers so effective. Success doesn't come as a surprise to them because they always expect it, and even if they aren't completely certain of an outcome, they carry themselves with a confidence that makes others think they are.

This confidence supports future success because it instills trust in and inspires others. People want to work with those who are familiar with achievement and understand how to accomplish what they set out to do.

One of the greatest running backs in NFL history and a game changer, Barry Sanders, exemplifies this. Every time Barry touched the ball, it felt to him as if something amazing could happen, and often it did. Yet he retired before he broke every major rushing record. It was not that he didn't have it in him to break those records; rather, he felt that he had accomplished all he set out to do. For him, that was success. From an everyday perspective, the greatest accomplishment for a running back is scoring a touchdown. In fact, scoring more points than the other team is foundational to football. And Barry scored a whole lot of touchdowns in his nine-year career—109, in fact.<sup>4</sup> This is a staggering number of touchdowns for any position, especially in the ten years that he played professional football.

Barry will be remembered as a touchdown machine but never as a spectacle in the end zone. When he scored a touchdown, he did not celebrate or dance or pat himself on the back as most other players do. Rather, once he reached the goal line and proceeded into the end zone, he quietly and politely handed the ball to the referees. Tom Landry, a famous NFL football coach, once said, "Act like you have been there before." That was Barry's attitude. He was a running back and supposed to score touchdowns. He knew he belonged and expected to reach the end zone.

The same is true in business. The best are not surprised by their successes and truly believe that success will continue.

They hold themselves accountable and behave as if it would be strange if they were not successful. This attitude breeds success. I tell my clients that they should always strive to maintain a level of composure no matter what the situation. If they fail, they need to act as if it is only temporary—a speed bump in the road. And when they succeed, they should act as if this is not the first taste of success they have ever experienced. They should be grateful but believe in their ability to do it again.

Because a fair amount of emotion is involved in both athletics and business, it is natural and only human for athletes and top executives to react when they fail or succeed. But in our society, how you react to your successes and failures is just as important as whether you actually succeed or fail. Thaddeus Golas, a famous writer from the early twentieth century, said, “What happens is not as important as how you react to what happens.” The best have all experienced exhilarating highs and plenty of lows too. Few successes, in fact, come without a series of disappointments and failures along the way—the inevitable bumps in the road. In fact, the failures actually help you succeed. How you react to these highs and lows is more telling of your character and heart than the height of the high or the depth of the low.

The best expect to hit the game-winning home run, or the last-second shot, or close the big business deal. They work for the promotion, but are not surprised when they receive it.

Acting as if you’ve been there before means keeping your composure and reacting to both successes and failures in a positive way. In fact, the simple act of maintaining composure can be the difference between success and failure. And even

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*How you handle success and failure can often be more important than the actual result.*

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more so, it can be the difference between succeeding and failing in the future because your reactions today influence how others perceive you and how they will think of you

tomorrow. How you handle success and failure can often be more important than the actual result.

### **The Best Have a Two-Minute Memory**

I tell athletes and coaches that when it comes to their success and failure, they need to have a short-term memory. Celebrate your accomplishments for two minutes, and dwell on your failures for two minutes, and no more. Less is okay. If you focus too much on your success, you can become complacent, and if you dwell too much on your failures, you can become fearful or depressed.

In 2008, one of my clients, MLB player Jeff Francoeur, was mired in one of the longest slumps of his career. He was tough on himself for his lack of success and could not dig his way out of it. He was playing for the Atlanta Braves, and the general manager at that time, Frank Wren, decided to demote Jeff to the minor leagues. After a home game, the coaches called him into the office and told him he would report to the minors effective immediately to work on his hitting. Jeff was upset and embarrassed, and felt as if he had let both himself and his team down. He called me on his way home from the ballpark at

midnight, extremely disappointed. I listened and allowed Jeff to vent and share but then told him, “You have a choice right now, Jeff. You must embrace this. This is an opportunity to prove that you belong in the big leagues. Go down there and go three for four the first night with a home run and a couple of RBIs [runs batted in].” And then I put him on our corporate jet and sent him down to the minor league team.

Jeff did just what I told him: in three games, he had over a .500 batting average. And within three days, he was called back up to the majors. In 2010, Jeff played for the Texas Rangers when the team made it to the World Series. He had quickly grasped the concept of the two-minute memory during that tough run in 2008. After we spoke then, he knew he had no choice but to be upset for a few minutes, but then he had to move on. He could validate his failure or reinvent his success. The only solution was performing to the best of his ability, and Jeff did just that.

At some point, all of my clients and friends have dealt with challenges and even failure. Yet all of them knew that their failures were temporary, and they worked harder and longer to ensure it did not happen again. The reason they can do this is they do not dwell on their failures because if they do not have the right mind-set, they will not succeed. And so they quickly move on.

I’ve had this experience myself of failing and then embracing the experience to find success. In 1989 I was a freshman at Michigan State University rushing a sorority, playing great tennis, and enjoying college—until I got my grades for the first quarter and found out that my grade point average (GPA) was a

1.8, the lowest possible average a student could have while still being allowed to compete in sports. I had barely made the cut-off. My life was tennis. Had I not been able to compete, I would have been devastated. The experience scared me into ensuring that it would never happen again. I spent most of the rest of the year either in the library or on the tennis court and began to pull that 1.8 up to a respectable average. In fact, I received a 4.0 in all my classes the next semester and most of my classes for the rest of college, and I graduated with honors. I had recovered quickly. The failure had tested me and made me rise to the occasion.

So never spend too much time celebrating your wins or dwelling on your losses. Remember that the two-minute memory is just that: two minutes to celebrate and two minutes to dwell. Then you must move on with a positive attitude.

### **The Best Are Committed to Excellence**

The best want to maximize their time on the world stage with the entire fabric of their being. Without this drive, they will not achieve extraordinary success. You will perfect the skills I set out in this book only if you are completely committed to being the best. You must be prepared to embrace greatness and distinction. The most successful people decide early on what their goals are, and their commitment to those goals remains steady and solid throughout life. Their commitment to excellence transcends any specific career path they may have. It is instead a way of life for them.

John Smoltz, a client and friend of mine of fifteen years, is a former Major League pitcher. For almost two decades, John

was the definition of consistency and greatness on the field. He made eight All Star appearances and won the Cy Young Award in 1996, the highest honor a starting pitcher can receive. He almost certainly will be enshrined in the Hall of Fame. No doubt he is one of the best pitchers to play the game.

And off the field, he is a spiritual, classy, and outstanding role model for others. It was no mystery to his colleagues and coaches that he also had a knack for golf. After his playing days were over, John attempted to qualify for the U.S. Open Golf Tournament and become a professional golfer. In a field of over nine thousand, John fell just a few strokes short of making the cut and qualifying for the event on the Professional Golfers Association tour.

John was a Major League pitcher but he was so dedicated to excellence in all areas that he built golf holes in his backyard, spanning nine thousand square feet, so that he could focus on his golf game during his time off.

Just as in sports, the best in business have an inner fire that drives their commitment to excellence. While they may fall short of excellence at times, just as John did when attempting to qualify for the U.S. Open, it will never be because of their lack of dedication and desire to succeed.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Best Are Solution Architects**

The best believe in solutions and possibilities, even in the face of a seemingly impossible problem or situation. They believe there is always a way and a means to reach their goals and solve their problems, and they find a way to put together the perfect solution. Life may place a huge obstacle in their path,

but their first response is to find an alternative route. They focus their time on sketching solutions rather than succumbing to problems. No one has reached the pinnacle of success without dealing with numerous complications.

Arthur Blank, cofounder of Home Depot and owner of the NFL Atlanta Falcons, is widely considered to be one of the most successful businesspeople of our time, and he works hard to maintain that success. When Arthur bought the Falcons in 2002, a lot needed to be changed: winning more games and gaining community support, the quality of the practice facilities, and the parking for the game, to name just a few. Arthur had enormous issues to deal with, and if he wanted to succeed with the team, he knew that he would have to find creative solutions to them.

When training camp began, a friend near the practice field at Furman University offered Arthur a beautiful home to use. He greatly appreciated the offer but nevertheless declined: "I will stay in the dorms with the players, as I want to be close to the guys and see what they like and dislike about the facilities."

The first thing Arthur learned was that most players were sleeping on the floor: the mattresses were so thin that the floor was better. He also learned that they could barely get wet when taking a shower since the showerheads were too small for their frames. Because he experienced these issues personally, he clarified in his own mind the need for improved facilities for his players. Ultimately he moved the training facilities to Flowery Branch, outside Atlanta, and asked his players to pull together and tell him what they needed for success. Listening to the players and requesting their input in designing the new

facility ensured the creation of a facility that everyone would be happy with, and it vastly improved morale.<sup>6</sup>

Another problem Arthur faced was at Georgia Dome, the stadium where the Atlanta Falcons play their home games. He learned quickly that the biggest complaint many of the fans had was the limited amount of parking surrounding the dome. Patrons who can't park easily stop buying tickets and attending games. So on one of his first days in his new office, Arthur strapped on his running shoes and walked four miles around the entire dome, plotting numerous new parking lots. And the result was that Arthur secured additional lots to house all of the cars he expected to see at Atlanta Falcons home games. As of 2011, the Atlanta Falcons have been surrounded with full parking lots for their sold-out games, welcoming over seventy thousand fans at each of the Falcons home games.<sup>7</sup> Arthur Blank has always taken great pride in his ability to acknowledge problems and quickly find creative and useful solutions.

The famous American educator Booker T. Washington once said, "Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way." When it comes to finding solutions, this is the attitude of the best. Recognizing a problem is the easy part; finding a cost-effective, time-sensitive solution to that problem is what separates the good from the great. We all work under time and budget limitations, and the most successful people are those who use their time and budgets wisely. Whether you are the top CEO of a Fortune 500 company or an up-and-coming manager at a local business, you certainly will face problems. It will be your responsibility to find solutions to both easy problems and more difficult

ones, like trying to figure out how to create parking for over seventy thousand fans attending a football game.

Regardless of what the issue is, the process involved in solving it remains the same: acknowledge the issue, envision a positive result, and think creatively about possible solutions, in the process being careful to not overcomplicate things, consider all the options, and choose the solution that is the most efficient and cost-effective while still delivering the necessary results. Throughout the entire process, keep a positive attitude and a steadfast belief that there is a solution out there, and you will find it.

## Conclusion

Although there is not ever a single way to achieve success, go-getters and game changers all share the fundamental characteristics identified in this chapter that keep them driven and at the top. No matter what field you work in, you have to be intensely focused on working harder and smarter than all of your competitors to be the best. You have to adapt to the fluid landscape of your business. You have to welcome success and demonstrate a confident but humble attitude when it comes to both successes and failures. You have to commit yourself to excellence while remembering that how you respond to failure is just as important as how many victories you may have had. And finally, you have to be better at finding solutions than anyone else.

Understanding these traits and committing to developing and embracing them is your first step on the journey to being the best.



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