



CHAPTER 1

Who Am I?

If ever there was a gym rat of business, it would be me. I absolutely love working and getting involved in any kind of selling or production. My earliest memories as a kid growing up in the 1960s were of spending my summers hanging around at and eventually working in the cotton gin my dad managed in our hometown of Opelousas, Louisiana. My mother worked (which was not so common in those days) for the largest privately owned department store in town. She managed the ladies' department while also serving as its buyer, a position that filled our evenings with the talk of business and, in particular, management. It was during these discussions about my parents' trials, tribulations, and successes that I first learned of miscommunications, back-room politics, "stupid management decisions," and employees who "didn't get it."

Right or wrong, my mother and father's insight and perspective on business framed the way in which I tend to approach and learn about it. Little did I know at the time how much those nightly lessons would fuel my hunger for business. I became extremely anxious to jump in and play the game myself. So when the time came, instead of following everyone else my age and pushing for that MBA, I decided to strap on the pads and start earning my chops in the business world.

And that's why, one month after graduating high school, I packed everything I owned onto my Honda 350 motorcycle and moved from my hometown to the big city of New Orleans. My first position was as a hand in the oil fields, and a year and a half into that job, I witnessed a scenario that rang a bell in my mind, altering my path and changing my life forever.

On one particular day, our crew was working on a job for one of the major oil companies and, honestly, doing a very poor job of it. So when their representative showed up on the job after his three-martini lunch and began berating my supervisor and everyone else within earshot, I was hit with my first of many epiphanies. As I sat there on that stack of pipe in the 95-degree heat that is New Orleans in the summer and watched this guy totally lose it, I asked myself a fundamental question: How is it that this drunken idiot in his short-sleeved shirt and tie made it into a position of authority? Hell, I can do *that*—and probably do it better—so why am I wasting my time here?

It wasn't long after witnessing this encounter that I cut my hair, bought a suit at Sears, and ventured out to carve my own path in the business world. I got myself hired by a national small loan company as a collector. I rose quickly through the ranks, became assistant manager, and then waited another six months to make manager, simply because I was not 21 years old yet and the company couldn't bond me until I was old enough.

So right after my 21st birthday, I was promoted to the position of branch manager, and I began to learn firsthand what it was like to run an office and manage a staff. It was a great time in my life; together with my staff, I began to win award after award for productivity, which only served to intensify my ambition and feed my hubris. In fact, I began to grow an ego the size of the Crescent City and quickly became a handful to manage myself. But under the subtle guidance of my district supervisor and mentor, I also began to learn. As with anything, some lessons came easily and naturally, but others were tough.

Of all the important lessons he taught me, probably the greatest lesson of all was that *knowledge isn't power until you apply it*. The key to ultimate success is to apply what you've learned effectively. I quickly realized that I needed to check my oversized ego at the door in order to apply what I had learned through others.

This important lesson stayed with me as through the years I worked with company after company, in management position after management position. (I was, and continue to be, a restless wanderer.) I learned by doing, reading, listening, and watching—all the while, stretching my limits. Combined with my natural biker instincts, this constant need to grow allowed me to absorb all that was around me, while continuing to ask the tough questions that cut through the bullshit and see the real game.

My road eventually led to a career in banking where I really earned my business chops by helping to turn around distressed banks and work through mergers for the better part of 15 years. John, my first boss in that world, was a no-nonsense bank president who wasn't a biker but should have been. He was *the* major turnaround guy in a company of turnaround guys. Tough as nails, focused, and determined, John personally taught me how to take an organization on the verge of collapse and turn it into a winner. This was no easy feat; we had to transform failing banks while retaining the same group of bankers that ran them into the ditch in the first place. After all, banking is a very conservative industry, and no banker in his or her right mind is going to leave a position in a sound institution to join one on the verge of collapse.

I began my apprenticeship in the mid-1980s under John's supervision. I was recruited to help restore a small bank in Houma, Louisiana, where the principal industry is oil, which was in the tank, so to speak, hitting an all-time low price of \$11 a barrel. (The good old days, eh?) Having assumed control one year prior

to my joining the institution, the bank was a distant third in a three-bank race and was losing ground quickly.

What made the challenge even more interesting was the state of the economy; there was little to no economic growth from which to turn a bank around. So we became predators, and through John's guidance and leadership, we became the only bank to show solid growth by literally taking business away from the other two.

I watched as John spent much of his time doggedly communicating his vision to everyone in the organization. He set a clear course and made sure that all the employees in the organization knew their roles and, perhaps more importantly, understood how their efforts were contributing to the overall cause. John's communication style was relentlessly straightforward and at times forcefully so. He let nothing slide; even though you might not have always liked his delivery, you *always* understood the message. That was a critical lesson I took with me going forward: Everything in business is dependent on clear and consistent communication.

And it was with John in mind that I coined my favorite and most often-used saying: "*Communication ain't always pretty, but it's always communication.*"

After that two-year master's level course in turnaround management, I eventually left Louisiana for merger-frenzied Florida. It seemed that every bank was either buying or being bought by another. Hell, in the eight years I remained in the business, the bank name on my business card changed five times without my ever really changing employers.

That job was a blast, though, and I remained in constant turnaround mode—getting office after office out of trouble and having the time of my life. Utilizing all the tricks that John had taught me, I focused on identifying and recruiting great talent, placing these people in the right spots, and then relentlessly communicating our mission and their role in it. Unfortunately,

all good things must come to an end, and as luck would have it, at the age of 38, the frenzy died down and my banking career fizzled—simply because I began to get very bored.

That was also around the time when my midlife “passage” kicked in and I began to wonder what else was out there for me beyond banking. Midlife is generally known as the time when you stop the presses, take stock of who you are and what you do, and reconfigure where it is you want to go. It’s when you tend to ask for a do-over or, in my case, an entirely new direction.

So I shunned conventional wisdom, left the false security of corporate America, and went off to explore a new game that eventually led me to build my consulting business.

Now, I wouldn’t necessarily recommend that you leave a successful 15-year career to go off and begin your own company while hitting that midlife stage but it *can* be one hell of a ride. I also have a sneaking suspicion that I’m not the only person who’s done so. Along the way I won a few, lost a few, and some got rained out. I went through the requisite divorce, experienced a number of spiritual awakenings and epiphanies, and learned several hard-ass lessons that lent true credence to the old saying “*that which does not kill me will make me stronger.*” And each trial, whatever its end result, turned out to be a treasure trove of lessons that has given me the balls to not only go out on my own but survive and thrive in the biggest, baddest game there is.

My current career started 15 years ago when I was recruited out of banking to join a small firm that ran CEO peer group roundtables, the type where six to eight entrepreneurs from different industries come together one day a month in order to discuss an issue that they’re facing and have everyone help resolve it. Early on, these very real issues seemed larger than life and left me feeling a bit intimidated. After all, it was one thing to read about these topics in a book or magazine interview, but I was actually there in the room, contributing to major decisions. It was a total rush for a business junkie like me, and more than

once I had to remind myself that they were actually *paying* me to be in the room and not vice versa! It quickly became apparent, however, that the issues weren't much different from those that I'd faced during my career in banking or heard discussed at my parent's kitchen table. So once I got past my awe over what this group of CEOs had built, I found them to be regular folks who are just wired a bit differently than the rest of us.

It also didn't take long for me to recognize that I needed to create my own niche and not simply join another pack. And so, seven months into that gig, I left to go my own way and launched my very own firm. Today I serve as Navigator to a select group of successful companies while growing my own organization.

Working with these entrepreneurs intimately on a day-to-day basis gives me the opportunity to see and experience first-hand how decisions are made and how issues are dealt with—and to witness the many ways in which these professionals handle the daily fear associated with being the leader of a company. Every day I have the privilege of riding with the big dogs, and I love every minute of it. I feed off their sheer drive and determination to succeed at this level, while also sharing their fear of failure, a fear fueled by an overriding sense of responsibility to the company and their employees. Therefore, the main thing that brings us together is their want and need to find and maintain the right focus.

I've carved out a reputation as the "anti-consultant" because of the way I approach my Navigation Process. I tend to help established winners achieve their definition of success by getting them to focus more on *living* than on business, because, as I've previously stated, at the highest level, excellence in business and life show up as two sides of the same coin. *Both* must embody your true passions and support each other, as greatness only comes when you embrace the fact that your business is a true extension of who you are, while making apologies to no one for it. Your business *is* the very essence of why you do what you do.

So on the pages that follow, I'll share my story, along with a few others that will help you get to where it is you want to go safely and on time. As Bob Parsons, CEO and founder of GoDaddy.com so aptly put it, "*We're not here for a long time; we're here for a good time.*"

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