

RISE ABOVE YOUR SUCCESS CEILINGS

by Mark F. Weinstein

Habits are the elephants in the room of personal and professional improvement. Habits burrow into our brains so deeply that we fail to see their power and influence even though they are, indeed, huge. They leave their tracks across our lives day after day. We have habits about everything: how we brush our teeth, how we sit in chairs, how we think, and how we manage our time, fitness and nutrition, our relationships with partners, friends, and colleagues, and our spirituality, integrity, and accountability. Of course, some are good habits—or *peak life habits*, as I like to call them. We could not get through a day without good habits, which could be anything from an “I’m worthy habit” to a “healthy exercise habit” to a “compassion habit.” You act out dozens of admirable patterns in your life without ever having to think twice about them. There are also the not-so-good habits—or *limiting habits*, such as the “guilt habit,” the “perfection habit” and the “can’t-say-no habit.”

Every one of us is truly a CEO, regardless of our career station. We are the CEOs of our own lives, always at the top of the pyramid of our personal world, with our habits alongside. And yes, though our circumstances may at times conspire to hold us back, each one of us has all the power over life to play big. Yet we get comfortable in our own good-enough situations for months, years, even our whole lives. We may *almost* have a great career, almost have great relationships, and almost have great health. Certainly there are times when *good* is good enough. Since you picked up this magazine on leadership, chances are that you want more. I’m the same way. I’ve got that constant yearning, a positive and serious interest in going further and getting beyond *almost*.

Growing Beyond Our Comfort Level

What gets in the way are *success ceilings*, which are comfort (or discomfort) levels that we park at. A success ceiling is a stationary comfort level, several rungs below the penthouse, a cap on how successful we are willing to be in a certain part of life. We may fear the accountability of reaching a heightened level of success, so we remain at a lower point instead of breaking through the ceiling to a higher level. We can recognize our arrival at a success ceiling when we see ourselves becoming distracted or complacent rather than continually growing better and happier.

Within the shadow of a success ceiling are limiting habits such as the “avoid accountability habit,” the “waiting for the right time habit,” the “procrastination habit,” and others that determinedly hold you in place. Often there is a belief wedged underneath those habits about relationships, money, health, and other aspects of life.

Limiting habits are excellent diversions. They give us an excuse to avoid what we don't want to face: accountability for our own successes and failures. They create vicious cycles that keep us stuck in *almost*. They perpetuate nagging dissatisfactions, those perpetual goods rather than greats that bar us from our ultimate lives. They keep us in familiar distress instead of allowing us to be fully satisfied with becoming everything we can be. Limiting habits are the ones that remain fully intact despite all the breakthrough and self-improvement workshops, books, and therapy. They come from our families of origin and from our early experiences and keep us from sustaining goals and successes even if we are able to attain them momentarily.

Companies, organizations, and sports teams have success ceilings, too, where they get “good enough” and become complacent. Over time they are eclipsed by their competitors, the ones who are not satisfied with just *good enough*.

As you uncover the origins of your success ceilings, ask yourself questions such as: Where did I get these habits? What are the origins of my beliefs? What conversations did I hear as a child? What did I observe

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about success and failure? What did my role models do that I am now repeating? The key is to break through the success ceilings that you know are containing your happiness and potential, and that of your organization, no matter where they have come from. When you find yourself bumping against a success ceiling, begin by asking, “Why is it that I'm only here and not moving forward in my career and my life?”

Happy, successful folks focus on who they want to become and take many actions to guarantee that attainment. They are coincidentally in action when the right time hits, just like they were in action in the days, months, and years before that “right time.” From the outside, their outcomes—getting the gold, the girl, the guy, making an important contribution, creating the life of their dreams—may look like miracles, yet it is simply what they've already promised themselves: success through accountable action.

It Takes Action, Not Passion, to Succeed

Greatness requires discipline and persistence, not passion. We've all had those moments, sometimes even days, weeks, or months when we feel the blahs, the lack of motivation and passion. An important way to generate momentum is to stay in action. Have you ever had those moments where you just didn't care, and yet you put yourself into action and worked your way through your malaise and into a big smile of satisfaction?

Growing beyond your comfort zone includes facing the pain of failure. Did you ever meet a child who did

not fall off while learning how to ride a bike? Seeds of success are within every experience that doesn't work out as planned. Professor Randy Pausch expressed this idea elegantly on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* (October 22, 2007): "Experience is what you get when you don't get what you want. The brick walls that are in our way are there for a reason. They are not there to keep us out; they are there to give us a way to show how much we want it." Don't allow rejection to derail your dreams.

Embrace each adversity as a success being born. Revise your perspective so that you use failures as a springboard for learning and change. What if failures empowered you because of great learning? What if they were something you came to welcome rather than avoid? That is the miracle of practicing the "learning from my failures habit," a peak life habit that admittedly takes emotional fortitude to embrace.

For example, Robert is an entrepreneur in the process of raising a \$15 million seed round of financing to help launch a biotech enterprise. He estimated he would have to approach 1,000 accredited investors to get 30 to commit the necessary money, and he decided to chart the rejections on a "failure board" along the way. His staff thought he had lost his mind when they learned that they were going to celebrate their rejections and put the letters on the wall. He later conceded that there was a lot of "fake it till you make it" going on at first—even he had to fake feeling good about his initial failures. He understood that the "learning from my failures habit" acknowledges the statistical predictability of life, which he believed in his case indicated

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that 1,000 prospects were more than enough for his financial goals. With that in mind, his team members were not attached to each yes or no, and they could go on to learn from the rejection they encountered on the way to the goal they visualized as inevitable. In the end, it took fewer than 300 contacts to raise the money.

Inspiration Comes from Discipline

Have you ever wondered why 99 percent of your New Year's resolutions wither on the vine? Have you made the same resolution two years in a row? New Year's resolutions are born from inspiration, not discipline. Their aim is virtuous: to change, break, or create a habit. The pathway to their fulfillment runs straight into the walls of your limiting habits, and you grind to a halt there in spite of your inspired "in the moment" commitment and clarity of intent.

Here's why: inspiration does not lead to sustained action. And now the good news: *discipline does, and that leads to inspiration.* That's right. You know that when you have truly applied yourself, whether in school, sports, at work, or in another venue, success has soon followed. Think back to a time or a success that has felt really good (before your "I'm not good enough habit," "confrontation with success habit," or other saboteurs jumped in). You were inspired! That inspiration happened *afterward*. Your discipline led to your inspiration, and that is the beauty of the equation.

Olympic athletes train with inner visualization techniques. They know that their body will manifest what their internal voice says and their mind pictures. They are not afraid of the spotlight; they embrace it. At the same time, their *discipline* defines who they are and

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where they are going, not the spotlight. Discipline is their motivator. It is the same for you as the CEO of your life. On those days when your game stumbles, you will want a tough skin. Critics and naysayers will appear. Your job is to maintain your focus and clarity as well as your habits of determination, stamina, patience, and discipline. Those habits are your allies.

Managing your spotlight, just as for great athletes, involves creating structures of discipline and sticking to them no matter how you are feeling. There is nothing revolutionary about scheduling, staying in action, and following through. The catapult of habitual greatness is in your mastery, one step at a time, of interrupting what has stopped you in the past and instead getting all the way to the checkered flag of joyful completion and success. That's the breakthrough—keeping on and not stopping, no matter what. That is why great athletes and teams *are* great: because they practice, over and over and over. They practice with purpose and intention. They preemptively work on circumventing anything that could get in the way, like limiting habits. Then they practice some more. Those practices and drills are all scheduled; there's nothing random about their days. It is the same with great CEOs, great parents, and virtually all people who challenge themselves in their roles to truly be the best they can be: they continue to learn and grow, constantly training and retraining themselves. With discipline comes success. You decide what your trophy case will display and what is important for you to master and feel joyful about.

When Roger Bannister became the first human being to run the mile in less than four minutes, he broke more than a success ceiling; he broke a belief barrier. He stepped out of the box that said humans could not run a mile any faster than four minutes. Thomas Edison tried thousands of different ways to get the light bulb to work before it did. He did not allow those failures to deter him; instead he continuously pushed and prodded right through his success ceilings. Who makes our boxes and limits our successes? We do. Pick one of your boxes and challenge yourself to step out of it! While you invoke success, build a positive, powerful relationship with failure. Anticipate greater success than ever before, put your peak life habits to work, and ascend your personal ladder of joyful greatness.



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