

Introduction

Reaching Your Unique Potential

This above all: to thine own self be true.

—HAMLET

What does it mean to be “successful”? How do you achieve your dreams?

Does it mean creating an impressive list of achievements? Does it mean gaining significant wealth, status, position, and power? Maybe it means pleasing your parents, family, and friends?

I wrote this book to address these questions and to create a road map to help you achieve your aspirations. Following this road map involves taking a series of steps and answering a set of questions, all of which require you to look inward as well as outward. It also involves developing a set of new skills and habits, some of which may be challenging and uncomfortable for you.

Another Path

Having wrestled with these issues over the past thirty years, I have come to believe that the key to achieving your aspirations lies not in “being a success” but rather in *working to reach*

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your unique potential. This requires you to create your own definition of success rather than accept a definition created by others.

For many of us, navigating this road is very challenging because it forces us to understand ourselves and screen out many of the external forces that profoundly impact how we think about our careers and our lives. This path may also require you to develop a thick skin that enables you to ward off the polite ambivalence (or active disapproval) of those loved ones, friends, and colleagues who turn up their noses at certain choices you decide to make.

This book describes a different—and, I believe, ultimately more fulfilling—path. It is based on many of my own career and life experiences, as well as lessons I've learned in managing and advising a diverse range of people regarding how to reach their unique potential.

This approach takes courage and hard work. It does not yield easy answers or get you to a final destination. It is, instead, a multistage, lifelong effort. It involves developing a different mind-set and a new set of work habits.

I first started speaking about this subject when I was running businesses in the financial services industry. Over two decades, I led a number of businesses in a variety of geographic regions of the world. I dealt with a significant number of challenging situations and managed and advised a wide range of people. These experiences helped me develop deeper insight into the role of leadership, individual development, and the nature of human potential.

When I joined the faculty at Harvard in fall 2005, I began thinking more systemically about these issues as well as teaching many of these concepts. I wrote an article on this topic in the July–August 2008 edition of *Harvard Business Review*. I regularly receive phone calls, e-mails, and visits from people who have read it and want to discuss how it might apply to them.

Over the years, I have advised numerous students and executives, and I have consistently observed that great companies and nonprofit organizations create an environment in which people are coached and encouraged to reach their unique potential.

In 2009, I began to teach an HBS course titled “The Authentic Leader.”¹ This course was created by former Medtronic CEO Bill George based on his superb book *True North*.² This experience further shaped my thinking and added a new dimension to my leadership activities and advice.

Each of Us Is Unique

Each of us has unique skills and qualities that we bring to any situation. We have different life stories, strengths and weaknesses, passions, anxieties, and idiosyncrasies. Consequently, doesn't it make sense that the ideal path would be somewhat different for each of us? Why, then, do we often try to mimic others and shoehorn ourselves into a cookie-cutter definition of success?

Think of people you know who have chosen their own individual paths. Perhaps they have started their own business, embarked on a career that appears to have little potential to be

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lucrative, joined a nonprofit endeavor, or otherwise made a career choice that flies in the face of current conceptions of what is “hot” or “cool.”

Many of these people are not famous. Others, such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, are celebrated on the covers of business magazines as enormous successes even though no one was cheering them on when they dropped out of college and started working in their garages.

Why did these people have the courage to choose the paths they did? Were they so talented that they would naturally have been wildly successful, no matter what course they chose? Or did they develop specific habits and a mind-set that helped them follow their own drummer?

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I believe there is a mind-set you can adopt and specific actions you can take that will help you realize your unique dreams. There are habits you can practice that will help you understand yourself better, improve your capabilities, and follow your own convictions. There are specific approaches that are useful to consider as you develop your life and career.

This book is not intended to help you attain material wealth, status, or power. It is not designed to help you figure out how to become celebrated as a “winner.” It is, instead, a book about self-discovery. It is intended to help you better understand your skills, discover who you are, and define what you want. It is designed to help you develop strategies for navigating your life and career. This book describes a systematic approach for

thinking and learning so that you improve your chances of reaching your own unique potential.

The following chapters describe a disciplined process. This process is not touchy-feely, and it avoids generalized answers or easy solutions. It is not intended to take the place of getting help from a psychiatrist, psychologist, or other mental health professional (something I strongly encourage if you believe you could benefit from this kind of help). Instead, it's about helping you strengthen your existing self-development muscles and build new ones.

Some of the lessons in this book can be learned and applied immediately; others may take years to internalize and apply. The key to this effort is not trying to arrive at a specific destination or establish a particular timetable. Instead, it is about learning how to develop your own path.

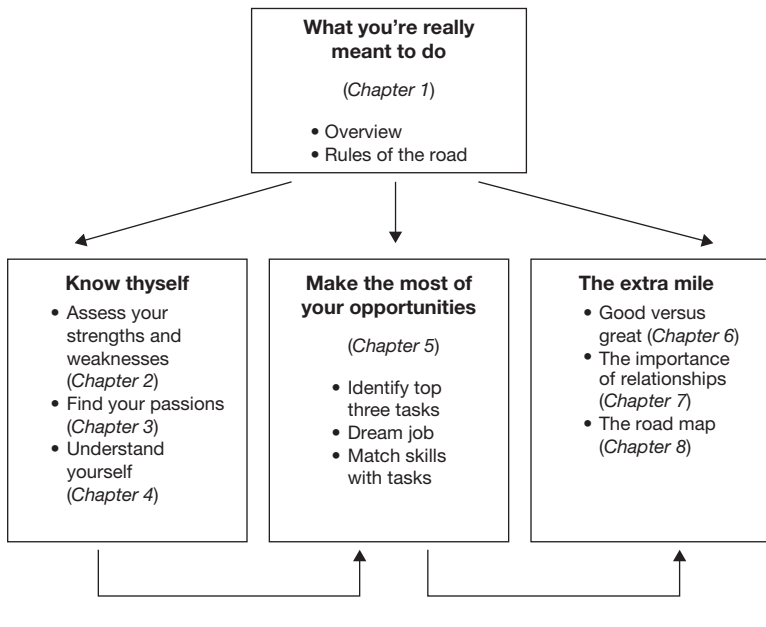
Reaching Your Potential

As with my last book, *What to Ask the Person in the Mirror*, this book encourages you to ask yourself a series of questions and perform a number of exercises.

My earlier book deals with questions that can help you become a more effective leader and improve your organization. This book is about asking questions and taking actions that will help you understand yourself and reach your unique potential. Again, it is not aimed at helping you make more money, achieve more status, or acquire more power—although I would strongly argue that these outcomes are ultimately more likely to occur if you follow this path. Rather, this book

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FIGURE I-1



is about creating a sustainable path to personal growth and fulfillment.

The book is organized into eight chapters based on the framework shown in figure I-1. The chapters are as follows:

Chapter 1, What You're Really Meant to Do. In this chapter I lay out the premise for reaching your potential. I also propose rules of the road, which are essential to developing a mind-set that will help you to address each segment of this book and ultimately put its ideas into action. As with any long journey, it's helpful to get started with the right frame of mind. The advice in this book may be mechanically easy to follow, but internalizing

these steps will likely require you to reexamine your presumptions and attitudes. Making this leap is challenging and can take time.

Chapter 2, Assessing Your Strengths and Weaknesses. This might sound easy enough, but some people are surprised by how difficult it is for them. A high percentage of people I speak with don't have a clear sense of their core strengths. At the same time, most people I talk with cannot accurately describe their weaknesses. This chapter challenges you to identify your own strengths and weaknesses. It discusses how to go about doing this and explains how to create a process for continually reassessing your skills for the rest of your life.

The chapter suggests several potential strategies for addressing and managing your strengths and weaknesses. I examine the role of coaching and explore why it is necessary to risk some degree of vulnerability in order to get a better handle on your skills.

Chapter 3, Finding Your Passions. What tasks do you really enjoy? How do you figure this out? What does passion have to do with career success? Can you really create a productive career doing something you love? Should you follow your passions now, or wait until you have made some money? How do your talents fit with your passions?

Many people struggle with figuring out their passions. This is particularly true if they're in a job they don't truly enjoy. This struggle can create a vicious cycle: lack of passion for your job limits your upward mobility, meaning that you're more likely to be stuck in that job indefinitely. It is difficult to become superb at a job you dislike. In this chapter, I discuss techniques

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to help you identify what you truly love, and I explore how to translate that passion into potential jobs and careers. Having passion helps you work on developing your strengths, addressing your weaknesses, and overcoming the many frustrations and obstacles you will face in developing your career.

Warren Buffett started with a simple passion: picking stocks. He ran a small investment fund for many years. He built on his strengths to become an outstanding CEO and build a superb company. He used his initial strengths to develop new strengths and was willing to learn new skills because he enjoyed his job.

Chapter 4, Understanding Yourself. What is your life story? Are you aware of the negative narratives in your head that may be hindering your performance? Do you feel blocked from taking certain actions that you know you need to take? This chapter discusses the challenge of identifying your blind spots and explains the need to understand why you do what you do. Understanding yourself is profoundly important to the quality of your choices in life. The most important person you will have to learn to manage is yourself.

Chapter 5, Making the Most of Your Opportunities. This chapter discusses how to match your strengths, weaknesses, passions, and understanding of who you are, with being effective in your current or a prospective job. It explores the importance of doing enough analysis and inquiry to identify the three most important tasks that are critical to your job. Do you know what they are? Can you write them down? Do you enjoy those tasks? Do you spend time on them? Do you gear your skill development to improving your ability to execute these tasks?

Reaching your potential requires you to make wise choices about how to spend your time. It requires you to choose an industry, job function, and company to pursue. Turning down the wrong job is just as important as choosing the right one. This choice is particularly difficult if you are highly motivated by money, status, and the opinions of others, or if you have an unclear sense of your passions and your skills. You need to put yourself in a position where you have an opportunity to shine.

Chapter 6, Good Versus Great. This chapter is about the critical intangibles that, over time, will increasingly determine whether you reach your full potential. It is about your mind-set and behaviors. It discusses the benefits of choosing to do for others without regard to what's in it for you—acting as an owner. It discusses the importance of believing that justice will prevail. I also explore the issue of playing it safe—for example, being too politically correct and failing to speak up, express your opinions, and even make waves as appropriate. The failure to articulate strongly held views, set ethical boundaries, and speak truth to power can lead promising professionals to underperform and can limit their career prospects.

Chapter 7, The Importance of Relationships. Reaching your potential is not a journey you can take all by yourself. At many points in your career, you will need the assistance of others. Again, creating relationships is harder than it sounds. Many of us believe we are tightly connected to others and we have strong relationships to call on—until that moment when we are under stress and looking for help. Then we realize that we haven't cultivated critical relationships with people who could help us with feedback and advice.

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It is critical to develop relationships with people who care enough about you to tell you the brutal truth—things you need to hear even though you don't want to hear them. These people care enough about you to risk you being upset with them. They can serve as a powerful reality check.

I am constantly struck by how isolated people are, despite being hyperconnected on Facebook or closely followed on Twitter. In my experience, one of the key impediments to reaching our potential is isolation. We all have blind spots. Sooner or later, we all need to reach out for help and reveal some degree of our vulnerability.

I speak from experience. For many years, I was deathly afraid of speaking in front of large crowds. I was convinced that I couldn't do it, and I was embarrassed to admit this fear to my peers or bosses. I went so far as to turn down promotions, knowing that if I took a bigger job, I would have to address large audiences regularly. I finally worked up the courage to confess this fear to a close associate. As a result of this discussion, I began to work on developing techniques for learning to speak effectively to a crowd. In my case, it turned out that focusing on speaking from the heart—about what I truly believed—was a way of overcoming my fear. I needed help from others, however, before I could begin to figure this out.

Do you have a handful of trusted colleagues or friends—even one or two—who care about you enough to listen, understand you, and give you feedback you need to hear? These people don't need to be your “best friends,” but they do need to be people you trust and can confide in. This chapter discusses how learning to play this role for others is often an excellent way to

better understand yourself and at the same time become more adept at cultivating close relationships with others.

Chapter 8, The Road Map. What helps you follow the prescriptions in this book? What hinders you? How do you overcome these impediments? How do short-term money problems and other crises impact this journey? This chapter will help you put the core ideas of this book into a sustainable process, using its exercises and other tools to help you bring it all together.

The Road Ahead

There's no single right way to accomplish your goals. Each of us has a number of avenues to reach our potential. The world constantly changes. Life often unfolds as a series of phases. Our potential is likely to evolve as the world evolves and as we continue to learn, grow, and develop our capabilities.

Reaching your potential is not simply about dreaming or being idealistic. It is a process that involves specific actions, exercises, discipline, and hard work. It is challenging, rewarding, and unending. I believe you will find that it's worth it—and, in the long run, this process will help you to experience a much greater level of satisfaction and fulfillment in your life and career.