Keys to Success in Business

Ever heard of TED? TED is the acronym for Technology, Entertainment, Design. TED conferences are held annually in the United States, Asia, and Europe. Most of “big ideas” of our time have been shared at TED. Popular presentations included brain-stroke recovery from the perspective of a neurologist who suffered one; development of the touch screen; and how math and magic interact. A very interesting presentation asked why there is a multitude of mustard choices in grocery stores, but only one choice of ketchup.

I have written the following essay based on a short TED conference video of Richard St. John (Ever Heard of TED?, July 15, 2010). Richard St. John has built a very successful marketing company, the St. John Group (with clients like Novell and Blackberry), whose slogan is “The Clarity Company” and “We Lead by Constantly Learning.” He invested more than a decade interviewing 500 successful professionals and distilled their responses into what he calls “8 to be Great.”

Success! What factors contribute to it, or must be present for it? There are eight requirements for success in business:

Passion is an intense emotion, compelling feeling, enthusiasm, or desire for something or someone.

A person is said to have passion for something when he has a strong positive affinity for it. Pursuing a dream out of passion not only feeds your psyche self, it can also provide the extra efforts needed to overcome inevitable unexpected challenges. When others quit, passionate people keep going. Passion pushes you to learn what you must do to get things done.

You’re likely aware of stories of dispassionate people attempting to rationalize passionate people out of their ideas. Have you ever heard the story of a shoe salesman going to a poor country to evaluate the prospect of a shoe market? A friend phones with a rather bland recommendation: “Do not bother, there’s no market here, nobody is wearing shoes!” Another friend is more enthusiastic, shouting into the phone to send over the shoes: “There’s a huge market here, nobody is wearing shoes!” This is passion!

Work is the energy required to produce results.
In physics, work means the amount of energy transferred by a force, acting through a distance. “Moving a pile of wood from here to there” is an example. A form of work, “manual labor,” is the physical work done by people. Another form, “project management,” is the effort applied to accomplish a task. Somewhere between manual labor and project management is “planning or mental effort.”

Planning is a process, whereby you start with what you care about. Planning identifies appropriate actions you must take to achieve your task; it then coordinates them into sequential steps. This is quite a bit easier said than done, especially if you seek top-of-market performance, where few examples of how-to-do-it exist. And along the way, you should be assessing and adjusting your plans. This phase is called “crafting,” done for the sake of producing satisfactory results. Of course, running a business requires all these forms of work, orchestrated into a coherent whole that delivers goods and services.

**Good** is producing the results you seek, predictably and consistently.

Your customers must know when they accept your offers, they can count on you to take care of what matters to them. When you earn their trust, you’ve become damn good at your business.

So how to get good at what you do? Practice, practice, practice! But, practice alone is insufficient. You must first identify the practice that works recurrently and reliably in producing the results you seek. After all, if you are seeking top-of-the-market performance, you must develop practices that nobody else embodies. Anything else is merely common.

Good requires educating yourself to learn what people fundamentally care about. It requires well-developed skills of “noticing and observing” for the sake of seeing and understanding what your customers specifically need and want. It requires embodying the capacity to physically perform. It requires constant assessment and adjustment. It entails checking with your customers about their level of satisfaction. Above all, it all requires “discipline,” for none of this comes easily. Along the way, you need teachers and coaches: professionals skilled at seeing what skills or practices you are missing, and then helping you to develop them. Without their help, the only guaranteed result from working hard is fatigue.

**Focus** is to concentrate intently on something or a situation and to bring an emphatic attention to your actions so they are connected to what you care about in every moment of time.

This is the attribute that helps you create a clear and compelling “meaning.” Meaning refers the interpretation of your expressed concern (something that matters to you).
intersecting with actions required to take care of your concern. For example, if your goal is to become an M.D., you must obtain a doctorate in medicine and gain more knowledge, skills, and experience during your residency years.

So what’s important to you? Whatever it is, identify the tools you’ll need to achieve it and to get and maintain the best tools you can find. In the world of auto racing, the teams that consistently win are the teams with the best tools and equipment. You must also find a mentor. Good teachers and coaches are those effective at helping you identify what you must learn, then at helping you learn it. They help you invent appropriate actions and evaluate effectiveness of these actions. They also help you identify the breakdowns you may produce, and teach you how to adjust your actions to reach desired results. Good teachers and coaches are worth their weight in gold.

**Push means to exert oneself continuously and vigorously to gain desired results.**

Solving problems requires the ability to push yourself mentally. You also need to push through obstacles of self-doubt and peer-pressure. Of course, it is not easy to push yourself. That’s why you need teachers and coaches in your life. Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi once aptly noted, “The good Lord gave you a body that can stand most anything. It’s your mind you have to convince.” Match a person skilled at pushing himself with a coach skilled at teaching and pushing and watch out! That’s a combination for greatness.

I dare say that **America exists because of our collective willingness to push the limits.** We are the most inventive people anywhere, anytime. We are free to pursue our dreams and push our way to achieve them. We are blessed to live in this place and at this time, we really are.

**Serve as in serve value to others.**

Let’s start with defining “value” as a significant offer of help. “Significant” in that it takes care of something that matters. And the more it matters, the more significant your offer will become. And the fewer the people who can offer it, the more “rare” it is, and the more valuable it will become. So learn what matters to someone and design an offer of help that provides it. Service cannot be both valuable and faked. As leadership guru John Maxwell says, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

**Ideas refer to the process of inventing and implementing new ways of doing things.**

The key is how to come with new ideas. First, one must listen to people for their unsolved problems. Observe them struggle with their problems. It helps to be curious and inquisitive, so be outgoing and engaging. Ask questions. Then, work to solve the
problems that are puzzles to people. According to Seth Godin, the “permission marketing” maven, the very first question to ask yourself, while observing people struggling to overcome their problems, is what is it they care about? But a good idea, by itself, is not good enough. Firstly, it must be remarkable (otherwise, it will not get noticed); secondly, it must spread in the society. If nobody knows your idea exists, how viable do you think it can be?

**Persist** means *to hold firmly and steadfastly to a purpose despite obstacles and setbacks.*

A significant component of persistence is, paradoxically, quitting. How’s that? If persistence is refusing to give up, where’s room for quitting? While persistence in the pursuit of your dream, you’ll learn you must be able to overcome failure, criticism, and rejection. These forces can obviously work against you. What I mean by persistence involving quitting is that when you encounter an action that doesn’t produce the result you seek, accept it as a failure, quit that action but learn from it, and continue your search by designing a new action from what you just learned. Thomas Edison is widely quoted about his many failures in developing the incandescent light bulb: “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” Now that’s persistence! Imagine if he had quit (for good) at 9,999.

You must also consider the occasional need for quitting bad people and bad habits. You do not need having people around, whose personal capacities interrupt your progress rather than helping you advance. You’ve got to quit these people! Better to have a few whole-hearted supporters around you, who add legitimate capacity to your tool kit.

How about bad habits? Well, your actions are either advancing you toward your goals, or they are retarding you. Like quitting bad people, you’ve got to identify and get rid of the habits that interrupt your progress. The deal with habits, however, is that the chains of a habit are built one strand at a time, each strand too small to be felt, until the chain they form becomes too strong to be broken. You’ll have a big problem if the habit stunts your pursuits. Interested in losing weight? A habit of overeating isn’t going to help you; it’s a habit you’re flat going to have to quit. Bad habits can often be blind spots for us. They become so automatic to us, we don’t connect them with the breakdowns they often produce. You’re going to need help, and that’s the role of teachers and coaches; they help you identify your bad habits, and they help you design new, more effective habits for the sake of fulfilling your dreams.

And then, there will be the inevitable failures. They are an obvious interrupter and often an ending. But if analyzed for “what went wrong and why?” they can offer tremendous learning and form a kind of catapult of progress. *The real value of persistence is using failures to learn and advance, one step at a time.*
Let me conclude with a comment that the hockey great, Wayne Gretzky, posted on the TED website of Mr. St. John’s video presentation on July 7, 2010:

“Generate IDEAS that SERVE others something of value and that you have PASSION for. PUSH yourself and WORK hard on your idea. PERSIST through failure, criticism, rejection, and pressure. With enough practice, you will become GOOD. Really FOCUS on this plan and you will have success!”