

The background of the entire image is a composite. The top half shows a large, close-up hand of a person with a dark complexion, holding a man in a dark suit by the back of his neck. The man is looking down. The bottom half of the image is a purple-to-pink gradient, featuring a chessboard in the foreground with several dark chess pieces lined up on the left side. The overall theme is business strategy and human control.

VIOLAND
MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATES

THE
**INNER
GAME**
OF
BUSINESS

BY
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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This booklet explores a set of timeless principles that reside out of sight, just below the surface of the daily activities we engage in as we operate our business. These principles guide the flow of the results we experience in our company and play a significant role in our ability to lead our company with greater ease and reduced frustration while delivering increased profitability.

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Italian Renaissance sculptor and painter Michelangelo may have best captured the essence of owning a small business with his quote, “Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.”

If I’ve learned nothing else over more than a half-century of owning businesses and more than three decades as an advisor to other small business owners, it’s that business is not about the money we make or the products and services we sell. At its core, business is a continual journey of personal growth, self-discovery, and fulfillment. As Michelangelo suggests in his quote, it’s about finding the work of art within the stone.

As a smug, twenty-one-year-old, neophyte business owner there was no way I would have understood this. And I’m not sure I would have believed it even if I had. As it is, I’m embarrassed to admit how long it’s taken for this concept to seep into my adult consciousness.

After working with hundreds of small business owners and their teams, studying heaps of research conducted by brilliant scholars, and by candidly addressing the guy I see in the mirror every morning, the evidence is undeniable—success in business is an inside game! Overwhelmingly, our business success has more to do with how we grow as business leaders than it does with the quality of our products, the markets we serve, or the state of the economy.

In learning this concept, one of the things

These principles are **timeless** and **universal**.

I observed was the presence of underlying principles that, when applied, allow business owners to achieve success in business much more easily, with more meaning, and have a more fulfilling life in the process.

These principles are timeless and universal. Many of them have been passed down through the ages by philosophers and spiritual teachings. Some of them apply to life as well as to business. I didn’t invent them. I simply observed them playing out in many of the companies I’ve worked with over the years. The principles I’ll highlight are:

- **Business is a game**
- **Our currencies are time and trust**
- **Numbers follow**
- **Our biggest competitor is our ego**
- **Shadowboxing depletes energy**
- **Fundamentals always prevail**
- **Purpose brings meaning to business**
- **All things are connected**

None of these principles are meant to replace the obvious importance of the leader having the drive, motivation, technical competence, and IQ to successfully run a business. Those are the table stakes just to get in the game.

The principles also do not dismiss the importance of having documented systems, procedures, and policies. Nor do they overlook the need to have the right equipment, sufficient capital, or the right people. Instead, the principles discussed here will either increase or restrict an owner’s ability to leverage these things in their business.

I am by no means the sculptor of anybody’s business but my own. At best, I am an acolyte who carries a toolbox full of chisels and hammers for other sculptors to use. My hope is that the principles I outline will help you uncover and sculpt the masterpiece that lies within.



Play it to win, but not at all costs. When we're consumed with the daily challenges of running our business (especially in the early years), or when things aren't going well, or when the stakes are high, it's hard to hit the pause button, take a deep breath, and remember that business is just one part of our life. And being in business is really just a giant game we've chosen to play to achieve the things that are truly important to us.

At their core, businesses are social constructs that assist people in living out their life's ambitions. Not just the business owner, but all the people who work there. Nobody "needs" to own or work at a business to live their life. It's a choice we make.

Some people choose to participate in the "game" of performing arts, sports, social service, military science, education, or religion. There are

"LEADERS ARE SELDOM BROUGHT DOWN BY A LACK OF SKILL OR INTELLIGENCE."

Things can quickly go sideways when we lose sight of this and are driven to compete too much or when we choose to "game" the game in a misguided effort to win.

When we play sports, we usually play to win. Sometimes to win just a game, sometimes a championship. Other times we play to build a dynasty. Regardless, it's still just a game we're playing. It's the same with business.

an infinite number of games we can play. Regardless of what it is, our choice is intended to help us live a fulfilling life as we strive to achieve our ambitions.

The high cost of winning at all costs. What happens when we get so focused on winning that we lose perspective on the things that really matter?

Marshall Goldsmith, one of my favorite business authors, thought leaders, and high-level executive coaches, captured this

when he said that business leaders are seldom brought down by a lack of skill or intelligence. Instead, it's usually because of self-destructive interpersonal behaviors. Chief among them is the need often felt by competitive leaders to "win at all costs and in all situations—when it matters, when it doesn't, and when it's totally beside the point."

Business owners lose their way when they start confusing the game they're playing with life itself. This is easy to do in the startup years of a company when our adrenaline is running high and our focus is consumed with just surviving. This is when priorities can get distorted and things can easily go sideways—both in our business and often in our personal life. Usually this happens gradually, with one small decision, disagreement, or argument at a time. It happens when we move beyond a healthy focus on our intended outcomes and let our competitiveness mutate into an obsession to win. This obsession becomes toxic when it displaces other, more important elements in life or when we start bending or breaking the rules in our attempt to win.

"Gaming" the game. I find it curious how often we soften unflattering terms by giving them friendlier names. "Gaming" is one of them. Gaming essentially means cheating. So, are we "gaming" a system or are we really cheating a system? In sports, teams get penalized for stealing signals from their opponents and for "juicing" baseball bats or footballs. Players get suspended for juicing their bodies. Winning at all costs does have a cost. If we need to cheat to





"WHEN YOU HAVE THOSE TWO THINGS, YOU'VE GOT IT LICKED, AND IT'S A LOT EASIER TO FIX YOUR BUSINESS."

win at something shouldn't we question our motives for playing? It's no different in business.

We raise our kids to tell the truth, play fair, and not cheat. It's the same counsel we should give ourself whenever we're tempted to do otherwise, claiming it doesn't matter as long as we don't get caught.

If we're going to "game" our customers by cutting corners or overstating charges; if we're going to "game" our employees by not following through on our promises; when we justify unethical decisions simply because they're legal, or when we choose not to deal all our cards from the top of the deck, then we should reconsider including words like integrity and trust in our company's Core Values and Mission Statement.

If we're going to play a game, it's always nice to win. But winning any game is always measured more broadly than just having the best score when the time

runs out. It's about learning and growing as a player, overcoming obstacles and opposition, and winning as a team. It's also about not losing ourself or our integrity in the process.

Whenever I'm approached by a business owner who's distressed by their struggling company, I'm reminded of advice I was given early in my career by the consultant helping me with my own troubled company. He didn't ask me about my company's financial condition or the products or services we sold. Instead, he asked me if I was healthy and loved. I told him that, yes, I was healthy and that my wife and I were very much in love. He said, "Good. Those are most important. When you have those two things, you've got it licked, and it's a lot easier to fix your business."

PLAY THE GAME WITH PASSION BUT REMEMBER THAT IT'S ONLY A GAME.



OUR CURRENCIES ARE TIME AND TRUST

This principle is just as true in life as it is in business. Too often, especially in business, we're led to believe our primary currency is money. While money is certainly an important element of daily life and business, it's not our primary currency. We can always make more money or we can borrow some. Our time is what's priceless and none of us knows how much of it we have.

We can either invest our time in activities that bring high returns or we can fritter it away on low-priority distractions. We can be busy, or we can be effective. Be sure not to confuse the two, as they are not even close to being the same. In fact, our busyness often diminishes how effective we are with our time.

There are occasions when the most effective use of our time is to do nothing. This is in direct contrast to our Western culture conditioning where

we've become obsessed with being busy, racing from one activity to another, giving little or no thought to what it is we're trying to accomplish. If we're not constantly doing something, we feel we're wasting time. This obsession has even worked its way into our vocabulary with phrases like "What are you doing today?" or "Are you staying busy?" When asked this last question, I often respond that I mastered "busy" years ago and it's "effective" that I'm working on now.

Time is relative. It's common in the early years to feel we have an unlimited amount of it to accomplish what we want—especially if we start our business when we're young. Then, as we approach the end of our professional career, it's normal to look back and wonder where all that time went or what we have to show for it. Investing some of our time in a little



"PEOPLE FOLLOW LEADERS BY CHOICE. WITHOUT TRUST, AT BEST YOU GET COMPLIANCE."

thoughtful contemplation along the way might have produced a better, more rewarding outcome.

Many of us would benefit greatly, and we would do our business a huge favor, if we would make the mental transition from being busy, to being efficient, to just being.

Trust. As human beings, trust is the foundation of everything we do. The relationships we establish with other people, the commerce we conduct with other businesses, the trade that takes place between nations, even our global economic systems are all based on trust.

We have all witnessed the catastrophic effects when trust is compromised or lost. Trust is based on telling the truth. Keeping our promises.

Following through on our commitments, even with things as simple as showing up on time and returning phone calls or emails. Too often we take trust for granted. "Trust me" we tell people, but what they really want is for us to demonstrate that they can, rather than us telling them to.

The people we employ trust us to put their personal safety and well-being ahead of our own self-interests. They trust that we know how to perform our job and that we're operating the company in an ethical and trustworthy manner. They trust that we'll return the trust they've placed in us by providing rewarding work and opportunities for them today ... and security for their family tomorrow.

Our customers trust us to deliver



OUR CURRENCIES ARE TIME AND TRUST

on our stated (or unstated) promise to provide them with the products or services we agreed to deliver and to treat them fairly in the process.

Of all the currencies in business that we have at our disposal, trust is the toughest to measure. It's difficult to see, but we can feel the unmistakable presence of trust whenever it exists and the absence of trust when it doesn't.

Unfortunately, the business landscape is littered with companies, large and small, that have been brought to their knees because they violated the public's trust.

Whenever a lack of trust exists within a company, yet words like integrity, honesty, and teamwork exist in its Mission Statement, it sours the culture and becomes a breeding ground for cynicism among the workers.

As author Jesse Stoner states in the book *Full Steam Ahead!*, "People follow leaders by choice. Without trust, at best you get compliance." And at worst you get customers who abandon you and workers who are disengaged in their jobs and are looking for their first reasonable opportunity to leave the company.

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NUMBERS FOLLOW

Numbers follow the actions we engage in, those actions follow the decisions we make, and those decisions follow the thinking that led to them.

If we want to change the performance of our company—whether it's financial performance, operating efficiencies, or sales growth—we must start at the source to determine what the thinking was that led to the outcome. Here's an example of what I'm talking about.

In my consulting work with small business owners, I made it a practice to initiate just about every meeting I had with them by reviewing their numbers. Sometimes, I'd give them a quick overview by scanning their P&L and a form we call the Flash Report (a dashboard of critical business numbers). At other times, I'd give them a deeper dive and include their Balance Sheet, Cash Flow report, and other operating reports.

I didn't do this simply because I love analyzing financial reports or because I wanted to obsess over every dollar the company earned or spent. Instead, it was because I knew that every number told a story about the decisions, actions, and thinking

that had led to them. My job (and the job of the client) was to ask the right questions about the numbers to uncover the stories and then to either change the activities if the number was unfavorable or to continue the activities if the number was good.

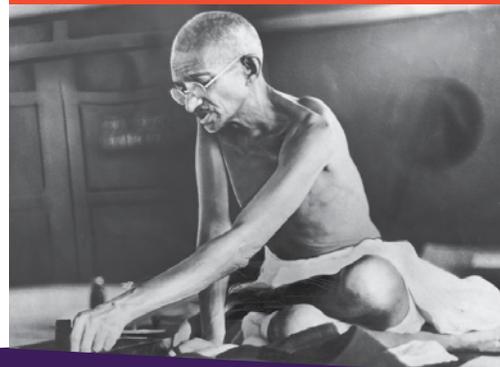
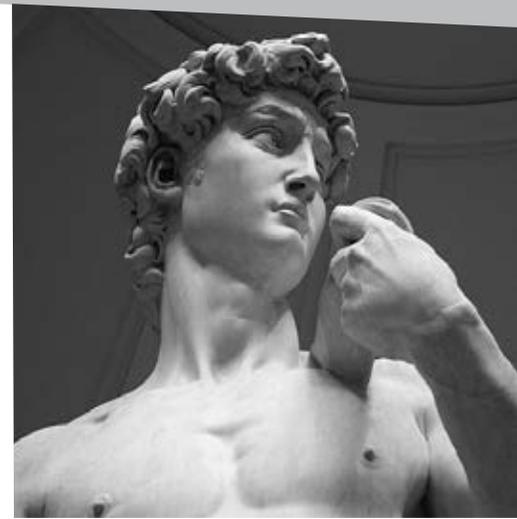
My work with small business owners has repeatedly affirmed that business owners live out our beliefs about money through our business. And our actions often contradict what we say with our words.

In his book *Working Without a Net*, internationally known change management consultant Morris R. Shechtman states: "There are no business problems—only business manifestations of personal problems." In other words, when we're experiencing a problem in our business, it does little good to address only its symptoms. Instead, we must investigate the root cause. In small businesses, this usually resides between the ears of the owner.

Time after time I've watched companies operated by smart, hardworking people, that deliver great products and services in large, economically healthy communities, fall far short of their potential and

"THERE ARE NO BUSINESS PROBLEMS - ONLY BUSINESS MANIFESTATIONS OF PERSONAL PROBLEMS."

**"YOUR BELIEFS BECOME YOUR THOUGHTS;
YOUR THOUGHTS BECOME YOUR WORDS;
YOUR WORDS BECOME YOUR ACTIONS;
YOUR ACTIONS BECOME YOUR HABITS;
YOUR HABITS BECOME YOUR VALUES;
YOUR VALUES BECOME YOUR DESTINY."**



suffer financially year after year. Yet other companies with undistinguished products or services, doing business in economically and demographically challenged areas, thrive. It's as if there's an invisible hand driving the performance of the company. In fact, there is, and it's nothing new! Philosophers, religious teachings, and even business leaders have spoken about this principle over the centuries.

The Book of Proverbs tells us, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." The great Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius concluded, "The things you think about determine the quality of your mind." Mahatma Gandhi said, "Your beliefs become your thoughts; your thoughts become your words; your words become your actions; your actions become your habits; your habits become your values; your values become your destiny." Even Henry Ford weighed in when he stated, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right."

While few business owners will say it out loud, many of us unconsciously restrict the things we're capable of achieving for a litany of reasons—chief among them are that we're comfortable where we are, or because we feel

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we're not capable of doing the things needed to achieve our hopes and dreams, or because we don't feel we deserve them.

The biggest challenge business owners face isn't in changing our company's performance numbers, it's in changing the thinking that led to those numbers. This is where the struggle comes in. Much of our thinking, especially about money, is rooted in the lessons and experiences we had early in life. While none of these

teachings are inherently good or bad, some of them may need to be relearned if we're serious about changing the outcomes in our business.

If we want to improve our business numbers, then we must improve the activities that lead to those numbers. Any change in those activities will always follow a change in our thinking. And changing entrenched thinking always involves hard, internal work.

OUR BIGGEST COMPETITOR IS OUR EGO

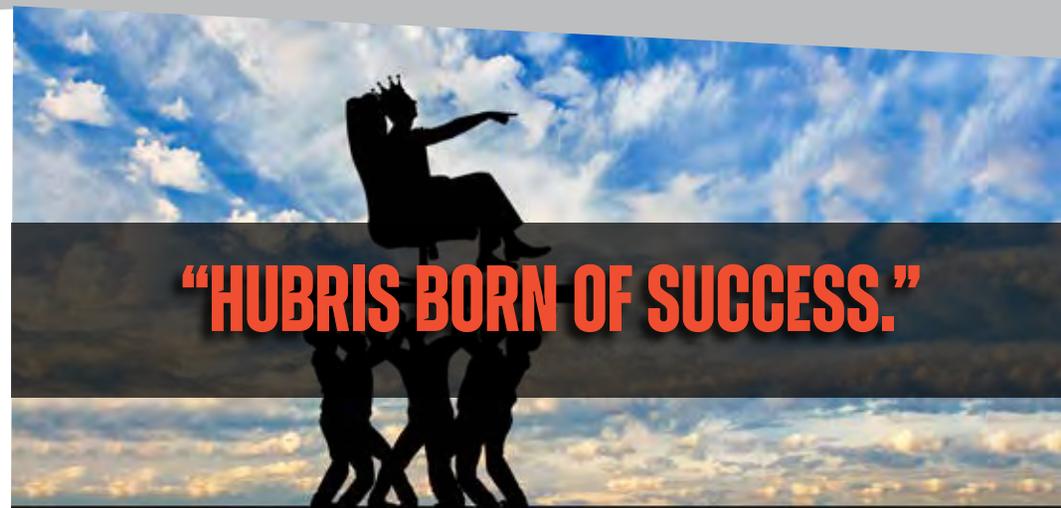
Not only is a swollen ego our biggest competitor, it's also the greatest threat to our future success. In my experience with small business owners, I can safely state that when an owner's business decisions are being driven by the needs of their ego rather than informed data, it's never a question of *if* the business will stall or slide into decline, it's only a matter of *when*.

I'm not the only one who has observed this. Celebrated business expert and author Jim Collins writes about it in his book *How The Mighty Fall*. In the book, Collins cites ego as the first step in the decline of previously great companies. He refers to it as "Hubris born of success." He goes on to explain how some business leaders overestimate their own contribution to the success of their company and underestimate the impact made by other forces, including luck. This mindset often results

in the company's fall.

Isn't this the paradox of success? The more successful we become, the more likely we are to get lulled into believing we had more to do with it than we actually did. It feeds our ego. We start believing our own press clippings, admiring our trophy case, and beginning to feel invincible. When we combine our inflated ego with our need to compete and win, it's easy to feel like a bear poised beside a waterfall, waiting to catch our next meal. Unfortunately, the reality is that we're actually the proverbial salmon swimming toward our inglorious end.

As Andrew Kerr writes in his book *The Humility Imperative*, "Humility helps to counteract this situational blindness and thereby can prevent some mistakes from ever happening. Humility serves as a kind of antidote to combat our natural tendency toward



"HUBRIS BORN OF SUCCESS."

overconfidence."

Harold Geneen, the former head of ITT, stated, "The worst disease which can afflict business executives in their work is not, as popularly supposed, alcoholism; it's egotism."

Some have suggested that an executive's uncontrolled ego is rooted in insecurity, fear, and a dislike for brutal objectivity. This point is magnified in small businesses where the owner rarely has a board of directors or outside investors to help hold them accountable ... and grounded! Most business owners are rulers of our own kingdom, and we prefer it that way.

Business owners are conditioned to view our competitors as "the other guys down the street" who perform similar services or

who make the same products as our company. Considering the competitive nature of many of us, this is no surprise. We prefer a rival we can see. It's also easier to compete with someone or something other than ourselves, rather than compete with becoming a better version of ourselves. That takes a lot of work and usually involves a lot of discomfort.

To compete with ourselves, we first must acknowledge that we have room to grow; that we don't know everything there is to know. And then to be open to outside counsel. At some point in almost every person's life their ego resists letting them do this. As a result, personal growth either stalls or shuts down completely. And when a business owner's personal growth stalls, so does the business they're leading.



OUR BIGGEST COMPETITOR IS OUR EGO

While all these factors can temporarily influence the performance of our company, they are not the greatest forces of competition we face.

Research on CEOs of large corporations conducted by Chris Zook and James Allen for their book *The Founder's Mentality* reported "A remarkable 94 percent of barriers cited by large-company executives had their roots in internal

imagine the impact they can have on small businesses!

A swollen ego doesn't just manifest itself as boastfulness, arrogance, or humble bragging. Sometimes it's much more subtle. It can reveal itself in an unwillingness to listen to advice or to consider different opinions—especially from people less experienced, less educated, or whose paychecks we sign. It also manifests itself as

"LEVEL 5 LEADERS CHANNEL THEIR EGO NEEDS AWAY FROM THEMSELVES AND INTO THE LARGER GOAL OF BUILDING A GREAT COMPANY."

dysfunction and lack of internal capabilities." In small businesses this dysfunction starts at the top with the owner and frequently involves their ego.

Returning to author Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great* he writes, "Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company." Collins goes on to state that a Level 5 leader "builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will." If these Level 5 traits lead to enduring greatness in large, multinational companies,

an unwillingness to be coached.

It shows up in an unhealthy fear of failure, or fear of being embarrassed or looking bad in front of our peers.

As a business owner it's easy to fall into the trap of believing that the best way to grow a business is to flaunt our position and our ego. Don't fall for it. Some of the greatest figures in history, people such as Jesus Christ, Buddha, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Teresa, not only changed the world, but changed the way the world thinks ... and they did it with humility.

"... enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of **personal humility** and **professional will**."

Since it's the extremely rare employee who will step forward to let the boss know that their ego is getting in the way (because these brave souls frequently end up with "former" in front of their titles—this by itself being an example of an inflated ego), I'm sometimes asked by owners how they can tell if their ego is a problem. In these situations, I mention that there are some easy, tell-tale signs to look for.

Owning a business and having loyal employees is an incredible privilege.

Pay attention to things like:

- » How often you apologize to your people for your behavior (anger, insensitivity, arrogance, etc.) or when you screw up. Do you own your mistakes?
- » How freely you thank people for the contributions they make to your company, for the support they've shown you, or for their accomplishments.
- » How much effort you put into growing your people, even when doing so could challenge your own skills or position.
- » How free your people feel to disagree with you or to respectfully challenge your decisions. If our people aren't questioning or challenging us, it's not because they think we already have all the answers. It's because they don't feel safe doing so.

The responsibility that accompanies this privilege is to manage our ego, look beyond ourselves, and acknowledge the people and events that got us to where we are.



SHADOWBOXING DEPLETES ENERGY

Shadowboxing in sports is a great conditioning exercise. It helps build upper-body strength, muscle mass, and stamina.

Shadowboxing with figments from our past is a complete waste of time and squanders our energy.

Business owners shadowbox in lots of ways. We shadowbox with ghosts and demons from our past. Sometimes they're actual people, sometimes they're beliefs, and sometimes they're just our perceptions. It might be a parent whose expectations we're trying to measure up to or whose approval we're still seeking. It might be someone's opinion about us that we're trying to prove wrong or to level revenge on through our business. It might be with a sibling, spouse, or ex-spouse. While these instances can serve to motivate us temporarily, in the long run they can leave us exhausted and feeling empty.

Many of us shadowbox with the belief that we're not good enough, smart enough, deserving enough, or competent enough. As we move into the later part of our career, it's not unusual for business founders to shadowbox with what we could have been or what we

**"THIS ABOVE
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could have accomplished. We shadowbox with our "what ifs." What if I had taken this route rather than that route? What if I hadn't made so many mistakes?

Every path we take, every mistake we make is all just part of our journey, part of our learning, part of what makes us who we are today. Shadowboxing for

lowed Polonius's counsel as it applies to our business.

It's been my experience that we are too often not true to ourself when it comes to our company. This can lead to wasted effort, frustration, and pain. We frequently see this in Vision and Mission Statements that are thinly veiled copies of someone



any reason is ineffective. More importantly, the time we spend shadowboxing is time that could have been put to much better use by growing ourself and our business.

In the Shakespearean play *Hamlet*, Polonius hints at another form of shadowboxing when he advises his son before leaving home, "This above all: to thine own self be true." As a business owner we would do ourself a huge favor if we fol-

else's, rather than the business owner writing what's in their heart or what they really believe. We see it in the goals they set for their company that are based on what a peer or a competitor might have accomplished. Or worse, based on one of the underlying motives mentioned above. As a result, they're really writing someone else's plan and not their own.

This was demonstrated at one of the recent Business Planning

SHADOWBOXING DEPLETES ENERGY

Retreats held through Violand Management Associates. The business owner was struggling with articulating what he wanted to accomplish with his business—not only with his long-term goals but even within the next twelve months. After spending time talking with him, it became clear that he was shadowboxing with his stepfather (the previous owner), with being picked on as a kid, and even with his colleagues who were operating similar businesses. While it's too early to tell how this realization will work out for the owner, I feel he now has more clarity about what he wants to accomplish and why he wants to accomplish it.

There is no denying that shadowboxing can motivate us to succeed, at least in the short term. But at what cost? It's a

bit like eating a candy bar in the middle of the afternoon because we're feeling sluggish. The short-lived sugar rush is undeniable, but it doesn't last long and soon we find our energy crashing down again. More importantly, what's the long-term effects on our health?

Rather than shadowboxing, we are far better off to hit the pause button on our crazy schedule long enough to ask ourself the tough questions that need to be asked, and then to be courageous enough to actually listen to our answers; to look deeper into the underlying motives behind the things we say we want to achieve or the drivers that are motivating us. This is always easier to accomplish when we're not busy shadowboxing with our past.

HIT THE PAUSE BUTTON ON OUR CRAZY SCHEDULE LONG ENOUGH TO ASK OURSELF THE TOUGH QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ASKED.





“... SUCCESS IS LESS ABOUT ACCUMULATING AND MORE ABOUT EDITING.”

While good luck and having the wind at our back are nice when we have them, in the long run maintaining focus and discipline is a much more predictable way of sustaining profitable growth in business.

Learning to run a business is no different than the learning curve we encounter in learning to master other skills in life like playing a musical instrument, taking up a sport, or even riding a bicycle. We start by learning the fundamentals of the activity—how to play chords, to catch and throw a ball, or to keep our balance. Learning these fundamentals frequently includes hitting sour notes, losing a game, skinned knees, or in the case of a business, losing money or valued employees. It's only after a lot of practice and repetition of the fundamentals that we're able to advance to

Discipline involves our ability to **stay focused** on the priorities we've identified **long enough to gain some traction.**

a level where the mechanics of the activity become second nature to us. We then can more fully enjoy the activity we're engaged in and realize the underlying reason for taking it up in the first place. Finally, with mastery of the fundamentals behind us, we are able to fully express ourself in the chosen activity.

But as business owners, we too easily get distracted by the shiniest new object that crosses our path and promises instant or effortless success, causing us to abandon the fundamentals that got us to where we are.

In his book *The One Thing You Need to Know*, business expert Marcus Buckingham writes, “... success is less about accumulating and more about editing.” The metaphor here is not building, but sculpting, in that sustained success is caused not by what you add on, but by what you have the discipline to cut away.”

As part of our onboarding process at VMA, I let new clients know right up front that there is no secret sauce to scaling their business profitably if

that's why they hired us. There are no easy answers for turning their company around if that was the reason. And there's no sedative that will calm the nerves when they're trying to ease out of the company they've spent their career building—whether through outright sale or transition to the next generation.

Rather than looking for complicated answers to these challenges, I suggest to our clients that they simplify things by employing some business fundamentals, starting with focus, discipline, and perseverance.

Focus has to do with identifying two or three priorities that need to be addressed. No more. When we have more than a small handful, they're no longer



"THE BEST WAY OUT IS ALWAYS THROUGH."

priorities, they're a punch list, and we too easily get distracted by all the items on the list or by things we want to add to it. Or we exhaust ourselves by trying to accomplish them all.

Discipline involves our ability to stay focused on the priorities we've identified long enough to gain some traction in accomplishing them. Many small business owners have very short attention spans, and we quickly grow weary of the discipline required to follow through on things.

Perseverance means that we can work through the self-doubts, mental fatigue, and financial strains that we will invariably encounter in addressing our business challenges. We need to realize that every journey worth traveling will have challenges

that cannot be avoided. As the American poet Robert Frost wrote, "The best way out is always through."

Business can become complicated enough on its own without us adding to it, especially as our business grows and picks up speed or as we add people. Returning to the fundamentals always brings clarity to confusing situations.

Focus, discipline, and perseverance are all learned skills, just like playing a musical instrument, learning a sport, or riding a bicycle. This is great news, because it means that none of us need to have been born with these skills, which are the hallmarks of successful businesses and strong leaders. They can be developed.



SKILLS LOADING...



**"IF YOU CAN'T
EXPLAIN
IT SIMPLY,
YOU DON'T
UNDERSTAND IT
YOURSELF."**



Whether we call it a mission, an objective, or just a strong conviction, having a purpose higher than anointing ourself “the best” at whatever we do or simply making our next dollar will bring more meaning and joy to our work.

So much has been written on the topic of company Mission Statements that it’s hardly necessary for me to add anything. At least not on the subject of how to *write* one.

Too often, though, in an effort to capture something that sounds witty and unique, or something that will look great hanging in our office or placed prominently on our website, we overlook the real value a mission provides to us and our company.

Jake Woods, founder of Team Rubicon, a 135,000-strong volunteer organization that restores people’s homes and lives after natural disasters, comes close to explaining the value of a mission when he writes, “Culture guides decisions in the absence of orders” and that a company’s culture is closely linked to its mission.

I’m not convinced that most founders of small businesses start their company with a lofty mission in place. Lofty thoughts

aren’t usually on the mind of an entrepreneur just getting started in business. We usually have more immediate needs like winning customers, meeting payroll, and trying our best to stay one day ahead of our bills.

I’m more inclined to the Michael Gerber school of thought that most businesses are started by founders who have what he calls an Entrepreneurial Seizure. This is where the founder either quits or is fired from their previous job, starts a business, and wakes up from their emotional bender sometime later only to discover that the business they thought they started is really just a poor-paying job.

If a company’s mission is there from the very beginning, it’s often buried deep below the mountain of hard work, exhausting days, and sleepless nights that we all experience as we grow a company.

More often than not, a mission reveals itself over time rather than being announced. It’s frequently after we’ve struggled long enough with our company or succeeded long enough that our mission comes to light, sometimes as a result of those very struggles or successes. And sometimes it takes years for this

to happen.

Determining your mission is not a race. It’s often a process of discovery that shouldn’t be forced or rushed. Take your time. Ask yourself the right questions. Listen for the answers. Let your mission present itself. Make sure it’s your own and that you embrace it.

When I was in high school, I had a physics teacher who once told me, “If you can’t explain it to me (the answer to a problem in physics), then you don’t understand it yourself.” The same principle holds true with a company’s mission. If we’re struggling to find just the right words to capture it, then we’re probably struggling to understand what our mission truly is. Maybe we’re trying to write one that we’re not really bought into. Or maybe it hasn’t fully developed and is only a vague or preliminary idea of what it will be, or at least what we *think* it will be.

Keep working on your mission, but don’t force it. It can take months or even years to drill down deep enough to truly understand what your mission is. But it sure makes business more enjoyable once you do.

ALL THINGS ARE CONNECTED

Several years ago, I was asked by a business journal in Phoenix to comment on what I felt was a core competency of a company they were celebrating, one that I had been working with for some time. I wrote that I felt there were several competencies I would consider, but the one that stood above the others was the owner's ability to build relationships both within the company and within the communities his company served.

As I've worked with clients over the years, I've witnessed how this relationship-building skill plays a central role in a company's continued success. And it applies to relationships with communities of thousands and communities of just two.

Relationship building is just one small outward example of the principle of connectedness. But it goes well beyond this and applies to the connectedness we have with things that have taken place before our lifetime, or the lifetime of our business,

and that will apply to things long after we are gone. It also applies to things not as visible as relationship building.

As you've been reading, one of the things you may have noticed is that most of the points are closely linked to the others. So even these principles are connected.

It's easy to think of our business as an isolated entity that affects mostly ourself. It's not. It touches everything else in our life and everything else touches it. Granted, this is a point easily missed when we're up to our chin in just trying to survive or grow.

When our head is down and we're immersed in the go-go phase of our business, it's easy to be consumed in our own bubble and to get lost in the weeds. We don't always see the bigger picture and how everything we do is connected to everything else: people, relationships, money, health, communities, and even love.

Most things we experience in life and in business have a way of circling back and revisiting us later in life—what some call karma. It's always best to set the stage early for a rewarding reunion.

Not only is everything connected to everything that exists now, it is also connected to everything that will come. Even if only in a very small way.

I didn't always pay attention to what I was doing, why I was doing it, or the long-term implications of the things I was doing. At the time, it wasn't about a sense of mission or interconnectedness, it was about feeding my family, meeting weekly payrolls, and covering the schedules of employees who didn't show up for work that day. I didn't have time to think about connectivity or any other fluffy stuff that

“THE ENTIRE PAST IS ENFOLDED IN EACH ONE OF US IN A VERY SUBTLE WAY.”

Many of us have witnessed relationships that have been started because of chance encounters, only to learn later how many seemingly disconnected events had to take place to lead to that encounter, and then to realize the impact that one encounter had on future events.

In my early years as a business owner, I was so busy running around with my hair on fire that

didn't address my immediate needs!

But that was the whole point. By not understanding the relationship between my immediate actions and the things I kept telling myself I wanted to achieve through my business, I was actually creating drag on them and making more work than I needed to. A moment of quiet and silent reflection might have provided

“ENERGY IS ALWAYS CONSERVED, IT CANNOT BE CREATED OR DESTROYED.”



"IF YOU REACH DEEPLY INTO YOURSELF, YOU ARE REACHING INTO THE VERY ESSENCE OF MANKIND."

the insight I needed to make better decisions at the time that would have saved me a lot of heartburn as I moved downline.

This concept of connectedness isn't limited to the world of business. It exists in every facet of our lives, and it exists in nature and in science as well.

The first law of thermodynamics is a good example of this. In a nutshell, it states that "Energy is always conserved, it cannot be created or destroyed. In essence, energy can be converted from one form into another." Since we and everything we do in our business is an expression of energy, then we're not only connected to everything that exists now, but we're connected to everything that existed before and everything that will exist in the future. It's no wonder that sometimes, after I've voiced a strong opinion on a subject, my wife accuses me of sounding just like my father. I guess I am him. And he is me.

Noted theoretical physicist Dr. David Bohm states, "The entire

"The **whole** is as necessary to the **understanding of its parts**, as the **parts** are necessary to the **understanding of the whole.**"

past is enfolded in each one of us in a very subtle way. If you reach deeply into yourself, you are reaching into the very essence of mankind." He goes on to mention Mach's principle (named after the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach), "The whole is as necessary to the understanding of its parts, as the parts are necessary to the understanding of the whole."

Translating these lofty scientific principles into the language of business means that the things we engage in every day are built on (connected to) everything

that has gone on in business before us. And the things we engage in today will be part of what future businesses will be built upon.

On its surface this idea of connectedness might not seem important, but it is. Fortunately, we don't need to be a theoretical physicist or an engineer to appreciate the benefits that our connectedness can bring. We don't even need to observe physical evidence of it. All we have to do is be open to seeing it all around us.



CONCLUSION

After watching the Earth “rise” over the horizon of the Moon, NASA astronaut Edgar Mitchell, one of twelve people who have walked on the surface of the Moon, later captured the emotion of that awe-inspiring moment when he said, “We went to the Moon as technicians. We returned as humanitarians.”

In many ways the same can be said for entrepreneurs. We enter the game of business

or pay our mortgage. When a customer doesn't pay us or they tell us they're not happy with our work, we take it personally. Whether things go right or wrong we feel them personally, emotionally, viscerally.

Then we move to a “we” focus where we grow beyond our own needs and consider those of the team we've surrounded ourselves with. We build close, mutually supportive relationships with



as conquerors. We want to conquer markets, amass wealth, and beat our competition, as if all of this is a zero-sum game of accumulation. It's not. The lucky ones gain the wisdom of Edgar Mitchell. While we might not walk on the Moon, we mature as we progress on our professional business journey.

We progress from an early “me” focus where it's all about us just trying to survive, meet payrolls,

the people who will help us “climb our mountain.”

Finally, we mature to a “them” focus where we're able to give back to the communities that have supported us on our journey, however we define those communities, even if it's just a community of two. This is when we frequently derive a deeper sense of purpose in the work we do and the lives we've touched along the way. And we

do this all in the course of our relatively short professional career.

Make no mistake, growing a business is hard, risky work, and it's not for everybody. It requires a lot of work and sacrifice on the part of the founder and the people involved in running it. Sustaining growth and then having something of value to either sell outright or pass along to progeny or to the people who helped build it is more difficult still. Building something of value that goes beyond the numbers, something that we can look back on with pride and satisfaction because of the impact it has had on the people and the communities it has served; especially on the personal growth and sense of fulfillment it has provided to us and the lives we've touched. This is where the real joy comes in.

None of this discussion about *The Inner Game of Business* is intended to diminish the critical role that sound management principles play in growing a successful business. Strong financial controls, operating efficiencies, mastery of digital and technological advancements, and strategic thinking are all critical to the continued success of a company.

I also don't want to imply that if we don't apply the principles I've discussed, or if we're completely unaware that they even exist, we can't grow a successful company. Of course we can. People do it all the time. It's just that when we apply these principles business becomes a little easier, a little less painful, and a lot more rewarding.



I AM SIMPLY AN OBSERVER.



I am not a psychologist, a scientist, or an academic. I am simply an observer; someone who has occupied a very privileged seat at the table of a lot of small businesses over a long career. While I've been able to observe much from this seat, I still struggle with just how observant I've really been. Have the things I've discerned been accurate and true? Have I connected the right dots in the right order? The dots I've connected seem to have worked, so I believe I have.

Some time ago, I was at an event with a colleague when we found ourselves waiting to cross the street at a traffic intersection. As we watched luxury car after even *more* luxurious car pass us, driven by seemingly wealthy retired guys, he jokingly asked, "Where did I go wrong?" We looked at each other, chuckled, and both agreed that he hadn't gone wrong at all. He was doing very well financially, had a beautiful home, a loving wife of several decades, and they had successfully raised a family of very accomplished children. We both recognized that financial wealth is only one of many measuring sticks of success and one that only some people choose to use to measure their accomplishments. While he may not have known it while

he was busy climbing the corporate ladder in his previous career, he had played the "inner game" very well.

This much I've learned: even the smallest business is about much more than the activities we busy ourself with throughout the days that make up our career. It's also about much more than the sum of all those activities.

When we allow ourself to step into the flow of this "inner game"—or whatever name we choose to give it—business is much easier and more fulfilling. And, just as Edgar Mitchell and his fellow astronauts did, we might discover a humanitarian that resides within each of us.



WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuck is a respected authority on entrepreneurial small businesses, having spent over thirty years as both a business consultant and an executive coach. He founded Violand Management Associates in 1987 with the objective of helping owners of restoration and cleaning companies build profitable businesses for their long-term professional and personal success. Chuck is a regular contributor to trade journals and newsletters and is the author of the popular weekly leadership series *Monday Morning Notes*.



CHUCK VIOLAND

ABOUT VIOLAND

Violand Management Associates (VMA) is a highly respected consulting firm that focuses on helping small businesses. At VMA, we are dedicated to executive development, management training, and business performance maximization.

Our mission is to enrich the lives of business owners and their teams by helping them achieve their goals and aspirations. Our team of experts works one-on-one to bring advanced, customized business solutions to your company.

By combining our advisory services with our innovative professional training programs, we are able to provide small businesses with the professional development tools they need to grow their people and maximize their profits.

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