

*"In From Suck to Success, Todd is bringing years of experience directly to you.
This is a must read for business builders."*

- Brian Brault, Cochair, Entrepreneurial Masters Program, and Former Chairman, Entrepreneurs' Organization

FROM *SUCK* TO SUCCESS



A Guide For Extraordinary Entrepreneurship

TODD PALMER

Chapter 1

Figure Out Your Mind-Set First

“The obstacles that we think most impede us from realizing our deepest wishes can actually hasten their fulfillment.”

— Gabriele Oettingen, *Rethinking Positive Thinking*

Without exception, the greatest factor that determines whether your business and life will suck three years from now is your mind-set today. It really is that simple. Your success as an entrepreneur almost always results from how you look at the world. All of the rest is the details you can learn along the way. But if you look at the world in a way that promotes success, you will become successful. It's only a matter of time. If not, you will end up stuck in a stressful, costly world of suck.

While the idea that your mind-set determines your future might seem ominous to you, the good news is that it's not very complicated to reprogram our brains. It's actually pretty simple to shift your mind-set. However, it's not easy. It takes a lot of hard work. But it's simple. In fact, I've never met an entrepreneur who couldn't develop a mind-set that set themselves up for success. I've met many who didn't, but I've yet to meet one who *couldn't*.

To use an analogy, if your business and your life were a car, your mind-set would be the fuel. You need the right type and amount of fuel for your car to run. The same is true with your mind-set and success. If you use the wrong fuel—in this case, the wrong mind-set—your car won't run, and your engine will become damaged. Try putting unleaded fuel in a car with a diesel engine, or vice versa, and see what I mean. (Actually, please don't try that; it really *will* damage your car.) Only the right type of fuel—in this case, the right mind-set—will allow your car to move forward. And what about the amount of fuel? If you don't continually add fuel to your car, it will eventually stop. You can't just fill it up one time and drive it for years.

You need to keep filling up your car with the right type of fuel. In our case, you need to keep filling up your business and personal life with the right perspective, the right mind-set.

When I hit bottom, as much as I thought what got me there was a collection of bad decisions, the truth was it all started with having the wrong mind-set. I was using the wrong fuel for my engine—trying to be a big staffing company, build a big team, and be everything to everyone. I also stopped filling up my engine with fuel. Had I connected regularly with other business owners or hired a coach to walk with me along the way, their influence on me would have shifted my mind-set and kept my engine topped off from 1997 until 2006. Instead, I was running on the fumes of the wrong type of thinking for almost a decade. When something went wrong, I didn't seek new or better information. I went back to doing more of what got me in the mess in the first place. A friend of mine refers to our tendency to fall back on the familiar, even if it means digging a deeper hole, as “saluting the flag of the past.” That phrase really resonated with me when I heard it the first time. Sometimes, we need to let go of the flag of the past and look forward to the flag of the future.

After hiring Greg as my coach to help me, I started learning to shift my mind-set. That was powerful. The more I shifted my thinking, the more my path forward became clearer. I learned what to say yes to and, almost more importantly, what to say no to by identifying what I was unwilling to accept moving forward. Almost immediately after starting to shift my mind-set, my business and personal lives both began to improve.

In this chapter, I'll walk you through the process and benefit of shifting your mind-set that I've refined since 2006, beginning with Greg's work with me and then as I helped other entrepreneurs avoid or come back from their own version of suck. I'll do so within the context of helping you overcome the most common entrepreneurial struggles from a mind-set perspective.

The strategies I share in this chapter are meant to help you through the biggest mind-set struggles entrepreneurs face. These are the tools you need to shift your own mind-set. They will also prepare you for the next part of navigating the world of entrepreneurship: strengthening your leadership skills. The more you practice these, the better you will get at avoiding

landing in your own world of suck. It will take practice. It will be hard. But it will be well worth it as you start achieving more and more success.

The Best Firefighter And Chief Arsonist

One common struggle entrepreneurs face is that they spend too much of their day putting out fires. That leaves them less time to do the most important work in their business. It also stretches them thin from a personal perspective, so they end up overworked, stressed out, and unfulfilled.

Are you spending all day putting out fires?

Do you struggle to get ahead with your workload because there's so much on your to-do list?

Have you spent years telling yourself that you need to better train team members but haven't had a break long enough to do so because you are putting out so many fires?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, congratulations. You're your company's best firefighter. This role is important because it can keep a company going for a long time. Fires come up in every business. These businesses need firefighters on the inside to prevent those fires from spreading.

So many business owners I coach complain to me that they spend all their days "putting out fires." I get it. That's how I felt for my entire first decade at Diversified Industrial Staffing, too. I spent every day putting out fire after fire, keeping the business open for nearly a decade before the flames got too big for me to control any longer. Every day, it was fire after fire. I'd swoop in and save the day and then move onto the next fire. That was my *Groundhog Day*. I'd head to the office, put out fires all day, and head home. The next day, I'd head to the office, put out more fires, and head home. I'd do that day after day until everything collapsed.

The first step to getting out of that stressful routine is to shift your mind-set. Sure, you will likely remain your company's best firefighter. That's not an issue. Fires will pop up in entrepreneurship. But if you're going to be your company's best firefighter, you can't just put out fires and then move on. Firefighters do much more than that. You need to complete the work of a firefighter.

Firefighters don't just put out the flames of a burning structure and then head back to the station. They also take time to research the cause of the fire and, if there are signs of arson, work with law enforcement to prosecute the arsonists.

If we know we are our companies' best firefighters, we must shift our mind-set and complete the work to identify the cause of the fire. When Greg worked with me to continue the job at Diversified Industrial Staffing, I learned that my fires were all caused by arson. We had someone inside the company who kept starting fires. Thus, the solution was to either get rid of the arsonist or prevent them from being able to start fires in the future.

Unfortunately, I learned that the arsonist at Diversified Industrial Staffing was me. If not for me, I wouldn't have had so many fires to put out. When I realized that, everything changed. Instead of seeing myself as the hero who swept in and put out fires to keep the company going, I visualized myself starting a bunch of fires and then running around putting them out until the fires grew too big for me to handle. I loved the jolt of adrenaline solving the problems. I felt like I had accomplished something that day. It was a fool's dream.

It's not just me, either. When I work with leaders who are overwhelmed by putting out fires all day, I ask them to shift their mind-set from putting out fires to completing the job. Virtually every time, my clients realize they were their company's chief arsonists, too. Some of them identified other arsonists as well, but every single one of them realized they could quickly improve their company if they just stopped starting fires themselves.

You don't have to find yourself crumpled on the pavement (or worse) to recognize that *something* has to change in your business, either. Sure, a setback could be as large as bankruptcy, or it could be as small as a mishandled meeting. What they have in common is a gut-wrenching, hair-raising feeling of regret, fear, and self-doubt that stops us in our tracks and stunts our growth. But many times, we feel overwhelmed by putting out fires all day because we don't do the work it takes to prevent fires in the first place.

As leaders, we can be the best firefighters—while also being the chief

arsonists. Think about it: the scary but joyous feeling we, as entrepreneurs, get from putting out a fire can be very visceral, like a spike of dopamine. Often, we lack self-awareness around the “rush” it gives us. So we will be subversive and act as an arsonist, which is self-sabotaging long term, in exchange for the rush of putting out the fire and being seen as the savior, the only one who can put out the fire. But we can make the complex simple by merely doing something different.

As straightforward as it might sound to identify the source of fires before moving on, you won't be able to do it if you don't shift your mind-set. But it takes awareness, discipline, and continuous practice to do so. Otherwise, the stress and relief of fighting and extinguishing fires will send us right back into our own versions of *Groundhog Day*.

Identifying What You Are Unwilling To Accept

Once you commit to sifting through the ashes of all the fires you've been putting out, you're going to start seeing your business—and yourself—in a different light. The mind-set with which you examine the ashes and react to what you find will be critical to whether you continue to head toward success or fall back into a world of suck. It's so easy to see all the mistakes you and others have been making and become frustrated. And it's easy for you to let that frustration lead you to fall back into your old ways.

One of the first questions my coaching clients ask me is what they need to do to clean up their messes. After all, they're high performers used to running from fire to fire. While that's a natural question to ask, the more effective question to ask is what do they need to *stop doing* in order to achieve success. That's because the entrepreneurs also frequently struggle with being spread too thin.

Thus, when clients ask me what they need to do, I shift the question and ask them to first identify what they need to *stop doing*—what they're unwilling to accept moving forward. This is the best way to shake up stagnation and prevent the frustration you feel from sending you backward. That's why one of the first things that I do with my coaching clients is have them make a “stop-doing list.” While the content of the list varies from client to client, every client I've challenged to do this has benefited greatly from the exercise.

For example, one of my coaching clients, Tom Schwab, runs a company called Interview Valet, which helps authors, speakers, and others talk directly to ideal customers through podcast interview marketing. Tom came to me already having achieved great levels of success in his business. He was making money and helping a lot of people. But he spent all day putting out fires. He was a bottleneck in his business.

I worked with Tom to sift through the ashes of several fires he had put out in his business. Like most of us, Tom realized he was spread too thin by performing administrative tasks he had no business doing. All those duties prevented him from leading his team as well as he could and giving them the systems and tools to operate independently. When Tom and I put together his stop-doing list, it quickly filled up with administrative tasks, such as entering payroll. He would spend three or four hours entering payroll every Sunday.

When I put together my stop-doing list as I was rebuilding my business, I listed being unwilling to accept that I was a victim of my employees. I used to think that my business success was limited to the employees I had on staff. While I was internalizing it as a permanent situation, Greg helped me view that thinking as temporary. He helped me see that I had the ultimate choice on who would stay and go. It took looking at my company with fresh eyes to see this, but once I did, it changed my life.

I want you to look at your company with completely fresh eyes as you do this, too. I don't care if you've been doing something for decades. If it's not the best approach for the future, write it down on the list of items you are unwilling to accept moving forward. Remind yourself that the phrase "We've always done business this way" is the sure kiss of death for long-term success. Instead, ask yourself whether you would accept that approach if you were starting your business over, or advising another business owner about best practices. Additionally, ask yourself, would you hire that employee again?

Identifying things we're not willing to accept can become stressful. Drawing a line in the sand over things that have defined our roles or businesses for years feels like a big deal. I know it did for Tom when he committed to stop doing payroll. It did for me when I committed to stop seeing myself as a

victim of my employees, too. That's what makes the next part of the process so important.

The next step with your stop-doing list isn't to take the list and immediately stop doing everything on it. Instead, the next step is to put a plan in place to stop doing them as fast as reasonably possible. For example, one thing on my stop-doing list was mowing the lawn. That was easy to stop doing quickly. I could hire a kid to mow my lawn for \$25 within days. However, it took Tom Schwab two years to plan and execute a successful payroll handoff for Interview Valet.

The way you see the world when it comes to the items on your list will go a long way toward determining whether you successfully outsource or delegate the items on your stop-doing list. Unfortunately, entrepreneurs often look at the tasks they perform with a fixed mind-set instead of a growth mind-set. They think they're the only one who can adequately perform the tasks. They think their way is the only or best way to perform a task. They think if something goes wrong, it will spiral downward to a world of suck. They'll lose a customer. That customer will post about it online. Eventually, the business will collapse.

Not only is a fixed mind-set incredibly stressful for the entrepreneur but it's also based on lies. For example, there's no way Tom Schwab was the only person qualified to do payroll for Interview Valet. How did I know at the time? Because millions of companies around the world did payroll without Tom's help. If he were the only person able to do payroll, no other company would be able to successfully process payroll. The same was true with Diversified Industrial Staffing. Once I allowed myself to stop looking at my team members as the only group of people who could help me, I started making tough but important decisions to find better fits for my company and train them well. (And, yes, I realize how ironic it is for the leader of a staffing company to be stuck in a fixed mind-set about staffing. But that's how strong a fixed mind-set can be. It can block out all logical thinking, and it did for me.)

We must shift away from seeing our world through a fixed mind-set and move to looking at it with a growth mind-set. *Of course* someone else could do payroll for Interview Valet. *Of course* others could help me run

Diversified Industrial Staffing. We must go into our stop-doing list with the mind-set that we have options. Others can do everything we can. Many times, they can do it better and cheaper than we can. And working our way through our stop-doing list with that mind-set opens up incredible opportunities.

Chief arsonists and firefighters love having things to accomplish, to cross off. They're used to having a lot to do. They're used to being busy. That's what makes the stop-doing list so powerful. It gives these leaders a sometimes-long list of tasks to hand off. Even better, the more they work their way through the list, the more they find that the things they had been doing that they thought were essential to the business could really be handed off or outsourced. Many times, they find others to do the task even better than they did.

The more they hand off or outsource, the more they can shift to driving revenue or just enjoying their life outside of work. In other words, they shift to doing the things they really *should* be doing as CEOs and the things they really want to be doing as people outside of work.

Creating Your First Stop-Doing List

It's time. Make your first stop-doing list today. I don't care if it's Saturday night and you finally caught a break from your firefighting. You don't need to be in the midst of sifting through the ashes to start listing things. You know at least a few things that you need to stop doing, so why wait? Why not start now?

Keep it simple. Take a shot at creating your first stop-doing list and keep it handy so you can add to it as you continue to put out fires. The first thing I added to my stop-doing list was mowing my lawn. It didn't take much for me to add it. Someone had challenged me about how much I valued my time shortly before I made my list. I had been thinking about it for a while and came up with the figure of \$500 per hour. So when I sat down to create my first stop-doing list, I started listing tasks I could outsource for cheaper than \$500 per hour. Mowing my lawn was the first thing to come to mind. It took me two hours to mow my lawn. That meant I was spending \$1,000 of time mowing my lawn when I could have gotten some kid to do it for \$25.

With entrepreneurs, it's important to know this is a holistic exercise and includes adding business and personal tasks to our lists. Look at everything you're doing inside and outside of your business as you create your list. This is critical because we have a tendency to try to separate our business from our personal lives. I believe it's because we've been trained to search for the illusive work-life balance. So our natural reaction is to look at work and life differently. But the truth is, there's no such thing as work-life balance for entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs play in the game of work-life integration. Therefore, stop forcing yourself to look at the twenty-four hours you have each day in terms of business hours and life hours. Instead, take those twenty-four hours and fill them with activities that help your business and personal life.

With a stop-doing list that includes business and life tasks, start to see your world differently and free up time to start doing things that are important to both your business and personal life. If you want to spend more time investing in your personal relationship, start doing date nights twice a month. Free up time to do so. Make those an appointment on your calendar and honor that commitment.

This is important. Entrepreneurs have a tendency to only add business activities to the time they free up with their stop-doing list. Be sure to add things that lift you up on a personal level, too. You'll find yourself much more fulfilled and effective in your business if you do.

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you prepare your first stop-doing list:

- What does a successful next ten years look like in my business?
- What do I want my legacy to be within this organization?
- What behaviors as a leader do I need to change or initiate in others to see this change occur?
- What do I want my personal life to look like?

Keep these questions top-of-mind as you explore what to add to your stop-doing list. If something is inconsistent with your answers to these questions, consider adding it to your stop-doing list.

Uncertainty vs. Change

After creating your first stop-doing list, you're likely to be in a much healthier mind-set than before. It might seem like you have a lot to do, but you will have a list of tasks to start outsourcing, delegating, or even eliminating. Start offloading or eliminating the simple things right away and create a plan for the other items to keep that momentum going.

While your mind-set will be healthier, it's important to keep a growth mind-set going forward because many entrepreneurs struggle with so much uncertainty and change. It sounds strange, but many people are more comfortable with a miserable situation they're used to than an uncertain path toward a better future that they're not used to. That discomfort could lead them to fall back into their old fixed-minded ways if they're not careful.

To keep our growth mind-set moving forward, we must recognize that, as leaders, what we may consider personal and private attitudes and actions are a direct pipeline to the performance of our businesses. It's understandable that we want as much certainty as possible. Desiring certainty is really a craving for prediction—trying to figure out what's going to happen or what to expect. We want to be safe. Unfortunately, that mentality is a falsehood that doesn't exist. When we choose the pursuit of certainty over the reality of uncertainty, we stop achieving. In order to change our businesses or grow our skills as leaders, we need to embrace uncertainty.

Change occurs when we are unwilling to accept our current reality, and for many of us, the escape route from being the Best Firefighter and the Chief Arsonist begins with one step:

- Are you unwilling to accept the current state of your business? Hire a coach.
- Are you unwilling to accept your current weight? Eat differently. Join a gym.
- Are you unwilling to accept an underperforming or toxic employee? Get them to leave your company or terminate them.
- Are you unwilling to accept your miserable job? Network. Post your résumé online.

You can decide in simply one day what you are unwilling to accept and make the changes from there. Engage with what isn't working.

Entrepreneurial coach Dan Sullivan writes about what he calls “the ceiling of complexity.”⁴ It’s the point in each and every stage of growth at which people can’t grow any further using their existing set of skills and knowledge. “As you progress in your growth, you gain experience by solving problems and transacting business,” Sullivan writes. “However, this experience often comes at a price: complexity. Each problem you solve, each transaction you make, and each hurdle you overcome adds to this complexity to the point where it holds you back from future growth of capability, performance, and achievement. You become overwhelmed by the messes, ‘stuff,’ complications, conflicts, and contradictions that come from doing things a certain way for a long time.”⁵

Stagnation causes more stagnation. But mastering your mind-set can start by asking yourself two simple questions:

- What is my pain?
- Have I reached a “ceiling of complexity”?

Remember, we can’t tackle a problem until we realize there is a problem. So falling into some common leadership traps stemming from the mind-sets I mentioned earlier—obsessing over cash flow, feeling like an outsider—can prevent us from recovering, listening, and focusing on what matters.

Suck vs. Success

Examples of a stuck mind-set include feeling like:

- “I am the business; the business is me.”
- “I’m a rugged individualist, but now I need to ask others for help.”
- “We’ve always done business this way.”

And a prime example of a mind-set ready for change is when we say to ourselves:

- “Old behaviors that once served me well no longer work.”
- “I am not the only person in the world who can perform this task.”

Solving Problems By Practicing Creative—Not Reactive—Thinking

How much of your time do you spend reacting to other people or the circumstances of the day? If you’re stuck extinguishing fires, you likely

spend more time than you'd prefer in reactive mode. Likewise, if you're constantly feeling the need to do everything yourself to get it done, you're probably spending more time than you'd prefer in reactive mode.

And what do you do when something doesn't go according to plan? Do you feel your blood pressure rise? Do you feel the intensity of the situation go up? If so, you're like most entrepreneurs.

How you respond in those moments is what determines whether your day will suck or end successfully. If you practice reactive thinking, your day will suck. If you practice creative thinking, it will end in success almost every single time.

Here's an example of how this works. Let's say you run a content marketing business. Someone calls you up and wants a discount. When this happens, many entrepreneurs fear that they'll lose the sale if they don't offer a discount. They have other clients who pay full price, but maybe times are tough, and a new project could really help out.

How would you respond in this situation? One of the most impactful lessons my coach, Dr. Daniel Friedland, taught me was the difference between practicing reactive thinking and practicing creative thinking.

When we practice reactive thinking, we might roll up our sleeves and try to solve this discount problem on our own. If we fear we'll lose the client, we might simply agree to the discount. Or we might get angry, feel disrespected, and steer the conversation somewhere unproductive.

On the other hand, if we practice a creative mind-set, we'll try to find a solution that defends our pricing model in a way that makes both our new client and us happy. I'll continue using this example to explain my Extraordinary Four (E-4) Process to shift from reactive thinking to creative thinking at the end of this chapter.

For now, I want to share what Dr. Friedland taught me about the creative and reactive mind-sets so you can begin to recognize moments when you fall into reactive thinking. The reactive mind-set, explains Dr. Friedland in

his book *Leading Well from Within: A Neuroscience and Mindfulness-Based Framework for Conscious Leadership*, is

where we feel threatened with fear, stress, self-doubt, ego, and conflict; where an unconscious and reflexive series of protective responses can dominate our psyche and ripple through our actions, activating similar experiences in others that can instantly drain energy and fragment teams as well as families.⁶

The creative mind-set, meanwhile, is one

where with conscious awareness, self-compassion, and courage, we can lean in and grow, even in our most challenging circumstances. Inspiration, energy, and empathy are present, and innovation can flourish, enabling a team to work well together with transparency and trust and become aligned in a shared vision to more fully focus its collective energy to serve others and something larger than themselves.⁷

Let's return to my curb-crying moment. Clearly, I was in a reactive mind-set, full of fear and stress as I contemplated the end of my business. Thanks to intentionally focusing on five positive things, however, I was able to shift into a creative mind-set. Sure, it took a while for me to lean in and grow, but it happened.

As Dr. Friedland writes, “[l]eaders, and their ability to be aware of and navigate stress, uncertainty, and self-doubt in any given situation can profoundly influence which mind-set dominates.”⁸

Some of the top tips I've learned from Dr. Friedland about shifting mind-set from reactive to creative include:

- Focus on satisfaction, not happiness. You earn satisfaction from taking your own hero's journey, at times. It's a reflection upon the highs and lows of the journey that results in a satisfying outcome. Happiness is a spike of dopamine. It's not sustainable and is short-lived.
- Listen to absorb, not respond.
- It all starts with you. In order to fix your business, your relationships, your parenting, or your coaching, you must work on yourself first.
- Practice appreciative inquiry.
- Approach all issues and conflicts with massive curiosity.⁹

Setting Intentions, Taking Action, And Iterating Forward

Another common struggle entrepreneurs face is when we find ourselves up against unfilled expectations. If the content marketing entrepreneur goes into sales calls with a rigid structure and expects every client to choose between two or three options, she would be setting herself up for disappointment. If we plan our business down to the smallest detail and expect everything to work out as planned, we'd be setting ourselves up for the same disappointment. And although most entrepreneurs would tell you never to expect everything to go according to plan, many run their businesses as if everything was going to work out exactly according to plan.

They don't intend to, but they do. So when things go wrong, they spiral into a world of suck. That's because we can only control the next step we take. After the first step, something else is going to happen. Someone is going to react to what we do. Something is going to change. So why plan your business based on the expectation that thirteen things will happen in a row in order to achieve an expected outcome?

Expectations are dangerous. They're poisonous to our mind-set and our businesses. Instead of setting expectations, I want you to set intentions, take action, and iterate as you go. Set your intended result. Plan your first step. Take action. Then plan the next step based on what happens after the first step so you are still heading toward your intended result. While that sounds tedious, as entrepreneurs we can make decisions quickly—especially if we're in the right frame of mind.

For example, my intention was to somehow pay off \$600,000 in debt, but I didn't know how. So I created a strategy and took action. It was in the midst of the Great Recession, and I had to find companies that would still hire people. Yeah, that was pretty hard to do. I didn't know companies who were hiring. I didn't have relationships with many companies. And, as you know, I don't like cold calling—at all.

But I had a list of companies I had worked with before, and my plan was to start calling as many people as I could to learn how I could place people at their company. That was as far as I had planned: I intended to pay off debt, and I planned to call as many people as possible to figure out how to place people.

As I started calling people, my fears were confirmed. Nobody was eager to hire. So, I iterated. Before I got off the phone with people, I'd ask two questions: "If you could only hire one person when you come out of the recession, what role would that be? And what skill set do you expect to be looking for when you come out of the recession?" Every time, they would pause and answer something like, "If I could just find a CNC machinist who could program in Mazak-Mazatrol, I'd be interested." (That's technical language for someone who can program software to automate complex machining tools and 3-D printers. Mazak-Mazatrol is basically Microsoft Office for complex machines.)

I kept asking that question over and over again. That was my strategy to understand what companies were looking for from a staffing perspective. If I could find those Mazak-Mazatrol people, I could place them easier than if I tried to continue what I had been doing up to that point. That would help me achieve my intention much better than to try to place people that companies didn't need. I couldn't expect what I had done before to work. But I could take action and adjust to what the market was telling me.

Confronting Your Brutal Reality

Remember when you were a kid and you just knew your parents were about to deliver some bad news? Maybe you were moving out of your awesome home in Arizona to somewhere new in New England. Maybe Chuck E. Cheese was already booked the day of your planned birthday party. Maybe you ran out of Fruity Pebbles. It doesn't matter. As a kid, you likely went straight into the reactive mind-set—often taking the form of a temper tantrum. (We still do this as adults, just in slightly more subtle ways, such as pouring another drink, blasting AC/DC through our AirPods, or bingeing on Netflix.)

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins calls upon leaders to "confront the brutal facts" when faced with a crappy situation if they want to pull out of it.¹⁰ As an example, he raises the contrast between supermarket chains A&P and Kroger. Both in the same industry with similar challenges, A&P suffered tremendous failure while Kroger did not. Why? As Collins explains, "[o]ne of these two companies confronted the brutal facts of reality head-on and completely changed its entire system in response; the other stuck its head in the sand."¹¹

In other words, A&P demonstrated a reactive mind-set response to a failing system. It continued moving forward with the same system and expected everything to work out. And it didn't work out, causing A&P to file for bankruptcy two times before shuttering its business. Kroger kicked in a creative mind-set, setting an intention to recreate itself using a new model and adjust along the way. Today, Kroger is valued at more than \$25 billion.

The trajectory took years and years to see itself through. It took tremendous patience and discipline for Kroger's leadership to see it through to the multi-billion-dollar powerhouse it is today. It had to confront the brutal facts that what it and A&P were doing hadn't been working and then set intentions, take action, and adjust.

So how do we learn from A&P and Kroger? We have to do the same. We have to maintain a creative mind-set while suffering through the brutal facts about our businesses. That can lead to strong feelings of remorse, stress, and fear that can drain not only our energy but that of our employees and even families. With me, I needed to confront the brutal facts that my entire business model needed to change. I couldn't compete against the big staffing agencies and survive. Margins were too low. The economy was too weak. And I had too much debt to pay down. I also had to confront the brutal fact that I needed to replace my team with people who were better fits moving forward. Only after I confronted that reality could I muster the confidence to try something different.

The Stockdale Paradox

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”—Vice Admiral James Stockdale

Retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties.

and at the same time

Confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

Another way to look at our brutal reality is through what author Jim Collins termed the Stockdale Paradox. For those unfamiliar with this framework, the Stockdale Paradox tells us that we must retain faith that we will prevail in the end while simultaneously confronting the most brutal facts of our current reality. It comes from Navy Vice Admiral James Stockdale, who was imprisoned for nearly eight years in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Stockdale was tortured more than fifteen times during that period and frequently battled with his captors in an effort to save his fellow prisoners. His efforts earned him a Congressional Medal of Honor, and he was one of the most highly decorated officers in the history of the Navy.

Collins met with Stockdale to discuss his ordeal. During the meeting, Stockdale said he never doubted that not only would he get out but he would also prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of his life, which, in retrospect, he said he would not trade for anything in the world.

While not a trained psychologist, Stockdale practiced and shared a psychological duality Collins coined the Stockdale Paradox. “In wrestling with life’s challenges,” writes Collins, “the Stockdale Paradox has proved powerful for coming back from difficulties not weakened but stronger—not just for me but for all those who’ve learned the lesson and tried to apply it.”

The Stockdale Paradox rings true years later. As I’m writing this book, we are in the midst of coping with the coronavirus pandemic. Before COVID-19 hit, my old model of growing my coaching business involved building awareness and generating business by speaking from stages around the world. In March 2020, however, all events began shutting down.

I had two choices: double down on what worked in the past and ignore the brutal reality of my circumstances or confront the brutal reality and adjust. I chose to confront the brutal reality and adjust in a few different ways:

1. I used the added time I had available to write this book. I had begun the book before the pandemic hit, but the shutdown opened up more time for me, at least at first.
2. I started speaking on webinars and other virtual stages.
3. I began looking at using different ways to get my message out in

front of my ideal customers. Beyond webinars, I have used Facebook and other social media platforms to serve people.

4. I created different pricing and delivery models because I no longer had to travel two days to conduct training for one day. Instead of sitting with a leadership team for six hours in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for example, I can do a four-hour Zoom call with the leadership team, with a tighter agenda, because I know that people can't sit still forever on a Zoom call.

5. I started inviting business owners to a phone call to help them as they struggle through their own brutal realities. I knew they needed help. And because I had more time available, I decided I would offer free coaching just to help as many people as possible, with no ulterior motives.

I did this all while retaining faith that I'll prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties—and all while confronting the brutal facts of my current reality. In the end, I know my business is going to be stronger two years from now than it was two years ago. I will have many more avenues to speak and many more ways to find coaching clients. In fact, all of those efforts started paying dividends even during the pandemic.

What Do You Really Want?

“That’s the hardest question I’ve found for many people to answer. I had to answer that for myself because what I thought I wanted, what I thought would fill the emptiness of that five-year-old who had lost everybody important to him, was ‘things’— money, toys, houses, whatever. What I really found, what I really get to do with my clients, is helping them define success related to something that matters to them. And more often than not, it does not have to do with material items. For me, success is doing what I want, when I want, with whom I want to do it, as often as possible.”—from my “Discover Your Talent” podcast.

Rethinking Positive Thinking

Let me confront a common struggle many leaders have as they work on their mind-set. Many leaders—and even coaches—emphasize the value of having a positive mind-set, even while confronting the brutal reality of their current situation. While I do support maintaining a positive mind-set, I do so with one big point of caution: a positive mind-set alone won't

improve your situation if it's not accompanied with action. That's why we shift from reactive thinking to creative thinking by setting intention and then taking action. We don't just set an intention to improve and wait.

However, research tells us that mind-set is more complicated than just flipping a switch from negative to positive. For example, in the book *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation*, author and psychologist Gabriele Oettingen shares the results of more than twenty years of research in the field of human motivation to reveal why the conventional wisdom about positive thinking doesn't work. She shares how people actually make changes and overcome the obstacles that get in their way when pursuing meaningful change. (I highly recommend reading *Rethinking Positive Thinking*. It's a well-written book that dives deep into one of the biggest challenges business leaders face when it comes to mind-set.)

Oettingen, like Stockdale, rebuffs naked optimism. Among other examples, she points to politics, analyzing presidential speeches from 1993 to 2009. "In particular," she writes, "we tested to see whether positive thinking in the speeches correlated with 'long-term indicators of economic performance.'" Oettingen and her team found a "clear relationship: the more positive the inaugural address for a given presidential term, the lower the GDP and the higher the unemployment rates were in the following presidential term."

Dreaming is just that: dreaming. And when we simply engage in naked positive thinking, it can actually make things worse, Oettingen explains. Specifically, Oettingen found that when people truly believe their goals will come true, they could fall into the trap of inaction. Their positive thinking lulls them to not take action because they believe everything will work out in the end. For example, Oettingen looked at university graduates to study the effect of positive thinking in job searches. What she found was that students who thought positively about their job prospects earned less money and received fewer job offers over the following two years than those who were less optimistic. Why? Because the ones who weren't worried sent out fewer applications.

So what do you do about it? First, you need to be aware of these tendencies. If you're a positive thinker, your brain quite literally lulls you into inaction. Second, you need to do something about it. The simple four-part test I share with you in Chapter 4 will help you with that. For now, what's most important is being aware of the tendency to lull ourselves into inaction.

Diagnosing Your Mind-Set

Author Zig Ziglar famously said people need to do a “daily checkup from the neck up” to make sure they move forward with the right mind-set. In this chapter, I've shared tools, exercises, and resources for you to identify and shift your mind-set to keep you from a world of suck and instead head toward one of tremendous success.

As you move forward, I want you to continue to develop the ability to self-diagnose whether your mind-set is in a healthy space. The tools I shared will help you do that. In addition, I want you to keep in mind that the very characteristics creating a ladder to success are also those that can tumble us to the ground. Consider this report from *Entrepreneur* magazine, which highlights twelve signs of an entrepreneurial mind-set:

1. You take action.
2. You're scared.
3. You're resourceful.
4. You obsess over cash flow.
5. You don't ask for permission.
6. You're fearless.
7. You welcome change.
8. You love a challenge.
9. You consider yourself an outsider.
10. You recover quickly.
11. You listen.
12. You focus on what matters (when you figure out what matters).¹²

Do these sound familiar? Many such mind-set signs could go either way in leadership. Taking action could mean securing the next great deal or making a \$1-million mistake. Obsessing over cash flow could represent financial savviness, or it could be a sign that your business is stuck. Fearlessness and feeling like an outsider can easily turn into fearfulness and feeling incredibly lonely in the leadership journey.

Use these tools to get and keep your mind-set in a healthy place. Be the entrepreneur who is willing to do the hard work to build a better, more fulfilling, and less stressful business. And if you find yourself struggling with mind-set, you'll want to keep my simple Four-Step Process discussed in Chapter 4 close by.

Ask For Help

Before we move onto Chapter 2, I want to encourage you. Mind-set is tough. It's the biggest thing that separates suck from success. And one of the best ways to maintain a healthy mind-set is to not be afraid to ask for help. From a coach to a group of colleagues to trusted friends, you have many options for getting help.

I learned this lesson the hard way. My mind-set since I can remember has been that I could always only rely upon myself: "I can always take care of myself. I don't need other people."

When I was five, my father died unexpectedly; he was only forty-five. My older brother was a senior in high school, and he left the state to take advantage of an athletic scholarship. My older sister was getting married and moved to Arizona with her new husband. And my mom, who was my primary caregiver and the prototypical stay-at-home mom of the 1970s, had to go to work.

So, within ninety days, all the people in my life left me as a five-year-old. The story I told myself after that was, "I can't rely on other people. They can disappear fast. I can only rely upon myself." That's a great trait for an entrepreneur—until it's not.

I carried that mind-set with me when I started my business. I'm going to rely on me, I said. I learned all the parts of the job. I learned accounting, I learned operations, and I told myself I could do it all. In growing and scaling the company, I was hiring people. But I was not really empowering those people. And I was not leading those people correctly, yet. So I got \$600,000 into debt.

After hitting rock bottom, I gave up and got help, first from Greg, and then from a whole bunch of others. I read. I hired a coach to help me get out

of debt. And I learned to identify the mind-set I'd had. I forced myself to get rid of that mind-set of "I can do everything; I can be all things to all people."

My entire life changed when I finally asked for help. Today, my motto when I find myself stuck is *I need to get help*.

Please learn from my mistakes and practice getting help from the start.

Insights

- All change starts from within.
- You are not alone. We all have fears and self-doubts.
- No one has all the answers. Ask for help when you've reached the ceiling of complexity.

Questions For Reflection

- What's the No. 1 negative belief you're holding onto that's holding you back?
- Who can you reach out to in your network for help when you've reached the ceiling of complexity?
- Do you start fires in your life just so you can put them out? Whether it's business, family, or other relationships, what are you doing that's counterproductive to what you want?

Action Steps

- Say to yourself, "Next time I enter into my reactive mind-set, I will pivot into a creative mind-set."
- Pick one person in your life that you will proactively listen to in practice—listening to absorb, not to respond.
- Write out your own version of an example from your life that would mirror a Stockdale Paradox.

Additional Resources

Friedland, Daniel. *Leading Well from Within: A Neuroscience and Mindfulness-Based Framework for Conscious Leadership*. San Diego: SuperSmartHealth, 2016.

Oettingen, Gabriele. *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation*. New York: Current, 2015.

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