



## Don't Ever Say Never

(Text of talk given in 2018 to a gathering of unemployed job seekers)

Have you ever been fired from work? Many, many people have. But I am willing to bet that you have not been fired by fax, email or text message. Many people have, but not as many as those fired by the traditional 'finger-in-your-face' method. Well, I am a member of this infamous club – fired via technology. After 10 years of presenting two segments of commentary on-air every week for a regional public radio station and its affiliates, I was fired by email.

I know being fired from a part-time radio gig, which was not really a real job, is not the same as being fired from your bread-and-butter job. And yet, being fired by email made me feel odd somehow. Not quite worthy.

But guess what. I was partly to blame. I created this outcome. Months prior to being fired I began to tell myself that I am sooo tired of writing and recording two radio pieces every week. Week after week for 10 years. Surely, 10 years is long enough!

My radio "career" started in June 2006 and so I thought I would resign at the end of May 2016. Exactly 10 years. When did I get fired? On the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2016.

### Two lessons

I now have two lessons to share:

Lesson #1: Don't dawdle. If you are unhappy doing something, deal with it quickly. I didn't. I complained, and moaned, and whined. Now I am committed to supply seven radio pieces every week to a regional station in Chicago. Not two pieces a week, but seven! (How the H did that happen? Nonsense was at work.)

Lesson #2: We get what we wish for or what we think about too often. This happens more often than not. (I could have said, "more often than we think," but I think that would have been confusing.) We have more control over our lives than we care to own up to or take responsibility for. What you think inside will eventually happen out there.

You have been warned.

### Never listen to success gurus

If you fully understand Lesson #2, you will know why it is so important that you never listen to success gurus. Wait a moment! That is actually a third lesson. Lesson #3: Don't listen to success gurus, especially not those gurus who promote five or even seven steps.

Why not? Because we have no idea what conversations they had going on in their head at the time of creating their success. Their success first happened in their head. And in your head is where your success happens first. That means that any guru's recipe for success is unlikely to work for you, because your inner conversations are undoubtedly different and unique to you.

Let's recap the three lessons you should heed: Don't dawdle. Think constructive thoughts. Don't obey success gurus (like me, wannabe-guru-in-the-making, who can only dream up three steps to success).

## **Instead, listen to my one step for success**

Just for today, ignore lesson #3, because I will now share with you One Step for Success.

Why will my one step work for you? Because I am your current success guru, the only one you are reading at this moment and you have been told many times to *be in the moment*. Actually, the real reason my One Step for Success will work for you is because one step is so much easier than five or seven steps.

Hang on a moment and answer this. Why do we listen to successful people? Because they are the ones who are still standing. It's called survivorship bias. The ones who failed are gone, and so we assume that the ones still standing must be right. We are biased to believe the survivors, even though there is no proof that what they did to survive might apply to us. We ignore the fact that we can learn much more from those who failed. Of course, the real problem is that those who failed are not here to tell us about their five or seven miss-steps. Or mis-takes, if you like movies.

But I have failed and I am still standing. I have failed on a grand scale, grand for me that is, and here I am. So here's the real reason you should listen to me, even if you don't want me as your guru: I was a failure and I am still here to tell my story.

## **Re-member (with a hyphen) backwards, not forwards**

Now, I could simply tell you what that one step is and so save us all a lot of time. But if I did that, then that would keep the step *my step* and not make the step *your step*. To understand this one step as your step, to own it as your step, to step it as your step (so to speak), we must at least step out together. If you know what I mean.

Here's how it works. To make this one step your step, you must tell your story. Backwards. In other words, you must remember your life backwards, starting from where you are today. Don't start with "when I was little." Begin with "when I look back from here."

What does 'remember' mean? It means putting the members back together again. You must put the members of your memory, the pieces and the people that make up your story, back together again. You must *re-member* with a hyphen.

As you try to re-member, you will remember things you thought you had forgotten. That will help. But of more value is that you will remember your past as you 'see' it today. In other words, you will interpret your past from your current perspective. That's the trick that will create successes today from what you thought were (past) failures.

## Why '5-7 steps to success' is nonsense

How many seven steps to success do you think were first implemented, in that exact order, with those exact descriptions, by any success guru?

None!

Because it is only in looking back that we can even hope to identify the steps that worked. Otherwise we would have north of 50 steps of which at least 43 were wrong moves. Only with hindsight can we know which steps worked. And then, of course, all we can be sure of is that those steps worked for that one particular person at that specific time.

About the only step that applies to all of us is "Wake up!" You cannot step into success successfully if you are sleepwalking, in a daze, in a different moment, texting on your smart phone, or just dreaming of being somewhere else.

## My Own One-Step-for-Success Story

To help you remember your story backwards, I will use my story as an example. I am going to tell you parts of my story backwards so that you can 'see' how easy it is to do so. And as I tell it, I want you to make notes of your own story. Backwards.

Are you ready to step out, backwards?

Wait a minute. Have you heard of Frank Buckles? Remind me at the end of my story to tell his story, because I will summarize my one-step the way I think Frank Buckles would have said it: When you start to, don't.

Now let's step out and walk backwards through our stories. As I tell mine, think of yours and make notes, backwards (in time, not in writing).

## Never financial services

Once upon a not so long ago, I told people that I would never work in the financial services industry. (I had my reasons.)

Would you like to guess where I now spend most of my work time? Correct. In the financial services industry. I work for a 38-year-old wealth management firm. So much for never working in financial services. *Don't ever say never.*

After the financial crash, the bulk of my retainer contracts as a strategy consultant and coach to senior executives were not renewed. My wife, who is my financial advisor, advised me strongly (i.e. told me) to get a formal job. I told her that at my age and experience (i.e. my attitude) I would only go back into corporate life at or near the top (i.e. altitude). And with jobs so scarce (at the time), who would hire me, a crotchety old guy, at the top?

Would you like to guess what my formal title is? I am the CEO and President of the wealth management firm mentioned earlier. So much for “no-one would hire me at the top.” *Don't ever say never.*

## **Never advertising**

Not too long ago, I told people that I would never work for an advertising agency. All adverts are lies and advertising agencies are the ones who create those lies, not so?

Guess what. The first long-term consulting relationship I secured after landing on USA soil was with an advertising agency. This relationship became so mutually beneficial that when my work permit was about to expire, this agency sponsored my green card so I could stay in the USA and still work for them. So much for not trusting advertising agencies. *Don't ever say never.*

## **Your turn to remember**

Do you get the picture? In looking back, is there a moment in your life that you can now see was a *don't ever say never* moment? If so, how did you react then? What did you do? Write it down.

Back to my story.

## **Never the military**

Not so very long ago, after my terrible experience in the South African military, I vowed never to work for the military.

Bad vow.

I caved and did some work for the US military. I was asked to give the opening talk at a general's strategy planning weekend. A boy from Africa giving a talk to a group of senior military commanders, all above the rank of captain? Why ever not? Plus the event was held in Myrtle Beach and my family could join me, all expenses paid, as part of my fee. So much for not working for the military. *Don't ever say never.*

## **Never coach**

In the mid-1990s I helped a CEO turn around a bankrupt retail clothing chain of 185 stores in 5 countries. We managed it in 18 months. One day he turned to me and said, “You are my coach.”

I was offended. I was not a coach, I was a strategy consultant. Not even a plain vanilla management consultant, but a strategy consultant!

Would you like to guess how I earned a steady base income for years in the USA? Executive leadership coaching. So much for feeling insulted. *Don't ever say never.*

## MBA control freak

I could go on by telling you that my university life meandered from signing up for civil engineering, to attempting architecture, to trying agriculture, before I settled on economics and finally secured a formal degree. But I could not stop studying. I studied for an honors degree followed by a masters in business administration. Or as it is commonly called, because it is so very common, an MBA. My kids believe that in my case it means Major Bull-Something Artist. Which is obviously why I focus on nonsense at work.

And the funny thing is this. Throughout all this walking on a wandering path, I thought I was in control. If not in control of my destiny, then at least in control of where I was going next. It is only in looking back that I realize that I wasn't even in control of where I was.

Over the many years of trying to grow up, I have shifted from wanting to control my future to being excited at what could happen next. Let me explain how that shift can happen to you. If you want it.

## Wheel of success

Back in the early 1980s I developed a consulting framework to show the influence of perceptions on strategy. Perceptions influence how we behave and make decisions, and therefore perceptions influence any strategy we develop. It is so obvious that we ignore it. The framework which I refined with the help of a business partner, is based on what we called the Wheel of Success.



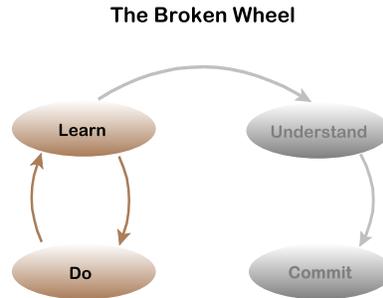
Before you do anything, you must understand what is to be done, why it is to be done and how it is to be done. This understanding must make you willing to commit to do what it takes. Finally, to ensure ongoing improvement, your *doing* must lead to learning which must in turn lead to a better understanding.

The wheel is common sense, which is probably why we, and many managers, don't apply it in practice.

## The broken wheel

The problem with people, teams and organizations is that we have become conditioned to get better at what we are already doing. And so we stay stuck as things move on, and we fail as our world changes.

Below is a diagram of the learning-to-improve cycle. This is obviously an important cycle. However, if we don't pay attention to reality around us, then this cycle soon becomes the learning-to-get-better-at-what-we-are-already-doing-even-if-it-no-longer-matters cycle.



How did this come about? How did we get trapped on this merry-go-round? (Merrily going nowhere.)

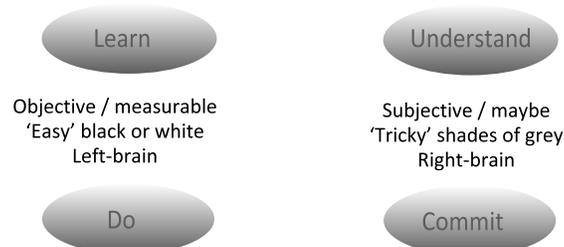
As kids we were told by Big Adults what to do and then how to get better at doing what they told us to do. We committed to doing what they wanted us to do, and to improve at doing so, because we wanted their love and affection, and because we needed their protection and support. Actually, we did it out of fear. Fear that we would not have their love and protection. So we end up understanding what they want from us, and for us, not what is right for us. And we commit to what *they* want and suppress what *we* want.

By the way, in the business world, this getting-better-at what we are already doing creates efficiency. The efficiency cycle is another important cycle. But just like the learning-to-improve cycle, the efficiency cycle can let you down badly when you become efficient at what no longer matters (to your customers, for example).

Before I stray too far down the business rabbit hole, let me get back to your story and *don't ever say never*.

## Control vs open to outcome

Have a good look at the diagram below. Stare at it until you realize that the left-hand side of the wheel is about objective, measurable, yes-no, black-and-white stuff and that the right-hand side is about subjective, maybe, grey stuff. If you, like me, like the debunked left-brain right-brain model, then you can add that as well. (Debunked? Sadly, yes. Search on-line.)



As you hopefully can now see, the left-hand side of the Wheel of Success is about specific outcomes (ones that we think we can control through doing and getting better at); and that the right-hand side is about possible, unspecified outcomes, ones that we cannot quite grasp and thus control (ones that tease us and excite us by their vagueness).

## **Where did you stop being open?**

Remembering your story backwards will show you where in your past you got stuck on the left-hand side of the wheel, when you stopped being open to something new. It should also show where and when something new, something exciting, happened because you stopped saying no-never at the right time.

With age I have moved from being a control freak fixated on the outcome I want, to being more detached from outcome, to where I am now (often), namely open to outcome. Yet, now and then I am *in open anticipation of outcome*, with butterflies-in-stomach excitement, waiting to see what surprise the universe will throw at me next.

## **So where are you today?**

Are you fixated on a specific outcome? A specific job? A specific relationship? Are you attached to outcome, because you are looking for something similar to what you had or did in the past? Are you becoming detached from outcome, because you are (comfortably) numb? Well, if so, then maybe you are now ready to let go enough so that you will be willing to consider almost anything. You are becoming open to outcome. And soon you will feel more often in open anticipation of outcome. As in “bring on the surprises.”

## **How being open works**

Let me give you a few examples of how being open to outcome works. How did I meet that advertising company, the one who sponsored my green card? A colleague made a phone call to someone who, she had been told, incorrectly, was a marketing consultant. This not-marketing-consultant picked up on something my colleague said and immediately asked whether she could meet me. That meeting resulted in many collaborations and a close friendship. It also led to her telling the previously mentioned advertising agency that it would be in their interest to meet with me. A phone call in error resulting in a green card!

How did I get to be on the radio? I met a guy a few times at a networking breakfast and then we lost contact. Nothing unusual in that. However, roughly one year after meeting him, he unexpectedly decided I should meet someone who was a commentator on the radio. That person needed someone to stand in for him on the radio. He asked me. The stand-in gig lasted 10 years.

How did I meet a client I still advise twice a month since 2006? Because of a woman I met in a pub. But that’s another story.

There is a catch, though, to being open to outcome. You cannot be open to outcome without being ‘out there.’ To be blunt: you cannot be open to outcome without coming out. Let me give you two examples.

## **Outcome is also Come Out**

I once did a radio piece about how much it irritated me when a cashier told me to “have a nice day.” A lady who worked in retail sent me a scathing email. I suggested we meet to talk it over. We did. She told me she hated working in retail because of the way customers (like me? Ouch.) treated workers in retail. Months later I heard about a job vacancy and told the company they should interview her. She got the job. She loves it.

When I became CEO of the previously mentioned wealth management firm, one of my first major tasks was to find a new director of research. I advertised on an industry site. Applicants applied from all over the world. None of them were right for the position. Who got the job? A woman who had not even applied. She was by far the best candidate. I found her by asking an ex-coaching client if she knew anyone suitable. Advertising did not work. My network did.

You see, the only way to be open to outcome is to split that word outcome into two and then say it backwards: come out. Come out of hiding, come out of your shell, come out to play. Because, let me tell you, when you let go of control, funny things happen. Funny peculiar and funny ha-ha.

## **Attitude in the moment gets you hired**

Things happen in the present. Don't live in the future, that magical place where things will be so much better, or in the past, where things were so much better. The future and the past don't exist.

If that is so, why then did I ask you to remember your past? So that you can recognize and acknowledge that the future is seldom what you expected it to be. And that it will most likely surprise you again.

You are not in control of the future. Actually, you are not even in control of the present. You are only in control of your *attitude* in the present. And it is attitude that gets you hired. Why? Because attitude attracts or repels people.

## **Frank Buckles**

Would you like to know the secret to a long life? Frank Buckles knew it. He fought in World War I and was captured by the Japanese in World War II. Yet, he survived both and died at home at the age of one hundred and ten. Here is his secret in his own words. “When you start to die, don't.”

As simple as that. Nevertheless, it is such a powerful recipe that you can apply it to almost any aspect of life. For example, when you start to feel sad, don't. When you start to feel tired, don't. When you start to feel angry, don't. When you start to feel failure, don't.

When asked again about longevity, Mr Buckles suggested that the will to survive is paramount. In other words, when you start to feel sad, don't; have the will to be happy. When you start to feel failure, don't; have the will to succeed.

Simple indeed.

So from now on, when you start to say never, don't.