Work Smarts
Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.
—Will Rogers
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You’ve just graduated college . . .
You want to get to a promotion . . .
. . . or you’ve just been laid off.

Whatever the case, you’re looking for some advice. Real advice. What does it really take to succeed? How do you get started? How do you pick yourself back up if you’ve fallen? What if I need to jump-start my career and it’s not enough that my spouse or mother is telling me I’m the greatest person in the world. That’s not actually getting me to my goal. I need real advice “from the street,” so to speak.

If you feel any of the above, this book is for you.

It’s also a book for me.

I interview people for a living who are at the top of their careers: CEOs, economists, policy thinkers, entrepreneurs. Inevitably, I began to wonder, how did they get there? Why can’t we get beyond the follow-your-passion advice and really find out what it takes to forge a career that maximizes all your interests and skills. What holds people back? What gets them ahead?

No career is perfect. Mine is riddled with mistakes and rejections. That’s why I had in the back of my mind that this book is also written for me. Have you ever lain awake at night, rehashing a conversation or
a meeting? Yep, that’s me. Maybe I didn’t convey what I wanted to in the right way, I think. “I shoulda” and “I coulda” are common phrases that pop in my head. When I head into the boss’ office to pitch an idea, I fret about it beforehand. How do I say it right? Surely, I think, others go through this too. How do they find the advice?

There’s a joke that there are more therapists in Manhattan than police. If you widened that out, according to data extrapolated from the International Coaching Federation, there’s now about one life coach for every 3,200 people in the United States. A decade ago, who even heard of a life coach? Clearly, people are looking for guidance, especially when they keep hearing about a jobs market that’s scarily getting smaller and tougher.

About 9 million people lost their jobs during the latest recession that began in 2007. As of this writing, things have improved. Firings are at their lowest level in five years and job openings are, conversely, at the highest level in five years. But the situation is a lot tougher. Some jobs in manufacturing, autos, and finance may never come back. Our salaries have pretty much gone nowhere in the last 10 years, which means we’ve got less money to spend because prices keep going up. And while the jobs are coming back, a good number of them are part-time or lower paying jobs which helps bring down the jobless rate, but doesn’t do much in the great scheme of getting ahead.

Okay, I’m not trying to depress you. I’m just giving you a reality check. Many people bury their heads in the sand when it comes to their careers. They hope things will just work out. But careers are not a lottery ticket—they’re not made out of luck. One CEO told me one of his biggest regrets is not managing his career better when he was younger. And this is coming from someone who is now a multi-millionaire with his own business. He says the biggest mistake he sees others make is that people are too passive about their careers. I’m a big believer in “everything happens for a reason,” but at the least, you want to make sure you’re doing everything you can to put the odds in your favor.

I’m not only talking about big ideas like: “How do I start my own business?” I’m talking about the small things that add up to a successful career:

- How to network.
- How to ask for a raise.
How to overcome fear.
How to be liked.

Men and women both have problems with the above. Around the time I was writing and researching, Sheryl Sandberg’s book *Lean In* sparked a national debate about equality of women in the workplace. I was glad to see all the attention the Facebook chief operating officer brought to the topic but I also felt the impression was that women did everything wrong in the workplace. The fact is, both men and women commit similar blunders. Both feel deficient in many of the topics Sheryl pointed out—networking, mentorship, salaries. I have a male friend who constantly complains he is not well paid. The problem is not his gender but because he’s just not very good at asking for a raise.

So if you want to know what’s the best way to do this, read this book. If you’ve ever wanted to get inside a boss’ head, this is as close as you’ll get. If you’re curious to know how the best in business got where they are, read on. If you want to know how even the most successful CEOs out there made mistakes and got fired, that’s all in this book, too. Take your head out of the sand and go out there with your eyes wide open and only good will come out of it.

********

People ask me all the time how I got into television.

The reason why they ask is because I got into television mid-career. I made the switch at the worst possible time, when I had left my job to have children. Not only was I leaving my current job but I was also attempting to get into a new, competitive career after having kids.

I learned two very valuable lessons in my career switch.

One came from a television coach who taught me something that had nothing to do with television. Let me explain.

A television agent said to me (years before I actually left my job) that if I had any serious thoughts about trying my hand at on-air work, I would need to hire a talent coach. So on her recommendation, I found one in New York. It was just a one-day session held at this person’s office. Or at least, I think it was her office. It may have been one of those rented spaces that give small businesses the air of a real office.
She walked over and led me into a little white room where several newspapers were laid out. Over the next hour or so, she had me read the newspapers as if they were television scripts. “More energy and emphasis!” she guided. After dozens of reads, I was starting to tune out. How many different ways can I read these paragraphs, I thought. Where I thought I was conveying energy, she was telling me I sounded flat. What was I really trying to accomplish? I just wanted to report good stories; I kept asking myself, why did I need to learn to read? She started getting on my nerves. I started not to like her hair. I wondered if her methods worked. I began to think about her fee. Everything else entered my head except that I needed to focus on being better to get a job.

Sensing my animosity, she suddenly sat down.

“I know this is frustrating,” she said. “I’m trying to help you find a job. You’re getting mad at me but you’re really mad at the process. It’s scary out there. Everyone wants to do the same thing you’re doing.”

She got up and grabbed a black marker and scribbled on the whiteboard.

Opportunity + Preparation = Luck

“Betty, do you understand what this means?”
“Yes, I do,” I said flatly.
“No, do you really understand what this means?”
I stared at her for a moment.

“People see other’s successes and they think, oh, they’re just lucky. Nobody is ever lucky, trust me. Sure, things happen to people. There’s stories everywhere of people who’ve been toiling away and all of a sudden, they get the dream job they’ve always wanted; or their business idea suddenly takes off and they make millions. We look at that and think, they’re lucky. No honey, they’re not lucky. They were prepared.

“Opportunities are everywhere for people. But if you’re not prepared, then you won’t be able to capitalize on that opportunity. It’s not luck, it’s being prepared. It’s doing the really hard work of being prepared for the one day when you get that opportunity. It may only come once so you have to be prepared. Your job is to prepare your whole life for that opportunity. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

She leaned in. “Do you understand?”
I hadn’t thought I was buying a life lesson but there it was, staring me in the face.

At that point, it really did sink in.

Richard Wiseman is a researcher in the UK who explores the idea of luck. In his fascinating 2003 book *The Luck Factor*, he concocted an experiment to show how “lucky” and “unlucky” people behave.

In one, he taped a five-pound British note on the ground outside a coffee shop near his office. He asked his test subjects, Brenda and Martin, to meet someone involved in a research project at the cafe. Martin considered himself a lucky man. Brenda thought she was an unlucky person. The scheming professor put various people in the coffee shop including a “millionaire” who was to do exactly the same thing with Brenda as he would with Martin.

Can you guess what happened?

Martin spotted the money right away on the ground, picked it up, and walked into the coffee shop. He sat next to the “millionaire” and began chatting him up, even buying him a coffee with the extra money he found. They began a fruitful dialogue and discussed connecting again on possible projects. Brenda, in the meantime, walked right past the free money, bought her coffee, and also sat down next to the millionaire. But she didn’t talk to him and he was instructed not to approach her first. So she left with no interaction and no extra money.

Imagine this was a real life scenario and you can easily see how one set of behaviors could lead to a lucky break and the other would lead to nothing. How many millionaires have you walked by and not said a word?

Me, personally, I really don’t like the word lucky. I prefer “optimism.” The people featured in this book are generally resilient optimists. They’re always preparing for the next chance that could change their futures. In certain cases, a no means a no, but in this instance, when it comes to your career, a no means you’ve got to look for another avenue to a yes.

After that day with the talent coach I stopped deluding myself that if I didn’t get a job in television it was because I was unlucky. I went about practicing and preparing and keeping my ears and eyes peeled for any opportunities or chance connections. I wasn’t nutty about it but just conscious that this was my goal and I was going to somehow get to it one way or the other.

Which led me to the other valuable lesson I learned in this transition.