

EXCERPT FROM HITTING YOUR STRIDE

CHAPTER 1

HITTING YOUR STRIDE



YOUR WORK, YOUR WAY

Nan S. Russell

A WINNING AT WORKING BOOK

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1

CREATING YOUR OWN LUCK

“Opportunities are seldom labeled.” **John A. Shedd**

I thought I was ready for what the world had to offer me. But, with an undergraduate degree from Stanford and a masters from the University of Michigan, I was fired from my first professional job. What I learned next was the foundation for a successful career. I learned the hard way, discovering firsthand the power of creating my own luck.

I decided to find an interim position while I looked for a *real* one. Against friends’ advice, I accepted a temporary position at minimum wage in an industry I knew little about. I decided the way to enjoy the position was to learn everything I could and contribute all I could. I poured over manuals in my downtime, developed processes to expedite the work, trained new employees, volunteered for additional assignments, and did anything that needed to be done.

Four weeks into a ten-week job, I was unexpectedly offered my first management position—a position that led to five promotions in the next seven years. It turns out I was creating my own luck, although I didn’t know it then, just by doing simple things many people fail to do. This chapter shares what I learned.

WHAT IT MEANS TO CREATE YOUR OWN LUCK

When you consistently and positively differentiate your performance, you create personal luck in the workplace. But people confuse luck with chance. Chance is me getting a hole in one. It’s “something that happens unpredictably without discernible human intention or observable cause,” according to *Merriam-Webster’s*.

We’re benefactors or victims of chance—finding a ten dollar bill, being in a fender bender, getting in the shortest but slowest line at the grocery store. We’re at the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time. Chance is out of our hands. Newspapers are filled with comic, tragic, frightening, and astonishing chance occurrences. Philosophically, it is what it is and can profoundly change lives.

Luck is different. You have everything to do with it. You create it. The quality and quantity of work you do, the impressions you leave, and the results you get influence future “lucky” moments and opportunities. Everyday, you

help or hinder your interests at work, often not knowing it. *Merriam-Webster's* defines luck as "a force that brings good fortune or adversity." It's "the events or circumstances that operate for or against an individual." And here's the key: you're that force.

Are you unlucky if you get lung cancer after a lifetime of smoking? Yes, compared to millions of smokers who don't. But a smoker has a luck-factor less than someone who never smoked. Just like my husband, a committed runner, has a healthy heart luck-factor higher than couch or mouse-potatoes his age.

It's the same at work. You control your luck-factor. You increase or decrease the likelihood of opportunity, enjoyable work, and goal achievement. What I've found in twenty years of managing is most people decrease, not increase, their luck-factor. Most people settle. They do what they need to do to get by. They opt out of *creating* luck. And they fail to do simple things that differentiate their performance.

Of course, simple doesn't mean easy. It's simple to understand that if you expend more calories than you take in, you'll lose weight. But if it were easy to do that consistently, there wouldn't be an obesity epidemic. *Knowing* how to differentiate performance and create luck will get you as far at work as it does knowing how to lose weight. Nowhere. It's not the knowing most people need, it's the *doing*. That's the first and most important component to any luck creation. Doing. The founder of McDonald's, Roy Kroc, put it this way: "Luck is a dividend of sweat. The more you sweat, the luckier you get." I know that to be true, too.

What you'll find in this chapter, and throughout the book, are specific luck ingredients I personally experienced in my career or in the careers of thousands of people I observed, advised, and worked with as I moved from a minimum-wage employee to vice president of a four-billion-dollar company.

There are many ways to create luck. But in work as in clothes, one size doesn't fit all. Personalize and adapt anything you find interesting or helpful to meet your style, needs, and goals.

ONE REASON REAL PEOPLE GET AHEAD

Of course, all people are real. But if your father is chairman of the board or CEO of a Fortune 500 company, your experience and exposure are different from most. Your skills may or may not be more developed, but you have the equivalent of an all-access backstage pass with unique

experiences grooming you for business interactions that are out of reach for most of us.

On the other hand, if you're like me, growing up without that backstage pass to business, this section is for you. As the daughter of a credit union manager and an elementary-school secretary in a southern California town of ninety thousand, I couldn't take my eyes off the skyscrapers on my first New York business trip and had to watch my host to navigate the silverware surrounding my lunch plate at Tavern on the Green. I entered the business world with little business savvy and experienced firsthand how *real* people, those without backstage business passes, can get ahead.

The answer? *Initiative*. It's the single most powerful way to create your own luck. That's because initiative is a rare commodity in the workplace. People with initiative stand out in a sea of just-enough-to-get-by-ness. Initiative is not about doing your job well. That's a given. If you're not doing the job you're paid to do at a good or very good level, all the initiative in the world is misdirected. Do your job. Do it well. *Then* do more.

Initiative is doing the stuff no one is expecting or telling or asking you to do. It involves "work at your discretion." That means doing what needs doing, and doing what is helpful and beneficial without being prompted. "At your discretion work" is always *in addition* to responsibilities you already have.

Initiative is why some people love working and seldom get bored. Being bored is a clue that you're expecting interesting work and rewarding activities to flow to you from the outside rather than be created by you. You put the control in someone else's hands. But ultimately, you're in charge of your thinking, your interest level, and your life. Initiative starts when you shift your perspective and take control.

Initiative comes in large, medium, and small increments. E-mailing your boss by the end of the day the answer to a question he had asked at a meeting (but no one could answer) demonstrates initiative. So does deciding to solve an inefficient workflow process by getting input from teammates and developing a suggested approach that others can react to. So does volunteering for a new project, or drafting an idea with detailed plans and an initial test.

Opportunity is everywhere and anywhere. Leveraging it requires personal enterprise and spotting ideas. Here are a few places to look:

- **Between the Cracks.** It's not part of your department (or job), and it's not part of my department (or job), but things falling through the cracks affect us both as well as the company. Solution—pick up, solve, or take responsibility for some.
- **Ask.** I love when staff members say, “I need more to do” or “I’m interested in what you discussed at the meeting, can I get involved?” or “Is there anything I can do to help?” Tell your boss you’d like more responsibility or ask for more work. I had an assistant who worked very quickly. She frequently asked what else she could do, and as a result, she ended up with higher-level projects and more interesting work. All because she asked.
- **Meetings.** Meetings are filled with wish lists, visionary ideas, and/or problems requiring solutions that may fall within your expertise. Set your listening cues to pick up what you could do, not just what you need to do.
- **Eclectic Places.** Seeds are everywhere: conferences, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, TV, sporting events, shopping centers. Incorporating concepts from one medium or venue to another can produce interesting applications.

I collect ideas and keep idea logs. It's had big paybacks for me. Hundreds of ideas pass through our heads each day. I'm not talking about world-changing ideas, but everyday “lightbulb” or curiosity moments. Train yourself to recognize and record them. Idea singles, not just home runs, can add up to a winning strategy.

When something pops to mind, log it. It may be just a snippet of an idea, but put it down. Borrow and build from other ideas because what someone else is doing may have application to your work. My lists are filled with column topics, website enhancements, marketing ideas, future books, personal development concepts, staff projects, business ideas, fun getaways, and life to-dos. If you develop a discipline to capture, nurture, and use ideas, it will dramatically affect your results. Of course, not every idea is good enough to warrant your time and effort; not every idea can be executed without approval or a nod of “okay.”

Here's an example of a positive outcome. Jen came with a proposal to fix a black hole between our department and marketing, even offering to take responsibility for the procedural solution, if needed. I met with the marketing head to discuss Jen's recommendations. We agreed her proposal was a good one, and fixing the problem benefited both

departments. Jen's initiative worked.

Jen often presented proposals and thus developed a reputation for solving "between-the-cracks" problems. As a result, she was asked to head a team to eliminate company black holes. The team reduced costs, increased efficiencies, and improved workflow. In time, a new department, headed by Jen, was created.

Initiative is not an attribute only some people have. Everyone has it. Visit any craft fair, hobbyist group, volunteer organization, or Internet blog. Take note of poets, musicians, artists, athletes, hackers, spammers, and graffiti artists. Initiative manifests itself in many ways and many places, positive and negative. People work on novels after a full day's work. That's initiative. They develop products in their garages, then determine how to manufacture and market them. That's initiative. Coaching your daughter's soccer team is initiative, too. So is almost everything you do involving your interests or passion.

It's curious how people can be so enterprising outside of work, yet leave it at the workplace door. Why be any less at work than who you are on weekends or evenings? Life is not just what happens outside of work. Applying that same action-oriented energy to the workplace will dramatically improve your results.

But here's the thing: initiative needs context. You build context by building experience. I learned in first grade that one plus one equals two. But, that's not the right equation when counting work experience. We often think we're building experience to help us get ahead. In reality, we're passing time. Ten years working, like a cloned Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, is not ten-years' worth of experience. Doing the same thing again and again yields an experience formula more like: ten times one equals one.

I used to equate years of work with years of experience. No more. I learned by making plenty of hiring and promotion mistakes, the two are not equal. Neither are years of work and performance. Doing something for five, ten, or twenty years better than when you started. I've been cooking for thirty years, but I remain a mediocre cook.

Two or three years involved with a business start-up or a new project might provide more growth and knowledge than ten years in a stable venue. And it might not. Gaining experience is more about you and your approach than anything else.

Recurring work events can be predictable, boring, and unchallenging ways of passing years at work, if what you're

doing is updating last year's memo, tweaking last year's budget, or fine-tuning last year's goals without applying innovation, analysis, or critical thinking. Retiring on the job is as prolific as spam and will get you as blocked as those unwanted e-mails.

I've found the difference between people who are *winning at working* and people who aren't is the difference between passing another year at work versus gaining another year of work experience. Those who build their experiences build their futures. And you can build experience without ever changing jobs.

Building experience involves the depth, diversity, challenges, and learning you gain by offering the best of who you are at work. It's seizing and creating opportunities. It's continual self-improvement and constant self-feedback.

You know you're gaining true experience when you problem solve your own mistakes, use hard-earned knowledge to handle more complex issues, make contributions more valuable than the year before, acquire new skills by venturing outside a comfort zone, embrace new ideas or technologies, or recognize you don't know as much as you thought.

People with initiative try new things, push the envelope, pitch ideas, offer innovative problem solving, and never stop learning and growing. They're the people gaining experience and building their work future.

THE POWER BEHIND IDEAS

You can have terrific initiative with outstanding ideas and never leverage it into *winning at working* results. That's because the power behind ideas lies in performance. Yours. The level of confidence people have in your ability to deliver an idea is directly related to your getting the okay to pursue it.

When you establish performance trust, you'll create for yourself opportunities on a regular basis. One successful idea delivery leads to another and another and another. Bigger and bigger ideas are entrusted to people who consistently turn ideas into reality.

Not only does an idea need to be good, but the ideamaker also needs to be a performer who can deliver the vision. That doesn't mean you need to have executed lots of ideas before getting one approved. It does mean the base quality of your work is a deciding factor. I've vetoed more good ideas than I've approved. Most were vetoed for one reason: performance trust. I didn't trust the person to deliver

the idea they had. A mediocre idea from a strong performer will win approval over a great idea from someone with inconsistent follow-through and poor results.

If you can't do the little things, why would anyone give you bigger things to do? And while every idea might not be big, it takes energy, time, and resources away from other work endeavors. Not all ideas that get approved turn out to be successful. That's okay. Much is learned from the failures, too. Look at Edison and the lightbulb. But if an idea fails because it was poorly executed, we only learn the competency quotient of the initiator.

There is a mercenary side to idea approval. What happens with your idea is a reflection on the person who approved it. I know for one, I'm not willing to risk my reputation on someone's half-baked or half-executed idea. That doesn't mean I don't take risks on individuals or ideas. I do on both. Though past performance is a good indicator of future performance (most of the time), business decisions are still about odds and risks. Make sure both are in your favor. Being a strong performer is the best way to get your ideas noticed and sell them to the powers that be. There are plenty of ideas that don't need approval. These are the ideas I start with when creating my own luck.

COMMON SENSE, UNCOMMON PRACTICE

Performance differentiation and luck creation starts with brand building. Everything you do builds your personal brand, your signature of sorts, which tells others what to expect from you. It's like any brand. If what they expect from you is not what they're looking for, you won't be the brand of choice for the assignment, the project, or the promotion.

Think of a brand you own or like, one you're passionate about. Maybe it's Starbucks Coffee or Apple's iPod or Target shopping. When you think of that brand, what attributes come to mind? Those qualities represent the brand. The same is true about brands you dislike. People create brands, too. When you hear Joe's name, you have an impression of the Joe-brand, good or not so good.

My first online class intrigued me when I noticed students' comments were more thoughtful, insightful, and connected to the material than those in a classroom. Why was that, I wondered? After my second, third, and fourth experiences with online learning, I concluded the difference was because one's name was permanently attached to the discussion log like a brand identifier. I found myself looking for certain people's names and reading their comments first because I knew their "brand" was reliable, with

good information.

Remember first grade when you proudly printed your name so everyone could see it at the top of the wide-ruled paper? We may not write our names in big, bold crayon on our work anymore, but make no mistake, your brand name is on everything you do.

Building your positive brand is easier than you think. It's not only about doing things well. Sure, that's part of it. But you must also do the right things well. This section underscores eight uncommon practices learned during my career that significantly differentiate performance and create personal work-luck and positive brand building. Scores of common sense behaviors make for great uncommon work practices. Doing any will strengthen your performance. Here are eight of my favorites:

- And Then Some
- Taking Your Words Seriously
- Take It or Leave It . . . But Get It
- Those Little Things
- A Dose of the Ds
- Ego-Detached
- Your ROI
- A Bit of Pollyanna

Like most things, performance differentiation is not in the knowing, but the doing. So, if you do three or more of these behaviors consistently, you'll set yourself apart. If you do five or more consistently, you'll see a noticeable difference in performance and results. And if you do all of them, you'll significantly enhance your positive brand attributes and your ability to create your own luck.

1. And Then Some

For most of my career, a plaque hung on the wall of my cube, then of my office. It was a reminder to offer the best I had to give. Like a good-luck ritual, I read that plaque everyday. On it was the inspirational saying, "And Then Some," by Carl Holmes. It's message was powerful to this impressionable woman seeking her way in an unfamiliar business world, at a time when even a child's picture did not adorn her desk, a signal she might not be serious about her career.

Over the years, I found truth in this message. People who do their job very well "and then some" have opportunities arise that others never do. After I was fired from my first professional job, it was my doing the job, and then some, that opened a door and many like it throughout my career. Good is not good enough. You need to offer your best.

People offering to do extra work only if they get paid for it, or take on extra responsibility only if their salary is increased first, have it backwards in my book. My experience: do the work, do it well, and then do it even better.

AND THEN SOME

*These three little words are the secret to success. They are the difference between average people and top people in most companies. The top people always do what is expected and then some. . . . They are thoughtful of others; they are considerate and kind . . . and then some. . . . They meet their obligations and responsibilities fairly and squarely . . . and then some. . . . They are good friends and helpful neighbors . . . and then some. They can be counted on in an emergency . . . and then some. . . . I am thankful for people like this, for they make the world more livable, their spirit of service is summed up in these little words . . . and then some. **Carl Holmes***

Higher pay, greater responsibilities, and increased opportunities follow individuals who are contributors. Anytime I look to hire people, offer permanent positions to temporary employees or interns, start up new departments or businesses, or promote individuals, I look for people doing their job well . . . and then some.

2. Taking Your Words Seriously

When we ordered a stained-glass window as an accent piece for our home, the artist-proprietor told us he was a bit behind. “So,” he said, “to be on the safe side, plan on six months.” That was two years ago. Each time we call or stop in, he has yet another plausible reason why our project isn’t done, the appropriate apology, and a new promise of a delivery date. What he doesn’t have is credibility.

Wishful promises don’t cut it in small-town businesses or big-city corporations. It doesn’t matter what role you’re in. If you tell me you’ll do something, I expect you will whether you’re a business, an employee, a co-worker, or my boss. You’re the one setting my expectations, so why wouldn’t I believe what you tell me?

It baffles me. Few people meet or exceed the expectations they set and they control. I’m not talking about deadlines other people set for you. I’m talking about the ones you establish. Maybe it’s because few people take their own words seriously. If you do, you can differentiate yourself at work. People who consistently do what they say they’re going to do, without sandbagging, are memorable. They’re the people with credibility. They’re the ones you want to hire and promote and do business with.

People fail to establish credibility without even knowing it. If someone tells me she'll provide information by Friday, but what she meant was "around Friday," she'll feel she met her obligation to me when she pushes "send" on her e-mail Monday morning. I'll view her as lacking credibility when the information for a project I wanted was late. However, if she told me I'd get the information no later than Tuesday and delivered it on Monday, while her delivery date remains the same, her credibility soars. By managing the words that define what others can expect from you, you can surprise and delight your co-workers, bosses, and customers.

To do that, replace casual speak and wishful promises of what you'd like to have happen or believe can happen, with commitments of what will happen. But here's the key: you can't commit what you can't control. If I tell a staff member he'll get his review next week, but I only control when I finish writing it not when it's approved, the likelihood of me failing to meet an expectation I set with him is strong. But if the review is written, signed by my boss, and in for processing at the time I set the expectation, I'll meet it.

If our delinquent artisan had called three months into the project, told us he had accepted an unusual opportunity to restore an historic building and was putting other projects on hold until that was completed, and then offered us the choice of waiting until he resumed work or getting our deposit back, he could have preserved his credibility and the relationship.

Actions may speak louder than words. But it's our words that provide the backdrop for whether our actions measure up. If I'm your customer, your boss, or your co-worker, I'm taking your words seriously. I think you should, too.

3. Take It or Leave It . . . But Get It

The expense was substantial. An immersion workshop with twelve participants sharing a common goal to hone their skills. With nervous eagerness, like kindergarteners embracing school, we received feedback and suggestions about our work. Some of the comments I used. Some I didn't. But all of it was helpful.

I haven't always viewed feedback that way. At times, I've taken it more like a personal indictment than a helpful gauge; an intruder I needed to defend against, rather than input I needed to evaluate. I've even found myself akin to a workshop colleague who said he wanted input, but when he got responses different from what he expected, he argued and debated and explained. What he wanted was praise or input he agreed with, not honest reactions. It's not enough to ask for feedback. You have to be open to

receive it. Our colleague's defensiveness created a willingness for us to offer nothing but cursory input. His argumentative actions lost him an opportunity for fresh voices and input.

I learned a painful lesson about feedback in my first management position. Given a large assignment, I was proud of what I had produced and certain it would be received as an outstanding product. Instead, I discovered my work was mediocre at best and significantly flawed, because I had failed to seek feedback and assessment from the end users along the way. Relying only on my thoughts and perceptions was a big mistake.

During my corporate work years, I learned to view feedback as data. The more data I got, the more information I had to improve what I was working on. Realizing I was in charge of how I used that feedback data, I learned to seek it. Feedback is opinion, not fact. It's something to evaluate, not blindly accept.

However, I find when several people have the same perception, it's good to listen. When I get insights I hadn't thought about, it's good to consider them. When input is mixed, it's good to follow my instincts. But when people provide feedback with a hatchet, finding fault rather than offering ideas for improvement, it's good to look at it with detached curiosity.

Bottom-line: if you want to differentiate your performance, learn to seek and offer well-intentioned feedback. I think of it like the Sicilian proverb: "Only your real friends will tell you your face is dirty." Let input, suggestions, and feedback be real friends to you.

4. Those Little Things

Moving to another state meant finding a new dentist. I tried one a neighbor recommended who seemed friendly and eager to please. But I never went back. His office was a case study in the importance of little things.

The coat hook was missing a screw and falling from the wall; waiting-room magazines were outdated; the posted office hours were taped over with an index card and new hours written in marker; the credenza was overflowing with mail and claim forms. There are plenty of dentists to choose from, and while he might be competent, why chance it?

It's the same at work. Bosses choose which people get the great assignments and promotions. Customers choose which businesses to frequent. All those little things really aren't so little. They're impressions. And impressions help

others make decisions about you.

Does it matter if you don't spell check your e-mail? It's only an e-mail, right? Wrong. It's an impression about the way you work. Does it matter if the address label is crooked on the letter you send a customer? Who looks at the envelope, anyway? It matters. It's an impression highlighting that the company, or individual, has poor attention to detail.

Does it matter if you're habitually late for meetings or don't show up at all? I'd say so. It's an impression about what you think of other people's time. What if your voicemail message says, "Your call is important to me. I'll get back to you as soon as I can," but then you return the phone call two weeks later. That "little thing" is an impression about the real importance of my call and your credibility.

If I ask you for a business card and you can't find one among your overflowing scraps of paper, it's a little thing. But it leaves an impression that you're disorganized. If your presentation looks like a sixth-grade term paper, it's hard to have confidence that the executed idea won't be flawed as well. How a proposal looks is a little thing that entices us to take a closer look, or not.

But, don't confuse little things with big things. You can't just do all the little things well and think that's it. Content is king on the Internet and television; competence is king in the workplace. The competent performance of your job is central to any *winning at working* philosophy. This is not a message encouraging perfectionism. You can't be perfect. If you try to be, you'll potentially limit yourself and get lost in those little things. And while some have a talent for details and noticing little things, everyone can learn.

Start by noticing those little things that create an impression on you. Little things like the cashier doesn't take off the sensor tag; or the babysitter is late again; or your name is misspelled on an invitation; or the orthodontist staff presents a rose to your daughter after her braces come off; or the repair man arrives at the designated time. What do those little things communicate to you about the person or business who delivered them? And what impressions are you leaving with your little things?

Bottom-line: If you're not paying attention to the little things, you're losing opportunities. If you want to be *winning at working*, you have to pay attention to little things, *too*.

5. A Dose of the Ds

Author and management guru Peter Drucker said, "People adjust to the level of demands made on them." I would

add—we also adjust to the level we demand of ourselves. At some point, we grow up and pass for adults by how we look. To match that look with actions requires a dose of the Ds: determination and discipline.

I'll give you an example from my life. My son, Ian, was born when I was twenty-six. I decided to stay home the first two years, but needed brain stimulation and interaction with an adult world, so I decided to pursue my interest in writing. I wrote my first article, sent it to a magazine, and waited. Everyday I anxiously checked the mail to discover if today would launch my writing career. When the manuscript was finally returned with a regrets' note, my aspirations of being a writer ended. I figured an editor knew better than I did what I could do. I'd been waiting for my lightning bolt to strike.

Twenty something years later, I know success has little to do with lightning bolts. So, when I left the corporate world to live and work from the mountains of Montana, I took with me that same dream of being a writer. For six months I studied writers and writing, read books, attended seminars, and learned the business of writing.

I wanted to be a columnist, so I developed a strategy to become one by volunteering to write a life-reflections column for a regional magazine. When they agreed, my writing career was launched while I learned the discipline of column writing and fine-tuned my new craft. That column, "In the Scheme of Things" (www.intheschemeofthings.com), is now self-syndicated in several states and Canada. A second column started a year later, "Winning at Working" (www.winningatworking.com), reaches millions of webbased readers and provided the foundation for this book.

So what's the difference in today's writing success? Luck? Yes, but it's self-created luck. Better writing? Sure, I'm better today than I was in my twenties. But that's not it. It's discipline and determination. There are days when I'm not in the mood to write, but writers write, and I write. There are days when marketing my column to another publication or getting one more rejection seems overwhelming. Those days I take a deep breath before giving myself a mental kick and moving on.

People who create their own luck have discipline and determination. They push themselves to do the project when they're not in the mood, make the phone call, brush off the rejection, or learn the skill they're missing. They know there are few career lightning bolts in the world they live in.

Want to create more luck? Demand more of yourself.

Stop thinking of bosses as parental, deadlines as moveable, and others as responsible for developing or motivating you. Tag, you're it!

6. Ego-Detached

With the opening of a new attraction and numerous reporters arriving in an hour, it felt like one of those “chicken-with-your-head-off” days. We were close, but not ready. So like locusts to a wheat field, a swarm of people were devouring last minute details. Then, it rained. With rain, came worms, hundreds washing onto the entrance sidewalk. When I returned to the area, I found a manager, several department supervisors, and a director outside with brooms, sweeping up worms. No one asked them to sweep worms. But with guests arriving shortly and no one else available, they found brooms and started sweeping.

They didn't get hung up over titles or roles. Instead, they did what needed to be done at the time. Their actions were what I call, ego-detached. Being ego-detached frees you to do what needs to be done because it's not about you; it's about something bigger than you. It's an attitude of contribution. How can I best serve today? How can I help? What can I contribute? Being ego-detached is taking your ego out of the picture. It's looking at the best result, not necessarily the result that's best for you.

But here's the twist. Being ego-detached is not being ego-less. I heard Donald Trump talking about egos with Larry King on CNN. He commented that all the successful people he knew had big egos, defining ego as confidence or self-esteem. Certainly believing in yourself and having high self-esteem are qualities that help to cultivate personal success. I'm not suggesting you shed either; quite the opposite. You need plenty of confidence and self-esteem in order to be ego-detached.

I learned that as a senior manager involved in a start-up company. One afternoon, the president saw me stapling information sheets in a conference room. After saying good-bye to his guest, he came back and asked, “Nan, what *are* you doing?” After explaining why meeting a FedEx pickup was critical to a corporate initiative and the number of people working to meet it, he offered to help. People who are ego-detached recognize that the best use of their time and talent can vary in the moment.

I used to marvel at colleagues of mine, other vice presidents, who delayed getting important papers to their boss because their executive assistant was gone for the day, and the papers needed to be copied. I'm not talking about the stuff that can and should wait. It's those late-night meetings when the boss says he has to review something, and

he needs a copy. Ego-detached people go to the copier, copy it, and walk the copy back to their boss, regardless of title. It's how best they can serve at the moment.

Don't let your ego dictate your actions, let the situation. Don't be afraid to sweep up worms from time to time. And don't be afraid to serve. As Tolstoy put it, "The vocation of every man and woman is to serve other people." That's egodetached.

7. Your ROI

All requests are not equal; all customers or clients are not equal; all to-do-list tasks are not equal; all work responsibilities are not equal. You can do fifty things today and get little, if any, return on your investment for having done them. Or you can do one or two things that have a large return.

You possess personal capital. It's comprised of your time, effort, knowledge, and skills. Investing that capital wisely yields a return on your investment. The higher your return on investment, your ROI, the more profit you earn. Profit in this context yields discretionary endeavors. Discretionary endeavors tap into the single most powerful thing you can do to create luck—initiative.

There are hundreds of books filled with an equal number of approaches to managing your tasks and time. Use whatever works for you. But as you do, keep your ROI in mind. Every day you invest your capital. Sometimes you invest it wisely, sometimes foolishly, sometimes neutrally. The better investments you make over time, the better your returns will be over time. Think long-term ROI. Your ROI is not about short-term gains, but sustainable long-term ones that build your brand.

Here are a few of my favorite personal ROI strategies:

- **Prioritize people over tasks.** Family or staff or a boss asking for something, regardless of what, should go to the top. Requests from your key people list should be met immediately, if possible, with a sense of urgency. These are the people who pay you the biggest dividends—love, support, and economic well-being—so do the requests from this group first, and you will build equity for the long term. When you hit life's potholes, this equity will help get you through.
- **Work smart *and* fast.** If you're slow on the computer, increase your skills. If you pace yourself or spread your work out through the day, don't. If you don't have time to train someone to help you, make the time. The more you can leverage yourself, and the more work you produce, the more

valuable an asset you become and the more interesting work you'll get to do. Invest in yourself.

- **Choose making progress over being busy.** Spend a day answering e-mails, reading mail, completing miscellaneous and unimportant tasks, and at the end of the day, you'll find you're no further along on your important work than when you started. Sure, those recurring tasks need to be done, too. But choose first to make progress, then do recurring tasks, not the other way around, or you'll find there's no time left for the big stuff that offers a better return on your investment.
- **Go slow to go fast.** If you take the time upfront to thoughtfully set up the systems, procedures, and approaches you need to function effectively, you'll be well rewarded in the long term for your investment. This might include training, research, mission statements, or project plans. Any number of work elements fit into this category, giving you exceptional long-term returns for your upfront efforts.

If you invest your personal capital wisely, you'll find your return on investment compounding year after year and your personal stock rising.

8. A Bit of Pollyanna

"Stop being such a Pollyanna," a trusted, more experienced colleague counseled as we took the long route back to my office. He had just witnessed my project idea annihilated as co-workers eagerly argued why it wouldn't work, where it was flawed, and why it shouldn't be funded. Despite naysayers in the room that day, I believed it was worth pursuing. Ultimately, it did receive funding and became, in time, a successful endeavor. A bit of Pollyannaism got me through.

Everyday, in meetings just like this one, ideas are gutted before they're allowed to evolve. It's becoming a workplace ritual to poke pinholes in the balloon of an idea until enough air leaks out to drop it to the ground. We look first for the reasons why something can't be done; why it won't work; why it's too difficult; why it's a bad idea. We've become so good at burning idea bridges that might lead to new business, new procedures, or new products that we don't even have to build the bridges first.

People who are *winning at working* take a different approach. They pump air into idea-balloons by offering suggestions, brainstorming possibilities, and encouraging input. They point out problems by offering solutions that

make the idea more viable. They're curious and intrigued, looking at how one idea might fit with another, or weaving two small ideas into one bigger one. Instead of asking why we should do this, they're encouraging people to give it a try.

Understanding the fragile nature of emerging ideas, they help protect, nurture, and greenhouse ideas—their own and others—until they have a chance to take root. They get excited about new possibilities. Often it's their optimism, vision, and positive approach that waters the seed until it grows and blooms. They have a bit of Pollyanna in them. But they probably won't call it that since Pollyanna gets a bad rap in business circles as naive and unrealistic.

I think it's time to look at Pollyanna differently. You will find more work success seeing the positive side and stretching your horizons than finding reasons not to. Impossible is often more a state of mind than a reality. As Helen Keller reminds us, "No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars . . . or sailed to an uncharted land . . . or opened a new heaven to the human spirit."

But I've also learned in twenty years in management that there's more to *winning at working* than positive thinking and optimistic approaches. A bit of Pollyanna should be mixed with strong doses of common sense. Or, as British political leader Harold Wilson put it, "I am an optimist, but I'm an optimist who carries a raincoat."

Still, I know if I had listened to everyone who deflated my idea-balloons, I wouldn't have the life opportunities I have now. I've experienced the power of hope, vision, and positive thinking in the workplace. My point of view? A bit of Pollyanna is a good thing.

WHAT CAN I DO TOMORROW?

Creating luck is a process. It's developing opportunities, recognizing and embracing opportunities, and being ready when opportunities come your way. Like Oprah Winfrey says, "Luck is a matter of preparation meeting opportunity." Start preparing for yours now.

You don't need to wait until Monday or for the stars to align. You don't need to wait to get a new job or a new boss or lose twenty pounds or get organized. You can start wherever you are. Like most things, creating your own luck happens a step at a time. Below is a list of ideas to get you started. There's no prescribed order or guidelines for completion. There's no magic beyond what you put into it.

Ideas to Help You Start Creating Your Own Luck

Ideas About You:

- Decide you want to.
- Decide you can.
- Decide you will.
- Read Chapter Six: “It’s All About You.”
- Where are you headed? How will you know if you get there? Define what *winning at working* means to you at this point in your life. Write it down. My definition has evolved dramatically over the years.
- On a scale of 1-10 (1 = not at all), how bored are you at work? If your score is 4 or more, write down five reasons why and reread, “One Reason Real People Get Ahead” in this chapter. If it’s less than 4, list five things that keep you interested in your job. Is there anything you can leverage from that information?

Ideas About Your Performance:

- Reread your last appraisal with new eyes—ask your boss or human resources for a copy. Make a list of areas noted for improvement. Write down specifically what you’re doing to address these. How are you doing? What else can you do?
- If you have a job description, analyze it. Usually the most important tasks are first. Determine how your performance stacks up on the critical responsibilities. Adjust accordingly. If you don’t have a job description, write down the ten most important tasks noted on your appraisal and go from there.
- Make progress on at least one important item on your to-do list. If you don’t have a to-do list, start one.
- Write five simple work goals for the week from a list of things you’ve been putting off. Do one a day.
- Review progress on Friday, and rewrite five for next week. And again—if they’re the same goals, take smaller bites. These should be simple, doable activities like scheduling the meeting you’ve been putting off, calling the person you don’t want to call, or reviewing the draft.
- Read your company’s annual report and marketing literature, plus information related to your department or division. Write down three ways in the position you’re in, you can contribute to your organization’s vision and goals.
- Review your company’s training and development curriculum, and sign up for skill development to help you do your job faster and/or smarter. If your company doesn’t have a program, stop by the

community college for a brochure, review online options, or check classes offered at large computer retailers.

Ideas About Your Brand Building:

- Write down your brand attributes. Read your last performance appraisal and determine which of your attributes are apparent at work. How are these the same or different from your list? What needs to be changed or enhanced?
- Change your voice-mail message to match your delivery and availability. Don't commit what you can't do. If you're away, adjust your message.
- Answer all e-mails and messages from priority people (family, staff, boss).
Answer all e-mails and voice mails on the same day you receive them. Assess how that worked or didn't. Then, develop an ongoing strategy you can commit to. It's fine to answer an e-mail by saying that you need to research something and that you'll get back to the sender no later than X—then make sure you do.
- Spell check every e-mail before you press send.
- Pick three behaviors from the common sense, uncommon practices list. Reread the section and do at least a first step from each.
- Start three idea logs—one for work, one for personal growth and development, and one for fun things to do. Log current ideas. Add at least one idea or snippet each week.
- In addition to what you need to do, listen at meetings for what you could do. Note those ideas in your idea log as soon as you return from the meeting.
- At a meeting or on a phone call ask, "How can I help?" Then do it.