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Overcoming the Fear and Becoming Successful

A few years ago I went to the funeral of a man I had once worked for and been fond of. His grieving daughter and wife hugged me and said, “He never stopped talking about you. A week before he died he said, ‘I made a big mistake letting Dani go and not firing his manager.’” Maybe he did make a mistake, but it turned out to be the beginning of great opportunities for me.

Fear is a dominating factor in many people’s lives which can cause them to work at jobs they are unhappy with for many years until they are forced to face reality. Finding their “new path in life” and becoming successful, they look back and wonder why it took them so long to make the change.

Becoming successful against the odds:

Coming to America in 1965 without formal education or financial backing, resulted in my working 80 hours a week for 3 ½ years coating prescription lenses at a minimum wage. Seeing no future at my job, I enrolled in a computer self-study school against my family’s “advice,” since they were more concerned about the income lost which I would not bring home than they were about my future. After graduating, I faced the bitter reality of not being able to get a job for a full year. Not having a college education and with English as a second language, I was turned down after each interview. Taking the NCR aptitude at Macy’s, I scored 10 questions correct out of 11, but was turned down because of spelling mistakes on my application despite the fact I was told that it was the highest score they had ever seen.

After being rejected for a year, I finally got a job as a computer operator on the NCR 315 Computer working late into the night. Watching computer lights blinking for hours while processing information, tasks that take seconds today, I decided to study COBOL programming with the aid of a Hebrew-English Dictionary. Seeing the method I used to study resulted in skepticism by everyone who thought I would not be able to learn COBOL programming this way. The NCR salesman who often visited us admired my determination and said: “Keep studying; practice makes it perfect.” When I asked him what it means he said: “one day you will understand.” The 75 year old President of the company I worked for and his daughter were another source of inspiration, encouraging me to study, feeling I will go far. Working closely with me, his daughter fixed the spelling mistakes in my programs enabling me to correct the program logic errors.

The President, who was a self-made man, started his company with his brother 50 years earlier, using 2 sewing machines to manufacture drapes and growing the business to 100 million dollar company by the time I was hired. Unlike the President, my computer manager was afraid of learning new technology and refused to keep up with the industry which resulted in having an outdated computer shop. The company executives and department heads realized that the computer manager could not give them what they needed and came directly to me to write the programs they wanted to fulfill their business requirements, which caused even more conflicts and stress between me and my manager.



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When “somebody gives you advice watch where it’s coming from:”

While visiting my sister in the cancer ward at Colombia Presbyterian, my father introduced me to a Textile Company owner whose company was in the same building where I worked. After speaking with me for a couple of hours, he offered me a job as his computer manager at a 25% salary increase. Hearing my computer manager’s daily complaint that “I can’t trust you since you don’t know what you are doing,” I decided to accept his offer. The next day I “broke the news” to my manager. He turned pale when he heard it and left the computer room in a hurry to see the company President. Shortly after, he returned smiling and said: “we decided to match the offer and increase your Xmas bonus.” Hearing about the manager’s offer resulted in everyone “advising” me not to take a chance starting a new job, increasing my fear of the unknown and resulting in my staying for 5 more years.

A few years later, when I was married to Ellen, she encouraged me to enroll in SUNY’s Empire College, a “University without Walls” that consisted of individual coursework with a mentor. Speaking with my company President about it, he agreed to pay my entire tuition saying: “study what you want and get good grades; I am sure we will benefit from it.” Studying 19th century literature with my mentor Dr. Stern, who has previously been the dean of Brooklyn College, for 2 ½ years resulted in my achieving 50 credits in literature. After taking an additional 10 credits in business, I wrote a computer essay about modernizing a company with an outdated computer system, using my company as the model. The essay was sent to Brooklyn Polytechnic where Dr. Flynn awarded me 50 credits for my computer and business experience. Next, the New York Theological Seminary awarded me 40 additional credits for my individual studies from encyclopedias, and my photography mentor, who was one of the original Life Magazines photographers, awarded me 6 credits in photography and gave me private photography lessons for another 6 credits. This resulted in being awarded 96 credits for my life experience and graduating with 156 credits with a B.S. in Computer Science.

After graduating from Empire College, I visited Dr. Flynn and spoke with him about my situation. After listening to me, he told me to quit my job immediately before I fell behind the market resulting in my never being able to leave. When I asked him if he thought I could get another job he said: “how about trying and asking for 50% more than you’re making now. My bright students who want to go to MIT don’t know as much as you do.” The “straw that broke the camel’s back” was a disk crash without a current backup that happened while my manager was on vacation. Feeling the backup process took too long, he told me to backup on a weekly instead of a daily basis, trying to save time. Working with the IBM expert, who later became a dear friend, for 48 hours without sleeping we managed to recuperate most of the damaged data. Hearing the news my manger cut his vacation short and when he returned, blamed me for not having a current back up. When I heard this, I told him that I quit, walked out of the job in the middle of the day, and went home.



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This resulted in “all hell breaking loose.” That evening the company executives called me at home trying to convince me to stay, and my manager spend two hours on the phone trying to change my mind. The next morning, the President called me to his office and offered me a pay raise and tuition for my master’s degree in any area I chose. When I told him it wasn’t a question of money or education since he had been kinder to me than my family, he looked baffled and asked: “Why are you leaving? You have been with us 10 years and have a home here.” When I told him what Dr. Flynn said about falling behind the computer industry he said: “that’s my concern as well. Stay for another 3 months as my personal advisor and help me change the computer department.” The next 3 months became “hell on earth,” working with a manager who refused to learn the new technology I tried to implement, and resulted in my getting sick. Realizing that am fighting a “lost battle” and that the President would not fire my manager, I decided to leave despite my fear of the unknown. Seeing how scared I was, Ellen who worked for the Board of Education at the time, decided to work that summer testing children in rooms without air-conditioning to earn additional income in case I decided to go to graduate school. Wishing me good luck in my new venture the President said: “I know you have to leave; if you choose to come back call me, you will always have a home here.” The following week I got a thank you letter from him with \$1000 check.

For the next 3 years I worked in three different jobs where I was very unhappy. The first job was with a computer Service Bureau which required long hours and resulted in having dinner with Ellen at 10 PM. The second job was with a Consulting Firm that promised me security and education and laid me off a week before my vacation. The third job was a computer Consulting Firm that hired people for specific projects and kept them only as long as the project lasted. Being unhappy and stressed at the 3 jobs, I remembered the President’s parting words about “having a home at his company” and had to fight the daily temptation to call him, since I never go back to places I left.

Modifying the IBM Manufacturing and Distribution software at the third job resulted in my becoming an expert in the industry and led to opening my own business in 1980 against my family’s “good advice,” who told me I will never make it. In 1985, being recognized as the IBM Manufacturing and Distribution software industry expert, I was selected to represent the Mid-Atlantic States at a round table seminar in Atlanta. At the “round table” seminar I met the IBM executives who were in charge of the software development. Discussing with them how to improve the software resulted in their next upgrade.

At that funeral I mentioned in the beginning of the article, I saw the nephew of my old boss. He became President of the company after his uncle’s death and used to visit the same restaurant I did for many years. Seeing me with clients or prospects he always came over to my table and said, “Dani is an excellent consultant. We made a big mistake letting go. It’s our misfortune and your luck.”

Remembering the company president who was kinder to me than my own family became my business model; I work on a handshake and never forget where I came from.



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