

You Can Get There from Here

My Journey from Struggle to Success

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Portfolio / Penguin

PART ONE

Foundation

Ospreys

I have an unusually revealing story to tell that is not set in the office or a classroom. In fact, it's not inside at all. To understand it, you have to put yourself by the water and recognize that in business and in life, there is a lot to be learned just by watching.

Watching has been the cornerstone of my personal leadership journey. So give me a moment to share with you an amazing example of a creature that perhaps embodies everything I'm trying to articulate in the early pages of this book.

I want to take you outside to observe the osprey.

I want to tell you some things about this magnificent bird.

This sea hawk drifts on the breeze. All the time, it gazes at the surface of the water, perhaps fifty yards below, looking for a hint, a sign.

As though it were suspended on an invisible wire, the bird stops for just a second in the air. It cocks its wings and unleashes a dive that is both fierce and fearless. Breaking the surface talons first—no other diving bird does this—it creates a big, loud splash.

At first submerged, the osprey pops its head from the water and then seems to rise as though it had been flying all along, shaking off a spray of droplets as it climbs. Sometimes it tosses its catch in the air and realigns it so that the fish is parallel to its body, which makes the osprey more aerodynamic. If the osprey misses the target, which happens about half the time, it goes back into the sky and continues searching.

But like all birds of prey, it persists. It is unyielding. It never gives up. It must always win.

Is there a better lesson?

In your job, in your school, on your team, in your family, the hunting osprey presents the perfect image and, I would argue, the perfect metaphor for how to live. Alone in the sky and hunting to provide for its family, the raptor is the living model, the definition, of diligence. People can create endless volumes of words to describe this idea, but the actions of the bird of prey alone, its determination, define this.

I believe this is how we need to be: aggressive, diligent, determined. Persisting, never giving up, embracing the idea that even though you will not always succeed, you must never stop trying to win. I hold a lasting image of legendary North Carolina State coach Jim Valvano in his emotional closing remarks at a televised ESPN awards ceremony. Dying of cancer and knowing that the end was near, he told the world, “Never give up. Don’t ever give up!”

That message is at the heart of this book.

You must work hard. You must treat your coworkers decently. You must be honest in whatever you do.

The United States is a nation of phenomenal opportunity. I have been touched by that, moved by that, all my professional life. Countless stories of men and women who achieved greatness by taking advantage of the opportunity to “try” and “never give up” fill our public libraries and our bookshelves at home. It is easy to lose sight of that potential amid endless accounts of economic turmoil, joblessness, and confusion. None of those conditions is permanent, and more important, none of them excuses us from making an effort to be the best at whatever we try to do.

Being the best has to be our objective, even if that goal seems impossibly hard to reach. With excellence as the objective, you will never have to apologize for the effort. Without that objective, a career, a life, can seem aimless.

This is not solely a book about business, because you will need to know more than business practice if you want to succeed. But it is full of stories about *my* experiences. They lifted me from poverty, then into school, and then into the workplace. I think of it more as a book about life: what I have learned and how those experiences might help you.

I know that it will be of great value in the workplace, but I also know it will be of value in school, too, or at home, or on the playing field.

There are a million business books with “leadership” in the title. To me, leadership is an approach to work and life that embraces the drive at the heart of that osprey’s dive. And the image of that osprey is an amazing one to hold as you pursue your objectives.

There is no apparent reason the osprey should be able to do what it does. Strip it down to its physical essence and you have just a few ounces of feathers and a few pounds of meat and bone. Spirit and purpose are the two elements that make those parts come together to achieve what that creature is able to achieve.

The drive to win flows from that combination.

I am going to tell you stories of how that drive to win played out in my life.

It hasn’t always been there. I very well could have embraced failure instead of success. I might have fallen into the despair and bitterness that often plague black men struggling to escape lives mired in poverty. You might have looked at my childhood and concluded that I had every reason to fail. I could have written a book about nothing but excuses. All the usual excuses were there at one point or another, and I had only examples of failure in front of me on a daily basis. I just never turned to them. The audacity that I could have a different path and outcome is just that: audacity. The mere thought that I could escape my environment and have a different outcome is astounding.

Still, there were also powerful experiences in that childhood spent in poverty that opened pathways where other people might have seen only obstacles. I know the value of people, and of how they intervened in my life.

As a child, I was blessed not only with athletic grace and speed, but also with opportunities in which those physical assets would lift me beyond expectations and put me on higher ground. Basketball, football, track—that is where the competitor was born in me. What I learned about drive and winning on the playing field still informs what I do today.

It doesn’t surprise me that I am so drawn to the image of the osprey.

I found inspiration in these birds since I first learned about them in the Bible as a child. There are dozens of specific references to birds of prey in there, almost all of them metaphors for speed, strength, intelligence, and persistence.

If you dig into the science of these birds—their life spans, how they mate, their habitat, how they raise their young—you will find so many characteristics you could easily apply to the challenges of leadership. Birds of prey change their location every year, so they must always learn about their surroundings. These birds almost always build their annual nest a little higher up than the year before, so their range of vision is extended. They mate for life. They ferociously protect their young. There is even a verse in Isaiah that pays tribute to the power of the eagle, another bird of prey I am inspired by: “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

What is most fascinating to me about birds of prey is that they use everything they have to great intensity and effect. Each feather, each muscle, is a masterwork of purpose and design: light, efficient, and strong. You can find assets like these in people, too, or in yourself, but they may not be apparent at first glance.

A lot of business books offer the promise of guaranteed success if only you do “exactly what I did the way I did it.” I am not naïve. I don’t believe that. My success has been a function of hard work, skill, timing, experience, and execution. There may be other externals that define your potential for success. It depends on who you are, where you are, and how you have prepared yourself. The question is whether you will recognize these opportunities and understand how to get the most from them.

Winning, then, is in your hands, no matter the challenge. Most likely you already have what you need, depending on the goal. As persistence is the great strength of the osprey, attitude is the great strength you carry into business.

The will to win must be at the heart of your career.

Everyone can’t be an osprey, but everyone does have assets. I found them in my own life, with a great deal of help and mentoring over time,

and they became the tools I have used consistently in a very successful career. I have drive. I have persistence. I love the company of people I respect. I have a need to find effective ways to reach my goals and to help people find their stride to reach their goals.

This approach lifted me from the kind of poverty that has crushed people for generations. It carried me into the intense competition of high school sports, where I learned invaluable lessons about paying attention to my coaches, the voices of experience and wisdom. It gave me choices when it came time to pick a college. When I went to work, that drive planted the seeds of leadership in me from my first day on the job.

Most important of all, the belief that I must always strive to win has fueled everything I've done in my business life, from the day I walked into Indiana Bell many years ago and decided I needed to know everyone's job to be a good boss, to my latest assignments as the principal at Eagles Landing Partners, with clients in Thailand, Brunei, Mexico, Japan, and the United States.

The most important person in defining how you are perceived is you, no one else. The choices you make and the way you pursue them build the image you present. If you are not honest and fair in your relationships with your coworkers, people will easily and quickly know that about you, and you will pay a price. It may not be comfortable speaking truth to power, but dishonesty is at the heart of so much business wreckage that the value of ethical behavior and honesty should be apparent to everyone.

Honesty enhances everything about a career. One of the achievements I am most proud of after decades on the job at many levels, bottom to top, is that there is an army of people who will always be eager to work with me if I have a job to offer. Time and again I have seen this play out: I shift positions, and it doesn't take long for the phone to ring with requests from people who want to come along.

This is so because I have been able to touch these people in their careers, to help them focus on what had to be done, to help them lead and win. You turn around organizations, in most cases, by turning around individuals. At many points in your career, that process starts with you and your decision to lead and to win.

Have I always succeeded? No. Have I ever stopped trying? No.

There are no mysteries here. That may well be the beauty of it. I have lived an honest and ethical life. That doesn't mean I have lived an easy life. But like the osprey, once I commit, I won't stop until I've won. I have refused to be defined by my limitations: my youth, my race, my background, my humble beginnings.

I made a different choice.

Like the osprey, I chose to win.