



CHAPTER 1

WHO AM I?

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Who Am I?

If ever there was a “gym rat” of business, it would be me. I absolutely love working and getting involved in any kind of selling or production. My earliest memories as a kid growing up in the 60’s were of spending my summers hanging around and eventually working in the cotton gin my dad managed in our home town of Opelousas, Louisiana. My mother also worked – not as common in those days -- for the largest privately owned department store in town. She managed the Ladies Department while also serving its buyer – a position that filled our evenings with the talk of business and in particular, management. It was during these discussions about my parents’ trials, tribulations and successes that I first learned of miscommunications, backroom politics, “stupid management decisions”, and employees who “didn’t get it”.

Right or wrong, my mother and father’s insight and perspective on business framed the way in which I tend to approach and learn about it. Little did I know at the time how much those nightly lessons would fuel a hunger for business in me. I became extremely anxious to jump in and play the game myself. So when the time came -- instead of following everyone else my age and pushing for that MBA -- I decided to strap on the pads and start earning my chops in the business world.

And that’s why, one month after graduating high school, I packed everything I owned onto my Honda 350 motorcycle and moved from my hometown to the big city of New Orleans. My first position was as a ‘hand’ in the oil fields; and a year and half into that job I witnessed a scenario that rang a bell in my mind -- altering my path and changing my life forever.

On one particular day, our crew was working on a job for one of the major oil companies -- and honestly, doing a very poor job of it. So when their representative showed up on the job after his three-martini lunch and began berating my supervisor and everyone else within earshot, I was hit with my first of many epiphanies. I sat there on that stack of pipe in the 95-degree heat that is New Orleans in the summer and watched this guy totally lose it -- and I asked myself a fundamental question. How is it that this drunken idiot in his short sleeved shirt and tie made it into a position of authority? Hell, I can do *that* -- and probably do it better -- so why am I wasting my time here?

It wasn't long after witnessing this encounter that I cut my hair, bought a suit at Sears, and ventured out to carve my own path in the business world. I got myself hired by a national small loan company as a collector. I rose quickly through the ranks, became assistant manager, and then waited another six months to make manager -- simply because I was not 21 years old and the company couldn't bond me until I was old enough.

So right after my 21st birthday, I was promoted to the position of Branch Manager; and I began to learn first hand what it was like to 'run' an office and a staff. It was a great time in my life; together with my staff, I began to win award after award for productivity -- which only served to intensify my ambition and feed my hubris. In fact, I began to grow an ego the size of the Crescent City, and quickly became a handful to manage myself. But under subtle the guidance of my District Supervisor and mentor, I also began to learn. As with anything, some lessons came easily and naturally; but others were tough. Of all the important lessons he taught me, probably the greatest lesson of all was the following: that *knowledge is not power until you apply it*. The key to ultimate

success is to apply what you've learned effectively. I quickly realized that I needed to check my oversized ego at the door in order to apply what I 'knew' through others.

This important lesson stayed with me as through the years I worked with company after company, in management position after management position. (I was, and continue to be, a restless wanderer) Both then and now, I learn by doing, reading, listening and watching -- all the while, stretching my limits. Combined with my natural biker instincts, this constant need to grow allows me to absorb all that is around me, while continuing to ask the tough questions to cut through the bullshit and see the real game.

My road eventually led to a career in banking where I really earned my business chops by helping to turn around distressed banks and work through mergers for the better part of fifteen years. John -- my first boss in that world -- was a no-nonsense bank president who wasn't a biker, but should have been. He was *the* major turn-around guy in a company of turn-around guys. Tough as nails, focused and determined, John personally taught me how to take an organization on the verge of collapse and turn it into a winner. This was no easy feat; we had to transform failing banks with the same group of people that ran it into the ditch in the first place. After all, banking is a very conservative industry; and no banker in his or her right mind is going to leave their position in a sound institution to join one on the verge of collapse.

I began my apprenticeship in the mid 1980's under John's supervision. I was recruited to help restore a small bank in Houma, Louisiana, where the principal industry is oil -- which was in the tank, so to speak, hitting an all time low price of \$11.00 a barrel. (The good old days, eh?) Having assumed control one year prior to my joining the

institution, the bank was a distant third in a three-bank race -- and was losing ground quickly.

What made the challenge even more interesting was the state of the economy; there was little to no economic growth from which to turn a bank around. So we became predators, and through John's guidance and leadership, we became the only bank to show solid growth by literally taking business away from the other two.

I watched as John spent much of his time doggedly communicating his vision to everyone in the organization. He set a clear course, and made sure that everyone in the organization knew their role, and perhaps more importantly, understand how their efforts were contributing to the overall cause. John's communication style was relentlessly straightforward; and at times, forcefully so. He let nothing slide; as such, even though you might not have always liked his delivery, you ALWAYS understood the message. That was a critical lesson I took with me going forward: that everything in business is dependent on clear and consistent communication.

And it was with John in mind I coined my favorite and most often-used phrase - *"communication ain't always pretty, but it's always communication!"*

After that two-year, master's level course in Turn-around Management, I eventually left Louisiana for merger-frenzy Florida. It seemed that every bank was either buying or being bought by another. Hell, in the eight years I remained in the business, the bank name on my business card changed five times without my ever really changing employers.

That time was a blast, though, and I remained in constant turn-around mode -- getting office after office out of trouble and having the time of my life. Utilizing all the

tricks that John had taught me, I focused on identifying and recruiting great talent, placing them in the right spots, and then relentlessly communicating our mission and their role in it. Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end; and as luck would have it, at the age of 38, the frenzy died out and my banking career fizzled -- simple because I began to get very bored.

That was also around the time when my mid-life passage kicked in, and I began to wonder what else was out there for me beyond banking. Mid-life is historically known as that time when you stop the presses, take stock of who you are and what you do and re-configure where it is you want to go. It's when you tend to ask for a do-over; or, in my case, an entirely new direction.

So I shunned conventional wisdom, left the false security of corporate America and went off to explore a new game that eventually drew me into building my consulting business.

Now, I wouldn't necessarily recommend that you leave a successful fifteen year career to go off and begin your own company while in the midst of a mid-life passage; but it *can* be one hell of a ride. I also have a sneaking suspicion that I'm not the only person who's done so. Along the way I won a few, lost a few, and some got rained out. I went through the requisite divorce, a number of spiritual awakenings, epiphanies and hard ass lessons that lend true credence to the old saying of *that which does not kill me will make me stronger*. And each trial -- no matter its end result -- turned out to be a treasure trove of lessons that has given me the balls to not only go out on my own but survive and thrive in the biggest, baddest game there is.

My current career started 15 years ago when I was recruited out of banking to join a small firm that ran CEO peer group roundtables; the type where six to eight entrepreneurs from different industries come together one day a month in order to discuss an issue that they're facing, and have everyone help to solve it. Early on, these very real issues seemed larger than life and left me feeling a bit intimidated. After all, it's one thing to read about them in a book or magazine interview; but I'm now there, in the room, contributing to major decisions being made. It's a total rush for a business junkie like me; and more than once I've had to remind myself that they are actually *paying* me to be in the room and not vice versa! It quickly became apparent, however, that the issues weren't much different than those that I'd faced during my career in banking or heard sitting at my parent's kitchen table. So -- once I got past the awe associated with what they'd built -- I found this group of CEOs to be regular folks who are just wired a bit different than the rest.

It also didn't take long for me to recognize that I needed to create my own niche, and not simply join another pack. And so, seven months into that gig, I left to go my own way and launched my very own firm. Today I serve as "Navigator" to a select group of successful companies while growing my own organization.

Working with these entrepreneurs intimately on a day by day basis gives me the opportunity to see and experience firsthand how decisions are made and how issues are dealt with -- and witness the many ways in which these professionals handle the daily fear associated with being the leader of a company. Every day, I have the privilege of riding with the big dogs -- and I love every minute of it. I feed off their sheer drive and determination to succeed at this level, while also sharing their fear of failure -- a fear

fueled by an overriding sense of responsibility to the company and those whom they employ. Therefore, the main thing that brings us together is their want and need to find and maintain the right focus.

I've carved a reputation as the 'anti consultant' because of the way I approach my "navigation" process. I tend to help established winners achieve their definition of success by getting them to focus more on *living* than on business; because – as I've previously stated -- at the highest level, excellence in business and life show up as two sides of the same coin. *Both* must embody your true passions and support each other -- as greatness only comes when you embrace the fact that your business is a true extension of who you are while making apologies to no one for it. It *is* the very essence of why you do what you do.

So on the pages that follow, I'll share my story -- along with a few others that hopefully will help you get to where it is you want to go safely and on time. Or -- as best put by Bob Parsons, CEO and Founder of GoDaddy.Com - "*We're not here for a long time...so you better have a good time*"