

# I Come First

How the Individual Ego Rules  
Every Business Decision

*Foreword by Roxanne Emmerich*

An In-The-Trenches  
Business Survival Guide

M.H. Nicholas



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*- Jeff Evans, Entrepreneur*

*To my father, Dr. Marvin Nicholas*

*This book is dedicated to my father, who passed away during the completion of the final draft of this book. My father was an amazing businessman and enthusiastically embraced the subject matter of this book. He identified many of the quotes you see scattered throughout the text. I miss him dearly and think of him daily.*

*To my wife, Kabla*

*...who so patiently tolerates her sleepless and opinionated husband. It is a better book because of her and is dedicated to her with my gratitude and love.*

*And to my daughter, Gabrielle*

*...who sleeps next to me as I craft her dedication. "They" say that authors offer their advice with themselves in mind. So may this book continue to give me the perspective and balance to dedicate my life to those things that are the most important. Sleep well my angel.*

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# LET'S GET STARTED...

*Let's be honest. There's not a business anywhere that is without problems. Business is complicated and imperfect. Every business everywhere is staffed with imperfect human beings and exists by providing a product or service to other imperfect human beings.*

*—Bob Parsons, Founder/CEO, GoDaddy*

**IF I HAD MY WAY** I'd make this a better world, one with less lying, manipulation, and self-serving behavior, and one with more sharing, compassion, respect, and decency. Unfortunately, ambition, aggression, jealousy, selfishness, and materialism are basic human traits—and it is unrealistic to think that in the workplace they can somehow be separated from the humans displaying them.

When it comes to changing the world, in particular the business world, it is clear that I will not have my way.

The solution to surviving and succeeding within business lies in knowing how to see, understand, and take advantage of (not fix) the behavior that surrounds you, all the while knowing how to utilize the best and most effective characteristics of your own humanity, along with your talents, skills, and resources, in a manner that allows you to get where you want to go. It is not possible to successfully defend as moral, ethical, or decent the bad behavior and negative qualities of the business world. Our ongoing challenge, however, is the acceptance of its reality.

In fact, the negative qualities of business exist because business is run by people, the same people who have problems with friendships and lovers, who have affairs, who experience depression and temper tantrums, who

lose control of their emotions, who take advantage of situations, who bully or who are bullied, who get tired, sick, disillusioned and bored, and who don't know how to deal with their own parents or children. Business is just one more place where humans coexist. It is only in this context that we can understand how to survive business and even life in general. It's all people and in that way is all the same thing.

*"I Come First"* is a collection of rules and ideas, maxims and mantras, offered for your consumption and consideration. The ideas come not only from my own experience in the business world (as well as the thousands of mistakes that I have made), but also from the experience (and mistakes) of my colleagues, mentors, and executives at all levels of the corporate ladder.

In the end, this book is not about changing the world but rather to help you to recognize and use the tools available to you to help you to influence the circumstances that surround you. In my own way, I've tried and failed to change the world, although I have learned to maneuver very effectively within it. I have climbed the corporate ladder, started a very successful business, and managed countless employees and projects. The business world simply doesn't want to be changed. There are countless examples of human beings trying (failing) to change—and that includes you and me. Like everything else in this world, either you will conquer what surrounds you or it will conquer you. This book is specifically about participating in the business world, a world of extremes, where a lot of very good and very bad behavior exists.

## INHERENT CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

*The public be damned! I'm working for my stockholders.*  
—William Henry Vanderbilt

Business exists for only one reason: *to make money*.

This is not a cynical but a rather realistic doctrine—that a business' first duty is to stay in business. While that generally requires a fine product and satisfied customers, no one can benefit from a business that cannot stay in business. And no goal of any business, no matter how virtuous, can

be achieved by a business that lacks the money or resources to accomplish its purpose.

Most businesses fail or go out of business within their first four years, and there is no sympathy for the failed.\* Society accepts the fact that any business that cannot sustain itself doesn't deserve to be in business. We all drive past failing businesses and going-out-of-business signs every day without any inclination to offer a helping hand. In the rare event someone does offer some financial assistance, it invariably comes in return for a piece of the ownership of the business or an interest-bearing loan in exchange for the generosity.

People generally work for one reason: *to make a living*.

That's not to say that people don't seek great fulfillment in things other than money but in the end we all need to eat and afford shelter. From the entry-level person to the high-ranking officer, employees want paychecks, advancement, stability, prestige, and benefits. I'm sure you want the best for your company and to help it every day—but if the business decides not to pay you, regardless of the virtues of the business, you will at some point (most often immediately) choose to work someplace else. In a sense we are all mercenaries, subject not to one master but two, serving the best interests of the business as well as the best interests of ourselves, but usually not in that order.

This is where we find the beginning of the fundamental conflict of interest that is so much a part of the fabric of corporate life; it is summarized by the simple phrase: "I come first." Ignore it at your peril. Accept it, and you will understand the game and play it better. Even if you are that rare person who does not come first, most other people around you will not share your generosity. Here are some ways in which the principle is manifest every day:

\* According to Census Bureau data, one half of the businesses employing other people and a larger percentage of non-employing firms are no longer in business within four years of commencing operations. Note, however, that being out of business does not necessarily mean that the business has failed financially.

- Managers want to be promoted, take vacations, and find personal enhancement, just like you and practically every other person in the business environment.
- Executives and managers want to work on the things that help them succeed at their own jobs, not on the things that don't. Thus, the manager prefers anything that makes managing other people easier. If you do not help your manager succeed at his or her job, or if you place your manager at risk, then your manager will attempt to distance him/herself from you.
- Managers establish monetary goals with limited bonus pools, and personal goals are judged subjectively. They intentionally pit team against team and employee against employee to enhance individual and team productivity. Managers want their people to decide for themselves who will earn the biggest bonuses and who will rise and fall within the corporate ranks.
- People treat people whom they like, including their friends, better than their acquaintances. People treat badly those whom they don't like, regardless of the other person's skills or value. Subordinates and peers who are otherwise equal are not treated equally. Some people are treated favorably as a result of competence, but more often because they are better liked than others.
- Many corporate participants, including managers and executives, engage in bad conduct such as yelling at and humiliating employees, as well as libel, slander, and defamation, treating these as accepted parts of the corporate process.
- Theft is legitimized, often as a perk. This theft ranges from the employee pocketing supplies such as pens and paper, to overstated and/or fraudulent expense reports, to the large-scale atrocities and self-serving behaviors of so many notable and newsworthy executives.
- Lying is everywhere. It is expected and even integral at times (*e.g.*, keeping trade secrets and negotiating prices).
- Bad employees, for a wide variety of reasons, rarely get fired. They often remain employed, corrupting others as well as the workplace.

- People who find themselves out of their league still fight tooth and nail to keep their positions instead of stepping down. It's up or out, rarely down.

We are each wired to see the world from our own perspective—and we judge everything from our importance and responsibilities, the value and competence of others, and our sense of fairness and entitlement, from that isolated vantage point. Our perspective, contrary to our personal belief that we can understand the plight of everyone around us, is limited only to this perspective—and what we are observing can be deeply colored by our personal interests, responsibilities, loyalties and experiences.

I don't mean to rationalize self-serving or substandard behavior, nor do I mean to suggest that the corporate world consists only of bad deeds and backs stabbed. There is enthusiasm, stability, excitement, money, creativity, and even love in the corporate world. But if you really see the “bad” stuff for what it is—integral, even natural—you'll see it's not dramatically terrible. It's just... there.

So we deal with it.

## ACCEPTING OUR HUMANITY

We are mostly *selfish*.

Studies have shown that people will take longer to pull out of a parking space if someone else is waiting to pull in. Holding onto a parking space for those extra few seconds is selfish and territorial for its own sake, an often subconscious behavior, without logic, existing for no apparent reason other than to deprive another person of something that is about to be voluntarily surrendered anyway. It is evidence of our natural predisposition to be mean, to inflict on someone else a loss of time, a punishment for our pleasure.

This selfishness is obvious on any roadway when one person refuses to let another person pull ahead, oftentimes opting to play a dangerous game of chicken when a bit of generosity would offer safety and cost nothing.

Even in those instances of otherwise pure generosity, many people expect something of equal value in return. The big charitable fund-raisers

are lavish events. Donations give us tax deductions, personal satisfaction and sometimes big parties, political advantage and business opportunities. Even martyrdom brings with it pride and principle. Religious fanatics who blow themselves up, for instance, expect that in exchange for their *generosity* they will automatically go to heaven. As far as reasons go, a person may do practically anything if he or she believes it will be of some corresponding personal benefit. Unfortunately in this world, depriving others of something seems to constitute a personal benefit.

Also, we are mostly *afraid*.

Perhaps we fear the loss of our jobs, but we also fear not making progress, being embarrassed, getting punished, being saddled with too much work, missing out on something, losing the people and things that we love, coming up short, and the end of the world.

We are driven by emotions, intellect/logic, risk tolerance, animalistic urges, sex, desires to be wanted and loved, attempts to hide our own deficiencies, and by our complex subconscious pushing and pulling us where it will.

For our purposes in this book, however, we will leave most of that psychology stuff for the therapists. As far as we are concerned, behavioral trends come in two kinds: those that help us (and should therefore be nurtured), and those that hinder us (but should be de-mystified, recognized, acknowledged, and quietly left at home, not bottled up, ignored, or “fixed”).

While businesspeople can embrace limited amounts of compassion, emotion, and sensitivity, business’ primary nature is driven by healthy amounts of selfishness, jealousy, aggression, territorialism, controlled vindictiveness, and the drive for power and prestige. These traits, among others, have the power to help us; recognizing them in others also helps us. Conversely, traits like neediness or being overly emotional or sensitive, although natural, can be crippling in the business world.

In the end, our humanity is the great equalizer. The executive with the fancy title and the houses and cars is every bit as human, and just as fallible, as the entry-level employee. In that way, we are all peers.

## THE FOUNDATION OF POLITICS: THE PRISONER’S DILEMMA

Much of our humanity, as well as the root of the corporate dynamic, is laid out in the classic negotiating exercise called *The Prisoner’s Dilemma*. “When it is put into practice the *Dilemma* tells us that even among groups of good friends, people generally have a very hard time trusting each other when their own personal welfare is at risk. When one person distrusts others, that person is much more likely to look out for his or her own interests and is more willing to sacrifice others’.

The *Dilemma* is this: Two people are detained for a major crime and interviewed separately by detectives. The detectives do not have enough evidence to convict the two men of the crime, but do have enough to charge each of them on a minor offense. The detectives offer each suspect the same deal:

1. if one person testifies against the other, and the other remains silent, the betrayer goes free and the silent suspect goes to prison for ten years;
2. if both suspects stay silent, they both go to prison for six months on the minor charge; or
3. if each suspect betrays the other, they each end up with a five-year sentence.

Each prisoner must make the choice to either betray or remain silent. Of course, neither prisoner knows for sure what the other is going to do.

So imagine this happens to you and a close friend or co-worker. The two of you benefit most if no one talks. This requires total trust and a personal sacrifice, since you are agreeing to spend six months each in jail. Your dilemma is that if your friend decides to talk and you don’t, he’ll go free and you’ll find yourself in jail for ten years. So as you begin to get nervous, you begin to consider talking, and then lying to your friend to convince him not to speak so that if you talk you would get to go free. Even if your friend speaks, five years in the clink is better than ten. By the end of the exercise,

\* Originally created by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher at RAND in 1950. Formally named by mathematician Albert W. Tucker.

you learn that *looking out for the group is very difficult to do when you aren't sure if the entire group is looking out for you.*

Corporate existence is very much the same. If we all do our part, work hard, and complete our goals, we all benefit. As we do, the business earns the greatest amount of money, and more money, in total, is paid to the employees in salaries and bonuses. Society as a whole benefits.

However, if too many people do well, the best performers might end up with less, as more people share in the profits than if more people did poorly. Too many good performers make it harder to stand out and get the highest rating. Any other top performers make it harder to be promoted. And if one or more others do not do their jobs, we don't want them to bring us down, and we are therefore more likely to sell that person out to protect ourselves rather than risk having that person take some of our money or make us look bad.

Just as the prisoner likes his freedom, the typical person likes money and stability and aspires for promotion. Some strive for power and responsibility, although many strive to avoid responsibility. The *Dilemma*, however, shows why it is easy for us to want to look out for ourselves right now rather than for the whole group later. There are fewer things left to chance.

As managers, we are required to act as the prison warden in this *Dilemma* every day—even while participating within our own *Dilemma*. We have employees that exist not to be productive but to cover their butts, those who pretend to be very busy in order to avoid additional work, and those who cause others to look bad so that they can look good.

The *Dilemma* finds its way into the company's relationship with us as well. We want to believe that in return for our caring about the business, the business will look out for us. But time and time again we are shown that the common corporation (and its executives) will look out for itself (e.g., golden parachutes and massive executive salaries while a business experiences lost revenues and layoffs), so the employees feel further justified in making personal long distance calls, surfing the Internet, wasting corporate time, taking company supplies home, et cetera. The formerly loyal group of employees decides that minimizing corporate expenses at its own risk and inconvenience is no longer worth the effort.

The *Dilemma* is relived constantly in every situation in which employees compete against one another; the more that is at stake, the more likely one employee or team may end up acting in its own interests, at the expense of (or even sabotaging) the others. This trade-off exists prominently in every situation of blame, every “cover-your-ass” memo, and every case in which one person speaks negatively of another.

In fact, it is the basis for practically everything that follows.

## PERCEPTION ISSUES

The personal success story in business is actually made up of three parts: getting hired, ensuring that you are perceived as a superior performer, and engaging in whatever process is necessary to continue to be valued, retained, and moved to the next level.

You may be wondering where “fulfilling your job requirements” or “performing excellently” fit into this equation. Well, they don't. Not necessarily. Fulfilling your requirements and performing excellently are good, but are only helpful from a career perspective if you are known and recognized for your achievements. Since this book is not about how to do your job, but about how to survive, achieve and succeed, let's assume you are already satisfying your job requirements. Quite honestly, if you are not capable, even if you are perceived as brilliant, you might eventually be discovered to be a fraud (although I know of people who have feigned competence for decades).

How can businesses ignore actual performance in favor of perceived performance?

1. We don't know what we don't see (if no one knows what great things you've done, you won't be rewarded for them);
2. we trust and retain the people we *like*;
3. most jobs do not offer objective criteria to be judged against; and
4. there are so many other *fuzzy* variables in success that must be weighed right along with the rest of the performance criteria, such as the ability to build and inspire teams, sell ideas, and build relationships.

Instead, managers rely not on absolutes but on patterns and generalizations. Everyone is busy and finds it greatly convenient to draw conclusions based on patterns and past experience rather than actual facts and outcomes. Despite the problems inherent in relying on generalizations, including some inaccuracies, patterns do tend to provide consistent results.

For instance, it is reasonable to presume that people who show up on time and dress well are good and desirable employees. It is more likely that people with past criminal convictions will commit theft or violence again. History tells us that those who use drugs might not show up on time or work as hard as those who don't. A newly married woman in her twenties or thirties is more likely to become pregnant in the near future and may take extended time away from work, or perhaps not come back at all. Single employees in their mid-twenties are far more likely to be distracted by the lures of social exploits and other vices. And married people of all ages are far more stable, particularly those with children. Like so many other managers, I have hired and fired enough people to know that these presumptions are generally quite accurate.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PERCEPTION

Except for those jobs that judge performance solely on objective/quantitative criteria, how you are perceived is more important than who you are or what you do. If you are perceived as smart, a hard worker, or an asset to the corporation, then you are. Once you become trusted by your superiors, it becomes much harder to be perceived negatively, and positive reviews become more automatic. Bad work is excused because it is inconsistent with the general pattern. If, on the other hand, you are perceived to be looking out solely for yourself, then it doesn't matter whether you are or are not acting in the best interests of the corporation. If you are perceived to lack trustworthiness, then your expense reports will be more closely reviewed. And you might as well be a lying thief.

It can be difficult or even impossible to convince people that their perceptions are not true. If it can be done at all, it can take months or years, particularly if someone is trying to overcome negative experiences. Once

trust is damaged, its recovery can be nearly impossible. Just look at how long it takes one spouse to begin to trust another after an affair.

How you dress, act, speak, walk, move, react, answer the phone, show up at meetings, decorate your office, arrive and leave every day, handle stress—and every other action, no matter how inconsequential—matter in every possible way. They ingrain upon others the perception of your trustworthiness, seriousness, competence, and connection to other people and to the business.

Corporate politics plays off these perceptions. It accepts the difference between perception and reality; it can cause great people to fail and bad people to appear trustworthy. *Success* in this instance is comprised of satisfactory work along with the proper handling of these perception issues. Manage others' perceptions of you by behaving in a more considered manner, and you will develop a sixth sense of learning how to see who other people really are.

## PLAYING KEEP-AWAY

Play “keep-away”—draw firm boundaries between your work life and your personal life. You have a closet for a reason. Keep your skeletons and personal life away from the spying eyes. Show only what you want them to see. Keep your work colleagues out of your personal space and, except for special occasions, out of your home. Certainly don't let your personal problems or sexual interests enter the workplace. And never lose control of your temper or emotions.

But on those occasions when you do allow your personal essence, emotions, and instinctive reactions to become a part of your presence, which will (and should) happen naturally from time to time, find a way to do it in a mindful manner, and in a way that exerts a positive rather than negative impact.

This game of corporate “keep-away” can be a challenge, but consider it in light of the fact that you are preserving the way you are perceived—your most important asset. Protect it with your corporate life.

## IN DEFENSE OF POLITICS

At its purest level, the word *politics* relates to the manner in which people interact with one another to get things done. The most benign politics simply involves getting the right ideas adopted. Effective politics start with building friends and relationships, because people tend to side with their friends and people who are loyal and whom they trust. This process helps our ideas find a receptive audience.

Politics is the art of the sale. We sell our ideas and value to the company and to the client, and we survive in business by getting people to invest in us, hire us, trust us, and listen to us. In this way, politics is pure and virtuous, merely a good discussion with knowledgeable people that leads to decisions that benefit the business and perhaps all of society.

However, that's not what the phrase "playing politics" has come to signify. It means something far worse—a persuasive and manipulative tactic that presumes people might need to be lobbied and *convinced* not publicly, but privately. Politics starts with convincing your friends and allies of the worth of your idea (or convincing them that they should adopt or support you as a person offering an idea). Politics might be centered around the idea of promoting an idea, yourself (or your friends) or attacking other ideas or others. Politics can involve the use of leverage or other tactics to *suggest* to others or otherwise motivate them to support your idea or cause at their own personal and/or professional risk, or politics can involve forming coalitions and crushing counter-ideas that might otherwise be considered and adopted.

Politics refers to dealing with internal conflicts among groups and "maneuvering within a political unit or group in order to gain control or power." As defined by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, to "*play politics*" means:

- "a. to engage in political intrigue, take advantage of a political situation or issue, resort to partisan politics, etc.; exploit a political system or political relationships; and
- "b. to deal with people in an opportunistic, manipulative, or devious way, as for job advancement."

As if embodying the inherent conflicts we have already discussed, politicians are often more concerned about their own re-election than their constituencies. The most effective politicians align with people who can

help them accomplish their objectives, all the while protecting how they are perceived.

Politics in action is, albeit natural, often not benign, particularly in larger, higher paying or more bureaucratic settings. It can be a game of power and self-interest, finding its strength in controlling and manipulating perceptions. We all have experienced circumstances in which power politics has worked against us. While it's a natural process, it sure can be an ugly, dirty game.

In my own career, after several years of practicing law in a major firm and obtaining some wonderful success as an entrepreneur and in the corporate world (see *About the Author*), I took an upper-level position in a highly political environment working for a person who was broadly despised (even throughout the industry). It was impossible for me to succeed, because the other executives were interested in sabotaging my boss. Since I had no direct representation within the executive team, my advice could be discounted or refused outright because of the person I worked for.

I decided that I would rise above the political game by displaying very high standards for truth and integrity, hoping to survive with flying moral colors.

I took a "the-buck-stops-here" approach. My clients were senior executives who had their own agendas, and the people who worked with me took full advantage of my naive approach. They soon learned that my butt was always available to cover theirs. Eventually, this became a very real problem for me, and there is nothing harder to overcome than a problem you allow to continue for too long.

One thing is absolutely clear: *it is not possible to stay above, or outside, the political fray*. Whether you have extremely high personal values or are entirely devoid of any moral or ethical scruples, you must engage yourself in the process. If you fail to build relationships, you will have no political base to draw from. If you fail to make a case for your ideas in a way that forces them to be noticed, they will not be heard or adopted. If you fail to defend yourself, you will be trampled. The buck can only stop with you if you have the clout and power to rise *above* the buck. If you don't—and most don't—a buck that stops with you will eventually be the cause for all kinds of problems sure to follow.

We do not get to hide from politics. And while it is quite possible to engage in the game without sacrificing your values, it is play or lose.

Becoming familiar with the way in which the corporate political game is played in your company (and industry) should be a priority. Getting to know and connect with the people who matter to you should be one of the first things you do. Success in business is, and always has been, largely related to who you know (including who will teach you, help you and inform you). When you have something to achieve you should think through how you want to get that idea or project accomplished. Think about this stuff like you are going into battle. Your value and the value you bring are not enough. Quite simply, one rarely finds true karma in the workplace; good people and ideas are not automatically rewarded.

Instead, the politically savvy among us *demand* to be accepted and not embarrassed; we take advantage of the way other people act and react so that we can get things done. Some are expert at taking advantage of others' flaws. The more aggressive players sit back and watch other people create their own problems without throwing a lifeline—and sometimes even encourage a problem or two here and there. Ultimately, the savvy almost always seem to find a way to rise to the top.

Until you are running the business or are in a profession in which you are somehow immunized, be a realist. See the world objectively, fully expecting, anticipating, recognizing, and appreciating its humanity. Most people who succeed in business seem to harbor a constant cynicism caused by their awareness of corporate self-interest, conflicts, corruptness, manipulation, and interpersonal disrespect; they accept these negative traits as part of human nature and the twisted reality of the world.

While you may (and should) adhere to those values that matter to you, your career is a type of game with no time-outs and no slip-ups, and if you hope to get things done and to reach higher places in the business world, you must embrace politics: you must find a way to become more influential, more respected, and less manipulated.

## THE EVOLVING WORKPLACE

Just like almost everything else in the world, the workplace is constantly evolving. Just as the last generation was the first to be born into a world of computers, today's new employees are the first to be born into a world of cell phones, text messages, e-mail, and the Internet. They (or you) don't know of a world without instant messaging, and they are master multitaskers, researchers, and resource mongers. They know how to use forums to gather or convey instant information, and they use chat rooms and free e-mail systems to become highly social, and to take on alter-egos and multiple personalities. Members of this generation play video games against competitors located anywhere around the planet. They have been exposed to violence, sex, porn, and dirty jokes from an age far younger than anyone in past generations. And they know that location matters less than it ever has before.

The youngest participants in business have always set the tone, and there is a great deal of writing and media attention about this new world. Today's workplace is diverse in every sense; employees are working from home and are demanding perks previously unavailable—at least until the economic downturn. On the productivity side, employees are accessing information and multitasking at levels never before possible.

Furthermore, statistics show that this generation is loyal more to itself, not only because of the transient aspects of the technology, but also perhaps because it's the first generation to refuse to be loyal to the modern business that has lost its ability to be truly loyal to its employees.

Business has evolved to the point where neither it offers nor its employees take jobs with the expectation that the employee will stay for more than a few years. Employees are expected to leave when they find a better deal elsewhere. Then again, up until recently this was also the only generation never to have seen a failed economy. That has changed.

While few are born ready for the competitive world of business, vying for attention in the Internet world is a magnificent education. It is a hard, cold place built on anonymity and bluntness, where the strongest survive in terms of prominence or fortune. Branding now begins at youth. Information is disseminated and manipulated (including biographical information) to

an extent never before seen. Navigating this landscape requires advanced political and marketing skill. Messages are tailored, images created, and people are transformed into legends—or diminished overnight. Networking, previously avoided by many, is now built into the fabric of communication, as we see with blogs and popular social networking websites such as LinkedIn, Facebook and photo sharing websites. While these are valuable strengths, they can raise complications (lost transparency for one) for the exceedingly politically correct business world.

And, very importantly, one last fundamental difference between the older and younger businessperson: perhaps because of the information cycle and the ruthlessness of blogs and social media, business folk are more accepting of politics, at least at a younger age.

Years ago I watched comedian George Carlin give a performance in which he launched insults at practically every group of people, eventually targeting the baby boomer generation. He reminded us that these are the same people whose slogan changed from “peace and love” to “just say no,” a natural hypocrisy, perhaps based on acquired wisdom or conservatism, that sought to deprive the youth of those things that the boomers once deeply enjoyed and cherished. We all keep changing along with our age, perspective and circumstances. Sometimes we end up wiser and other times parental, stubborn, cynical or disconnected. This is no different today than it was forty or even one hundred years ago.

This book presumes that as human beings we are and always will be very similar. Each of us must be able to adapt to any situation that might arise—and that with the right skills and tools we can. Each must develop personal and working relationships with people of all ages, regardless of the fact that as a species, we haven’t changed in just one or even many generations. Our music, fads and styles have changed; business has evolved, and technology has improved. But while our sensibilities change, we, as human beings, are still cut from the same cloth as everyone else, young and old, fat and thin, sharing the same emotions and stresses that human beings always have.

The lessons here do work. Just apply to taste.

## REST OF THE BOOK: THOUGHTS, GUIDELINES AND PEARLS OF WISDOM

Here’s an actual rule of my current company (paraphrased slightly for dramatic effect): “In case of fire, leave the sick, old, and infirm behind in the stairwells. And be sure to remember to tell the fire department where you left them.”

Now, this rule accomplishes its intended purposes of getting the greatest number of employees out of the building in case of an emergency, and it helps to ensure that other employees are not injured, while it allows the fire department to do what they have been trained to do and minimizes potential legal liability. But this is exactly the kind of rule that illustrates our twisted corporate existence. We used to reward traits such as generosity, courage (particularly in the face of danger), and the idea that the sick or old deserve our special attention. We don’t anymore.

“Save yourself” is literal corporate policy.

This book aspires to try to tell it like it is. Instead of focusing on being politically *correct*, we will focus on what it means to be correct *politically*. To be clear, it is usually correct politically to be politically correct. However, in our case, we are following established rules of political correctness and etiquette not for the betterment or benefit of society, and not to make other people feel less victimized, but for our own self-serving interest—to become a master at navigating our own corporate waters.

Our humanity is our primary obstacle. The irony in business is that smart business decisions can so easily be undermined by our human frailties. Obvious examples are emotional outbursts, workplace hostility, and sexual misconduct. Why do some people lash out at others even if it places that person at risk of being terminated? It is just a job after all. And why are some of the people who hold public office, or act as teachers, baby sitters, police officers or priests, unable to find a way to control their sexual desires or advances? Or tempers? Or thievery? Many politicians can’t even find a way to restrain their damaging behaviors for the shorter length of time they are running for in office.

While not condoning this behavior, or any bad behavior, I’d imagine that bad acts continue to occur because we are human beings first. Our

emotions, urges, and tempers always get in our way. The concept of civility requires that many of our human traits, notions, functions, and reactions be suppressed. And while the corporate world is a tug-of-war between civility and humanity, and each is awarded its share of victories, politically savvy employees are almost always those that appear at all times to be the most calm and civil, correct politically, and able to act in a manner that is understanding and embracing of the treacherous environment that surrounds them.

Let's take the rest of our time together to offer some thoughts, ideas, guidelines, and pearls of wisdom for success in the modern business environment. These are for your consideration and contemplation. Perhaps you will find some insight here into how you should relate to your job and career, and perhaps you will become better aware of the behavior of others. Maybe you will be entertained. And of course it is fine if you disagree.

As an attorney, I hope that my clients listen to my advice and the advice of my team. I hope that they appreciate our knowledge, experience, research skills, and background. Then, I hope that, using their own intellect and intuition (which is usually quite outstanding), they consider the advice, develop an understanding of the issues that are being raised, and make their own decisions. When choosing a course of action, there is rarely an absolutely right or wrong answer.

But in general, our advice, when judged in retrospect, is usually correct, because problems, when viewed objectively, tend to be simple and obvious and to follow the same patterns they have followed countless times before. Yet, regardless of these objective patterns, once we add emotions and desires and the rest of human nature to the equation—including our constant desire to perceive ourselves as competent, moral and ethical—we become blinded to the obvious, and things always seem to end up a bit screwy.

In the end, the business environment is a game of role-play; being savvy means respecting the rules of this strange and deceptive world. This advice is offered by lots of very smart and successful people.

How do we learn the rules? For most of us, these rules are learned and tested over time, over the course of thousands of mistakes, big and small,

and from being around thousands of others, and having fired or been involved in decisions regarding the firing of others.

Whether you agree or disagree with the ideas presented here, the most important thing you can do is to weigh these thoughts against your own situation and values. In doing so, I hope that you end up more capable and better suited to this complex world.

*Disclaimer: I do not claim complete originality for some of this advice, but here it is—in one place—along with lots of stuff you may not have heard. These rules bear the weight of gospel (whose, I don't presume to know) and all bear repeating. No one rule can work for every person in any given situation. Worse, the ideas are offered to you by a fairly opinionated author.*

With that said...

# THE ART OF POLITICS

*I formed a corporation this year, and I'm the president, my mother is vice president and my father is secretary and my grandmother is treasurer and my uncle is on the board of directors - and they got together the first week, and they tried to squeeze me out. I formed a power block with my uncle and we sent my grandmother to jail. —Woody Allen*

**ALL POLITICS**, even the most innocent kind, can end up leaving somebody on the short end. More aggressive tactics can leave others scarred and tattered. And while it is impossible to be *successful* while avoiding politics, it is nearly impossible to play politics defensively; waiting until you are under attack means being put in the awkward position of looking wrong or guilty. Your best defense is participation, and perhaps a planned offense. This typically requires that you intuitively know how others are likely to react and behave in different situations.

Most *savvy* politicians participate in business assertively, setting boundaries, engaging in meetings, and establishing working relationships. The cleanest, value-driven politics can provide a terrific basis for good ideas to be adopted, and it permits others to save face so that relationships are not damaged and problems are not inadvertently escalated.

Offensive politics can be genteel and humane, and it can be practiced in a manner more suitable to personality and values. Perhaps you might choose to play inclusive politics, getting other people to join you, or play exclusionary politics, leaving certain people out. But beware of the dirty player who might take advantage of your soft approach. Another form of subtle power politics is to look helpful as you set another person up for failure by

assigning tasks that can't be successful. When you are on the offensive, you have the cards and you dictate the tone.

Defensive politics is best accomplished only by the most ruthless. Once you or your ideas are under attack, or when you have already been blamed for something, any blanket denial or counterattack can be seen as petty, predictable, and untruthful. Playing effective defense might require the use of the dirtiest tactics, something that the defensive and reluctant politician might not want to engage in.

The reluctant politician's greatest weakness is his tendency to become offended at others' methods or tactics. In business it is difficult but important to keep emotions under control so that objectivity and prospective can be maintained. Any negative reaction—including poor morale, imprudent behavior or a childish response—exacerbates the problems that are already present.

Great politicians tend to appear to take the workplace as it is (note: one exception may be the ruthless politician who obscures dangerous retaliatory tactics and the anger that prompts them, under the guise of loyalty to the business). It helps if you are familiar with all of the characters playing the game and the tools and tactics they are likely to use. As I mentioned in my discussion of negotiating, it is often enough to reveal the politician's tactic in front of other people, if necessary, to cause the attacker to back off and deny the approach. In other cases, recognizing the tactic tells you what you need to do to protect your ideas or yourself.

This is hard stuff. It takes time, patience, and practice. It requires knowing and considering how people think and make decisions. And the more savvy the players or the place, the more complicated, and methodical, the game.

## SSSSSSHHHHHH. WE DON'T TALK ABOUT THIS STUFF

*With Foxes we must play the Fox. —Thomas Fuller*

We all know that politics are everywhere, yet we all pretend to not be political. Outside of your strategic group, you should never talk about political strategy. Many of the best politicians are all pretending that they are clean, that playing politics is beneath them, and that they are only acting for the best interests of the business.

## SCHMOOZING UNDER THE GUISE OF WANTING NOTHING

*If you're a gifted flirt, talking about the price of eggs will do as well as any other subject. —Mignon McLaughlin*

Politics starts with whom you know: your friends, your loyal team, and those people you can count on because your interests are aligned (or because they like you or owe you a favor or two—although these last factors are less reliable).

Building relationships is not easy. Businesspeople are smart and don't like to be sold—our default reaction is to immediately reject salespeople, sales calls, and visits. We make it hard on people who want something from us. And as a general rule we do not help people out of sympathy. We help people and get to know them because we believe that they will eventually help us.

On the other hand, we have none of these same barriers when it comes to building relationships with people who want nothing from us. We appreciate the idea of networking and welcome opportunities to shake hands and spend time with people we might one day want something from but who want nothing from us today. Inroads are best made before you want or need anything.

Remember the basic keys to building a business relationship:

1. Be known, liked, fun and funny.
2. Have some special thing, perhaps information or market connections, that can one day make another's life better and easier.

3. Offer ideas, events or *secrets* that prove your value or create a bond.
4. Become a friend. Stay in touch!

In short, people already have too many contacts. The best in any field already know everyone of importance. So in order for them to want to know you, you must offer the idea of something that can be of interest to them down the road. While you are acting in your self-interest, they are acting in theirs, and neither of you really cares very much about the other's. Come to the networking game from a position of value.

Get into the conversation. And then follow up immediately. Get that lunch or drink meeting scheduled right away. Get on the golf course. Do something! If you don't, you might as well have stayed home and watched television.

## MONEY BUYS FRIENDS, LOVE, HAPPINESS, AND SUCCESS

*Money is power, freedom, a cushion, the root of all evil, the sum of all blessings. —Carl Sandburg*

Do not underestimate the power of money. It most certainly is capable of buying happiness, friends, and love. For that matter, money buys success and even more money (money is one of the leading causes of fights among friends and in divorces). Friendships based on money are often the most productive relationships in all of business. Money also buys talented employees and everything else that can be purchased to enrich and pamper those people and their businesses, thus magnifying the spender's power all the more.

Relationships are a major key to success in business, and money buys relationships and opportunities, mostly through planned events and shared benefits. Successful people like to hang out with people who have box seats to major league sporting games, memberships at prestigious golf clubs, and other perks that we would never otherwise enjoy. The more you spend, the more you get.

Also, money brings with it the perception that you are a worthy person to associate and do business with. Spend wisely, however, or you will be taken advantage of. Pay for the things that will be remembered, and you are certain to have your calls answered and strings pulled. With the right friends, no matter how you get them, you can do pretty much anything.

## FRIENDSHIPS DO NOT LAST FOREVER

*Have no friends not equal to yourself. —Confucius*

Regardless of how loyal a person is, everything can and does change. The cold, hard fact is that many friendships should not last—or pretend to last beyond their actual expiration date. Some break down, only to rebuild later. Others collapse, causing each former friend to declare himself an arch-enemy of the other. People's interests and opinions change over time as we grow in separate directions and perhaps tire of one another.

When a friendship fails, there is an emotional component—hurt and regret. This is normal. There can be great longing and a time-consuming desire to achieve a fresh start. But without burning any bridge, as even a basic contact (such as an old friend) can be important, do not cling to the idea of loyalty where it no longer exists. When someone is no longer a friend or his or her interests no longer align with yours, you should bear in mind that most friendships do not last forever and consider what this might mean to your business dealings.

## KNOW THE PEOPLE WHO KNOW STUFF

*Position yourself as a center of influence – the one who knows the movers and shakers. People will respond to that... —Bob Burg*

Without looking obvious or sleazy, get to know the people who have information that would be helpful to you. Mostly these are the assistants to the bigwigs, but they can also be the people that just have a knack for “hearing” things and getting things done.

When it comes to corporate politics, these people are worth more than their weight in gold.

## IF YOU ARE NOT NOTICED, YOU DO NOT EXIST

*If you don't get noticed, you don't have anything. You just have to be noticed, but the art is in getting noticed naturally, without screaming or without tricks. —Leo Burnett*

Regardless of whether a person is doing well or poorly, we tend to offer the most glory and promotions to people who have let us know their expectations and aspirations. We respond to the squeaky wheels, sometimes just wanting them off our back or to keep the status quo. And we often promote not the best people but those who have indicated to us their undying desire for career enhancement.

The quiet, brilliant worker who is not asking for recognition or promotion has a far worse chance of receiving even the simplest gratitude than the less competent person who is doing a great job hustling or letting their aspirations be known (tactfully, of course). The diligent employee is seen as the stable employee, best left alone for fear of upsetting whatever delicate balance he has.

*If you want more than you have, you must be active in your manager's and the company's consciousness—in a good way of course.*

In the entertainment world, great publicists keep their clients in the public eye, whether it is for the good, bad, or controversial stuff. Being a household name (and face) matters.

If you are *present*, if you are sending e-mail updates, attending meetings, taking/making calls, taking the initiative, voicing educated opinions, and in the end expressing your interest in money and promotions, then you will be the first one on others' minds when these issues are considered. Throw your hat in the ring for whatever you want. And make your case. If you don't, you might as well not exist.

## GIFTS, GOLF, CIGARS, SHOOTING POOL, AND BONDING

*The American businessman is somebody who talks about golf all morning long in the office, then for the rest of the day discusses business on the golf course. —Jerry Lewis*

Send gifts, early and often. We remember those few people who send us gifts.

Playing golf or smoking cigars with the executives, or doing anything else (such as playing poker, skiing, attending conferences, or shooting pool) that gets you in the room with the key people on a friendly basis is tremendously important, although remember that your interpersonal mistakes may be magnified. In addition to name recognition, the advantages from person-to-person contact can provide nearly instant payback. It is no exaggeration to suggest that many of the biggest business decisions are made away from the workplace in lower stress, fun environments. The games are non-threatening, and the shared activities place you in close and friendly proximity with business leaders who will, in turn, notice you and hear your ideas, comments, and concerns.

This is why aspiring business people pay for membership at the country clubs where the rich people hang out.

And when you are engaging in a competitive game, be sure to remember to lose a round from time to time.

## PEOPLE WITH WHOM YOU MUST NOT BE FRIENDS (AND AVOIDING THEM)

*If you wish to be held in esteem, you must associate only with those who are esteemable. —Jean de la Bruyere*

Loyalty to the wrong person will hurt you. This is a bit of a different twist on tying your image to idiots (covered previously), but here we are talking about the politics of the matter. Outcast acquaintances make you an outcast. If your boss doesn't like one of your work colleagues, and you are friends with this person, your boss will not only not respect your decision,

but will justifiably question your loyalty and your judgment—and you are not as likely to be confided in.

There are lepers in the office. Some people are lazy. Others are bad news. Others aren't trusted or respected. Others gossip. Many are just not liked. People who are miserable or complainers are known and despised by management. And while you need to protect your perception and not be connected to this negative baggage, your best approach is to identify these outcasts and keep your distance. You undermine your credibility and your connection to your manager and to the business when you associate with these hooligans. If you are going to socialize with them, do it far away from the spying eyes of the workplace.

This is one of those harsh rules (we have a few). It tells you not to help the weak. But in business there might be no other way. Known interactions, including talking to people of disrepute or seeing them after work, can hurt you. It may not be decent or charitable, particularly when these people start out as your friend, but when management clues you in to their feelings about certain people, you are being asked to choose between the business and the bad crowd.\*

## DEAD EMPLOYEES MAKE FOR THE BEST EXCUSES

*I never blame myself when I'm not hitting. I just blame the bat, and if it keeps up, I change bats. —Yogi Berra*

The key to mastering the blame game is to blame people who can't or don't defend themselves. Examples of terrific people to blame are employees who are on the outs with their managers, are otherwise not trusted, or have departed the business.

\* An example of the tremendous power of association, sometimes just from a monetary contribution or people appearing in the same photo is found in campaign politics in which the negative aspects of all known acquaintances are attributed directly to the candidate. Here, even the loosest connection between two people may be enough.

Although this tactic can be unethical and distasteful (who would figure), it is tremendously common and effective—so effective that even if people recognize it as a weak attempt at passing responsibility, they will allow the blame to go on for years. It's easier (and accepted) to blame people who have no voice or who allow themselves to be blamed. If you want to see this process in action, just look at how our national leaders blame past presidential administrations, Congress, people of the other parties, the weather, other countries, and elected officials not limited to those just recently out of office, but people dead and gone for decades.

When you are the one who is gone or suffering, expect to get blamed. But if you are not gone, defend yourself aggressively or the blame will continue *ad infinitum*. It is the cycle of life.

## POWER SHOULD ALWAYS WIN

*You can get much farther with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone. —Al Capone*

When it comes to a head-to-head dispute, the person with the most power or leverage in a given situation *should* always be able to get his way and to control the outcome of a situation.

And yet, they often don't, commonly losing out to people who are more politically savvy. Instead, compassion, the acceptance of lesser power as something greater than it is, bad decision making, poor negotiating skills, and an overarching sense of fairness get in the way, undermining the powerful person and allowing the less powerful to end up in control.

Pay attention to your sources of power and where the other person perceives their power to be. Maximize your position; diminish theirs.

Being truly powerful means wielding power (not subjugating yourself to lesser power), winning negotiations by being *unwilling to concede*, making decisions, dismissing opponents and critics, and doing all of this in a manner that does not ultimately damage your credibility, likability, and the power that allowed you to do all of this stuff in the first place.

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