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## CHAPTER TWO

### **THIS PART'S A LITTLE HARDER: DO WHAT YOU SAY YOU WILL DO, ON TIME, EVERY TIME.**

*“You can’t build a reputation on what you are going to do.”*

—Henry Ford

#### **IT IS AS SIMPLE AS KEEPING YOUR WORD**

There is nothing more valuable to a boss than a person who does what he or she agrees to do. That person can be trusted, allowing the boss to sleep better at night and to feel confident when speaking with his or her own boss. Someone who does what they say they will do—on time, every time—is a very rare and wonderful asset.

I have had a lifelong tendency to take on every possible job assignment or outside opportunity that comes my way. I am a high-energy worker. If it takes weekends and evenings to get the job done, count me in. I want to do my part and more. It is part of how I compete. I want to be the most valuable person on the team.

However, I found out the hard way that this strategy can wear you out and cause you to derail. There have been times in my life when I took on too much. I delivered on more than one person should be able to, yet I failed to deliver on everything I said I would do. I worked my butt off and made some people very happy, but I also made some people unhappy because I couldn't get their work done on time. As Tupac Shakur said in one of his songs, to work hard and disappoint, "That's no good for nobody."

## **IT IS GOOD TO VOLUNTEER AND HORRIBLE TO OVERCOMMIT**

I have a couple of thoughts concerning this point. First, I favor taking on more than your fair share of work. It makes you more valuable than your competition. It's how you gain experience quicker than the next person. I think it is a good career strategy.

I also think it is good to take on work or leadership roles outside the workplace. I'm talking about being involved in Rotary, the United Way, or your place of worship, coaching Little League, or taking an industry position for professionals in your industry. The exposure helps you network. It builds skills that you may not be developing at work. It gives you experience and confidence that will help you at work.

However, when you add the extra work in the workplace to the extra work outside the workplace, things start to become difficult. You are making commitments and promises in two different directions. Those commitments may overlap in a mutually exclusive way. It's tricky business.

To be crystal clear, if you really want to be successful at work, you must not endanger your ability to deliver—every time—on your at-work promises. This is advice coming from someone who has famously overcommitted both at work and outside of work. Learn from me: You are better off focusing on one huge goal than on two or more.

One of the real highlights of my life was becoming the president of the Chartered Property Casualty Underwriters Society. This is an international organization of more than 25,000 insurance professionals who have earned the CPCU designation. I love the men and women of this organization. I am thankful to have served as their president.

At the same time that I was stepping into the leadership roles that would take me to the presidency of that organization, I was CEO of a sizable business. And just to make things a little more exciting, I was diagnosed with cancer. I didn't expect or want this to all happen at once (of course, I didn't want the cancer thing to happen at all), but it did.

Net result: I nearly killed myself trying to make everything work. I scheduled radiation treatments for seven in the morning so I could be at work by eight. I never missed a minute of work, although there were days when I was so worn out I was pretty useless in the office.

An aside on this last point: During the time of my radiation treatments I tried to get out of the office at an early hour, like 5:00 p.m. One afternoon I got caught up in something and when I finally realized what time it was, it was nearly seven in the evening. I drove home with my head out the window to

stay awake (an exceedingly stupid thing to do; I should have called a car service). When I got home, I guess I pulled into the garage, turned off the car (thank God), and immediately fell asleep, with my forehead against the hub of the steering wheel. My wife did not hear me drive into the garage. When I awoke two hours later, I staggered into the house and found my wife in a panic. She had been looking for me for two hours. And now I was standing before her, with a Mercedes-Benz symbol embossed on my forehead. Not my brightest moment, although we smile about now. My work did suffer. I was too close to the situation to know the truth. But I do know this: My boss didn't think that I could do all three things. He probably had better sense than I did. He took me out of the CEO job and gave me something else to do that was a better fit for my situation. I didn't like it, but it may have saved my life.

Back on point: My outside commitment started small, but it built up to a point where the work absolutely conflicted with the job that paid me real money. Be very careful with your commitments. They can lead you into impossible situations. And if you do take on huge commitments outside of the workplace, be prepared to pay the price. I was prepared. I'm happy I took on the outside commitment. It didn't help my real work career at all, and since I was nearly sixty years old at that time, that was OK with me. But it wouldn't have been acceptable to me when I was in my forties.

Be careful about overcommitting. If you want huge success at work, put 98 percent of your efforts there. Use the other 2 percent to help others. You will have many more

chances to give back to society, or your industry, after your success is assured.

Do what you say you will do each and every time and on time, and you will be a superstar at work.

*“Responsible persons are mature persons who have taken charge of themselves and their conduct, who own their actions and own up to them, who answer for them.”*

—William J. Bennett

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### EVERYONE GETS ONE GOOD SCREWING.

*“Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is a little like expecting the bull not to attack you because you are a vegetarian.”*

—Dennis Wholey

The title of this chapter and the inclusion of the above quote might keep me from getting the motivational man of the year award. No problem. I’ve been screwed before.

I loved working for a living. I loved Corporate America. I was treated fairly and rewarded well all along the way. I am now retired from that part of my life, with nothing but good feelings and appreciation for forty years of continuous employment.

I did get screwed a couple of times. My guess is that you will too.

Before I describe the screwings from my own career, I need to say that, quite often, the screwing is in the eye of the



beholder. Every time I got screwed at work, it made someone else happy. And many of the people around me didn't consider what happened to me a screwing at all. They, of course, were wrong.

I got my first screwing from President Nixon. (And I was not alone.)

In August 1971, I was making less than \$9,000 a year. That's horrible money now. Heck, it was horrible money then. At the beginning of August, I was given a nice raise, to be effective September 1. I needed that raise because inflation had grown to 4 percent, my wife was still in college, and we were quite broke. On August 15, 1971 (not that I remember such details), President Nixon imposed price and wage freezes. My raise was out the window. The raise my buddy got the month before? He got to keep it. Screwing number one.

Screwing number two was also going to come in the 1970s, again because of government actions. It was something called Affirmative Action. The big boss, a really old-fashioned Southerner, told me I would be passed over for promotions in the days and weeks ahead because I was male and white.

That screwing never happened. In fact, I have always thought that Affirmative Action was both right and a help to me. It kept me focused on being the best that I could be so that nothing could get in the way of my success.

OK, technically not a screwing, but a pretty interesting look into how things were in America not that long ago.

The real screwings at work fell into two categories: someone less talented than me got the big promotion and I got the big screwing, or just as I was about to hit it big at work, the rug was pulled out from under the business.

In my business the latter usually meant that a huge hurricane hit somewhere on the East Coast or Gulf Coast, the earth moved in California, or fires swept across the land. It was kind of hard to find anyone sympathetic to my plight when actual lives were lost and people's financial lives were ruined. Nonetheless, being screwed by circumstance feels just as bad as being screwed by a misguided boss.

Probably the screwing that hurt the most was the one that happened when I was sure I was finally going to make "officer" for the first time in my career. My boss loved me. I was next in line and well qualified. What could go wrong? Well, I never did find out what went wrong, but something certainly did go very wrong. Another guy got the job. What's worse, I was asked to write the press release. I did. It wasn't my best work.

Stick around long enough and you too will get screwed. The company you devoted your life to will get sold out from under you. Your godfather at work will quit/die/be fired or otherwise leave you high and dry. The company will go into bankruptcy and turn your pension over to the government. On the day there's exciting news to communicate, you will be sent to New Jersey to make the announcement while the women in the next office over will get the trip to Paris. Oh, the screwings never stop.

## **STUFF HAPPENS. GET OVER IT.**

Now that I have vented about the thinly veiled screwings from my life, it's time to offer you some good advice. The advice is this: get over it. Stuff does happen in a long career. Think of the rule that says you will lose your wallet or purse three times in a lifetime. If you know that it's going to happen, when it

does, you can react as though it was expected and move on. That's one less loss of a wallet that I will have to put up with in this lifetime. As Helen Keller wrote, "When one door closes, another opens. But we often look so regretfully upon the closed door that we don't see the one that has opened for us."

Bad things will happen to you along the way. You will be too close to the situation to fairly judge whether the decisions behind those bad things are actually the best decisions or in some way will be good for you in the long run. No matter. It's the hurt and the feeling of unfairness that derails many an achiever.

Take your occasional beating. Let it strengthen your resolve. You don't have to win everything today. Tomorrow might even be a better day for winning. And when you get older, take a moment to reflect on the screwings that came your way and write a nice book about them. I did, and I am feeling better already.

*"And this too shall pass . . ."*

—Attributed to Abraham Lincoln