

CHAPTER 9

All the Ways Your Diamond Sparkles

You never realize how much of your background is sewn into the lining of your clothes.

—Tom Wolfe

WHAT DO YOU DO ONCE YOU'VE BEEN

let in? Once you've shown how you can enrich, through first delighting others? The answer seems clear: you just enrich. You do the work. And yes, it's true—to a point. But not only do you need to do the work, you also need to guide how others perceive your work and your worth.

guide /gīd/

to direct, to steer; to influence the course of action

We need to guide because the levers that enable success are often outside our control. And those who pull the levers are making judgments and decisions based

on their perceptions of our competence and character.

We can't demand that others pull the levers, but it's within our power to direct *how* they pull the levers. We have the ability to guide the course rather than settle for the course of action that others decide for us.

That's what this next part of the book is about: how you guide others' perceptions of you and how you can enrich. You *must* guide that process; otherwise those preconceived notions that others will have about you—and they will exist, whether they are benign or malicious—will guide in your place. And in doing so, you can use the biases that others have against you in your favor.

Guiding, Following, and Knowing Yourself

Be yourself. This is a piece of advice that we've all heard, and most likely given to others. I've said it many times. A friend is about to interview for a job and they are nervous. What do I say to them? Be yourself. Someone is giving a big presentation? Just be yourself. About to ask someone out on a date? What do people say? Again, just be yourself.

This advice is great in principle, given the benefits we derive from delighting others authentically. But it doesn't give very much explanation. Without understanding the nuance of "being yourself," it can be very danger-

ous. It doesn't work for everyone. It's complicated.

When people say, "Be yourself," we tend to think first about what we are good at. Sometimes it's something that people can put a clear label on and communicate easily to others—"I'm good at tennis; I was invited to the junior Olympics, and am ranked sixteenth in women's singles," or "I play piano, and I played at Carnegie Hall at the age of ten."

Other people, like me, have a harder time describing what we are good at. When I was younger, the best I could do was to say that I was good at school. I loved school, especially math; when I grew up, I wanted to be a math teacher. I took pride in memorizing my multiplication tables, I loved the elegant way that solutions to long-division problems fit into neat columns, and I loved the symmetry required to solve algebra problems. Math came naturally to me.

A large majority of you are probably shaking your heads vehemently, either silently horrified or silently mocking me and secretly hating me. But I didn't have an advantage in many other things. I was small and timid; I was last in line for just about everything else. This was one of the only areas I had identified where I had a natural advantage. And even then, it was something that I recognized as an advantage only after I encountered it as a bias that people might hold against me.

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My sophomore year in high school, I had Mr. Heine for algebra II and trigonometry. And then I had him again for pre-calculus my junior year. (I'm a product of public schools. Not a huge budget for teachers, you know? So I tended to have the same teachers for multiple years.)

In the beginning, I *adored* Mr. Heine—truly worshipped the man. Mr. Heine also loved math. He loved it so much that he would squeal in delight when he drew a perfect parabola on the board. I learned a ton from him—about math, as well as about having an edge. Or the lack thereof.

Mr. Heine had a "perfect test" bulletin board. It was prominently displayed at the front of the classroom, hugging the blackboard. If you got 100 percent on a test—it had to be a test, not a quiz or a homework assignment—Mr. Heine would write your name on a gold star and display it on the board for the *entire year*. Now, this wasn't just any gold star—this was the mother of all gold stars. This was a ten-inch star that Mr. Heine would meticulously cover in thick, shiny, gold-colored paper, with perfect edges. And then he would carefully apply vinyl lettering, with your name and the date of your perfect test, precisely centered and aligned on the gold star. It was truly beautiful to behold. And what made these gold stars so desirable is that they were scarce. It would be a surprise if Mr. Heine handed out more than five or six in any given year.

Over the multiple years that I had Mr. Heine for math, guess how many gold stars I got. Zero.

Now, that probably would have stung regardless, but what made it particularly upsetting to the fourteen-year-old version of myself was that there was another girl in my class, Elizabeth, who got nine gold stars over the course of those two years. Not to take anything away from Elizabeth, because she was probably damn smart. But I do remember looking at her test papers on each of the occasions that she got a perfect 100 (the test papers were proudly displayed next to the gold stars)—and observing that our tests always looked nearly identical. On each of those occasions, when I may have gotten a 99, I'd notice that she'd have written something like $7x = 49$; $x = 49/7 = 7/1 = 7$. I, on the other hand, might have written something like $7x = 49$; $x = 49/7 = 7$. I'd get a point taken off for not showing my work and including $7/1$.

When I tried to ask him questions about why I got points taken off, he would tell me that each time I questioned his grading, he would take another point off. I stopped asking. I also stopped asking questions in class. I noticed that when Elizabeth was struggling with a concept, we would spend days on that topic, and I would become agonizingly bored. When I would ask for clarification, he would tell me that he couldn't stop the entire class to explain, and that I should ask a friend to help explain it to me outside class.

At the end of that year, to be allowed into honors calculus for our senior year (rather than basic calculus), we needed to have a teacher sign a form. I remember sleepless nights, worried that Mr. Heine wouldn't sign my form, even though I had gotten close to 100 on nearly all my tests. When I finally asked him to sign my form, he looked at me and said, "I don't think you're ready for honors calculus." He signed the form for many others in the class, students who I knew struggled with math.

After that, I decided I no longer wanted to be a math teacher. I decided I was no longer good at math.

Self-Awareness Encumbers Our Ability to Guide

Self-awareness is a sense of who we are, what we value, and what our inherent strengths are. When we say "self-awareness," we mean knowledge of who we are internally. But gaining an edge requires knowledge of your inner self *and* how it interacts with the outer world. It's both within you and contextual. That's what I didn't yet understand.

We need to own who we are *and* the context—what is within us and what is around us need to complement each other in order for us to be successful. I didn't understand that self-knowledge and self-awareness only go so far if you ignore the truth of others' perceptions and don't take control to guide them.

As far back as 1890, the philosopher and psychologist William James spoke about self-awareness as a source of continuity that provided an individual with a sense of “connectedness” and “unbrokenness.” As researchers gained more clarity and confidence into the construct, self-awareness came to be defined as the capacity for introspection and recognition of our own values, passions, aspirations, and interactions with our environment.

These early definitions, however, emphasized the self, rather than the social self. And modern-day examinations of self-awareness seem to do the same. Self-awareness has become the latest buzzword, with everyone trying to become more self-aware—as the popularity of BuzzFeed quizzes can attest. (Which episode of *Friends* best matches your personality? Which Disney princess are you? What city are you? What color best describes your personality? I’ll admit to doing at least a couple of these.)

Science has its own version of these quizzes—for example, the widely used Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI attempts to inventory your traits and place you into one of sixteen personality “types,” capturing all your attitudes and preferences (Are you more introverted or extroverted? Do you function more through thinking or feeling? Sensing or intuiting?) into one parsimonious label.

I’m the first to admit that I find tests like the MBTI to be a fun way for me to categorize and be more aware of my own values, feelings, and motives, and

provide a context to talk to others about theirs.* But tests like this are problematic* for all sorts of reasons. Many do not meet the basic criteria of psychometric scales. In fact, tests like the MBTI lack general external validity, are based on outdated psychoanalytic ideas, and dangerously oversimplify to the point where they are no longer scientifically and methodologically accurate. In addition to methodological concerns, we should be wary of all these tests because they create the illusion that our “selves” can stand independent from externalities.

We use tests like the MBTI and often take them as gospel. But this popular conception of self-awareness doesn’t really account for contextual and interpersonal differences. This is detrimental to truly gaining a sense of self-awareness because personality is a continuum rather than a series of binaries. While I might tend to be introverted, in actuality, I’m somewhere between introversion and extroversion depending on the context. We’re all somewhere in between depending on the context.

Assessments like the MBTI assume static personality traits, when in fact the most successful people perceive their personalities and skills as fluid and are able to represent themselves differently and adaptively.* And therefore it’s damaging for us to think of our “selves” as static and monolithic because we may be missing out on opportunities and occasions in which we might have an advantage. When we neglect to pay attention to how context affects our per-

sonality, we also limit our ability to find and cultivate our edge based on the situation at hand.

What we want is to balance who we are with the external environment in a way that is additive, rather than limiting, so that we can, as Judy Garland once said, “be a first-rate version of ourselves, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else.”

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We’ve been focusing on other people’s perceptions of us and how that informs our view of ourselves. What happens when we experience an internal conflict? How do we accommodate what others tell us we should be, while simultaneously gaining clarity and precision in defining this sense of self *and* guiding external perceptions of that self?

Most of us begin with a strong sense of internal self-awareness—a sense of who we are, what we value, what our inherent strengths are—before it is shaped by what others tell us about who we are, what we value, and what our strengths should be. As a student, I was intuitively aware that I was good at math. I would just absorb mathematical concepts, and it was something that was fun for me. It made me feel light, relaxed, and carefree.

But our natural awareness is chipped away as we become attuned to the opinions of others. We live in a loud world, one where we are interconnected to others, whether we choose to be or not.

What we are able to achieve and how far we are able to go is often in the hands of others—managers who determine promotions, investors who determine the financial resources we’ll have at our disposal, partner organizations who determine our place in the market, and yes, math teachers who determine our future career trajectories. It is inevitable that we will be affected by how other people view us, and how they perceive us when we are merely trying to “be ourselves.”

We might think one way to cope is to ignore the perceptions of others—to silence the things around us so that we can hear our own voice. I’m certainly an advocate of mindfulness and meditation and understand how this provides abundant benefits—but it cannot be the entire solution. The reality is that we do operate in a world of interdependency. It’s impossible to isolate yourself from others’ opinions and ideas. Those who seek to rely only on their own voice and their own silence quickly find that it is not sustainable.

But it is also not about allowing the interactions and perceptions of others to define who we are without our input, without individual agency, lest we allow others to dictate our own values, feelings, motives, and desires. We allow others to damage us, just like I allowed Mr. Heine to impact how I perceived myself.

Instead, we have the power to guide how we position ourselves to others and hence how others perceive us—but first we need to understand our “self”: the perceptions we have of ourselves, and

how we internalize others' perceptions. Only then can we take an active role in guiding and reconciling the voices, opinions, and perceptions of others vis-à-vis who we know ourselves to be.

The path forward—the path to creating an edge for oneself—is there before about acknowledging and receiving the perceptions of others, while simultaneously empowering yourself not to embrace and adopt those views. You can accept the perceptions of others so that you can consciously address them and confront them—but without embracing and internalizing them. For as we'll discuss later, the views of others are overwhelmingly not about you at all—they're about their own insecurities, their own goals, and their attempts to reconcile their own sense of self-awareness.

Were my fourteen-year-old self privy to this, I would have recognized how Mr. Heine's perception of my skills affected my own self-perception. And that might have shielded me.*

You're Not Selling Out When You Reclaim an Awareness of Your Self

In Newark, New Jersey, Ashley Edwards knows how to talk the right talk. Her father grew up in the inner city of Newark, and a large proportion of her family still calls it home. To her, it's also a hometown, the city where she spends most of her time. She cofounded a tech nonprofit called MindRight to empower Newark

youth of color to heal from the type of trauma—such as emotionally abusive relationships, neglect, and physical violence—that she observed and encountered in her own childhood.

Ashley is in her element at MindRight, talking twists and goddess braids with students while also helping them deal with the aftermath of seeing classmates being shot dead or dealing with parents being incarcerated. It's often tough, but as a black woman, Ashley feels like she belongs. It is her home.

And yet her home at one time was Palo Alto, California, one of the highest-earning towns in the United States, where she attended Stanford University for her MBA. Before that, New Haven, Connecticut, where she attended Yale University and majored in economics. But the amazing memories she holds of Stanford and Yale are also interspersed with poignant memories of the struggles she faced and the feeling that the advantages those prestigious universities promised to bestow were for others, not for her. She remembers classmates who were offered financial funding from professors to start ventures for “ideas that were based on nothing.” Those offers were never even an option she considered available to her as she sought funding for MindRight.

Getting people to take her and her nonprofit seriously was a struggle from the beginning. She launched MindRight while at Stanford and approached investors at philanthropic foundations who financed ventures just like hers.

She thought it would be a perfect fit, and maybe it was—but *she* wasn't.

At first, investors told her to “come back to us after you’ve won more fellowship awards” so that “you can show us that you’re a serious contender.” She told herself that investors just wanted to know she had the credibility to do it (and tried to stifle any other thoughts, even as all around her, nonblack peers and friends from Stanford and Yale were being lauded as credible, talented individuals coming from prestigious institutions). Despite her degrees, she felt like she needed to prove herself over and over again because of the color of her skin. It made her resent the privilege of her top-tier education, and it made her frustrated and angry.

When she began to win prestigious fellowships—the very fellowships that had been cited by those investors a few months prior—she was told that she needed to “do a pilot first, so that you can get more data and can demonstrate more credibility.” After three successful pilots in Camden, New Jersey; Washington, DC; and Newark, where she was able to demonstrate not only a viable business model but also that they were already earning revenue, the message shifted yet again. This time, it was simply that they were sorry that they could not invest.

She eventually bumped into these same investors at panel discussions at various conferences and events, where she would listen to them talk about their commitment to equality and funding people of color. She heard how they were

lauded for their commitment to diversity and inclusion, and how they were considered game changers in a new, inclusive social entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Ashley remembers the day she reclaimed an awareness of her “self.” She was in a meeting with another potential funder when, completely unrelated to her organization, he began to talk about Burning Man, the annual event at Black Rock City, a temporary city erected in the deserts of northwest Nevada where people come together to celebrate the arts, self-expression, civic responsibility, and decommodification, among other things. She played along. When he started comparing Burning Man to other festivals such as Coachella and Cannes, she continued to play along. At one point, the conversation felt surreal to her; the contrast between this conversation and those she’d been having with her students just an hour prior was stark.

She realized that her students in inner-city Newark would have no idea what Burning Man was—and yet *she* could carry on a scintillating conversation with opinions about this festival, and about Coachella and Cannes. These were places, cultural references, and topics that were also a part of her makeup—things that she had a perspective on and an understanding of, because of her time in top-tier institutions. She could talk this talk as well.

Rather than fighting to prove and reclaim her status as a highly educated minority woman from an “atypical” home city, Ashley decided to start own-

ing her background and perspective. Funders, she realized, were partially driven by a lack of understanding of what trauma in Newark looked like. They had preconceived beliefs about who she, as a black woman advocating for mental health in inner cities, was and should be. And she realized that it was “crazy that I had allowed people to make me feel like it was about me—and not about them.”

She started doing all her initial interactions with investors over the phone—where investors could not tell by the sound of her voice that she was a black woman, and where she could connect with them based on her education and apparent privilege.

She gave herself permission to embrace both identities, carrying her Yale backpack to meetings with investors and not letting herself entertain any feelings of selling out her Newark family—she had earned her Yale identity just like anyone else there had.

She found that this was the most difficult part for her—feeling like she was selling out. But it wasn’t selling out. It was giving herself permission to embrace all the varied and complicated pieces that made her, well, *her*. Once she allowed herself to reveal all the facets of her experiences, even vulnerably discussing her trials with depression and mental health with investors, it allowed her to guide investors to a different level of understanding of MindRight. She showed that she was the rare person who intimately understood both the community MindRight served and the objectives

and motivations of the investors who funded it.

Ashley realized that by embracing who she was—all her identities, her multiple selves—she was able to cultivate an edge for herself, which allowed her to associate more effectively with others in both worlds and show how she could enrich. As Ashley describes, “It helped me flow in these worlds. In both worlds. I felt like I was flowing, rather than being halted.”

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“Being yourself” requires embracing all the varied and complicated pieces of yourself. For Ashley, embracing all her identities collectively gave her an edge. But for others, that may not be feasible, and external demands may force you in directions otherwise. People have expectations for how you “should” be.

Self-awareness, in fact, is made up of two components: internal self-awareness and external self-awareness. And these are inextricably linked. As William James wrote, “A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.” We come to know ourselves by observing how we fit into the fabric of social relationships and what others expect of us.

There are many versions of ourselves. And there are many versions of who others expect us to be. But with true self-

awareness, you can guide others and the perceptions of others nonetheless.

One for Me and One for Them: Guiding the Expectations of Others

In the early 2010s, Ashton Kutcher starred in a number of movies. One was the dramatic biopic *Jobs*, in which Kutcher played the visionary Apple founder Steve Jobs. Another was the outlandish romantic comedy *Killers*, in which he played a goofy assassin turned good guy.

Kutcher was strongly advised not to take the role of Steve Jobs, for fear that it would negatively impact his career—a successful career that he had built playing the down-to-earth romantic protagonist.

A few months after *Jobs* was released, I met Kutcher at a conference. An audience member asked a question about the impact that actors could have in the world, and his response surprised me.

I'll admit that I never expected to quote Ashton Kutcher in my entire life, but what he said that day has continued to resonate with me, and it is something that I have repeated many times when people struggle with trying to "be yourself" in the midst of societal and external pressures, demands, and realities. What he said was this: "I do one for them, and one for me."

What he meant by this is that it is important to balance and consider exter-

nal demands of who others want you to be while also giving yourself the freedom to embrace the realities of your personal choices. He has to decide what movies to do. His agent puts pressure on him to do certain movies. For a long time, he was seen as someone best suited to romantic comedies, movies in which it was assumed that his charm would sell tickets and bring in large audiences.

But what he wanted to do was artistic movies, things that spoke to him personally—theater productions, artistic and indie films. Films like *Jobs*. But he also knew that in order to survive and be successful in Hollywood he needed to maintain his audience and his relevance, by doing those chick flicks.

So how did he describe what he does? "I do one for them, and one for me." One film that gets him the audience and maintains his celebrity. And then one that really speaks to him personally.

Some might see this as selling out. But I see it as an artist smartly guiding expectations and finding a way to thrive within others' expectations. We are complicated creatures, with multiple identities. There may be some identities that are more salient in some situations than in others, but they are still very uniquely ours. Kutcher is both a rom-com lead and a critically acclaimed actor in ambitious films. He gave himself permission to own all his strengths, including the ones that weren't as personally fulfilling but still served a purpose. When we have that kind of self-awareness, that's when we

can guide others without compromising our own ambitions and desires.

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And so how do we get a strong sense of our self (while not excluding the external factors that we must depend on)?

As we've seen from many of the experiences of others described in this chapter, when we tell people to "be yourself," it is confusing. There are so many versions of others. There are so many versions of ourselves. So first, compare yourself with yourself, not with others.

Second, remember that life rhymes. Look out for what rhymes in your life—the situations that seem to repeat themselves, the similarities in both your successes and your obstacles.

Third, as you begin to pick up on these patterns, don't go for absolutes; go for directionality. We tend to want to package, in a neat little parcel, the sum of who we are. But it's enough to just identify what areas are your "right directions" and which are your "wrong directions." It's actually better that way.

Going for directionality, rather than absolutes, helps you manage the impressions of others and guide their perceptions. You can be more fluid and adaptive, and you don't have to try to guess at what exactly they want you to be (because as we saw, they don't really know). You can embrace and bundle multiple identities, like Ashley Edwards was able to, or disaggregate and separate

multiple identities while still owning them all, as Ashton Kutcher described doing. It gives you permission to be all the glorious versions of yourself.

If you go for general directionality, you'll be more likely to avoid striving for goals that don't leverage your strengths and that make it harder for you to create unfair advantages. Too often, we pigeon-hole ourselves into what we think our strengths are, rather than building on those strengths. Rather than saying, "I'm an athletic person, so I'm going to try lots of sports," we force ourselves into one particular sport that we are going to excel at no matter what. What we sometimes fail to remember is that we are not one-dimensional beings. Self-awareness, in and of itself, is an elusive goal. We never really know ourselves; the best we can do is find general directionality.

And finally, going for directionality allows you to simply move toward something that feels right, while already finding ways to cultivate an edge. Just start going toward something—don't worry about if you haven't yet found *the* direction. When you go in that direction, do you feel light, free, and happy? Or do you feel fearful, constricted, and dark? Is it a situation or an interaction that makes you feel this way? Rule out some of those, and your choices become clearer. Sometimes the easiest way to figure out your right direction is to know which ones are the wrong directions. And keep yourself moving in the right direction without limiting yourself.

Often, having a vague direction in mind leads to multiple opportunities for success rather than one chance to avoid failure. Your success is rarely dictated by one single outcome that constitutes the *W* on the win column. There are lots of different ways to win. That's what we forget. We see one path that worked for someone else, and then try to replicate that, forgetting that there are infinite ways to get from point A to point B. And there are lots of point B's.

For Kutcher, it was giving himself permission to embrace what would delight and enrich others, as well as what would delight and enrich himself.

For Ashley, it was about her ability to feel like she belonged when she was with students and community partners in inner-city Newark, but also simultaneously giving herself permission to embrace how she belonged and could be a part of the Yale and Stanford elite.

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As for me, eventually I did find my way back to math. Even though I decided that I no longer wanted to be a high school math teacher, I never stopped loving math.

The next year, I had an amazing chemistry teacher named Mr. Kost, who encouraged me to go to college, and to major in engineering. I did, and I did.

But even as I studied to be an engineer, I recognized that I was a different type of engineer than other people, and

was taught to recognize how *I* would have to guide.

Part of the difference was my gender. I remember electrical engineering professors talking about current by stating that many of us must have tried to stick our fingers into electrical outlets as kids, and remarking to myself that it was probably something boys usually did because girls were dissuaded from doing so, like I had been.

Part of it was my lack of experience and my lack of familiarity with and access to computers. I also remember a professor talking about processors and assuming that everyone had tried to take apart a computer at some point—and thinking about how I had never had a computer of my own, let alone taken one apart. In those days, computers were only something rich kids had at home—the only ones I had seen were the ones I got to use once a week in computer lab.

Given all this, it probably shouldn't have been surprising that I found engineering to be extremely hard. Damn hard. So hard that I failed my first test in my very first engineering class, a computer science class, with a score of 37. Out of 100.

I quickly realized that I was probably going to lose my scholarship, but then two things happened.

First, I called my dad and told him that I wasn't smart enough, and that I needed to switch majors. But he gave me a piece of advice that I still give my own students. He gave me permission to switch—as soon as I could tell him what

major I would switch to and why I would like it better.

I couldn't conjure up another major. He helped me realize that too often we derail ourselves from a path before we've even had time to refine it. When things are going badly, lots of different options look better. But if we think about it and try to visualize what even one of those other options might look like in reality, we realize they might be very much the same, or even inferior.

Second, my computer science professor, a wonderful woman named Dr. Laura Bottomley, called me into her office the next day after class. I thought she was going to tell me that I was going to fail the class and that I should drop engineering. But when I got there, she had a copy of my exam in her hands and asked me to explain my solution—in words, not in code—and to explain my thinking. And I did. She did the same for the next question and then the next. And then she paused and said, “You know exactly what you're doing—you just don't know the right syntax.” She gave me a C.

She asked me if I had ever done any programming before, if I had ever seen any programs. I told her that I'd taken a typing class in high school. She asked if I had a computer. I said no. She asked me about open lab hours at the computer cluster. By then I was choking back tears as I explained that open lab hours were at the same time as my work-study job.

She nodded, and then told me something that I've never forgotten: that she too had nearly failed her first engineer-

ing class, but that there is no right way or wrong way to do this; there is no one-size-fits-all. That I was headed in the right direction, and I should give myself the chance to go in that direction while embracing who I am and how I think about the world.

She told me that I may not have had the opportunities that others have had, and may never have those opportunities—but that I did have something. And that we are all diamonds; we are all diamonds that sparkle in different ways.

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Self-awareness is like a diamond, sparkling differently from every angle. There are many facets of a diamond, and sometimes the light will hit at one particular angle, and other times it will hit at another angle—and sometimes it will hit multiple facets at once and appear spectacularly brilliant.

Cultivating your edge is about knowing each of your own facets and knowing how they will shine to those who are looking. There is no right or wrong way. Too often, even when people have a strong sense of self, they don't use it. The advice to “be yourself” actually limits us from doing exactly that. There isn't one singular version of oneself. There may be flaws and you may have disadvantages, but you have a diamond. And you can guide how your diamond is perceived, you can delight and differentiate, and you have the power to enrich.

PRINCIPLE 9

“Being yourself” entails guiding others to all the glorious versions of yourself.

CHAPTER 10

Turning Biases and Stereotypes in Your Favor

People hear me through their eyes first.

— Author unknown

CHRISSY TEIGEN, A SUPERMODEL WHO has graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated* numerous times, has had to address, time and time again, critics who slam her for being “too fat.” She has told many stories about how that word—*fat*—has defined people’s perceptions of her. One of the most vivid stories is of the time she was fired in the middle of a photo shoot for a major clothing company, in front of dozens of photographers, directors, and executives, because she was . . . “too fat.”

But as time went on, and after being fat-shamed one too many times, Teigen decided that *she* would be the one to guide the message about her weight. She was going to own her own identity, rather than letting others create it for

her.

On one occasion, she posted a picture on Instagram of her bare stomach, clearly showing her stretch marks, with the caption “mom bod alert!”

On another, she saw a tweet from her good friend Kim Kardashian West, who tweeted a full-frontal picture of her body covered in a plaster cast, writing, “We took a mold of my body and made it a perfume bottle @KKWFRAGRANCE.”

Owning her own body weight, and not to be outdone, Chrissy promptly retorted: “well I’m going to put out a **COMPETING PERFUME** from a mold of my giant body and it will hold **TWICE** as much perfume as your bottle and the people will get **MORE** perfume.”

Chrissy Teigen is not *just* a supermodel. Yes, this woman has graced the covers of *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Glamour*, but she is also the author of bestselling cookbooks and has her own line of kitchen products as well as beauty products. Oh, and she’s also married to John Legend and raising two young children. She clearly works hard, maintaining her career, her family, and her figure. And yet, she tweets about how “large” she is (never mind that she was about six months pregnant at the time).

She knows she has her haters. And she knows the perceptions that they have of her. Some have called her attention seeking, some have criticized how publicly she shares news of her family, and some just see her as too fat.

But rather than going along with those stereotypes, or even trying to

ignore them, she embraces them. She uses the stereotypes to guide people to the point that *she* wants them to make. About her role as a model *and* a mom. About how her self-image extends beyond her weight. About owning all her identities and allowing herself to be gloriously all her. She is a supermodel, but she can be a supermodel in her own way: as wife of John Legend, as mother to Luna and Miles, and as an independent person who tries her hardest to remain down-to-earth.

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Perceptions matter. They certainly matter in modeling, even though the industry is evolving and embracing more positivity and inclusivity. But they matter even in our everyday lives, even as we strive for more equitable systems and a more inclusive culture.

Chrissy Teigen will always need to acknowledge that there will be stereotypes that people hold about models—that they must be skinny. Just like I'll always need to acknowledge that there are stereotypes that I will face as an Asian woman. Not too long ago, for example, I was setting up slides in my classroom, getting ready to teach a new MBA course, when a student mistook me for the IT support specialist who was ostensibly setting up for the professor. Easy mistake, right? Asian woman equals tech support, not professor.

Stereotypes invade our interactions.

A couple of nights after that, I was having dinner with a rather diverse group of friends. As I relayed the story to them about how I had been mistaken for the person setting up for the professor, rather than being the professor, it was amazing how quickly our conversation spiraled to stereotypes in general. "As a black woman, I'm angry and aggressive. But as a black man, I'm seen as violent if I'm aggressive—and I'm good at sports, to the point where I'm dumb and can't think about anything else."

The racial stereotypes came fast and furious: Asians are dorky and meek; Latinos are loud, hot-tempered, and volatile; blacks are aggressive, outspoken, and threatening. So too did the gender stereotypes: men are messy and disorganized; women aren't smart and their place is in the home.

Then we got to cultural stereotypes: Americans are obese, lazy, and dim-witted; the British are rich and snobby; Italians are in the mob; Russians are angry and love vodka; Nigerians are dangerous; Bahamians are on the beach all day with coconut bras and no internet; South Koreans are always taking selfies; Singaporeans get thrown in jail if they chew gum.

There are even more stereotypes about class: the upper class are well-dressed, intellectually superior, posh, and well spoken; the middle class are white collar, live in suburbia, and are obsessed with owning their own homes and cars; the working class are blue collar, factory workers, with little savings.

And let's not forget some of the others out there, lest we leave anyone out: politicians are philanderers and only think about personal gain and their own benefit; librarians are old and boring; blondes are dumb; old people are out of touch; teenagers are rebels; bankers are sexist and greedy; and people who work in tech are geeks.

Have I managed to offend just about everyone now? Okay, good. Here's why this matters. Everyone has something. We are all susceptible to stereotype and judgment no matter who we are. Classic research on social perception tells us that we all rely on stereotypes to some extent. Psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Brian Nosek have shown how the information and observations that we pick up from people's physical appearance, facial expressions, tone of voice, hand gestures, and even body positions or movements are used to form impactful impressions of, and large-scale inferences about, other people. We have limits to our cognitive capacity, our working memory, and the mental effort we can exert—and so we rely on inferences about a person based on observations of their behaviors or on secondhand information to help us out.

In doing so, we must acknowledge that all those around us do the same, and so we all fall prey to being categorized in certain ways, even disadvantaged, as others try to process the limited amount of data that they can process at any one given time.

What if we could take that “burden”

off others? What if we could lessen that cognitive load? What if, rather than expecting others to rely on stereotypes, we helped them see what we want them to see?

We can do this by simultaneously recognizing the unfair judgments while guiding them instead to what we *want* them to see in us. Guide them to the attributions that you want them to make about you rather than being a bystander in the attributions that others are making about you. Having a strong sense of self-awareness and an awareness of how others perceive us also helps us understand the expectations of others so that we can better associate with them in a way that provides an advantage, rather than just trying to aimlessly fit with the external context by engaging in unfocused self-enhancement.

We can do this, and we should. But we often don't. We bemoan the unfair judgments that others have about us—and complain about bias. Bias does exist, and it's incredibly frustrating. But rather than beating our heads against the wall, we can empower ourselves to do something about it. We can flip things a bit in our favor. We can use the biases that others have against us in our favor.

This is such a critical point that I want to repeat it: if you guide the perceptions of others, you won't have to be at the mercy of their stereotypes.

. . .

When Cyrus Habib decided to run for lieutenant governor of Washington, he knew it wasn't going to be easy. He knew that he was not the stereotypical political candidate—someone who is tall, polished, and charismatic. Cyrus is rather short, coarse in demeanor, and blind. Not the picture of a successful public figure.

But he also knew that winning the election wouldn't be the hardest thing he had ever done, nor would it be his greatest achievement if he won. Cyrus, an Iranian immigrant, was already a Rhodes Scholar, a Truman Scholar, and a Soros Fellow. He had studied at Columbia University and the University of Oxford, and received his law degree from Yale Law School, where he served in the prestigious role of editor of the *Yale Law Journal*. And don't forget, he achieved this all fully blind, having lost his eyesight at the age of eight.

Cyrus was four months old when he was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, and by the age of two, he had lost sight in one of his eyes. Over the next few years, the vision in his healthy eye continued to deteriorate until doctors were forced to remove his retina when he was eight years old.

When he first told me his story, I have to admit that I was overcome with sadness and regret—what could he have done had he not been blind? I felt guilty thinking this way, and when I shared this with Cyrus, he showed me his amazing ability to guide others' perceptions. He assured me that sadness and compassion is exactly what he expected me to feel.

It's exactly what most people feel.

He went on to share how he doesn't think of his loss of vision as a loss; he experienced sight for long enough to retain memories of visual images of the world. Cyrus considers it a blessing that he became blind young enough to still have the time to adapt and learn how to live a normal life without sight.

Hearing his story reminds me that he indeed has lived a normal life thus far, and he continues to strive to live a normal life. In fact, he has achieved more in his thirty-eight years than most—in spite of his disability. And listening to Cyrus speak, I realized that his challenge hasn't been the blindness itself. Cyrus doesn't talk about overcoming disability, but about overcoming bias—through self-awareness about his disability and others' perceptions about his abilities.

When Cyrus was in third grade, he was told that he couldn't play on the playground with the other children during recess. Instead, a teacher would have him sit by her side while the other children climbed on the jungle gyms and scaled the recess equipment. He was told that it was because teachers were worried about his safety, and they probably actually were. But it was also a form of bias, one that he didn't quite know how to understand at that age. Angry and frustrated, he would repeatedly try to explain that he was fine, that he could manage. The response was always that it was too dangerous.

That became the norm, not just on the playground, but in situations that

Cyrus continued to face, time and time again: borrowing books at the library, taking karate lessons, learning to play the piano. Over and over, people assumed that he would fail or be incapable before he even had the opportunity to try—and the disadvantage was real even though it was rooted not in hate or fear, but in pity and compassion. The same compassion that I felt hearing his story. The same bias that I was guilty of because of the lowered expectations I might have implicitly had for Cyrus due to not wanting to oppress him, or not wanting to burden him with more than *I* (not *he*) thought he could handle.

Cyrus the third grader began to spend evenings and weekends on the playground with his mother, learning the lay of the land and where there might be obstacles or sharp edges on the playground equipment. He did the same upon arriving in New York City, when he had to figure out the Port Authority Bus Terminal. And again at Oxford, learning the layout of the campus and figuring out how to maneuver around the city. He learned to navigate physical spaces. In doing so, he also learned how to navigate his encounters with others.

When Cyrus first decided that he was going to run for lieutenant governor and began to tell his friends and supporters of his intent, he already knew what their hang-ups were going to be, what criticisms they would offer, and what doubts they would express. He already knew how he could preempt those doubts. He had long known that as he walked along-

side people, allowing them to physically guide him because of his handicap, as he hooked his arm onto those of colleagues, of friends, he was also literally guiding them—by sharing his perspective. When people started expressing their doubts and tried to nudge him not to run, he was prepared. When people said things to him like “Running this type of campaign involves so much door-to-door interaction with people; it involves so much canvassing. Is this going to be too much for someone with your condition? Are you going to be able to navigate?” he was prepared. He recognized that it came from a place of concern. He understood that they wanted to support him and to ensure his safety, but they were so worried about his limitations that they couldn’t see his strengths.

Cyrus’s response?

I ask them if they have ever heard of a place called the Port Authority Terminal in New York City. And I remind them that I had learned to navigate the Port Authority Bus Terminal. I explain that I went from “Braille to Yale.” That I had somehow navigated thousand-year-old dorms and cobblestone streets when I was at Oxford. Navigating neighborhoods, going door-to-door, I’m sure I can find a way. It’s not the hardest thing I’ll ever have navigated.

And navigate Cyrus did. He canvassed door-to-door. He connected with

voters. He used his awareness of his disability to guide voters the same way he had guided his friends and mentors into understanding his ambition and turned them into supportive constituents.

Cyrus owned his disabilities and his limitations as part of his self—because they *are* part of his self. But how he has dealt with his limitations, and how those limitations were overcome and will continue to be overcome—that's the advantage that he can communicate. That's how he has always been able to turn a bias that others have against him to work in his favor.

Cyrus ultimately won the election to become lieutenant governor of Washington. As he did with voters, he quickly established himself as a self-aware, attentive politician. He uses that awareness to guide different perspectives and people of different walks of life so that they can come together and discuss issues that matter.

"I take the opportunity to walk with them," he said. "That creates a bond and reminds us that we're really all going to the same place. I guide them away from who they think I should be, to who I am." And that has allowed Cyrus to not only contend with his disability and the disadvantages he may face because of it, but extend his disability into an edge.

Stop, Drop, and Redirect

Paul Graham, who cofounded Y Combi-

nator, one of the most influential start-up accelerators and seed capital firms in the world, once said, "One quality that's a really bad indication is a CEO with a strong foreign accent." He went on to say that it's difficult to communicate if you have a strong accent and that "anyone with half a brain would realize you're going to be more successful if you speak idiomatic English, so they must just be clueless if they haven't gotten rid of their strong accent."

After facing severe backlash for his comments, Graham elaborated on his stance to say that a big part of running a successful company is being able to sell it and accurately communicate your mission to others. An accent might hinder communication.

On the heels of his comments, I decided to study this stereotype about foreign accents. And what I found was that in the United States, people with nonstandard accents (i.e. Russian, Japanese, etc.) were much less likely to be promoted to middle- and upper-management positions.

The most common assumption for why this might be so? Stereotypes that people with nonstandard accents were not able to communicate as well—like Graham's assumption. I decided to test this. In a research experiment, I had people randomly assigned to listen to a message delivered by either someone with a foreign accent or someone with a standard American accent, and found that there was *no difference* in what they understood. I asked them to recall facts

When it came to our findings of entrepreneurs with a foreign accent, again, there was no difference in terms of what they were able to communicate, but those with an accent scored lower on ability to influence others, a key criterion that all the investors could agree was important for the founder of a start-up. And in turn, their likelihood of securing start-up capital was much lower.

But our most fascinating discovery was that even though those with a non-native accent were less likely to get promoted to leadership positions, and entrepreneurs with non-native accents were less likely to get funding—in both cases because they were deemed less “interpersonally skilled”—there were ways for individuals to preempt those perceptions. Recognizing that others would form judgments about them based on their accent, they could redirect misattributions about their competence to give themselves an advantage.

To illustrate: When Emmett, one of our candidates in a job interview, said, “I know it might seem like I’m not able to communicate impactfully, but let me tell you about a time when I fought for resources for my team . . .” this individual was actually rated higher than those with no accent. When Nien Qi, one of our entrepreneurs, mentioned how she was able to “politically navigate a crowded supplier market in order to receive preferential pricing terms,” she redirected the perceptions that investors had of her and obtained far more funding than her counterparts.

The “disadvantaged” person acknowledges the misattribution in a nonreactive way, linking it to a specific qualification and asset that they bring to the table. Numerous studies have found that addressing implicit bias and stereotypes directly, however, is not always the best way to reduce disparities.² When bias is confronted directly, it often leads to backlash in the form of increased prejudice

and discrimination. Psychologists Alexander Czopp, Margo Monteith, and Aimee Mark even found that confrontations not only increased the hostility of the person being confronted but also created negative self-directed, internalized emotions in the confronter.

Focusing on behavioral change and structural interventions that may not require you to address bias specifically sometimes gets you much further. Put simply, what we showed is that we are capable of guiding and redirecting others. We can address any preconceived links—stereotypes—that people are making and break that linkage to form a new one.

As Charlie Munger once said, “Recognize and adapt to the true nature of the world around you; don’t expect it to adapt to you.” Once you have a pulse on how others tend to see you, you no longer have to rely entirely on their perceptions of you; you can guide them to how you want them to see you.

. . .

When Dawn Fitzpatrick started her career as a twenty-two-year-old at the American Stock Exchange, traders made bets on how long she would last. She understood that it was a manifestation of their insecurity about how long *they* would last. When they questioned her confidence, she recognized that it was about *their* confidence. When they questioned her about her ability to take risks, she recognized that it was rooted in their aversion to risk. So she created her own playing field and set her own standards, no longer tying herself to what was dictated or established by her male coworkers’ norms.

As she was beginning her career at the investment bank UBS, she kept a pair of Christian Louboutin shoes under her desk, but often walked

around the office barefoot as a display of her confidence—separate from other people's conceptions of what confidence should look like. When they questioned her ability to make tough decisions and pull the trigger on risky investments, she refused to play their game. She stepped away from “testosterone battles” and displays of dominance, gains, and competitive success. Instead, she created a position that started from a place where risk was about humility and having the insight to cut losses more quickly. “I communicated [my] belief that ‘women have more . . . humility in their investments . . . [and will] cut losers quicker, in a more effective way than generally men will,’” so that she could guide and demonstrate her positioning.

“Clearly, there are single moments in time when I would have rather been a 6-foot-3 blond-haired ex-football-playing guy. But those tended to be offset by the times when I thought it was an advantage to be a woman,” she once said. “I guided people to those advantages,” reiterated Fitzpatrick, now one of Wall Street’s most powerful women, running a \$26 billion fund as the chief investment officer of Soros Fund Management.

In my research and in the research of many experts in the field, we find that guiding others requires an understanding of how others think of you on two key dimensions: (1) power and status differences, and (2) cooperative or competitive interdependence. Power and status differences are relatively straightforward to explain. They merely refer to how others see themselves compared to you in the social hierarchy. It’s not a bad thing or a good thing; it’s just a determination that is a fundamental element of social life, and one that emerges spontaneously to help coordinate interpersonal dynamics. But the greater the power differential between you and another, or your organization and another organization, the more you need to be attuned to the

cooperative or competitive interdependence that might exist between the two of you.

In these cases, the more you can anticipate the needs of your counterpart, and in turn align your needs with their goals, the more you are able to guide in a way that allows you to be nonreactive and show how you can enrich and bring value.

Even in cases where there may be no power differential at all, however, cooperative and competitive dynamics still ensue. *Cooperative interdependence* and *competitive interdependence* refer to assessments of whether the other person is someone you expect to cooperate with or compete with. This determination also colors the dynamic. For example, imagine you are interviewing a candidate for a job in your organization. Do you expect the candidate to be someone you will cooperate with, or derive benefits from? Or do you expect that the candidate will compete with you in some area of your work? If it’s the former, you may discriminate in their favor; if it’s the latter, you may discriminate against them.

What does this mean in normal language? “When we’re in harmony, but distinctly different, that’s when magic happens,” the gifted pianist Ji-Yong Kim said. Be together, but not the same.

These determinations matter because they impact how you will guide your interaction. The reason Dawn Fitzpatrick was able to endear herself to her coworkers is because she was able to level the power and status differences (or at least make them seem irrelevant), while forming a sense of cooperative interdependence. She saw that her colleagues perceived her, as a woman, to be competing with them on a different dimension and by different definitions of confidence and risk. To mitigate this, and as you now know, she very cleverly helped guide and redirect their perceptions of her.

...

The next time I was set to teach a new MBA course, I made sure to preemptively prepare to be seen as the professor and not as the IT support specialist. I proactively did some reconnaissance by speaking with current and former students and colleagues, and I discovered some of the common perceptions and attributions that my students had of me—namely, that I didn't "fit" their perceptions of what a professor should look like—I was too young and too female.

And so I helped redirect their judgments. I started out the class by saying, "I know it may look like I'm here to sell you Girl Scout cookies," redirecting them away from my youth and my femininity to my credentials,² quickly establishing what would ultimately be the tone of the class.

Later in the week, I did much of the same when I was scheduled to interview a venture capitalist for some research that I was doing. We met in his office, and I excitedly saw that he had an autographed basketball on his shelf, with signatures from Patrick Ewing, John Starks, Charles Oakley, and numerous others from a New York Knicks team of yore. As a huge Knicks fan, watching almost every game growing up, I commented on it, and was met with a look of derision. I quickly discerned that his assumption was that I, as a young, Asian female, couldn't possibly know anything about his beloved Knicks.

I stopped and redirected the conversation. We started chatting about my background as an engineer (yup, that fit, Asian engineer), and my prior ex-

perience working with VCs in my research, and I was soon on solid footing again. Once I had established that, I started making offhand connections between what we were discussing and random statistics and facts that I knew about the Knicks ("Yeah, you made that deal work. Sometimes you just need some Anthony Mason kind of brute force behind you to enforce your position, am I right?"), which began to amuse him and even impress him.

To guide and redirect, I needed to start with stereotypes—the baseline of me as an Asian female and the behaviors he was expecting from an Asian female. And then I used those stereotypes to provide just a little twist, something that allowed me to redirect. This investor provided me with all the information that I had hoped to gain from that meeting, and when I left, he promised me two court-side tickets to a home game of my choice at Madison Square Garden to see the Knicks.

Use the biases and stereotypes that others have of you in your favor. Guide them to the attributions that *you* want them to make.

PRINCIPLE 10

Know how others see you, so you can redirect them to how they *should* see you.

CHAPTER 11

Framing Perceptions and Attributions *Your Way*

Your mission isn't your guide. You have to find your own way.

— Yellow Tanabe

DECIPHERING HOW OTHERS SEE US IS SOME-times like putting together a jigsaw puzzle: we have only a vague notion of what the overall picture looks like at first, but clarity and specificity come as pieces start to come together. But what makes it even more imprecise is that each time we interact with someone new, it's a new puzzle image.

It's like going on a diet, really. A couple of years ago, I decided to go on the Paleo diet, which you may have heard of or even done yourself, because it was all the rage for a while. A friend of mine, Anna, was raving about how it was changing her life. She was seeing amazing results. Like, incredibly obnoxious results. I tried to be happy for her each time I heard her say something like "The pounds are literally just melting off!"

Now, this is a friend of mine who has never been known for her willpower, someone who had tried every diet in the books and was never able to stay on

any of them, and yet she was exclaiming how happy she was and how amazing she felt. And so I tried to cheer her on. And then I decided that if Anna could do it, I could too.

And for a while, I actually did do it. I had to avoid many foods, including but not limited to sugar, oatmeal and other grains, and processed food in general. Those things took a few days to get used to, but it was manageable. The hardest part for me was cutting out dairy, as I have a love affair with cheese—but I made do because the diet lets you eat lots of meat (bacon, even!), and oil is totally fine.

The first week, I felt like crap, but Anna reminded me that feeling like crap the first week means that the diet is working. (Apparently it's a real thing. People call it the "Paleo flu" because the first week you feel tired, sick, and sluggish, as if you really have the flu.) But then I started seeing some results. I lost a few pounds (not as many as Anna, but still . . .).

And it became easier. I started to get used to eating only eggs at breakfast. I incorporated almond butter and nuts into my regular repertoire, and even got accustomed to putting my meatballs and pasta sauce on top of spaghetti squash instead of actual pasta.

Three, four, five weeks passed. And I started talking about how this was no longer a diet, but a lifestyle (yes, I was one of those annoying people). But then, about six weeks into the Paleo diet, something happened. I had an allergic reaction. Like, a nightmare of an allergic reaction. Rash, swelling, blisters all over my face, especially around my mouth.

What I discovered is that there are different body types based on different genetic makeups (but of course). With different body types come different dietary needs, one of which is called an arginine-lysine balance (lysine and arginine are two amino

acids found in protein-rich foods). Though I am not allergic to nuts, when I have too many, it throws my arginine-lysine balance out of whack and I find myself highly deficient in lysine. Apparently, I actually *need* lots of dairy. Like, *lots and lots* of cheese.

What did I learn? Not every diet is suited for every body type. Just because the Paleo diet forbade cheese didn't mean that I could, or should, stop myself from eating plenty of it. And, more philosophically, there are an infinite number of people in this world, all of whom need and want different things. Creating your edge in any situation requires a personal perspective and personalization. We have to find our own paths, not just follow the paths that others have made.

. . .

Not only are there infinitely different people, we often forget that we are dealing with imperfect creatures who are themselves fickle, people who might hold multiple expectations of others simultaneously. This especially applies to those who are in positions of power and are making decisions on behalf of others. We tend to think people generally agree and that there is a universal norm surrounding beliefs and perceptions that we can follow.

But that is far from true. The people we depend on to make important decisions that alter the progression of our lives don't know what they are looking for or how they make their decisions, and even when they claim to know what they are looking for, the target shifts from instance to instance.

Over the past ten years, I have met and interviewed more than 500 entrepreneurs and 350 investors. I often ask entrepreneurs to describe what they believe is the single most important quality that investors are looking for. Their answer: passion.

For the investors, I similarly ask them to describe what they believe is the single most important attribute that they look for in making their investment decisions, and again, overwhelmingly, it's passion. Some, like Mark Suster, state it immediately. "The goal is to invest in passionate entrepreneurs. That's it, end of story. Passion," he often says, unapologetically.

Other investors will describe it in a more offhand manner—for example, an investor once told me, "I want someone who, at four o'clock in the morning, would not be able to go to bed because they are so excited."

Another shared, "This gal, she would light up when she talked about her business. She was so interested in anything that I would say. She just had to make it work, and the intensity of her passion was just obvious."

Still others try to provide more of a philosophy to back up their assertion, explaining what this passion means and why it is so important to them:

Ninety percent of success in anything comes from just giving a shit. The older I get, the more amazed I am at how many entrepreneurs just really don't. Ten percent is skill and luck, but just caring enough, having passion about something, means that they will do their best. If they have passion, they will not fail one way or the other, and that matters more than you can imagine.

In my research, I've tested the perceived passion of an entrepreneur, and investors are right—it does matter. It is actually one of the most significant factors in determining who receives start-up funding. I've found that entrepreneurs presenting in pitch competitions who are rated high on passion by investors are 7.4 times more likely to receive

funding than those who are rated low on passion. In fact, perceptions of passion compensated for poor performance and weak objective data on the venture—things like profitability, product performance, and market size.

It's no wonder that entrepreneurs feel the need to show passion when they are presenting their ventures to investors—and they often ask me how they can do it. Other scholars have tried to pinpoint what passion is, as well. For example, Melissa Cardon, a professor at Pace University, along with several colleagues who also study entrepreneurial passion, defines it as “an entrepreneur's intense positive feelings that [are] the result of their engagement in entrepreneurial activities.”

The influence of such passion is that it presumably impacts an investor's own levels of passion—whereby they experience a change in their own internal emotions. I've heard this echoed by investors as well, who say things like “He was so passionate about it that it made me passionate about it. I could feel myself getting excited in the same way he was.”

So to gain an edge, at least in the start-up world, the trick is to be self-aware and pinpoint how you can demonstrate your passion in a more focused, self-enhancing manner, right? Well, not exactly.

First off, what I've discovered is that in the minds of investors, they don't actually know what they're referring to when they say they want a passionate entrepreneur. That is, investors don't agree on what passion is; different investors have different definitions of what it means. Some investors think it's about an entrepreneur demonstrating passion for the vision of the company—that you believe in what you're working on. Others think it's about demonstrating commitment—having the type of passion that can sustain you through the rough cycles. Some investors see these as being linked, while others argue that it's two entirely different things.

So as an entrepreneur, you might be trying to enhance in the very ways that would turn one investor on and turn another very much off.

But it's not just differences between investors—in which one investor thinks passion means X, while another thinks passion means Y. Often, when I pushed individual investors, even gently, to define passion, they couldn't. To illustrate: One day an investor told me that he doesn't invest in anyone who doesn't have passion. But then, not more than five minutes later, when I asked him to tell me about an entrepreneur whom he decided *not* to invest in, even though all the objective business data was telling him that it was a good investment, he told me, “Well, there was this one guy who looked like he had had waaaaay too much coffee. He was so passionate, and I couldn't invest in him.” People might think they want one thing, but that can change at any time.

Not only do people not know what they are looking for in others, they're not likely to notice even if you feel that you are being particularly compelling in demonstrating your passion—or charisma, as it were. This type of “spotlight effect” occurs everywhere. As humans, we all tend to forget that although we are at the center of our own world, we are not at the center of everyone else's. We drastically overestimate the effect we have on others.

We need to train ourselves to redirect that spotlight and get people emotionally invested in people other than themselves. Guiding entails being purposeful in helping others frame the attributions that they make about us.

...

Gary Vaynerchuk, the mastermind behind Wine Library and VaynerMedia, once told me, “There is not a single person's opinion that bothers me. I have

no expectations of anyone.” I called bullshit (his term, not mine) on this pretty quickly, pointing out how much of the success of his companies depends on his public persona and how he is able to deftly interrelate his sense of self with other people’s perceptions of him. He is unrepentantly who he is while simultaneously harmonizing with what people think of him. He replied by retorting, “Nope, I’d literally walk away from VaynerMedia and start all over. I think that would be fine and I would make something else incredible. I think that would be fun.” Which proved my point exactly.

Gary, as opposed to me, was not a good student in high school. I don’t say this with any sort of grandiosity (he does, after all, have a net worth of over \$160 million, whereas my net worth is closer to . . . well, never mind). And I only know that he wasn’t a good student because we both attended the same high school—a public high school in middle-of-nowhere New Jersey. Rather than endeavoring to earn gold stars, Gary occupied his free time with a small side business selling and trading baseball cards. He started out by going to baseball card shows at a local mall, where he would pay a table fee of \$100 to \$150, and then try to make a profit selling the cards. When he wasn’t selling cards, he was helping out at his dad’s wine and liquor store, where he would help crush ice, stock shelves, and manage inventory.

Gary told me once that if he was to have just been himself, he would have spent his early twenties watching sports and looking at baseball cards. But he cultivated a strong sense of self-awareness very early on, and despite his protestations otherwise, he found a way to guide in a manner that allowed him to reconcile who he was with his external responsibilities—namely, the expectation that he join the family business. He said, “I realized that wine is no different than baseball cards. We had the *Beckett*

Monthly and every month it came out with what cards were going up and what cards were going down. And with wine we had the *Wine Spectator* that rates wines and dictates what every retailer tries to buy and sell. It’s basically the same thing. I would joke about it.”

Upon graduating from college, Gary joined the wine and liquor store full-time and started applying some of the techniques that he had learned from selling baseball cards to help his dad make larger profits. He reminisces, “Instead of ‘Hey, what about this baseball card?’ now it was ‘Hey, what about this wine promotion?’ or ‘What about carrying this type of wine?’” Inexhaustible, he would come up with fifteen or twenty such ideas every day.

Gary, along with his best friend, Brandon, who eventually joined the store as well, continued to formulate ideas for how they could drive more revenue to the store by turning it into a major wine store. Quite quickly, he began to face barriers and realized that he was at a disadvantage relative to others in the industry—he was considered too young and too inexperienced to be a wine connoisseur. His family didn’t own a vineyard, just a discount wine and liquor store. He was perceived to be completely unconventional in his thinking, and others in the industry resented that he didn’t respect the sanctity of the wine business.

Gary and Brandon knew that to be seen as a major wine store in the eyes of customers, they would need to keep up with trends first and foremost—just as they had kept up with athletes and trends in selling baseball cards. They began to connect with premier wine-producing areas, beginning with a few big but lesser known importers from both Australia and Spain. Over time, this garnered them a huge selection of some of the best wines from emerging regions that would later become regarded as prestigious collectible wines. This then

gave them access to more traditional collectibles, such as Insignia, Dominus, Caymus, wines that you previously could get only if you knew the owner or had your name on a special list.

Gary began to connect and engage with customers, and realized that while the wine world was very elitist, he saw wine as something that should be widely accessible. Just as he was seen as unconventional, so too were many consumers. In this way, his unconventional background helped him tap into a market of unconventional customers.

Gary began to build a customer list and openly offer quality wines to all, providing everyone with the opportunity to access high-end collectibles, Spanish and Australian imports, and other new and upcoming wine regions. He started a fax service to fax people offers in the middle of the night. Before leaving his store at nine p.m., he would set up a fax to go out at three a.m. advertising all the high-end collectibles that they had. The idea was that in the morning, people would come into the office and find wine offers on their fax machines. It was Gary's way of getting out large amounts of information to customers quickly with just the push of a button.

As business improved, their fax service evolved into an email service. Gary started emailing thank-you notes to each of his customers, and then he started sending attachments of short videos of him personally saying thank you.

These videos led to other videos, in which he continued to try to make wine accessible to everyone by posting short instructional clips on wine and wine tasting. Gary's friendly and approachable demeanor resonated with his viewers, and soon he found that he had a huge audience—which led to a video blog on YouTube called *Wine Library TV* and an eventual rebranding of their liquor and wine store into Wine Library, a platform that offered online sales and a wine-delivery service, currently

bringing in more than \$60 million in annual sales. Gary now also owns VaynerMedia, a social media-focused digital agency, where he helps companies create an accessible persona and brand just as he did for Wine Library; as well as VaynerSports, a full-service sports agency; a shoe line with K-Swiss; and his own YouTube show called *The #AskGaryVee Show*.

Those who know Gary describe him as straightforward, real, and raw. He is immensely self-aware. Gary doesn't often mention that his road to success was paved with lots of biased perceptions from others, especially from those who were in the wine industry early on. He was truly an unconventional player in the wine world because of his lack of experience, as well as his youth and background.

But what gave him his edge was being unapologetic about who he is, while simultaneously being attuned to the perceptions of others so that he could align his strengths with the opportunities he saw in his external surroundings to connect and engage with customers. He relied on his strengths—a casual, approachable demeanor—to create associations with customers and suppliers. He was able to guide wine consumers in a way that others could not. He delighted them with his no-nonsense, brash perspective on wine, and enriched them with a new type of experience with wine.

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Hearing Gary's story, it seems simple. But Gary did not fit in. He was not part of the wine elite. Often when we're confronted with situations like Gary's—feeling out of place or unqualified—we try to fake it till we make it.

Remember that *we all have something*. Perceptions and attributions are being made about all of us—and getting into a contest about who has more

privilege is not likely to lead to your own long-term success. In the long-term, on a macro level, posturing and faking it provides just temporary value. It doesn't endure, and what ends up being more long-standing is a belief that inevitably holds people back—an enduring feeling of uncertainty and self-doubt. The fear that you will be stereotyped will be more pervasive than any amount of “elite brass” that you can channel, and you will start to anticipate situations in which you may not be as valued as you should be, in turn leading to more self-doubt.

This was what I experienced in all those engineering classes years ago, as one of four females majoring in electrical engineering, where none of us exactly fit the masculine persona—yet we all tried to act that part.

Scholars have found this exact type of posturing in women in mathematics and women and minorities in the workplace—finding that while it does provide some temporary respite, it nonetheless has negative effects on perceptions of performance in the long term.

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And thus, it was quite by accident that I discovered my elite brass equivalent (or as a good friend calls it, carrying herself with the confidence of a “mediocre white male”). That is to say, my personal solution to how I should be framing the conversation when I found myself in those situations in which the culture, the norms, and the environment were dictated by the “elite”—or any fill-in-the-blank type of person (my recent favorite version of the instruction is to “act like Oprah”: channel what you think Oprah would do) that I, quite simply, am not.

That was certainly true for me, as I discovered early in my career. Recognizing that guiding myself

by acting like someone I wasn't (whether a white man or Oprah) had tended to get me into trouble, I had just given up. I found that overwhelmingly, when I acted like a man—or how I thought a man would stereotypically act—I got pushback. People saw me as aggressive, and I had nothing to show for it.

I had just started a new job, and a trusted mentor had told me that in my new role, it was critical for me to be good at networking and making connections with those in power. He advised me to reach out to people, be assertive, and ask them to coffee. I followed his advice and I did manage to make a few connections and set up a few coffee meetings.

After a few of these encounters, however, I noticed that it was feeling superficial—like I wasn't really getting to know these people. They would offer me the same sort of surface-level advice, and I seemed to be having the same conversations over and over: they were glad to have me, the company provides wonderful opportunities to those who work hard and seek out stretch assignments, and I should get to know lots of people. I didn't really feel like I was making any meaningful connections with any of these people.

And yet, all around me, I'd hear my colleagues saying things like such and such VP “took me to this awesome sushi place and totally hooked me up with the tech team,” and such and such managing director “invited me to join him at the sales awards meeting,” and even things like “Oh, I'm so wasted. I was doing shots last night with such and such senior head until three a.m.”

I was clearly not as proficient in my networking. Again, I received advice along the lines of: “You need to do that—invite people to lunch, invite them out for drinks, not just normal coffee meetings.” But in the back of my mind, I remember thinking, “Me?

As a young Asian female? I should be inviting my senior male colleagues out for drinks?” There was no way that was going to happen. I knew intuitively that I was not going to be able to pull that one off.

But a few weeks later, I discovered that I too had the ability to make connections with senior leaders in my organization—authentic connections, even more so than I had imagined. I was scheduled to give a presentation at an industry conference and was taking an early flight to get there. It wasn’t until we landed and I got off the plane that I saw that the senior VP of the division I belonged to was on the same flight.

I went over and said hello, and asked him if he had flown in for the same conference and was planning to attend, or if he was in town for other business. He indicated that he was attending the same conference and then asked me, “How are you getting to the conference center?” I told him that I was going to catch a cab, to which he replied, “Oh, I have a driver coming to pick me up.” (Of course he did. I too was having a driver come to pick me up . . . only my driver works for a cab company, and his private driver works for him.)

But then he offered, “Do you want to catch a ride with me?”

Over the course of the forty-five-minute drive, we chatted and he got to know me, on neutral turf where I felt confident and comfortable. Not in a restaurant or bar, where I would feel the need to make that time worth his while; where I would feel the need to impress him, or be interesting or insightful so I wouldn’t feel bad about asking him to drinks. Or where I felt like I had to have some agenda (which would be clear to him). Here, I could just be myself.

There was no time pressure, no meeting for him to rush off to. We were captive for forty-five minutes and just enjoyed the time. Our conversation progressed naturally, like conversations are meant to

when you’re merely trying to get to know someone with no alternate agenda. I asked him for advice on things that came up organically; I was witty and let my natural sense of humor show. And he saw that I was a smart, insightful person. He got to know my personality.

At the conference, even though he was running between meetings, he made the time to catch the last ten minutes of my presentation and then came up to me to tell me how well he thought it went. He told me that I was a natural presenter. A few weeks later, he invited me to give a presentation to his internal team. To this day, he remains one of my most trusted and closest mentors.

It is stories like this one and the one with Gary of Wine Library and VaynerMedia that I hope you remember when thinking about guiding others’ views of you. Gary didn’t pretend to be a snooty, typical wine elitist, and I didn’t try to be one of the bros doing sake bombs. We can’t try to cater to what we think others want, because we have no idea how to do that, or what they want, and they don’t know either. Instead, we have to be opportunistic and savvy in seizing chances to demonstrate who we really are, and be unapologetic and confident.

Guiding others does not have to be arduous or painful, nor does it have to be an act that takes you out of your own comfort zone. It can be a simple by-product and an organic extension of your surroundings. Let things work for you, especially in guiding perceptions about you.

PRINCIPLE 11

Guide others to what is within you by recognizing what is around you.

CHAPTER 12

You Need at Least Two Points to Create a Trajectory

You have the power to say, “This is not how the story is going to end.”

—Cindy Eckert

IT’S NOT JUST WHO YOU ARE AS AN INDIVIDUAL that others will be judging. People will also be judging your path—the trajectory of where you have been, and where they think you are going.

The trajectory of an academic is often expected to follow an apprenticeship model. Advisors take students under their wing, teach them their craft, and then release them into a world of academia and boundless economic opportunity.

I was fortunate in landing my first academic placement after that propitious dinner with Raffi and Mac, if you’ll recall. But the part of the story that I left out is what led up to the invitation to visit with them in the first place.

Before you’re even at the stage of being invited to visit the school, there is a four-to-six-month lead-up—a period when you must substantiate that you are a well-trained apprentice. In my field, organizational and behavioral science, when you’re in

the last year of your doctoral program, you go “on the market” and start looking for either a postdoc position or an academic position at a college or university.

There is a ton of strategizing and advance preparation that goes into this process. Months before, students are advised to start putting together their packet of materials, which are eventually sent to all the colleges and universities to which you’ll be applying. This packet includes a résumé, multiple writing samples, a research statement that outlines the importance of your scholarship, a teaching statement that outlines your pedagogical philosophy, and multiple letters of recommendation.

Prior to sending out formal applications and packets, students also attend our field-wide academic conference, the Academy of Management conference, attended by more than ten thousand people each year. At this conference, students attend networking events, start to set up some initial interviews with some of the schools that they are interested in, and try to talk to as many people as they can. Those who are on the market are easy to identify—they are the ones in full business suits, while everyone else is dressed much more casually.

In the year that I was on the market, my dear advisor (the master to this humble apprentice) made it a point to give me one particular piece of advice: “Be the prom queen.”

I remember looking at her and thinking, “Wait, that’s the only advice you’re going to give me?”

In the four years I had spent working with her, I had never left a meeting without hordes of advice about my research, what improvements I should be making, what I should be working on, things that I should think about, how to think about my data. Every manuscript I had sent to my advisor would be returned with pages and pages of comments, things crossed out in red, notes and feedback in the

margins of each page, scribbles of revisions, and suggestions and items to think about. But for the process I was about to embark on, which would be the culmination of my PhD career, the only thing she had to offer was “Be the prom queen”?

And so I sputtered out, incredulously, “Be the prom queen? What does that mean?” I needed clarification. Her reply: “Everyone wants to date the prom queen.” And then she sent me on my way.

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Truth be told, I was far from the actual prom queen in real life. And I certainly was far from the social science equivalent of the prom queen. You see, the main currency that academics have in the field is their publications. Of which I had none. Publish or perish, baby. By the time doctoral students go on the market, they often have multiple publications, or at the very least, one—preferably in a top-tier journal. These are the students who command the most attention from universities; these are the students who land the plum academic jobs.

In lieu of top-tier publications, search committees will sometimes significantly weight the quality of the institution from which you’re receiving your PhD, as a signal that you have the academic chops to publish in top-tier publications, even if you haven’t yet done so. And there is a clear hierarchy of these research institutions—typically schools like MIT, Stanford, and Yale are considered top-of-the-line, but well-known public research universities like University of Michigan, UT Austin, and University of North Carolina also carry immense influence.

I had neither going for me—neither any publications to my name nor a high-caliber school to back me. My doctorate would be from UC Irvine, which often does not even make the list of the top fifty re-

search institutions.*

And so I pondered why my advisor felt that I had it in me to be the prom queen. Perhaps it was just that she was like a mother; every mother thinks that their kid is the prettiest in the class and should be the prom queen, right?

My advisor’s advice kept plaguing me, even as I started networking and meeting with people at the Academy of Management conference. It was there that I met the prom royalty, so to speak—a handful of men and women in my cohort who had multiple top-tier publications, were being wined and dined by professors at top schools, and had plenty of charisma that captivated everyone around them.

In that instant, in addition to realizing that I, in fact, was *not* the prom queen, I also understood that a number of schools were doing intimate, invitation-only chats with people they knew to be on the market. My attempts at networking with folks at these schools would be, at best, feeble.

When I saw my advisor later that evening, she asked me, “Well, were you the prom queen?” To which I replied, “No, but I did meet the prom queen.” She was only slightly amused, and then she went on to explain that it didn’t matter that I wasn’t coming from the top institution, because I was well trained. My advisor didn’t think any of that should stand in the way of a belief that I could fare just as well as, if not better than, others. It didn’t matter that I didn’t have the most publications (or any at all), because that wasn’t the journey I’d had, nor the trajectory that she believed I *would* have.

She had expected me to guide the understanding that while I hadn’t had the normal trajectory that we expect to see in a doctoral student—one in which you work hard, make steady progress, and then have a paper or two to show for yourself—I hadn’t had the traditional apprenticeship trajectory either. Mine wasn’t the model of a *steady, upward*

trajectory of someone who is taken on as the student of someone famous, groomed to produce a certain type of work, and then able to show the fruits of that labor.

“But that’s what makes you uncommon,” she said. “That’s what makes you special. That’s what makes you the prom queen—someone who generates the interest, demand, and attention of everyone, based on the aura of something special. That you’re on an uncommon, *special* trajectory. Guide people to *that*, you dummy.” (She didn’t actually say that last part.)

Don’t let them make assumptions. Give them the data points so that they can draw the trend line that *you* want them to see. Tell them, rather than allowing them to guess, about your future potential.

My journey, my trajectory, was one in which I was not told what to do, but was instead given support and encouragement to explore my own research passions. Where others had been *given* a passion project, I had discovered mine by having to go out there myself to struggle and figure out a phenomenon. In turn, I had answered an unanswered, previously unsolvable question: the role of gut feel in entrepreneurial investment decisions—something that very much ran counter to traditional economic theory and entrepreneurial finance, which no one else had dared study. And as a result, I had produced one of the most novel and interesting dissertation topics out there.

This trajectory wasn’t the shiniest or prettiest—but it did offer something special and unique. No one else had had the trajectory that I’d had, nor the story and the resulting research that I had to offer.

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You already know how this story ends—how I

found myself at a steak dinner in Philadelphia, and ultimately landed my first academic position. What I haven’t said yet is that I ended up sitting down the hall from one of those famous professors, who I remember was wining and dining and wooing others. Years later, he told me in passing that I was hired because I was seen as an “unfinished work”—someone with a fresh, new, and distinctive way of looking at the literature, with an amazing trajectory and tons of upside potential. It was basically the same thing that my advisor had said.

Being the prom queen, I discovered, truly is about the aura of something special. It’s about mapping and explaining where you have come from and where you are going, in a way that guides others to understand your value. Too often, we try to follow the trajectory that others have taken, using it as a road map for success and trying to contort our own experiences into the standard trajectory. But had I attempted to sell myself with the tried-and-true academic trajectory—the type that others embodied—it would have gone horribly wrong.

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What is it about trajectories? Why are they important? First, being able to clearly communicate your trajectory allows you to guide people in such a way that they can comprehend who you are in a coherent and meaningful way. Some may call it a personal narrative, but it’s more than that. A narrative provides an anecdote, a moral, a quick lesson, like what you’d get from one of Aesop’s fables. A trajectory, on the other hand, paints a richer picture of where you are and where you have come from—who you are as a person and what others can expect of you. This trajectory, importantly, lets *you* dictate what is meaningful for them to know. *You* get to package

factual information about both your tangibles and your intangibles—you get to be the one to construct it. They don't. That is important. There will always be people trying to project a description onto you, trying to tell you who they think you are based on signals that they pick up on, cues that they notice—and biases that they draw from. When you take control of the trajectory that you've experienced, it's the equivalent of taking over the steering wheel and constructing the sequence for them before they have a chance to do so. You anchor them at a point that *you* dictate, rather than letting them construct a view of you that you might then need to spend all your energy getting them to think differently about and trying to prove yourself otherwise.

This is what I eventually did with job search committees. Rather than letting them write me off because I didn't have any publications, I took the steering wheel and communicated how my trajectory had led me to a novel, never-before-seen research contribution. And so senior faculty members went beyond their initial signals and cues. They overcame their uncertainty and risk avoidance that otherwise would have disqualified a candidate from a lower-tier university, to understand how I could be that diamond in the rough.

In this way, a clear and fitting trajectory also allows you to help others understand your value and how you will enrich. What do you want people to know about your trajectory—where you have been and where you are going? What is it about your trajectory that helps people understand your potential and your ability to enrich?

You can immediately help them do their sense-making around understanding how who you are and where you've been will bring potential value. You won't have to explicitly elaborate complex reasoning behind how you're going to get from point X to point Y, because your story allows them to make

that leap on their own. Your trajectory provides the handholds and the logic that allow them to do it on their own, which is not only more powerful but also more memorable.

Finally, a proper trajectory helps generate interest and commitment. You've directed others to your upside potential and you've primed them on what your future trajectory might be. Effectively communicating your trajectory allows others to connect what you are saying to a broader context. Make no mistake, your depiction and your trajectory are yours—so it will still appear original and distinctive to others—but just by painting a picture of where you have been and where you are now, you allow people to embed what you are saying within broader contexts that are interesting to them.

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So how do you grasp and recognize your trajectory—the trajectory that will give you your edge? It's about recognizing the path you have taken thus far, and the path you intend to take going forward. Many different trajectories exist—like the steady, *upward trajectory* that we discussed, or the *distance-traveled trajectory* or *second-chances trajectory*, as we'll soon see, but these are just a few. Yours may be some variation of these or something entirely different. Daniel Bertaux and Martin Kohli, sociologists who examine the use of life stories and autobiographical narratives, find that there is no comprehensive set of archetypes to describe one's trajectory—but instead, there are two main trends. The first focuses on meaning and patterns, and the other focuses on what shaped these patterns within the social milieu. In other words, the logic *and* the larger paradigm. Your trajectory has to provide an account of the details that really matter, but if you don't know how

each detail fits into the overall story of what really matters, you don't really understand it and you can't effectively communicate it. But communicating your trajectory isn't just about storytelling and isn't just about being cute. To pinpoint your trajectory, you must understand and appreciate the underlying disadvantages, challenges, and obstacles that you face and have faced and the ongoing path that you see yourself on.

My friend Beatriz's path is about how far she has traveled, from bookkeeper to Louis Vuitton—quite effortlessly, it seems. When I met Beatriz on the first day of our MBA program, I was immediately struck by how unbelievably poised she was, dressed in a style that was uniquely hers—professional and practiced, yet effortless and chic. It was only months later that I learned about how she had grown up in an extremely small rural town in Spain, where her childhood was spent helping her family tend farmland. Until the day she left, she had never ventured more than about thirty-five miles outside her town, let alone left the country.

She had achieved quite a lot by the time she left Spain, by her town's standards, having gotten some basic bookkeeping training and even landing a job as a receptionist at one of the larger offices in the next town. But one day, she decided that she was going to move to Germany, a country she had always dreamed of seeing. To her and her friends, it was a place that could provide something bigger, something greater than what they were destined for at home, even greater than anything Spain could provide.

So she saved up, took a chance, and moved to Munich. She started interviewing for whatever jobs she could—in German. The first few interviews were, predictably, quite disastrous (and as she recounts it, quite humorous), as she spoke no German at all, and even if her interviewers spoke Spanish

they didn't let on. But she owned it, and kept at it, acknowledging her language deficiency. She noticed that when she openly told her interviewers that she was from Spain and that her German was still evolving, they would do most of the talking—they even seemed to enjoy doing so. As Beatriz recounts, “I started noticing that some of the questions were the same. And I would listen to them talk about their companies and almost answer the question themselves.”

She would listen. And then she started memorizing certain phrases, not knowing what those phrases even meant. She found that almost instinctually, at the next interview, she'd repeat some of those phrases she picked up here and there—just to keep up with the conversation. “Lots of times, I didn't even know what it was that I was saying. I was just stringing together words and sentences—things that I had heard and that sounded good,” she told me.

People found it charming. She was amazed. She would infuse her own interpretation of things that she only barely understood, and then be complimented for taking a risk. She recalls, “They said that I was distinctive. One person even told me that they thought I would go very far in life.”

She started to realize that people took to her. More specifically, they took to the *distance-traveled* trajectory. When they would ask her to tell them about herself, she would guide them through her trajectory: coming from a small town in Spain, but having the guts and fortitude and gumption to not only operate in a foreign language, but to do so with her own flavor of poise and sophistication.

And then one day, she had an interview at a company that she had never heard of: Goldman Sachs. They were looking for a receptionist in their private wealth management area. The minute she set foot into the company, she knew that what they

wanted was a receptionist who was professional and practiced, yet effortless and chic. She guided them through her trajectory, stringing together phrases that sounded good, even while not speaking German fluently. They loved that she could improvise and charm while still not having command of the language—and in fact, they saw that as a huge asset, especially with their client base, many of whom were also not native German speakers. She got the job.

She was a spectacular receptionist. Within a year, they promoted her to analyst—the first time they had ever promoted a receptionist to a frontline role. Her manager had made the case that she had made great progress, and that she continued to show guts and gumption, poise and sophistication time and time again—her trajectory. And then shortly after, she was promoted to sales associate in private wealth management. They gave her the opportunity to take stretch assignments in Frankfurt, New York, Miami, and Switzerland.

She soon left Goldman Sachs to pursue her MBA, which is when I met her. She wanted to make a switch into luxury goods—which proved to be difficult, though the industry requires the very qualities that she had been building throughout her entire trajectory. Even as we faced our impending graduation date, she still had no job. Yet while others who also had no offers were nervously scrambling, she just reminded herself that what she was experiencing was merely what had been foreshadowed in the past, in the early days of her trajectory. Instead of not speaking German, this time she didn't "speak" luxury goods.

Three months later, she received an offer from LVMH (Louis Vuitton) as their manager for women's leather goods in Paris at Maison Champs-Élysées. She started out on the sales floor managing sales associates, but it surprised no one when she became store director for Louis Vuitton in Monaco,

responsible for the store's revenue and profitability targets, local marketing, operations, HR, and team management, and later also taking on responsibility for Louis Vuitton in Milan, managing private client relations and client events.

. . .

Beatriz's trajectory helped her communicate an important account of who she is: gutsy, risk-taking, sophisticated, and poised under any circumstance. Yes, she started off from humble beginnings. Yes, she probably felt at times like she had to work twice as hard as everyone else. But as she noted to me on multiple occasions, all of that was irrelevant. People don't even notice (or care about) effort. At first, they judged Beatriz the same as everyone else—as if everyone began at the same start line. It was how she communicated and positioned her trajectory that changed that. It was her trajectory that enamored them, allowing them to see that she had actually come very far on very few resources (and in spite of lots of hurdles), and she was able to deliver her brand of sophistication—the very characteristic they valued and appreciated—precisely because of the path she had taken.

For others, it's not about coming from humble beginnings and showing the distance they have traveled. The world can be cruel at times, and someone like Dave Dahl, whose trajectory is based on what someone can do with a second chance in life, can tell you that it was the story he was able to tell because of this second chance that gave him his edge.

Dave had spent fifteen years in and out of prison for drug abuse, robbery, and assault. He found himself labeled as an ex-con and a failure. But his identity wasn't always tied so tightly to such labels. Dave

conveys the days from his childhood when he found that he had a gift for making bread. And that led to him deciding that he would try to turn this gift into part of his salvation: he would make breads that were nutritious, natural, and filled with seeds, nuts, and grains,* and slowly try to build himself back up. The only problem? He saw the way people reacted to his ponytail, gravelly voice, and overall demeanor, and knew that starting a bread company was going to be a tough road. The distance-traveled trajectory was never going to work for him. But he could do something else—he could own his failures and present his own trajectory. He started his company, calling it Dave's Killer Bread, with the description of the company mirroring the trajectory of his life:

At Dave's Killer Bread, we have witnessed the power of Second Chance Employment: hiring those who have a criminal background, and are ready to change their lives for the better. It gives people a second chance not only to make a living, but make a life.

Without employment opportunities, those with criminal backgrounds often resort to the only life they know—a life of crime. We want to change that.

Dave guided not only investors but also retailers and customers to see why his trajectory warranted a second chance. Turn it into your advantage and make it about guts. Remember that 75 percent of superhigh achievers come from troubled families—the types of families who have found success from a second chance.

This can be harnessed to guide. Describe your failure, your trajectory, without bitterness: “It has been an incredible journey.” “I learned a ton.” It presents every failure as temporary—a way station

to success.

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There are many trajectories and many ways to depict your own trajectory. We've discussed a few here, but it is nowhere near a comprehensive list. There isn't one path that is “better” than another, because your edge comes from recognizing the corresponding impressions that others will have of you based on the path you have taken and the path you intend to take, and how to manage and guide those impressions.

The way you chronicle your personal trajectory helps you explain who you are in a compelling way, a way that others will understand and be impacted by. People are trying to guess about your future potential based on your past trajectory. Ultimately, there is no wrong or right trajectory. The only mistake you can make is having no trajectory in mind at all. If you don't provide your own chronicle of who you are, one will be given to you. You'll assume whatever description the other party gives you, dictated by *their* biases, perceptions, and attributions. Don't passively let others write your narrative—write *your own* narrative and guide others' view of you. Make sure you have a baseline account of your trajectory, craft your own narrative, and don't shy away from embracing all your past experiences—even the disadvantages, challenges, and obstacles that you've faced—in mapping your story. Your past is not something that you should lament; it should be another asset in how you gain your unique advantage. Let your past make you better, not bitter.

PRINCIPLE 12

It's not where you've *been*; it's where you're *going*. Guide how others see your trajectory.