



First, Be Intentional

by Rod Zeeb

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Are you intentional about the outcomes you seek to achieve in your business and personal life? When you come right down to it, everything important in life begins with an *intention*. All that we say, do, create, plan for, build, mess up, and ultimately achieve is the result of behavior that we produce on purpose. In every sense, our intentions create our reality. That being the case, it should be reasonable to assume that each of us takes the issue of intentionality quite seriously.

As children we learn (often through hard experience) about the relationship between purposive behavior and desired outcomes. By the time we are young adults we have figured out that any meaningful actions we propose to take can be realized only by virtue of our *sincere* intentions to perform them, not by hoping, wishing, or engaging in other random activity. Even so, after years of hard-earned life ‘seasoning,’ our decision-making processes as adults still often tend to be random, and based on intuition and hunch more than they are on a deliberate, intentional process of reflection, information gathering, and planning.



The best way to make good decisions and experience better outcomes is to become more *intentional* about everything we do.

The value of being intentional

In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I have been developing original processes and instructing advisors how to successfully employ them in their work for a couple of decades. And

in that stretch of time, I have witnessed the meteoric arrival and inevitable demise of more business fads and hot new professional trends than I can count. Particularly amusing are the cure-all solutions proffered by the ‘business-books-du-jour,’ hot-off-the-press guides that promise to transform us overnight into wealthy, happy, much-admired (not to mention thinner!) giants in our field. Do you want to learn business secrets gleaned on the battlefield by medieval Asian warriors? Sure, why not, a spear and battle-ax are just what I need to build better client relationships. How about a book that is chock-filled with ‘inside’ management tips from some of America’s best-run companies? Uh, ok, as long as you don’t follow-up on how many of those perfectly run organizations are out of business a year or two down the road.

Chicken Soup for the Boardroom? Manage Any Task in I-Minute? What can your poor dad teach you? And, particularly important for our topic today, ‘SHHH! It’s Not Really A Secret: Just Think It, and It’s Yours!’ A sense of fairness requires me to acknowledge that many of the best-selling business books from years past had something to offer. There might even be a tidbit or two from each best-seller that is worth remembering today. But if fairness compels me to mention that fact, honesty and common sense mandate that I also note that many of the “Rod, you absolutely have to read this new business book” titles that friends and colleagues have touted over the years are no longer in print. You don’t see business travelers pouring over them in airport book-shops, or lugging them across hotel

lobbies. Their pearls of wisdom aren't shared in MBA lecture halls, and kindly old CEOs don't hand them out with a pat on the back to their most promising young junior executives.

So, why do so many of these master-of-the-universe-in-a-week kind of books fade away into bargain bin obscurity? The reason is *intentionality*, or in this case, the lack of intentionality. It's one thing to give advice, and plenty of business books do that. By the bucket full. It's quite another thing to place that advice in proper context: that is, how to be intentional about integrating the advice into your life. Not how to 'apply' it. Not how to 'embrace' it. Not how to 'get' it. Those activities won't get you (the reader) beyond the most rudimentary level of understanding. Without the addition of one more ingredient, the vital



ingredient, all of the great knowledge stored between the covers of even the hottest, most thoroughly researched, and best written book is pretty much useless.

Imagine turning on the Food Network Channel and seeing a couple of world class chefs struggling to make a five-star dish from a recipe that does not contain a single herb or spice; or a winemaker striving to produce a perfectly balanced Cabernet with only a pile of table grapes and a pinch of dry yeast. That is the challenge you will face if you approach a popular book, seminar, workshop, or professional advancement program without having this one critical and irreplaceable ingredient in place. That ingredient is your own intentionality.

Does that sound like an over statement? Can one single variable from among many that are inside a complex system with dozens of component parts really make that big a difference? In a word, yes. Here's a way to think of it: do you remember the old Middle Ages rhyme about how the loss of a single tiny nail changed history? It went:

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.*

One ingredient. The right ingredient.

Yes, indeed, one ingredient truly can make all the difference in the world. But, don't assume that your failure to understand and apply intentionality is upon your shoulders alone simply because you did not follow-through and integrate the lessons, ideas, and strategies that seemed so compelling and powerful when you were reading that last rip-roaring best-seller. (It is a great feeling, I agree: the sensation of anxious, impatient enthusiasm we sometimes get when a particular passage or statement in a book lights a fire in us. Especially when it makes us want to drop the book and get out there and put that idea into action right now!)

In fact, plenty of fault lies with authors and publishers. They need to understand that if they really want their particular patented and copyrighted 'formula' for success to work, they need to start from a different place when they map out their book. It's not enough for the author to say, 'Rod, if you will study and follow these three steps each time you meet with a prospective client, your conversion rates will soar and you will achieve all of your goals.' And yet, that's precisely what most business advice books do. Here's our formula, they say: learn it, apply it, and get rich. (Of course, they usually take a hundred pages or more get to the central point, to that one paragraph that sums up the entire book.)

It takes two to succeed

For a business-oriented book to deliver true, lasting value, it's not enough that it be fresh and original. Or that it be fun to read. It doesn't even matter if the strategies, ideas, processes, and tactics the author puts forward seem absolutely perfect to you, in fact, like they were written *just* for you. No, the content of any given book—even the best of the best— can only provide a portion of the recipe for your enduring success. (I'll go out on a limb and say that at most the content of a given book can only boost your opportunity for lasting success by a few percentage points.) The success that you can realize by virtue of reading a particular book (or, by extension, by attending a seminar, getting a degree, or earning another certification) is 100% dependent upon the one vital ingredient that only you can bring to the recipe: **your intentions**. Absent your intentions, all of the advice, expertise, and education in the world are about as useful as a screen door on a submarine. The author of that must-read business book, the instructor at that gangbuster seminar, no matter his or her brilliance, is only a fractional part of the game plan. You and your intentions are the other, far more important part of the recipe.

Intentions vs. Expectations & Positive Thinking

We can best understand what intentions are and what they do by first clarifying what they are not. Your intentions relative to a book (or class, seminar or coaching) are not the same as your expectations. Many people confuse the two. Expectations are the pictures that you form in your mind of the outcomes that you anticipate will result once you have taken a particular course of action. Think about that slimmer you in the mirror sporting your favorite jeans after 30 days of dieting, or the banker thanking you for making another huge deposit. Expectations envision the achievement of that which inspires and drives you, or as Shakespeare called it, that 'consummation devoutly to be wished for.'

Intentions—even the best— are not expectations, nor are they a form of 'positive thinking.' Positive thinking encourages you to 'visualize' yourself in a

(typically happy) situation, like watching a mental video that features you as the star. As uplifting as the act of positive thinking may feel (and let's face it, the idea of positive thinking continues to sell books!) there is increasing evidence that simply visualizing oneself from an external perspective in critical life events can actually hamper your progress, up to and including preventing you from achieving your goals. (Regrets to Dr. Phil and the cavalcade of 'put on a happy face no matter what' crowd, by the way.) But, rest easy: you may not have to put your smiley face bumper stickers away quite yet. Researchers at the University of Western Ontario say that while happy thoughts really don't work, there is a mental technique that does: its called mental rehearsal, and it definitely comes under the heading of being intentional.



Rehearse

In a mental rehearsal you imagine a business presentation as if you are actually in the thick of it. Call it a 'mental trial run.' A successful mental rehearsal breaks down the presentation into tiny component parts and allows you to work on improving specific aspects. Through mental rehearsal you concentrate on the most difficult moments and work out good coping strategies for all of the things that can go sour. Competitive sport coaches routinely offer training in mental rehearsal, which today is considered the decisive element separating the top tier athlete from the second division player. Mental practice has even been shown to work as well as actual physical practice for things like learning play patterns and getting timing just right in different sports. Interestingly, athletes do not use intentional

mental rehearsal training to get their bodies to win; instead, they use it to train their minds not to lose. Focused intention is considered essential for champion athletes to improve their games—and it should be the same for professional advisors.

In practice

Basketball legend Michael Jordan was intentional each time he picked up the ball. When he practiced his shooting, he didn't play around. He took no trick shots or backward shots, though he was clearly capable of doing any kind of shot he wished. He simply did not take shots in practice that he wouldn't normally take in a game. For Michael Jordan, every practice shot was a real shot. His only shot was an intentional shot. He knew that old saying: "if you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time." That's why he always aimed at something. **And so should we.**



This isn't a dress rehearsal. This is the real thing.

The take-away from the idea of intentionality as expressed by Michael Jordan can be summed up by that headline. In our professions, as in our personal lives, our intentions set the objectives and standards, create the accountability mechanism, and keep us on the path that is as true to us as we are to it. Intentions spring first from our imagination, where they roll around for while before we organize the emerging ideas into plans, and the plans into action.

Intentional Business

There may be no more important words of counsel you can give to a professional about the conduct of their business than this:

BE INTENTIONAL

This two-word sentence sums up one of the most important guiding considerations for every aspect of your work, from branding and hiring, to managing and operating your business and creating the all-important client experience. To be intentional with your business means that you and every member of your team are fully connected to your business's intent: what your business does, what value it delivers, what your roles are, and why that's important. It is only after you and your team have become fully grounded in your business strategy and intention that you have the basis upon which to make your 'promise.' That promise is

your brand. And that promise (short though its written expression should be!) expresses what your existing and future clients believe about your business, and what they expect from you. You must keep that promise. And to keep it, your promise must be

connected to the actual experience being delivered to your clients. This idea can be expressed as a formula:

Intention + promise + the client experience = a successful, significant business.

Conclusion

To become intentional in all you do is no accident. It requires that you make good decisions and that you achieve clarity about what matters most to you in your personal life and your business. The intentional person stands for something. They ask for what they want. They account for their days. Be intentional about what you are seeking to learn, intentional in selecting the quality, depth, wisdom, and permanence of the advice you are reading or listening to, and intentional about how you integrate what you learn into your life. Intentionality begins in the imagination, but it

does not linger there. Intent without action is simply magical thinking. To achieve what matters most in your life requires that you be intentional, and that you act. The smallest deed is greater than the best intention. A great sage once said, “*the road to perdition is paved with good intentions.*” For our purpose, he should have added one word: “the road to perdition is paved with good intentions *unrealized.*”

Clarify your intentions, and put a foundation under them, and your road will lead exactly where you want to go.

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