



## **Rising to the Challenges in Life and Business**

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At a conference some thirty years ago, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, when asked what the purpose of life was, said, without batting an eyelid, that 'the purpose of life is to be happy' – not too far off Jesus' view that we're here to 'live life and live it to the full'.

When it comes to business, you might say that the purpose of being in business is 'to be successful' – so that all the stakeholders get a good return for the efforts.

Of course, each of us has our own unique definition of happiness and success – assuming, that is, that you've ever stopped to reflect on it at all.

But, you might care to reflect on this question for a moment – are you really, really happy and successful – and, if not, why not? Do you, perhaps, have issues in business and life that get in the way? What exactly is standing in your way?

What are the challenges? Well, from a business perspective, we have a decelerating domestic economy, Europe's main economies slipping into recession, the soaring cost of energy and food, the relative demise of the construction industry, a contracting travel and leisure sector, a slow down in consumer spending, EU GDP rules being breached as the tax take falters – not to mention the mayhem in the financial services sector.

And, of course, a strong € - now that's an interesting one – we bemoan either a weak or strong currency – it's a case of every silver lining has a cloud.

That's a fairly hefty list, isn't it! And I haven't even mentioned the Irish summers! We haven't even touched on the personal challenges many face – fractured personal relationships, health issues, problem teenage children, a deteriorating golf handicap. Seriously, though, for example, an Irish Times Poll published in September stated that 63% of men are 'extremely or very concerned about having enough money to pay for day-to-day expenses.'

You see, the list of potential obstacles to happiness and success could be endless – bet you're happy that PWC got me to speak today!

But are all the things I've just mentioned really challenges? Are they really the obstacles that have to be overcome on the road to happiness and success? Surely, if you were going to enter an ocean-going yacht race, you'd expect and be prepared for big waves! Surely, these are just big waves. Surely, neither life nor business can be plain sailing.

I would suggest that these are not the real challenges that we face – they are simply the sand and water hazards of the normal round of life and business. They are externalities – the things that go on around us. The real challenge is how we react and respond to them. The real challenge is within.

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There are, approximately, 250 people in this room this afternoon/morning. Statistically speaking, at least, according to 50 years research at Harvard, that means that there are 240 normal people and 10 abnormal people here!

Before you go clapping yourself on the back for being normal – let's explore what normal is.

Well, according to Harvard, normal people rarely, if ever, achieve what they set out to achieve. According to normal people themselves, they're 'not too bad' – just ask anyone you meet how they are today – nine times out of ten, you'll get the answer – 'not too bad'.

According to thirty years research at the universities of Chicago and Milan, normal people only invest 1% of their mental energy in what they're doing – you heard me – we only use 1% of our mental capability to do what we're supposed to be doing here and now. This should come as no surprise – after all, how many times has your mind wandered since I started talking? How many people have one eye on me, one eye on the clock and a good deal of their mind wondering when their Blackberry will vibrate again? And that's just the stuff that we're aware of in our conscious mind. Without trying to depress you, your subconscious mind is running riot to an even greater extent – you're just not aware of it! So, the research indicates that, if you're normal, your mind controls you – not the other way around. Normal people are mad!

In other words, 'normal' simply means that enough morons got together and agreed that 'this is the norm' – and we all happily and unwittingly tag along!

This begs a couple of important questions. First of all, could a normal person ever be really happy and successful? How would they even know? They're not all there! Secondly – and this is the question we're going to focus our minds on over the next few minutes – if we're normal, how can you or I rise above the so-called obstacles that we perceive as challenges in our ordinary everyday business and personal lives?

Actually, it is a question that can be answered straight away – and the answer is obvious. Everyone can be effortlessly happy and successful by using more than 1% of their mental capacity to focus their minds on the task in hand – whatever the task in hand might be.

Easier said than done? Perhaps, but, in fact – and by that I mean scientific fact – it is the sole challenge that stands between us and the kind of exceptional success that abnormal people

experience – people whose names we all know, people who stand head and shoulders above normal people – people who are clearly not normal.

So, let's get down to business. Because time is short and, by the time I've finished, I want you to have fully understood a couple of things that you can put into practice straight away.

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Firstly, we need to get to grips with what I meant when I said that we only apply 1% of our mental capacity to doing what we're supposed to be doing here and now. Although the only place and time we can actually be – at this moment in time – is here and now, thirty years research confirms that the normal adult is living in the past and wondering or worrying about the future.

At a conscious level, research suggests that we are bombarded by 50,000 random thoughts each waking day. These may be useless thoughts like 'did I turn the oven off before I came out?', 'did I set the alarm this morning?' or 'I should have called that client before I left the office'. Thinking about things like that cannot alter what has or hasn't been done – these thoughts only serve to annoy and distract us. But, some of our random thoughts may be a little more toxic than that – 'What if we don't get that new piece of business – are we going to have to let some people go?' 'What if markets keep on tumbling?' 'What if we cannot secure that additional credit line?'

Thoughts like this often hit us at bizarre times – sometimes four in the morning – and they are a little more insidious than random nonsense. They're corrosive and destructive. And they are borne out of our more deeply held subconscious perceptions.

And it is our subconscious that really damages our ability to focus our mental capacity on the present moment. Generally, our subconscious lives in the past – looking at events long gone that psychology tells us stuck in our minds, during our formative years, through snapshot learning – events that have nothing to do with the here and now but which, nevertheless, colour of perception of today's events – and colour our perception of ourselves.

Of course, you've no idea that any of this is going on – it's subconscious, below your level of awareness – but the net effect is that your mind is unfocused, unbalanced – in stark contrast to abnormally successful people who are focused and single-minded.

Without delving into the research in detail or dissecting the mechanisms that get us into this sorry state, suffice it to say that the normal adult mind is focused in the past and the future – and completely unfocused on what you're supposed to be doing here and now.

Let me put it more simply – normal people do not know how to pay attention. And, yet, paying attention is the key to happiness and success. Research proves that when we're happy, it is because we are completely engrossed in the experience. You know what I'm talking about – a beautiful sunset on a tropical beach that takes your breath away; the all-consuming joy of falling in love; hitting that perfect tee-shot without any effort; being so engrossed in a good film that two hours feels like twenty minutes.

And recent neuro-psychological research indicates that it works the other way around. If you can train yourself to be engrossed in what you're doing, you'll be happy – and, it goes without saying, better at what you're doing – more efficient, more effective, more successful, more satisfied.

And that leads me to the most important point I could make today. The only way we can behave appropriately and act effectively in the face of the everyday so-called challenges that life throws at us is by paying attention.

Otherwise, we're not acting at all – we're reacting. As normal adults, we spend our lives reacting. We shout at our kids – when we know that that's counterproductive; we lose the head in traffic – when we know it makes no sense; we feel guilty when, having taken home an important piece of work, we bring it back into the office the next morning untouched – when we know it would be simpler just to do it; we get stressed when someone, like our boss or our board, asks us to do something unexpected – when we know that being stressed will only slow us down; the FTSE reacts to Asian markets and the Dow Jones reacts to the FTSE – markets react to sentiment and confidence – random thoughts running through our heads.

As adults we do everything habitually. Research shows that we walk the way our parents walked; adult males shave the way their fathers shaved before them; we dress ourselves the same way every day (leading with the same arm and leg). What that means is that, each morning, you walk to the bathroom automatically, brush your teeth automatically, dress automatically, drive without thinking about it, react to other motorists automatically, greet your colleagues automatically, come home again and channel-hop automatically.

Obviously, automaticity, as psychologists call this phenomenon, ensures that we are effective in doing repetitive tasks – imagine if you had to learn to walk or drive every day! But, as long ago as 1936, a certain Prof. Stroop proved conclusively that automaticity prevents us paying attention to the things that we actually decide that you want to pay attention to.

I know that sounds bizarre – but perhaps it provides an explanation for how, when you know you have a report to write, you'll do anything except write it; or when you've a huge workload you'll first make yourself a coffee and read the paper. Does it explain why markets follow each other – based on sentiment and confidence – or, more recently, based on fear and panic?

In short, automaticity prevents you paying attention. But it's worse than that – the mindlessness induced by automaticity ensures that your subconscious mind lives in the past.

How can we become less mindless – more mindful? How can we stop reacting and start acting? How can we become less automatic and more attentive?

Perhaps we can take a leaf out of Harvard Business School's book. At their executive summer school in Lausanne, participants are required to take their notes with the hand with which they do not habitually write. At my two day workshop, my clients are required to brush their teeth with the hand they do not habitually use. The men are asked to shave with the other hand. Knives and forks are reversed.

This is your first take-away from this session. Break little habits. The benefits are two-fold. First of all, in deciding to do something differently, you break the cycle of automaticity. In realising that you

have a choice, you become mindful, aware. Secondly, in doing something like shaving differently, you will have to pay the task greater attention. In breaking little habits, you begin to re-learn how to pay attention to the task in hand. Do this for little things – great things will follow.

Take one step back – see what is going on, not what a normal muddled mind thinks is going on. Ensure that you are not normal – quote Warren Buffet...

By being more attentive, you do what you're doing more effectively. By paying more than 1% attention to what you're doing, you become more present – gain in presence of mind, which will enable you appropriately act in the face of perceived challenges. And, of course, presence will make you more impressive. Isn't that how we describe abnormally successful people – like Bill Clinton for example – they have charisma, or presence – in other words, they are more than 1% present – more present than all the normal lunatics.

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Breaking little habits has been likened, by many of my clients, to meditating with your eyes open. And that brings me to my second point. It seems to me that most abnormally successful people meditate. They may not call it that, but a comparison of Thomas Edison's well-known mental exercises shows that they are identical to three or four thousand year old meditations. The mental exercising that Sir Richard Branson does six times each day are meditations. The many senior business people with whom I've worked over the last thirteen years meditate regularly – as do the many members of my online workshop. Some of you may well meditate.

Either way, I would suggest that you set about turning off the noise in your wayward heads – start ignoring the daily 50,000 random thoughts. Formal mental exercising will do that for you – it will equip you do sail effortlessly through the big waves I mentioned earlier.

In a paper published in 2000, the WHO recommended meditation as a way of avoiding stress – which they believe will be the biggest killer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Don't get me wrong when I suggest that you try meditating. I am not suggesting that it is necessary that you wrap your legs around your ears. Nor am I suggesting that you meditate for the sake of meditation. I am suggesting that you learn how to compose yourself in a quiet moment – so that you can be fully composed when all hell is breaking loose around you.

Isn't that what Ronan O'Gara does? All those place kickers are not only meditating before your very eyes, they're using a twelve thousand year old technique of paying attention to their breathing. Turn on the sports channels and you'll see all the greats at it – Rafael Nadal adjusts his underwear to compose himself, Tiger Woods strokes his cap to prepare himself to fully focus on the job in hand.

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Which leads me to Pdraig Harrington. I suggest that we might all agree that here's a man who is abnormally successful! When he became the first European golfer in more than 100 years to retain the British Open, he remarked afterwards that he had 'convinced' himself that he was going to win in advance. Statements such as this are not uncommon amongst the world's leading movers and shakers – in sport, entertainment, politics and business.

But, what does 'convince' mean? All the research that I have studied has led me to conclude that the word is synonymous with 'belief' – whatever that means! Actually, I've already told you what 'belief' is – who was investing more than 1% of their attention in listening to me?

Beliefs are stored in your subconscious mind – they are things that stuck there, during our formative years, through snapshot learning. They are the snapshots that your subconscious mind is focused on – they create your view of the world – and your view of you and of the life you expect. And, of course, both psychology and quantum mechanics tells us that we get what we expect – that's not hypothesis, it's proven fact. Normal people expect not-too-bad – they get not-too-bad. Expect something different and something different will happen.

There's just too much research – and the practical experience of abnormal people – that underlies this fact. So, how do you change your expectations? How do you change your beliefs? How do you convince yourself?

I've already mentioned how we snapshot learn during our formative years – something, generally speaking we cannot do as adults. Our subconscious takes snapshots. So using affirmations – as recommended by many working in the field of motivation – cannot work because they're addressed to your conscious mind, the part of your mind that has little impact on your daily life.

However, we can all use the techniques used by people like Muhammad Ali to impress ourselves to the extent that our childlike subconscious does, indeed, take a new snapshot. When Ali would sign the contract for a fight, he would go to the venue, take out his 'magic book' and write what he saw, felt, heard, smelled and tasted – in the moment after he had won the fight. In other words, using his five senses, he experienced winning, long before the event took place. Many business people are actively using this technique and fifty years research of Harvard business graduates validates its ability to re-program the subconscious.

This is your third take-away. Believe. Believing isn't wishing, hoping or wanting – believing is seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling and tasting – using your five senses to impress your subconscious.

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So, there you have it – three quick suggestions on how to effortlessly overcome what is, in reality, the only challenge that we face – how we act in the face of what life and business throws at us – good, bad and indifferent. Three proven ways of ensuring that you can ride life's big waves on an even keel.

1. Get into the habit of breaking little habits – stop reacting like all the other sheep. Start today – it's your choice as responsible adults.
2. Meditate – find a way, that suits you and your busy lifestyle, to calm that mental noise. Give yourself some mental breathing space.
3. Handwrite what you want to achieve the way abnormally successful people do.