

THREE POWERFUL WAYS
TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES
IN WORK AND LIFE

Be the Hero



NOAH BLUMENTHAL

From the Foreword by Marshall Goldsmith

"Read it, devour it, and practice it. The benefits will be tremendous!"

An Excerpt From

***Be the Hero:
Three Powerful Ways to Overcome Challenges
In Work and Life***

by Noah Blumenthal

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Contents



Foreword by Marshall Goldsmith ix

Introduction: Change Your Stories, Change Your Life 1

Parable

Challenges of Work and Life 9

People Stories 31

Situation Stories 71

Self Stories 91

Afterword: Find Your Heroic Inspiration 119

Resource Guide

Overview of Book and Online Resources 123

Recognize Your Stories 126

Build a Community of Heroes Around You 127

Take Actions to Encourage the Hero in You 134

Hero Tips for Managers 136

First Steps to Take Today 137

Acknowledgments 139

Index 141

About the Author 149

Foreword



Every once in a while a book comes along that strikes right at the core of a problem and brings a solution. We all have patterns of thinking and behavior that sabotage our effectiveness, success, and happiness. Noah Blumenthal believes that we can replace these negative patterns with a more positive approach — what he calls the way of the everyday hero. He shows that everyone can be a hero — when they choose the “right” path, even when it is difficult to do so. Around this concept, Blumenthal spins a tale that brings to life the lessons, techniques, and tools anyone can use to become an everyday hero.

This book is about changing one’s perspective to become more successful. Such a change can be difficult because most of us tend to repeat behavior that is followed by positive reinforcement. If we are rewarded for being a victim, why would we ever want to change? B. F. Skinner showed that hungry pigeons would repeat meaningless twitches when the twitches, by pure chance, were followed by random small pellets of food. In much the same way, we repeat dysfunctional behavior when this behavior is followed by sympathy, money, job promotions, and so on, even if the behavior had no connection with the rewards!

So, why might we want to change? Because for most of us our deepest desire is to be happier, to be more effective, and to have peace of mind — in other words, we want to be successful.

In this great book, Noah Blumenthal shares the three secrets that will take you to success and beyond. Read it, devour it, and

Foreword

practice it, and you'll learn how to increase your effectiveness, improve your relationships, and find success. The benefits to you and to the people around you will be tremendous!

Marshall Goldsmith

Marshall Goldsmith is *The New York Times* best-selling author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, winner of the Harold Longman Award for best business book of 2007. His new book, *Succession: Are You Ready?* is from Harvard Business Press.

Introduction:

Change Your Stories, Change Your Life



No one is free from challenges. Work and life events stress us out, people treat us unfairly, and we sometimes feel powerless.

We have tough moments, times when we become frustrated and angry with our jobs or our lives. We may have angry bosses or customers, or we might have spouses or kids who at times feel like too much to handle. Life is uncertain, and change is constant.

When frustration settles in, we sometimes see ourselves as victims. Perhaps you can finish these victim sentences:

“My boss is a _____.”

“My job _____.”

“Worst of all, there’s nothing I _____.”

When in victim mode, people complete these sentences with words like *jerk*, *stinks*, and *can do*. Such statements produce a self-fulfilling mentality that makes it impossible to be your best.

Yet some people are at their best even in the toughest times. You might know some of them. No matter what happens, no matter the stress or challenge, even if they become angry or get thrown off their game, they quickly recover. And before you realize what happened, they are positive, energized, and taking productive action.

I wrote this book because I believe anyone can become that person—the person who experiences pain or doubt or tough

These outcomes arise from telling hero stories, and we can all tell hero stories. I have divided these stories into three types:

People stories. Heroes choose to feel others' pain and seek to understand their actions. Victims focus on their own pain and blame the people around them.

Situation stories. Heroes see the best in their lives and appreciate what they have. Victims focus on what is wrong in their lives.

Self stories. Heroes believe they can influence their lives and choose to take action. Victims believe nothing can be done to improve their lives.

No one tells hero stories all the time. We all lapse into victim mentality occasionally. Part of being an everyday hero is recognizing those lapses and shifting back to hero stories.

The techniques and strategies presented in this book come out of my years of corporate coaching and consulting, helping everyone from senior executives to line workers to entrepreneurs achieve greater success and peace of mind at the same time. These strategies also come from my personal experiences as an employee, manager, business owner, husband, and father.

In the last decade, first as a founding member of an internal consulting group at a Fortune 500 company, then as the founder and president of my own consulting company, I have coached hundreds of corporate executives facing work crises, family challenges, life decisions, and moral dilemmas. I have taught thousands of people how to accept accountability and lead themselves to the life and work experiences they desire.

Each time I explore a story with one of my clients, we both learn from the experience. I am grateful to all of my clients for helping me understand the power of our stories. Each time I catch myself in a victim story, I also learn. The lessons from all of these experiences are captured in this book.

To support you in shifting your stories, the book is divided into two parts: a parable and a resource guide.

Parable

In the parable we follow the story of Jeff, a good guy with talent and high hopes whose life throws him some unexpected challenges. His struggle is one I believe we have all faced. How do you respond positively to adversity without letting it bring you down? With a little help, he discovers the answer, and so will you.

I wrote this book as a parable because I think the story brings the lessons to life and makes them easier and more fun to digest. Although this story is fictional, the characters draw from many people in my life—my family, friends, colleagues, clients, and of course myself.

However, one part of this parable is true. That story has been one of the greatest inspirations of my life. If you can't guess which part that is while you read the parable, you'll find out in the afterword.

Resource Guide

The lessons of the parable will be evident, but that doesn't mean they will automatically translate into sustained behavior change. Therefore, a resource guide after the parable offers specific tips and tools you can use to carry the lessons from this book into your work and life.

I have done my best to provide effective lessons in this book. However, changing your stories is a skill that takes practice over time. I still discover more every day. In order for me to share these lessons, www.be-the-hero.com features a reader's section that will be updated with more information and tools to help individuals and managers succeed.

You will also have access to a forum where you can connect with others who are seeking to live and work like heroes, and

Change Your Stories, Change Your Life

you will be able to ask me questions about the heroic challenges in your work and life. Your access code to enter the reader's section of the Web site can be found in the resource guide of this book.

I hope you enjoy this book, and I invite you to be the hero you want to be.

Noah Blumenthal
July 2009

Parable



Challenges of Work and Life



The Funk

Jeff was in a rut.

The day started off with a familiar pattern. His alarm rang and he hit the snooze button. He used to wake up on the first ring. Today it took him four snoozes.

“Why is this happening to me?” This wasn’t the first time he had asked himself the question. It had become a common lament, usually followed by, “When is my life going to get better?”

Jeff’s company had recently adopted the acronym B-HAG, which stood for Big Hairy Audacious Goal. B-HAGs were supposed to energize people and encourage them to strive for greater things. Jeff had adjusted the term slightly. By the time he cut himself shaving and spilled his coffee, Jeff had declared the day a B-HAD. For him B-HAD stood for Big Hairy Atrocious Day, and lately he felt almost every day was a B-HAD.

Jeff had never experienced a funk like this in his life, and it was quite possible things were about to get worse. Today he had to hand in his year-end performance appraisal to Yvette, his boss.

Jeff wasn’t certain how Yvette would rate him, but he was willing to bet she would not have good news. She had been on his case constantly lately. He knew he had to be on his best behavior, but all he wanted to do was tell her to shove this job. Each day he felt like he was about to lose his cool completely and do more than a few things he would certainly regret.

Everything in his life was going south. His relationship with Yvette had been deteriorating for months. His nine-month-old daughter, Siena, had colic, which he was convinced was a medical term that meant the doctors had given up trying to figure out why she cried twenty-four hours a day. The lack of sleep and the baby's continuous crying put a major strain on his relationship with Marie, his wife.

In the past when he got frustrated he used to play basketball or go for a bike ride or a long walk. These days he always had reasons to stay late at work, and if he actually did get home at a reasonable time, he had to help out with Siena. Forget about taking time or doing anything for himself. Those days were long gone, and his stress was mounting.

Given that he had to hand in his performance appraisal, Jeff was anticipating the worst from this day. Just a few hours later it would shock him to discover he felt happier than he could remember feeling in months.

The Good Life

Life hadn't always been so challenging. Everything used to fall into place for Jeff. In fact, even now most of Jeff's friends and colleagues thought he was successful and fortunate. There were no speed bumps, tragedies, or meltdowns. Jeff's best friend, Art, had nicknamed him Smooth because everything in his life seemed to flow.

Art's life was anything but smooth. His parents divorced when he was ten, and while Art was in college his father died from cancer. Every time Art dated a new woman he seemed to go through a cycle of euphoria, disappointment, and boredom. Art had sold furniture, paper, pharmaceuticals, and financial services. He seemed to need to find a new job each time he bought a new pair of shoes. When the shoes wore out, the job had to go.

Jeff's life looked nothing like that. He had an intelligent,

beautiful wife with a great sense of humor. Most of his friends had joked that he definitely married up. Jeff agreed. He was one of the youngest people in his company to get promoted to a management position. He had a daughter who, aside from crying all the time, was healthy. So why didn't things feel great on the inside?

Jeff used to think of himself as lucky. It wasn't that he got everything he wanted, but starting early in his life, things seemed to work out well for him.

When he tried out for his high school basketball team, he wasn't the star player, but he made the team and performed well. When his friends were stressing out over getting into college, he was accepted early to the college of his choice. He had always been viewed as a leader and was well liked by other students and by the parents, teachers, and professors he had come to know in his youth.

Then he graduated from college and got a job, but before he started his new job, Jeff and Art headed to Europe for three weeks of fun. With a travel guide that promised they would see Europe for under \$50 per day, they left in search of unforgettable experiences.

They went to the running of the bulls in Pamplona and the opera in Prague. They dined on escargot in Paris and wurst in Berlin. They saw the Roman Coliseum and the Palace of Versailles. They traveled through seven countries in three weeks, but one experience always stood out for Jeff.

The Guru

Toward the end of their trip, Jeff and Art landed in the small Swiss town of Interlaken, which is surrounded by some of the most beautiful mountain peaks a traveler can find.

When they arrived at the youth hostel, they dumped their backpacks in their room and headed to the common area where travelers gathered to share food, drinks, and stories.

Jeff looked around and saw the usual mix of happy, bedraggled youths, but his eye was caught by a bulletin board covered with pictures on one of the walls. Most of the pictures were of people standing on top of a mountain smiling, but something else made their expressions noteworthy—something in their eyes, some kind of knowing look.

“What do you see?”

The question took Jeff by surprise. He turned around to discover that an old man with a long beard had asked the question. Beyond the old man, Jeff was not surprised to see Art sitting at a table with two women, talking animatedly and pointing in Jeff’s direction.

Jeff turned back to the man and said, “They seem happy.”

He was about to leave and catch up with Art, but before he moved the old man asked him, “Is that all you see? The people in the pictures seem happy?”

Jeff thought momentarily about whether or not to share his observations with this stranger, but then he figured why not? Interesting conversations were kind of the point of these places.

“At first that was what I noticed, but if you look closer, it isn’t just happiness. They all seem like they know a secret. That probably sounds dumb. I mean, how can a smile tell you someone knows a secret?”

“No, it’s not dumb, but I agree their smiles don’t tell you that. It’s in their eyes.”

Jeff felt a surge of excitement hearing his own thoughts spoken by the man. “That’s right! It *is* in their eyes. They look like they’re seeing more than just the camera.”

“In a way they are. They’re looking at the world in a brand new way.” The old man gestured to an empty table and sat down. Without thinking, Jeff sat down with him.

“Kids come here all the time looking to do some sightseeing and meet other travelers. They leave here with a few memories, but some leave here with more.”

Jeff thought the man was being a little melodramatic, but he was intrigued all the same and asked him what he meant.

“The mountains are the reason people visit Interlaken. Everyone sees beautiful views. However, some see something far more precious.”

For the first time Jeff looked deep into the man’s eyes. He could see then that this man had the same look as the people in the photos. He knew the secret.

The old man continued, “When you are surrounded by the kind of beauty you will see on these mountains, it can be overwhelming. It can make macho guys like you want to cry it is so beautiful. Most people rebel against those feelings. They don’t want to let themselves be exposed to such powerful forces. They are afraid of what they will feel or see or know. So they don’t let themselves slow down and deeply experience the moment. They take out their cameras, snap a few photos, and then head back down the mountain as quickly as they can. They may have seen the beauty around them, but they didn’t absorb it in a way that would change them forever.”

At this point Jeff started to feel a little uneasy. Part of him believed what the man was saying and was afraid he would be one of the ones who would rush past the experience. Part of him doubted this man and was afraid he was being made a fool by listening to this story. When he looked at the man’s eyes, though, that part disappeared. He could see the knowledge in this man’s eyes, and he wanted to know what the hikers in the photos knew.

“What about the ones who aren’t afraid of the experience,” asked Jeff. “What happens to them?”

“Well,” said the man, “most of them are afraid, too, but they don’t let that stop them. They stand there on the mountain and they drink it in. They look at the scenery, but they also look at themselves. They feel the weight of these enormous mountains and the awesome power that created such marvels. These hikers who drink up the experience feel their own frailty and the

mistakes of their past. They also feel their own strength, their triumphs. Then something shifts in their perspective. They see themselves and the world in a whole new way, a way that changes everything.”

Jeff furrowed his brow in confusion. “How do they do that?”

Before the old man could answer, Jeff felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Art looking down at him with a big grin on his face.

“We’re all set for tomorrow. I have the day planned out, and we’ve got company, too.”

Usually Jeff would have been eager for whatever Art had planned, but right now he wanted to have the experience the old man had described. He wanted to know what he meant about a perspective that changed everything. He turned back to ask the old man to explain, but he was gone — heading toward a door at the back of the common room.

Jeff thought momentarily about chasing after him, but the old man had said what he had to say and moved on. Jeff turned back to Art, frustrated but resigned that he might not learn the secret of the mountaintop.

“OK, what’s the plan?”

“Well, the women I met got a hiking map and recommendations from the Guru and said we should all go together in their car.”

Jeff gave him a confused look. “Who’s the Guru?”

Now Art looked confused. “He’s the guy you’ve been sitting here talking to for the last twenty minutes. He runs this place. They said everyone calls him the Guru.”

At that moment Jeff realized he had never asked the man’s name. He didn’t know anything about him, but he suddenly felt very excited to see what he would discover on his hike tomorrow.

The Hike

Jeff and Art left early the next morning with their new friends, Suzanne and Alexa, and as predicted, the scenery was spectacular. The pine forests were rugged. The peaks above showed jagged rocks and snowcaps. Jeff found himself wondering if it could get any better higher up on the mountain. He would soon discover it could.

They found the trailhead the Guru had recommended and began their hike. Before they reached any of the great views from the top of the trail, they had a lot of climbing to do. Art happily sparked up conversations along the way.

Art relived old memories of high school with Jeff. They talked about what was waiting for them when they returned from their trip, a job for Jeff, uncertainty for Art, who had yet to find a job. Jeff went along with the conversation, though he was pretty sure this wasn't what the Guru had in mind when he talked about finding a new perspective.

So Jeff was happy when Art moved on to start a conversation with Alexa, and Suzanne naturally fell in step with him. Suzanne seemed to be soaking up the atmosphere, and Jeff was content to remain silent as they hiked farther up the mountain.

Now and then they stopped when the terrain broke up to allow them a broader view of the surrounding mountains. Each time they stopped, Jeff felt a greater sense of awe about their surroundings. When he thought he might be nearing the experience the Guru had described, he wanted to confirm it.

He turned to Suzanne and said, "So you and Alexa spoke to the Guru, too?"

Alexa and Art were about fifty yards up the trail. The faint sound of giggling drifted down from where they walked.

"No," Suzanne replied. "Alexa wasn't there. I spoke to the Guru alone."

Jeff wondered if her experience with the Guru was similar to his. He asked, “What did you talk about with him?”

Suzanne gazed off at the terrain and said, “It was kind of a weird conversation — hard to explain.”

Jeff had to know if her conversation was like his. “Was it about this hike and the way you see the world?”

Suzanne looked a little surprised, then she smiled. “Yes, it was.”

“Mine, too,” Jeff said.

They both gazed into the distance, feeling a sense of peace and kinship with one another before they returned to silently climbing.

It took about four hours to reach the top of the trail: a clearing above the tree line in a spot where the mountain seemed to fade out of the way to allow unobstructed views in almost every direction.

Jeff wanted to absorb the whole scene, but it was too much. He couldn’t look in every direction at once, and every time he turned his head he felt as if he were seeing something even more spectacular. Now Jeff understood what the Guru meant — just looking at the scenery could be overwhelming.

Having started early, they arrived at the top with plenty of time to eat and soak up the views. As they rested and stretched their muscles, Jeff noticed Art and Alexa were carrying on a continuous conversation. They weren’t spending much time looking around.

He remembered what the Guru said: some people want to get off the mountain to escape the gravity of the experience. Art and Alexa appeared to be running away without running off the mountain. Their conversation seemed like their way to avoid the deep feelings created by this place.

When he looked at Suzanne, he saw something quite different, and he could tell she didn’t want to talk. She just sat quietly, gazing into the distance. Now and then she would shift her

view. She looked peaceful. Jeff thought he and Suzanne were clearly having a deeper experience than Art and Alexa.

Looking at the scenery, Jeff thought about his past and his future. He thought about his mistakes and his successes and about what the secret might be that he was supposed to discover on this mountain. What kept coming to mind was that climbing this mountain was a triumphant experience. He wanted to hold onto that.

So he made a decision about how he would view the world. He decided he would hold onto the feeling he had of being on top of the world. He would live like he was always on top of the mountain.

Upon coming to this conclusion, Jeff stood up to stretch his legs. As he walked around, his feet practically bounced off the mountainside, feeling lighter than air. A grin spread across Jeff's face as he imagined a phenomenal life unfolding before him.

Then the others stood up, took lots of pictures, and they all hiked down the mountain. Jeff thought this day would be memorable because he changed the way he viewed the world. He was wrong.

Three days after Jeff and Art returned home, Jeff reviewed their pictures from the trip. They had a lot of pictures from their three weeks in Europe, but the one that stood out for Jeff was the picture of the four of them on top of the mountain.

They all looked happy in that picture, but two of them had a special look in their eyes. Two of them looked as though they knew a secret. What surprised Jeff was that those two people were Suzanne and Art.

It would be almost a decade before Jeff discovered why.

The Fast Track

It was easy for Jeff to put away his concerns about the picture from the top of the mountain. Only a few days after viewing

the vacation photos, Jeff started his new job and quickly convinced himself he was living like he was on top of the mountain.

His company operated at a fast pace that Jeff loved, and he threw himself into his work. As was the pattern in his life, he may not have been the best new hire in the company, but he did distinguish himself.

At the end of his second year he was put in the company's Fast Track program, where he spent three years rotating through all the different areas of the company. For four months at a time, he worked in various offices and functions for different people and on different projects, learning more than he thought his brain could hold.

The assignments were both exhausting and invigorating, which is how Jeff would have described his personal life as well. During his Fast Track years he met Marie, the woman of his dreams. She was a musician who easily switched between cello and piano, but her most amazing quality was her ability to laugh. It was her laugh that made Jeff fall in love.

At about the same time as the Fast Track ended, Jeff and Marie married. At work he received a permanent assignment working in the marketing department, and at home he got a permanent partner to share his ups and downs.

In the marketing department Jeff loved the combination of analytical and creative work. Once again he threw himself into his work, with a fair degree of success. His manager decided to reward him by volunteering him for a cross-functional team that was looking at cost-saving ideas for the company.

Again his work and his personal life seemed to be in sync. Only the week before this new opportunity arose, Marie had told Jeff she was pregnant. Life seemed just about perfect.

The cross-functional team's project was challenging and long. During the many months they worked together, Jeff made a strong impression on one of the other team members.

Yvette was an executive in the company, and before he knew it, she had offered him a management position in her department.

It seemed like the chance of a lifetime.

Jeff was sitting in Yvette's office, and she was actually trying to convince him to take her job offer. Jeff just listened. Did she really think he wasn't already sold? Wouldn't he have to be crazy not to jump at this? It was all he could do to keep an ear-to-ear grin off his face.

"I know you haven't been in your job very long," Yvette said, "but I think this is exactly the kind of stretch assignment that would be great for you. You're better off moving to a new job before you get too comfortable with your current one. I've always said I'd rather be busy than bored, and I know this position will keep you busy with new and exciting work."

She went on to explain that Jeff would grow into the position. He was smart and picked things up quickly. There would be a steep learning curve, but she had confidence in him.

"I watched the way you interacted with other team members on the cost-saving project, and I think you will be a natural as a manager."

Hearing this praise was an odd experience for Jeff. His pride exulted that an executive in the company should see him so positively. At the same time, his fears ran rampant. Was he as good as she thought? Could he live up to her expectations? In the end his pride won.

As Yvette went on, Jeff imagined himself as a manager. He saw himself as the team captain, the fearless leader. He dreamed of his team charging through walls for him.

"Just in case you aren't convinced," Yvette continued, "I'll point out the obvious benefits. You'll be jumping to a new pay grade, and the last three people I hired into management positions got further promotions within twenty-four months. I don't need you to make a decision today. I just need to know

if you are interested so I can move the process forward and formalize the financial offer. So what do you think?"

Jeff was dumbfounded. What did he think? He thought he couldn't believe he was getting this kind of opportunity. He thought he couldn't understand why she wanted him for this position. He thought he would gladly take this position even if it came with a decrease in salary.

He was pretty sure he didn't mask his glee very well as a grin crept across his face, nearly connecting his ears to one another. However, he felt good about himself for having enough composure to simply say, "Thank you for your interest in me. I'd be very happy to see what the offer would be for this position."

As he left her office, Jeff felt he was once again living life as if he were on top of the mountain. Four weeks later, he had accepted the new job and was working for Yvette. He had a team of six people working for him, and he had a lot to learn.

He was ready for the challenge. What he wasn't ready for was wondering if accepting the position had been a huge mistake.

Falling Down

Jeff was on the fast track and had just been promoted. Then his child arrived. He and Marie named her Siena, and immediately he understood what the phrase "Daddy's little girl" meant. From the moment he first saw her, he knew he would do anything for her. But things weren't perfect for long.

People talked about the ways parenthood would change things, but nothing had prepared Jeff for this. He had heard it all from friends and family members—the crying, the diapers, the sleepless nights—but how do you describe sleep deprivation to someone who had never experienced it? Although people had warned him, he had never truly understood how difficult it would be, and Siena wasn't making it any easier.

None of this made Jeff perform at his best at work. Then, at

about the time Marie went back to work, Jeff's work situation started to turn sour.

He had been in his new job for about three months and he was still getting to know the players on his team. Still, he knew enough to recognize Sarah was his top performer. When she came into his office to hand in her resignation, his heart sank. Not only was she leaving, but she was going to their chief competitor. When Jeff went to tell Yvette the news, he didn't expect her to be happy.

It was the end of the day on a Friday, and when he got to her office, Jeff found Yvette pouring her usual late-afternoon mug of coffee, the third of her daily ritual coffee drinks. Yvette operated at a breakneck pace most of the day. Her coffee times were when she slowed down, when she shifted out of rapid-fire decision mode and into a more contemplative, reflective frame of mind.

Yvette's coffee routine was one of the quirks Jeff had become accustomed to. She considered herself more than a coffee addict — she was obsessed. She kept a coffeemaker in her office, and she used only top-quality beans, which of course she ground herself.

Jeff hated to interrupt this ritual, but Yvette had already seen him. She was now looking over at him as she inhaled the aroma of her coffee.

I might as well get it over with, he thought.

"Hi, Yvette," he said as he walked in and sat down in one of the chairs opposite her desk.

"Hi, Jeff. Coffee?" She always asked. That, too, was part of her ritual.

"No, thanks," he responded, as always. He figured he might someday catch the coffee bug, but it hadn't happened to him yet. "I have something I need to tell you."

Yvette raised her eyebrows. "For some reason I've never heard good news follow that statement. What's up?"

Jeff shared the news about Sarah and could immediately see the disappointment in Yvette's face. Whatever calm she attained while sniffing her coffee had disappeared in an instant.

"OK," Yvette said. "Let's explore."

This was one of her pet phrases. Yvette loved to poke around and discover. The truth was her questions always impressed Jeff when she went into exploration mode, but today he felt a little nervous. He felt that losing Sarah was a big deal, and he honestly didn't know what to do about it. Yvette's disappointment seemed already clear on her face.

"What do we know?" That was her usual opening question.

"Well, we know she is our top performer. She came to the company two years ago and has consistently distinguished herself. My predecessor gave her a glowing review when I took over as manager, and I have seen her continue to perform exceptionally."

"What did she like about her job?"

Jeff hesitated a little. He wasn't sure what Yvette wanted to hear, and truth be told, he didn't know Sarah that well.

"I think she liked the work itself. She was very good at her job. So she must have gotten a sense of accomplishment."

"OK. What didn't she like about her job?"

Now Jeff hesitated even longer. What was running through his mind was that she stayed in her job and was happy for almost two years. The only thing that had changed was she got a new manager, but he didn't want to say he was the reason for her departure.

"I don't really know," Jeff answered lamely. He knew it was a lousy response, but he was afraid to reveal his true thoughts.

"OK, first key lesson: always know what people don't like about their jobs. If you don't know the answer, you can't improve their situation. One of your jobs as a manager is to ask people what they don't like."

Yvette always included key lessons as part of her exploration process. Usually Jeff didn't mind and even looked forward

to hearing the lessons. He wanted to learn, but today he was feeling insecure over Sarah's departure. His anxiety made him defensive.

Suddenly, instead of thinking Yvette had made a good point, Jeff thought of her as a hypocrite. After all, she had never asked him what he didn't like. If that was such a key lesson, why wasn't she following her own advice?

Yvette continued to explore with more questions and more lessons, but Jeff wasn't listening today the way he usually did. He was frustrated and disappointed in himself, and he grew annoyed with Yvette. Fortunately, she didn't seem to notice his reaction. After a while she wished him a good weekend and told him to come back fired up on Monday.

Unfortunately, the following week things didn't get much better. One of Yvette's peers pointed out a big mistake in a report Jeff's team had prepared. When Yvette took Jeff exploring, he was in no mood for her key lessons.

The week after that one of their important clients, Amanda Kim, called to complain. Lee, one of Jeff's team members, had promised to send Amanda some information and had forgotten. The complaint arrived on a day when Jeff and Lee were traveling to see another client. So when Amanda couldn't speak to Lee and then asked to speak to a manager, her call was forwarded to Yvette.

When Jeff returned from his trip, he felt ambushed. There was an angry message from Amanda and a note from Yvette to come see her in her office. He could already imagine the scene that would play out—going through explorations and lessons to point out more and more ways he was deficient in his new role.

First, he called Amanda. She was angry and said she hoped he would find a way to improve his team's reliability. He apologized and, as Yvette had already done, promised her he would send her the information by the following day.

One unpleasant task done, it was time for the second one.

He went to Yvette's office and knocked on the door. As expected, she wanted to talk about Amanda and his lessons learned. Jeff talked and listened and tried not to let his frustration show. The conversation went pretty much as he expected, with one surprise.

After what Jeff felt was beating the Amanda situation to death, Yvette changed the subject. She said she wasn't going to be able to spend as much time with him going forward. She had just been assigned to another cross-functional team for a very important strategic initiative of the company. It was going to take a lot of her time. So she expected Jeff to be more independent.

It was all he could do not to grin. Receiving less attention from Yvette seemed like the best news he could get right at that moment.

"I'll do my best to figure things out on my own and respect your time," he said.

"I know you will. You always do. And don't forget. If you run into trouble, just go exploring. The key lessons will show up if you just ask some good questions."

Jeff left her office wondering why she had to be so pushy with her annoying exploring, but he had a smile on his face. Less time with Yvette was exactly what the doctor ordered.

For the next three months Jeff was able to operate with a great deal of independence. He even found himself going exploring on a few occasions, but his life was still dominated by exhaustion.

The truth was Siena was getting better at sleeping at night, but she wasn't getting better fast enough for Jeff. He and Marie were fighting a lot over what to do.

Jeff wanted to try anything to get Siena to sleep through the night, up to and including letting her cry it out all night long if that's what it would take. Marie hated the idea of letting Siena cry. She had been reading book after book about what you could do, looking for what she considered "humane" methods. Unfor-

tunately, Siena wasn't going for these. Now Jeff wanted to let her cry, and Marie couldn't accept that.

Then Yvette's task force completed its mission, and Jeff felt his freedom come to an end. Almost immediately she was back on his case. One of her peers had observed that Jeff appeared unhappy. Yvette told him that wasn't the kind of impression Jeff wanted to make with people. To stay on the fast track, he needed people to see him as positive and upbeat.

Jeff wanted to scream, "How in the world are you supposed to be upbeat on six months of three hours of sleep per night? I do my job. I work hard. What more do you want from me? Why don't you just leave me alone?"

When he left Yvette's office, he knew his lack of sleep was getting to him in a big way. The months continued to pass by in an exhausted haze. To Jeff, his life was a blur of sleepless nights and frustrating days with no end in sight.

The Team Meeting

It was getting close to the end of the year. Jeff decided to hold a planning meeting with his team. He emailed everyone that he wanted to discuss their goals for the following year, and he encouraged them to come to the meeting with any ideas they had for new directions for themselves or the group. He thought he was doing the right thing—being a good manager and leader.

Somehow Yvette got wind of the meeting and asked Jeff if she could attend. It wasn't the kind of request Jeff thought he could refuse. When the day of the meeting came, Jeff felt ready. He had prepared a solid agenda and had lots of ideas to share. If Yvette was going to judge him today, he would show her that hiring him had been a great decision.

At ten o'clock Jeff walked into the conference room. Half his team was already there, and the rest quickly filed in. Yvette wasn't there yet, but Jeff decided not to wait. She was usually on time, so if she hadn't shown up yet it was possible she had to cancel.

That's just fine by me, Jeff thought.

He kicked off the meeting by asking the team to brainstorm their biggest successes of the year. There was a lot of energy around this conversation. People were excited as they recounted accolades they had received from their clients and senior management. Jeff felt like the meeting was off to a great start.

Next he asked the team to brainstorm their biggest disappointments. Jeff was in the middle of writing DISAPPOINTMENTS at the top of a flip chart when Yvette walked into the conference room.

The first thought to race through Jeff's mind was, "That's just perfect. Of course she missed the success discussion."

"Sorry I'm late, everyone." Yvette said. "Please don't stop for me. Just keep going with your discussion."

Jeff could feel the room tense up, but he had to continue. "All right, everyone, it's less fun to talk about, but let's bring the same energy to this discussion that we had when we talked about our successes."

Slowly a few ideas came up, but it was like pulling teeth. Jeff was frustrated by the reluctance in the room, and his frustration only increased when he saw the look of consternation on Yvette's face. After glancing her way he pushed even harder.

"Wendy, Julian, what about some of the challenges you experienced working with the national sales desk at the beginning of the year? Do you want to talk about those experiences?"

The two Jeff had singled out exchanged a long look. Then Wendy turned to Jeff and said, "That was a frustrating situation. We did a lot of work on the 5 IN 5 growth campaign. Then we asked national sales to partner with us in introducing it to the sales force. Before we knew what was happening, they were presenting it as their idea and taking all the credit."

Here Julian jumped in. "Yeah. The salespeople and the executives here in the home office all seemed to heap the praise on them without recognizing us at all."

“I remember how frustrated you were,” Jeff replied. “Most of that happened right before I came on board. I wish I had been here earlier so someone could have supported you when you needed it.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jeff realized they were a mistake. Yvette had been overseeing the group right before he arrived. His statement pointed the finger at her. He glanced her way, but her expression hadn’t changed. Maybe she hadn’t made the connection.

In any case, Jeff decided it was time to move on. He also decided it was time for him to prove his value to Yvette.

“Now let’s talk about the future. I want everyone to give me one goal or new project or idea you think we should consider for next year. Nothing is off limits.”

Julian, who was sitting directly across the table from Jeff, spoke first. “I think we should create some kind of follow-up to the 5 IN 5 campaign. Maybe 4 MORE 4 SURE.”

He pronounced the last word “shore,” and there were some groans around the table and some good-natured ribbing over the rhyme. Someone mentioned the words “kindergarten concept,” but it was all in jest. Jeff felt the mood was positive, and he actually saw Yvette nodding her head with half a smile.

“Who’s next?” asked Jeff.

Tyson was sitting next to Julian and threw out an idea. “I think we should expand our newsletter. I was thinking about doing monthly case studies and maybe some kind of instant poll.”

“Great,” said Jeff. “Let’s get everyone’s ideas out and then we can talk specifics.”

Next came Kim, who was sitting to Tyson’s left, and the pattern was established that they were going around the table in order. When it came around to Jeff he glanced at Yvette. She seemed in good spirits, and he figured he would never have a better chance.

“I have something to propose that is a little different.” Jeff

times or unfairness but who maintains perspective, humor, and a sense of optimism. When this person faces difficult problems, he or she still performs at his or her best. This person is an everyday hero.

This book is about helping you choose to be an everyday hero.

Everyday heroes don't let life's challenges bring them down. Instead, they stay positive and find a way to overcome their obstacles. Everyday heroes don't always succeed, but they consistently act on the belief that they can do something to improve their situations and those of the people around them.

The way you think — what I call your stories — can lead you to be an everyday hero. The stories you tell can make your life positive, hopeful, and empowering or bitter, miserable, and hopeless. You can choose your response to everyday events that might disappoint, frustrate, or anger you — to react in a way that casts off the victim mentality and enables you to act with a hero's resolve.

Your stories determine your happiness and success. When you think like an everyday hero, you open the door to new possibilities. When you work in a company of heroes, communication increases, silos break down, and creative ideas multiply. You experience greater camaraderie, openness to new ideas, and receptivity to change.

Telling hero stories does more than change your state of mind. These stories lead to actions that produce:

- Career success
- Improved relationships
- More effective conflict resolution
- Increased adaptability to change
- Stronger leadership
- Reduced stress
- Greater happiness

took a deep breath and launched into his vision for the coming year. He had thought a lot about this and had details and arguments to back up every piece of his plan. If this didn't wow Yvette, he didn't know what would.

He covered nearly every aspect of the team. Each time he touched on responsibilities or tasks specific to certain team members, he made sure to ask them for input, but everyone seemed in agreement with what he was proposing. The farther along he went, the more he picked up steam. Before Jeff knew it, Tyson raised his hand and apologized for having to leave the meeting. It was noon and he had a lunch meeting with a client.

Jeff hadn't realized how much time had passed. "This is a good time to adjourn the meeting anyway. Let's plan another all-hands meeting next week and pick up with this topic."

Everyone cleared out of the room until Jeff and Yvette were the only ones left. He was eager to hear her reaction to his plan and was completely unprepared for what she would tell him.

Blindsided

Jeff walked over to where Yvette was sitting and leaned against the table, eager to hear her take on his performance.

"Tell me what you thought of the meeting," Yvette said.

"I thought it went well. You missed the beginning when we had a great conversation about our successes from this year. Then we got some really good ideas on the table for next year."

"Tell me. What were the good ideas?" Yvette asked.

"Well, we've been talking about them for the last hour or so. Which ones do you want to discuss?"

Yvette suddenly looked very tired. "I don't really want to discuss any of them. It's not that the ideas aren't worth discussing. It's that I don't think you realize what happened just now."

Jeff could feel the rug being pulled out from under him. He didn't know what Yvette was going to say next, but he recognized the sinking feeling in his stomach.

“What does that mean?” he said. “What do you think happened?” Jeff realized his voice was rising, but he couldn’t control it.

“Jeff, you have great enthusiasm, but it hurt you today. You were so eager to talk about your own ideas you didn’t listen to or consider anyone else’s. The last ninety minutes of that meeting consisted of you telling everyone what they were going to do next year.”

“Wait a second. That’s not fair.” Jeff’s anger was beginning to come through in his tone. “Everyone loved the ideas. I checked in with every single team member. They all agreed.” Jeff could feel his frustration building. She was always on his case.

“Jeff, no one contradicted you, but no one supported you either.” Now Yvette’s voice was rising to match his. “You were pushing your ideas in front of your manager. Of course no one stood up to tell you they disagreed. I’d be willing to bet no one here bought in either. You talked almost nonstop for an hour and a half. You didn’t create any real dialogue.”

Jeff was struggling to keep himself under control. “What are you talking about? I brought great ideas here today. Now the ideas are no good because I talked about them?”

“Jeff, what do you think is going on here? I’m on your side.” Suddenly Yvette shook her head and gathered up her things. “When you are ready to talk about this calmly, let me know.”

With that she walked out of the conference room. Jeff was left standing there, wondering what had gone so wrong. How could they have judged the meeting so differently?

It felt as though Yvette had it in for him. He was aggravated and exhausted, and he just wanted to find some way to regain his footing. He remembered he once had a positive relationship with Yvette. In fact, he remembered he once thought life would always feel as if he were on top of a mountain. If only there was some way to regain that feeling.

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