THINK BIG

ACT BIGGER

THE REWARDS OF BEING RELENTLESS

EXCLUSIVE CHAPTER PREVIEW

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WITH JIM EBER
Years ago, my family went to a wedding in Fargo, which at the time was a big deal for us. It was a brilliant day, and we were all feeling good walking down the busy main street when my wife, Tami, hit a crack in the sidewalk and face planted for all to see. A small crowd surrounded us as we helped her up. Mortified but largely unscathed, Tami said what so many of us do as she started walking again: “I just want to die.”

“That’s okay, Mom,” my daughter, Lindsey, smiled. “I do it all the time.”

We all do. Of course, Tami didn’t really feel like dying. No one should. Sure, when we face plant publicly, we feel like idiots. How big an idiot and
how much it hurts are directly proportional to the number of people who see us. Tami did feel like hiding, but no one should be embarrassed about the mistakes we make or the actions we take, even when we fall on our faces. We should own them because no one is going to die.

You’ve already heard me use a version of this expression in discussing The Katelyn Rule. In fact, I first wrote about having a “no one is going to die” attitude in my second book, Running the Gauntlet. “Repeat after me,” I wrote. “No one is going to die from the changes you make in business. Say it: ‘No. One. Is. Going. To. Die.’” Since then, I have refined the idea in speeches and presentations, but it still boils down to this: Nothing is ever going to be perfect. You’re going to screw up. Things are going to not work. They might suck. You could even fail. So what? No one is going to die.

I remember hearing about Carl Bass, the CEO of the multinational software company Autodesk, telling analysts on one of his quarterly calls that the company’s latest results were “an unmitigated disaster.” He owned that his company fell on its face with everyone watching and . . . no one died. It was just a loss. Winners in sports, business, and life always know this. Tom Brady won his fourth Super Bowl as the quarterback of the New England Patriots in 2015, but he had a rocky start to his season. The media speculated about his “demise” after a sound thumping by Kansas City in week four. The next week, after a season-turning win over Cincinnati, he was asked if he was aware of the reports of his death. “The emails I get from people that are always so concerned, and I’m always emailing them back, telling them: ‘Nobody died or anything. It’s just a loss.’”

Like Brady, we often use some version of “no one is going to die” as a way to say, “Calm down. We have a plan. Losses may hurt, but they don’t kill us. We will recover.” In a July 2014 interview with a New York Times Magazine writer, Brady used the word “grieving”—a word we associate with dying—to describe the feeling of losing in the postseason, but he obviously knew his career was not dead. He kept thinking big and acting bigger the following season until he made it back to the Super Bowl and won. Playing on Brady’s words, I prefer to use “no one is going to die” as an exhortation before the fact.
Sure, you will lose a few times. Heck, I often fail five to six times trying to launch something new. But if I wait for something perfect, I am still going to fail and miss new opportunities and possibilities. Thus, I exhort you to do what I do:

*Connect your “no one is going to die” attitude to your success, not just your failures, and let it drive your passion as you think big and act bigger.*

**FAIL FAST? I’D RATHER SUCCEED FAST**

“Fail fast!” “Pivot!” An entire business vocabulary has sprung up around the idea of failure. Talking about failure has become so en vogue it’s even passé in some industries: A once-successful Silicon Valley conference called FailCon, well, *failed*. FailCon focused on presenters and attendees sharing stories of their flops, but the event’s founder cancelled the 2014 conference because, as she told *The New York Times*, “Failure chatter is now so pervasive in Silicon Valley that a conference almost seems superfluous. It’s in the lexicon that you’re going to fail.”

*Going to fail? Really?* Simply put, I’m with Captain Kirk from *Star Trek*: I may make mistakes, but I refuse to accept the parameters of the “Kobayashi Maru” or the no-win scenario as an assessment of my character. I get the moral dilemma behind tests like the one I saw people take on National Geographic Channel’s *Brain Games*: A runaway train heading down a track will kill a bunch of bystanders unless you pull a switch and change the direction of the train, but pulling the switch will kill a single worker on the tracks: What do you do? I know this and countless other tests are about assessing my character and moral compass, but they are *ridiculous*. I understand the dilemma, but I don’t accept the value of the no-win situation.

Simply put, failure has become too much of a badge of honor in this country. I’m never going into a situation thinking I’m going to fail no matter how risky or seemingly impossible it is. There is always a win-win scenario that doesn’t involve hurting anyone if that’s what you want to do. I get why we think it’s okay to fail. Some companies file
Chapter 11 without shame and recover. It’s a mechanism for a do over, and there is nothing wrong with a mulligan. But it’s better not to use it.

I believe we are making so much of our mistakes and thinking of failure as the new black that we are getting bad at celebrating actual success. And isn’t that what we are really talking about here: success? Did you ever notice in the stories about failures that we never talk to the long-term losers—only those who failed after making big wins or went on to greater triumphs? If they hadn’t ever succeeded we wouldn’t be talking to them. I wouldn’t want to make a career as a continual loser who finds success only in failure. You wouldn’t want to listen to me. No one listens to permanent losers.

Maybe the reason we don’t celebrate success enough is because we think and act small; the successes are not much to celebrate. That’s the real danger here: allowing the voices in our heads to creep in again and keep us from thinking and acting big.

Here’s the thing: How many of you believe that if faced with that Brain Games train test you could actually act? It’s easy to answer hypothetical questions about morality, but these tests assume that we have the ability to act in the moment. I know too many people who would simply fail to act—not because they are bad people but because, as we hear in so many wartime stories, the stress of having to make that decision causes them to freeze. Few of us will ever face anything like the “Kobayashi Maru” or a runaway train, but one thing these scenarios prove is that the worst thing to do is nothing. Then someone dies no matter what, and no one even tried to act bigger. When no one is willing to act, no one fails, but no one wins either. NO ONE WINS.

We shouldn’t celebrate failure, but we can’t afford to wish it away. Sadly, this seems to be what we are teaching our kids: that everyone is a winner. After all, if everyone is a winner, then no one is. Why are we afraid of that? Whose self-esteem are we trying to protect: the parents’ or the kids’? Take it from Michael Williams, the former CMO of Grand

Stop overthinking things, coming up with reasons why not, and then playing it safe.
Prix America who has also worked for the NFL’s San Francisco 49ers and the NHL’s New Jersey Devils: “I have two daughters, 10 and 13, and it absolutely kills me that they give trophies out for fifth and sixth place teams and participating. I think the reason sports is so valuable is it teaches you about sacrifice, how to deal with success and failure, individual and team accomplishments and goals, and how to work towards a common objective as a group that you may not even agree with some of the time but know it is for the better of the team.”

NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, SOMETIMES THINGS WILL FAIL

Can asking the right questions mitigate the chance of failure? Sure! Bennet James Bayer, former global CMO of Huawei Technologies, the largest telecommunications equipment maker in the world, sees this as a lost art, another problem with the way too many people learn and act today, and I’m inclined to agree with what he says: “If you don’t want to buy my product or service, I need to find out why. Is it the product qualities? The color? The price? I don’t see people practicing those skills as they used to. Part of the fun of the job for me is how I overcome problems and adversity. This is the difference between selling and telling. I think social media has led to more telling and more anti-social behavior. That is my biggest pet peeve. If you tell me you walked the cat today as part of a tweet to everyone, not only do I not care, I don’t feel a personal connection. There is no personalization—no question back to me: Did you walk your cat today? Everyone talks; no one asks and then listens.”

Yet even when you do listen and ask the right questions, that may not be enough. Michael Houlihan and Bonnie Harvey, co-founders of Barefoot Wine, America’s number-one wine brand, launched its “California Beau” brand after the state dropped the legal limit of blood alcohol concentration for drunk driving to .08 percent from .1 percent. California Beau had half the alcohol of regular wine so women could drink the same one or two glasses and still stay below the legal limit. Great idea, right? “It failed miserably,” said Michael. “People called the 800 number on the bottle and said, ‘Now I have to drink twice as much..."
to feel buzzed’ or ‘Why are you charging full price when it is only half the alcohol?’ Californians loved the idea of keeping intoxicated people off the road but still wanted the buzz. They said they wanted to drink less alcohol, but they didn’t. They were used to drinking two glasses. We just said, ‘Done,’ and ate the $100,000 we invested.”

I like what Bonnie said to me about failure in light of that story: “I would like to eliminate the word failure from the English language. It really doesn’t explain the process of learning.” That works. Bonnie isn’t pretending that California Beau succeeded, but she isn’t celebrating its failure as evidence of her entrepreneurial spirit either. No one is going to die: I am going to succeed or learn.

If people were going to die, I’d be dead or in jail facing many counts of murder. People constantly mock my choices and use any missteps as “proof of death.” They flaunt my refusal to obey the numbers. They say, “My God, Jeff, what did you DO!?” and look at me with an expression somewhere between Edvard Munch’s The Scream and Macaulay Culkin in Home Alone. All that has happened in my TV career alone. “They” laughed when I said, “This face belongs on TV,” and then I made it on CNN, MSNBC, Fox Business Network, and shows like Celebrity Apprentice. They scoffed at my hubris when my first national TV pilot failed to get off the ground—and for even thinking it could. And when I reached my goal of having my own show on Bloomberg? They scoffed again when I pulled the show after one season and took it in-house as part of my own “C-Suite Network” (http://c-suitenetwork.com/) and the business channel on United Airlines (http://c-suitetv.com/).

Did I have any idea how to start a TV station when I launched the C-Suite Network and C-Suite TV? Of course I did! But I didn’t know everything. Not even close. I didn’t need to know everything. Momentum overcomes a lot of problems, and your passion fuels that momentum and drowns out the voices in your head that say “no” and tell you to act smaller.

Listen all you can. Look at the data. Ask the right questions. You still might fail. And that’s OK. No one is going to die.
Some leaders will say I’m crazy—not just the ones who think deeply on these kinds of tests but the people who say I am acting without data. “The data say it can’t be done; the data say I’m going to lose one or more people in confronting the moral dilemma of the runaway train.” Younger leaders are especially savvy about numbers. They’ve never known a time when loads of data weren’t available. Data analytics, social media, and web-based marketing . . . so much is measurable today to help us make better decisions. But just because data are available doesn’t mean you are getting the complete picture. Data don’t tell you how and when to act, much like a recipe doesn’t teach you how to cook, when to serve dinner, or whether your guests like bacon.

Of course I take the data into consideration, but my experience says that even if the data say “red” when I know it is “blue,” it is blue. Even leaders at tech-based or data-driven companies, where they are completely drawn to the logic and clarity of numbers to help them make better business decisions, will tell you at the end of the day it is their ass on the line. They’d better believe the decisions in their gut and take responsibility for them—data or not.

That’s what I do, and nobody, but nobody ever doubts my passion. If you have that passion, you’re ready to say, “Hey, watch this!”

SOME OF THE BEST IDEAS START WITH SOMEONE SAYING “HEY, WATCH THIS!”

Some of the most terrifying experiences start that way, too—so do some of the worst ideas. We know “Hey, watch this!” is often code for “This is gonna be spectacular or this is gonna hurt—either way you’ll get a show or a clip for America’s Funniest Home Videos.” Sometimes you don’t know which one it will be until you experience it. But without passion, you’ll never say “Hey, watch this!” with the conviction needed to deliver on your promise of something big.

Passion can override the voices saying no. It is the fuel for your climb to the top and the safety net for the bad landings.

Some of you who have read my previous books may be thinking, “Wait, Jeff, doesn’t this contradict what you have said before? Didn’t
you say in *The Mirror Test* that you took a bath on pheasant farming all because your passion for a product got you so carried away?” Now why did you have to go and bring that up? Oh wait, I did . . . and the answer is, “No, it is not a contradiction.” Passion *can* blind you from due diligence, but it will not take you in the wrong direction if you do the right things and keep listening as you go.

Passion *cannot* override the facts. Passion that pushes past facts becomes an indulgence. If the indulgence gets too big, you cross into obsession, and that’s when you lose perspective.

The problem and the promise of passion is that it comes from your heart and your gut, not your head. Passion is defined as a strong and barely controllable emotion. That’s why people feel like they constantly have to limit it; they don’t like the lack of control that comes with it. Of course, passion leads us into bad decisions and doing some questionable things even when we have all the information we need. Remember that runaway train scenario? Most people interviewed on *Brain Games* said they would pull the lever to kill the one worker and save the bunch of people—unless their kid or someone else close to them was the worker. Then the reverse was true. I know that’s honest. I know how I feel when someone wrongs my wife or hurts my kids. My passion for them can get me in trouble, because it is built on something genuine in my heart.

Maybe that’s why I connect deepest to the passions of the people I meet, like Gene Simmons of KISS. He was my first interview for my CBS radio show, *All Business with Jeffrey Hayzlett* (www.play.it/allbusiness), but we had already met years before on *Celebrity Apprentice* when he was a contestant and I represented Kodak as one of the sponsors of a challenge. We butted heads a little about the results but stayed in touch and today have a great amount of mutual respect, even if we disagree on who is better looking. Gene is also exactly the same in person as he comes across onstage and on-screen. Last time I was at his home,
he gave me a pair of thong underwear. Not a gift I expected from one corporate executive to another, but exactly what you’d expect from Gene Simmons. They chafe a little, but I digress . . .

While people know Gene Simmons the rock and reality television star, they don’t see Gene Simmons the entrepreneur and marketing genius. Gene Simmons is a brand, and KISS is a big business that is now more than 40 years old and still at the top of its game, selling out concerts and merchandise. (KISS has licensed more than 3,000 products.) But Gene wasn’t nearly as passionate about any of that as he was about telling me about starting his first business at 6 years old. He lived in a small village in Israel, and he and his friend went out and gathered cactus fruit, washed it, and sold it for a few pennies. He made two dollars that day, and after rewarding himself with an ice cream cone, he brought the rest of the money home and laid it on the table for his mother. At first, she was worried that he stole it, but when he told her the story, she said, “My little man.”

That’s the root of Gene Simmons’ passion. Here is a guy, a millionaire in his sixties, and what drives him forward is the memory of what that ice cream tasted like and hearing his mother say those words when he was 6 years old. That’s what fuels the fires he breathes literally onstage and figuratively in person. Peel back the face paint he wears, wipe off the blood he spits, and silence the ax-shaped bass he plays as part of his performance, and you find someone who does it all for his family.

Most of the biggest and best businesspeople I know tell some version of Gene’s story as the root of what drives them. I know I do. We draw on that passion every day and never let it go as we push the proverbial envelope. We’re not in it for the money. Well, we are and we aren’t. We’re in it for the money because that is how we keep score. That’s how we build capital and get to do the things we have to, need to, and want to do for our businesses and families. But beyond that, we’re in it for the adrenaline we get from pouring our passion into acting big in all we do in the most genuine way possible.

So if you fall flat on your face like my wife, Tami, did all those years ago, don’t worry. Your family, friends, and the people who surround
you in business will be there when you stand up. Don’t let those face plants make you falter. Sometimes your passion and willingness to go “all in” might cost you, but no one is going to die. You’re better off in the long run, when your passion will run up against other people’s passions. You will need to be bigger to stand up to their attacks!

That’s why I’m so passionate about everything I think my business can do. My partners or the market will remind me we don’t have the time, resources, people, money, etc., to do all I dream about now. But if I start by limiting my passion, I can’t do any of them. I also can’t push my team forward. I might sound crazy at times, but that’s the point: No one who says, “Hey, watch this!” with conviction is being completely rational.

LESSONS LEARNED: NO ONE IS GOING TO DIE

Repeat after me: No one is going to die. Say it: “No. One. Is. Going. To. Die.” Nothing is ever going to be perfect. You’re going to screw up. Things are going to not work. They might suck. You could even fail. So what? Stop celebrating failure as inevitable or a badge of honor for your entrepreneurial spirit. Succeed or learn and move on:

➤ No one is going to die when you think big and act bigger, so get over yourself.
➤ Stop overthinking things, coming up with reasons why not, and then playing it safe, and move! You still might fail. And that’s okay. No one is going to die.
➤ Succeeding fast is better than failing fast: Stop wearing failure as a badge of honor.
➤ Passion fuels that momentum and drowns out the negative voices in your head.
➤ Passion can override the voices saying no, but it cannot override facts, lest it leads to overindulgence, obsession, and lost perspective.

Passion comes from our hearts and guts, not our heads. It’s a strong emotion and can lead us into bad decisions and questionable actions. But it is the adrenaline we need to succeed. Without passion, you’ll
never know what it feels like to say, “Hey, watch this!” You’ll never have the conviction needed to deliver on your promise to think and act big. Can that passion and willingness to go “all in” cost you? Perhaps. But no one is going to die. What’s it going to cost you without it?

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