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The Only Way to Win

How Building Character Drives Higher Achievement
and Greater Fulfillment in Business and Life

Jim Loehr • Hyperion © 2012 • 253 pages

Social Skills / Trust

Take-Aways

- Society teaches that you are what you accomplish.
- Its standards are external measurements like money and power, not how much good you did, how honorably you acted or how faithfully you adhered to your values.
- If your triumphs (no matter how great) are meant just to impress others or to gain wealth or status, you will feel only hollowness once you've attained them.
- Pursuing ambitions defined by popular culture and not by your inner standards cannot satisfy your fundamental human needs.
- To be fulfilled, you alone must define your life, work and goals to fit your purpose.
- Your purpose comes from your deepest values.
- To gain meaning and fulfillment, adopt a values-driven approach to your life and work.
- The way you uphold your values in the face of stress or pressure reveals your character.
- Your pursuit of outward success – career, earnings, influence and recognition – will strengthen your values. These goals are relevant, but you must redirect their purpose.
- Adhering to your intrinsic values will be difficult at first, but in the long run, people and organizations of character outperform and outlast all others.

Recommendation

Do you ever wonder whether it's possible to be a person or company of honor and still succeed in today's world? If your fellow athletes take steroids and you don't, will you make the team? If you tell the truth but your competitors lie, will you go out of business? After decades of working with dozens of top athletes and executives, coach Jim Loehr argues persuasively that success stems from achievement based on your values and purpose. He teaches that no matter how enormous your gains, if you lie or cheat to attain them – or even if you achieve them honestly but for the wrong reasons – you will fail. Loehr doesn't preach; rather, he compellingly – if a bit repetitively – asks you to define what you stand for and then to implement the standards you value as you compete, rather than pursuing only extrinsic rewards. *getAbstract* recommends this substantive manual to those who seek meaning from their work, to leaders trying to build sustainable cultures, and to parents striving to raise children with good values.

Summary

Can Nice Guys Finish First?

Imagine that you lived and breathed tennis from age two. You were self-centered and mistrustful, but you worked nonstop to become a professional by age 16. You were a fierce, take-no-prisoners competitor with little respect for your rivals or tennis tradition. Over the next decade, you set new records, won three grand slams, became No. 1 in the world and won an Olympic gold medal. Now...how do you feel? Andre Agassi achieved all of this by age 26 and yet felt only profound hollowness and disappointment. He attributes his drug use, lies, cover-ups and failed first marriage to his lack of purpose.

“When you find – or, more aptly, choose – your purpose, then you are the agent of your own happiness.”

Even if you're the best in the world, the rewards alone – wealth, fame, power, influence or material possessions – won't bring you happiness or satisfy your fundamental needs. Fortunately Agassi “had the courage to reinvent himself.” He reversed what might have been an all-too-familiar story of celebrity self-destruction. In 1998, he began a meteoric comeback: He finished 1999 as the top player in the world, again, and won five more Grand Slam titles before retiring in 2006. Agassi eclipsed his previous accomplishments after deciding to become a nice guy and drop his win-at-all-costs persona.

A Crisis of Morality

Pursuing accomplishments to please others, even if you do it with a bad or abrasive attitude, is hardly reprehensible. Such driven people often lose on the inside, even when they succeed on the outside. The trend toward pervasive lying, cheating or harming oneself or others for competitive advantage is even more disturbing. Every two years, researchers present some 200 athletes with the hypothetical “Golden Dilemma”: If they could, without ever being detected, take an illicit performance-enhancing “magic pill” that guarantees athletic success – but also promises death within five years – would they take the drug? Shockingly, more than half say they would.

“Moral character strengths represent the fundamental core of what it means to be a fully functional, healthy human being. And, if that’s so, business leaders should...teach them.”

Research shows that most sports – especially team sports – have a negative impact on morality, ethics and character. The pressure to win, and the widely accepted behavior of acting one way on the field and another off, makes cheating, and even deliberately injuring opposing players, more tolerable. Obviously, cheating is not limited to sports. Some “one-third of US high school students admitted to using the Internet to plagiarize.” Four-fifths of high school and college kids confess to academic cheating. High schoolers face pervasive anxiety about getting into a good college; collegians worry about grad school or jobs. And upon graduation, young workers often enter an even greater pressure cooker – the office. Business offers huge rewards for success, but at what cost? The frequency with which executives turn to cheating, bribery and fraud is evident.

The Competencies

Despite his character flaws, Agassi was supremely competent in his sport. Even so, he could not ultimately succeed based on those skills alone. For Agassi – and the fulfillment he craved – cheating and doping weren’t necessary, but personal transformation was.

“Most of us have been adhering to measures of achievement that...don’t really matter to us.”

Your best skills and abilities may have some basis in genetics, but you developed them and made them useful with long, dedicated practice. Most of your external goals, including promotions, bigger titles, the corner office and wealth, rely, in part, on these competencies. They include noble traits: resilience, intelligence, courage, ambition, diligence and perseverance. But if you do not link your abilities to the moral competencies that define you, they will lead you to focus only on the ends – the accomplishments – and not on the path. Like Agassi, you’ll feel unsatisfied – no matter how big your attainments – if you have no purpose aside from scoring the wins. Purpose is rooted in your values, those moral competencies that you develop with dedication and long continuous practice.

“When we lose the present, we lose our lives and all sense of joy.”

Agassi explains that his transformation occurred only after he admitted that he had come to hate tennis, largely because his sacrifices were in pursuit of someone else’s goals. His realization that being a man of compassion, generosity and humility mattered more to him than winning tennis matches gave him a life purpose that positioned him to achieve even more after his collapse than he had achieved before, either on and off the court. Today, Agassi links his extrinsic accomplishments – money and fame – to his values. Indeed, the reason he still seeks external challenges is to exercise and strengthen his character, and to gain the means to attain his most cherished purpose-centered goals, including a tennis school to give kids great, balanced training they couldn’t otherwise afford.

The “Primacy of Purpose”

Thinkers, philosophers and theorists teach that purpose is essential to a meaningful, contented life. Saying that you want to be a wealthy, important executive – or even a wealthy, important, compassionate, generous executive – is not enough. You must know why you want that. What will you use money and power to accomplish that is greater than yourself? Once you know your purpose, you can define the values that will help you achieve it and, thereby, give meaning to everything you attain. Without such a purpose, most people find their accomplishments unsustainable, hollow or both. Avoid this fate by practicing the tenets of “Self Determination Theory,” which prescribes three elements for sustained, intrinsic motivation and subsequent character development:

1. **“Autonomy”** – You decide. You choose your work, actions, life and goals.
2. **“Mastery”** – After you select what to do, you naturally want to do it well. You’re happy as you learn, practice and apply the skills you need in your chosen pursuits.
3. **“Relatedness”** – You link your pursuits to a meaningful purpose.

Building a “Personal Scorecard”

Once you have a purpose and define a set of values to help you achieve it, you need a way to keep score, to measure your progress as you develop your character strengths. Most people focus on societal benchmarks that tally their visible accomplishments (the ends) but often ignore the means. Do you truly value wealth, status and material goods more than health, family and charitable deeds? After your death, do you want the reputation of someone who had lots of money and controlled hundreds of employees or of a person of strong character and values who helped others and built a loving family (perhaps while also gaining wealth and status).

“Here lies the 30th-richest man in America...Is that really the epitaph one intends to leave behind?”

Craft a one- or two-paragraph “purpose statement” describing your reason for being, a statement you can use as the gauge to measure the importance of anything you consider doing. Based on your purpose statement, construct a list, a scorecard, of the values and character traits you find most important to achieving your life’s purpose. Grade yourself on those traits now and at regular intervals as you develop your strengths. Striving to become a better human being doesn’t mean stepping out of your professional arena. The way you win will change, but the pursuit of external achievements – with all its challenges, setbacks and difficulties – is essential to developing your values and character. You cannot strengthen the traits that you measure yourself against unless you subject them to the temptation and adversity that comes with working in the real world.

“If you use your sport to make you a better person, then you’ve won.” (Dan Jansen, Olympic speed skater)

Going forward, live by your scorecard. This new, better you need not fear less-principled players’ actions. Having purpose and being happy, engaged and motivated will make you – like Agassi – a more formidable

competitor. Now you have a reason for accomplishing your goals that is integrated with your deepest personal definition of success.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Each day will present many opportunities to strengthen your character. Over time, action leads to habit. To get there, practice the following:

1. **“Modeling”** – Consciously practice the values and character strengths you’ve chosen to build. For example, demonstrate patience and show compassion. Your effort to develop your abilities will influence those around you.
2. **“Talking”** – Speak about the traits you admire, cite them in your conversations, point to examples and openly praise those who demonstrate these attributes.
3. **“Writing”** – Capture your purpose statement on paper; list your crucial values. Describe your gratitude to those who have helped you along the way. Writing your purpose accelerates change and reinforces memory.
4. **“Reading”** – Seek books, stories and articles that reinforce your prized values. Novels with courageous protagonists and stories of honesty in the face of great temptation will give you fortitude in your own journey.
5. **“Storytelling”** – A good story uniquely taps your emotions. Hearing an inspirational story about character and values can give you a powerful lift when you need it most.
6. **“Debating moral dilemmas”** – Work with others to create, discuss and examine imaginary situations involving value judgments. To carry out this exercise alone, write about such a situation and draft a variety of values-based solutions.
7. **“Role-Playing”** – To use this “surprisingly effective learning tool” with your staff or kids, stage situations in which each person demonstrates a character trait.
8. **“Doing”** – For maximum impact, just carry out the character trait itself. Volunteer, perform “random acts of kindness” or discuss the reasons you feel grateful.

Helping Others Develop Character

Employers, “parents, teachers and coaches” can help those they lead deliberately build stronger character traits. To develop a formal program in your organization for this purpose, use 12 steps:

1. **Share the company mission statement** – Use it to explain the organization’s goals to your team. Tell them how values and principles govern the firm’s accomplishments.
2. **Discuss the mission statement** – Put your goals in the context of your staffers’ values and character strengths. Use hypothetical ethical situations to spark debate.
3. **Ask team members to write “life mission” statements** – Have them reflect on their lives and list the values and character qualities that matter most to them.
4. **Review the statements with your team** – Connect your team’s purpose with the company’s mission.
5. **Have people describe their “best self”** – Ask people to write for about 10 minutes on who they are at their finest and how that benefits those people around them at home and at work.

6. **Ask them to build their scorecards** – Have them use their purpose statements and best-self descriptions to construct personal scorecards of the top six character traits they each want to work on to become the person they want to be.
7. **Charge them to maintain a “character-based training log”** – Have them track their efforts to develop their values and character traits. How often do they thank a colleague, treat someone kindly or humbly share credit with their team?
8. **Urge your team members to seek feedback** – For genuine growth, they should solicit real-world opinions about their progress in developing the moral strengths they listed.
9. **Advise people to “script...critical conversations” ahead of time** – Documenting what they want to say will help them exercise crucial values and attributes.
10. **Show “your commitment to your personal mission”** – You are your team’s model, so make sure your actions always align with your purpose statement and your organization’s values. Consistently demonstrate the behaviors you want to encourage in others.
11. **Recognize achievement** – Praise people whose actions support the corporate mission and their own purpose statements.
12. **Remove people who will not grow** – Have the courage to dismiss those who you cannot trust to adhere to ethics, personal purpose or your firm’s mission.

The Bottom Line

Pursue outward goals with vigor. Use your effort, setbacks and wins to exercise pivotal values and behaviors. Connect your external goals to your internal purpose. Following a formula based on your mission and tied to your purpose will help you be more engaged, fulfilled and successful.

About the Author

Performance psychologist **Jim Loehr** is a sports and business coach who has written 15 books including *The Power of Story*.



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