

Introduction

Mental Toughness: Potentially the Difference Between Life and Death

At 8:00 A.M. on Friday, October 13, 1972, Nando Parrado and 44 of his rugby teammates left an Uruguayan Air Force base on a twin turboprop plane headed for a match in Santiago, Chile. Tragically, the squad would not make it to their destination. At 3:30 P.M. that afternoon, as the players threw a rugby ball around the cabin of the plane, the aircraft crashed into the Andes Mountains. The next morning, Nando and 26 of his teammates found themselves alive and struggling to accept the horrifying reality that would keep them on the mountain for the next 10 weeks.

Nando decided that he would do whatever was necessary to live. Through this conscious choice, he became *accountable* for the daily process required for survival. He worked diligently to prepare a makeshift shelter to help him and others brave the frigid temperatures and serve as a rudimentary hospital to nurse those who were injured and ill. With no food available in the frozen tundra and starvation approaching, Nando wrestled through the personal dilemma of using his perished teammates' flesh for sustenance. He refused to let his emotions overtake him, and he *focused* on using his mental capacity to avoid death.

After 17 days an avalanche hit, creating a certain tomb of snow for those who remained. Still, Nando refused to

give up. After three days of digging, huddling for warmth, and fighting for their lives, Nando and 18 of his teammates found their way out from under the mountain of snow. While despair and grief gripped and defined many of his teammates, Nando forced himself to remain *optimistic*. Nando refused to accept failure even as imminent death stood directly in his path time and time again. He stayed focused on what it would take to survive, no matter the circumstance. On a daily basis, he worked to control his mind to emphasize and execute the solutions needed to overcome each and every obstacle.

After 62 grueling days on the mountain, Nando realized help wasn't coming and decided the only way to survive was to rescue himself. For 10 days he climbed in subzero temperatures across some of the highest and most unrelenting mountains in the world. Unbelievably, after 72 days, a physically weakened Nando emerged out of the mountain wilderness to safety and was able to direct rescuers to his 16 remaining teammates.

Nando's quest for survival obviously involved incredible amounts of the physical toughness that we might assume from an international rugby star. Yet the key to his survival and what set him apart from the others was his *mental* toughness. Take a look back at the story. You'll see the three key characteristics of executive toughness in italics: accountability (doing what *needs* to be done), focus (improving execution and consistency), and optimism (overcoming all obstacles). You'll find that these same three characteristics are used to divide the book you are now holding with the fundamentals detailed throughout as components of each. Mental toughness saved Nando's life, and I want you to realize that to be truly successful and fully satisfied with life, you will need to learn to take the same life-or-death approach to developing your mental toughness. Your quest for happiness depends on it. These same three characteristics will deliver the level of performance you need to

achieve your personal win and approach greatness in your career and in your life.

Nando set his sights on survival. What are you aiming for? Are you aiming simply to survive your career? If you are constantly setting your sights as low as getting through the day and doing your job—the corporate equivalent of mere survival—are you really achieving the quality of life you want? Are you, like some of Nando’s teammates, waiting to be saved by someone or something else? Most of us go through life waiting: waiting for the next big idea to strike us, waiting for the client to sign on the dotted line, waiting for the big promotion, waiting for the competition to run out of steam, waiting for the giant bonus, waiting for our spouse to change or our kids to grow out of a difficult phase. We wait patiently and politely, never realizing, as Nando did, the importance of deciding exactly what we need to do for ourselves and then pursuing those actions with relentless vigor.

The Characteristics of Mental Toughness

What you are about to read is intended to be a holy grail of developing mental toughness as it pertains to your high-level success as either an executive or as someone who aspires to become one. Although this book is specifically geared toward improving your achievement in business, the tools and principles it provides mirror the same methodology I use to enhance performance for anyone—from some of the world’s finest athletes to the everyday individual trying to lose weight, stop smoking, or improve his or her personal relationships. The 10 mental toughness fundamentals presented in this book will work for you whether you are a high-level executive, entrepreneur, midlevel staffer, or independent contributor, because they translate Coach Wooden’s simple, time-tested philosophy of iden-

tifying and training the correct fundamentals needed for success.

Much like athletic prowess, business success derives from a combination of physical and mental ability. The real key for improving consistency and performance in business is learning to control what goes on between your ears and then getting your body to follow through and take action. Business performance doesn't require you to fight through a 26-mile marathon, nor will you need to be able to hit a 96-mile-an-hour fastball. However, you will need to learn to strengthen your mind to a point that your body and your brain work together. Executive toughness comes from *mental toughness*.

MENTAL TOUGHNESS: The ability to focus on and execute solutions, especially in the face of adversity.

Executive Toughness shares practical stories of how real-life people have used this program to achieve high-level success. It is going to teach you not how to be busy but how to be *productive*. Presented as a step-by-step prescriptive manual, it will tell you exactly what to do to develop your own executive toughness and ability to perform so you can and will win more often at work and in life.

Ability is not God-given. Ability is learned, and therefore you can *learn* to perform to the best of your ability. Recent books like *The Talent Code* and *Talent Is Overrated* reinforce this finding. What is less clear is *how* you can develop your ability and learn to perform. *Executive Toughness* gives you that "how."

If you're like most professionals I've met, you want to achieve career success, but *not* at all costs. You don't want compromise, you simply want it all: a well-paying job in which you get to make a difference, a fulfilling personal life, great relationships, and health. You may even go as far as to add happiness and spiritual peace to the mix. In

fact, I want it all, and after 15 years of developing my own mental toughness, I am well on my way to getting it all. While other personal development plans prioritize just one of these areas or use one part of your life as a means to achieve success in another, *Executive Toughness* imposes no such limitations. You begin by determining your top three priorities in life: you define *your win*. That means you do not have to choose. You can have it all, or at least the three most important parts of your all. So no matter if you define winning as making a million dollars, being recognized as a leader in your industry, becoming president of your company, fundamentally changing a market, making a difference in society, enjoying fulfilling personal relationships, being the best parent in the world, running a marathon, or simply being happy, these mental toughness fundamentals will work for you.

Mental toughness will require more than just stopping negative thoughts. It is imperative that you learn to fill your mind with thoughts representing your strengths. The mentally tough CEO doesn't magically have the strength to wake up before sunrise and make difficult decisions all day before returning home to his or her family full of positive energy. Throughout the day the CEO replaces negative thinking with statements like: "I can do anything when I put my mind to it," or "I am an intelligent and confident leader," and "I love my family, and I am present and full of energy when I am with them."

Thought control plays a vital role in mental toughness, and as we all know, it is much easier said than done. Success—however you define it for yourself, and you will do so in Chapters 1 and 2—is a fine balance between managing personal desire and external requirements. Executive toughness hangs in that balance; however, if you follow the comprehensive plan that is outlined in the next 10 chapters, the mental toughness that results will make you unstoppable.

Developing Accountability

Unfortunately, greatness rarely happens on accident. If you want to achieve excellence, you will have to act like you really want it. How? Quite simply: by dedicating time and energy into consistently doing what *needs* to be done. Most of us think we are invincible. Oftentimes, we extrapolate our sense of invincibility to convince ourselves that great things can happen without great effort. Chip and Dan Heath, authors of the bestselling books *Made to Stick* and *Switch*, capture our tendency to exaggerate our greatness with these statistics:

Only 2 percent of high school seniors believe their leadership skills are below average. A full 25 percent of people believe they're in the top 1 percent in their ability to get along with others. Ninety-four percent of college professors report doing above average work. People think they are at lower risk than their peers for heart attacks, cancer, and even food-related illnesses such as salmonella.¹

Many people clearly have an inflated view of themselves and their capabilities. Aspiring entrepreneurs want to make a million dollars a year and simply know their idea will deliver that result. But how many are willing to work with the purpose and passion required to generate such wealth? Thousands yearn to change the world, but they back down when the going gets tough. People want to live to be 100 years old even though they don't exercise, continue to eat as they please, or won't stop smoking. Everyone wants to be happy, healthy, and successful; however, very few have taken the time to identify precisely what they need to do to achieve those goals. This lack of connection between personal effort and personal outcomes promotes excuse making and justification for being incredibly average at work, and unhealthy and unhappy at home.

Many of us simply don't hold ourselves to a higher expectation; because of this, much of our work ethic has eroded and our ability and skill levels have suffered.

Accountability is the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for actions and outcomes. Simply put: doing what *needs* to be done on a daily basis. How far do you think Nando would have gotten if he had said things like, "This is not my fault," or "It just isn't fair that this is happening"? In choosing accountability, Nando said instead, "Success is up to me."

Being accountable in the business world is extremely difficult for two reasons. First, we allow our schedules to become overpacked. Trying to do too much creates the conditions for increased stress and pressure in our lives. Many of us regularly feel overwhelmed by all the things that seemingly need to get done—so overwhelmed, in fact, that we reach the point of feeling as though we are unable to do anything at all.

Cognitive dissonance (CD) is the second reason accountability eludes most people at home and work. CD is a self-protection mechanism that we humans use to justify our actions (or lack thereof). Our brains want our experience to line up with our beliefs, attitudes, and expectations; when there is a disconnect, or dissonance, we become so uncomfortable that we tend to change what we think to align with what we feel. Often, that change involves justifying our mistakes, blaming others, and denying responsibility. The increasing pressure we feel to get *everything* done creates a distinct self-preservation need to shield ourselves from feeling badly about our lack of personal competence. So we do what almost everyone else does when they underachieve: we make excuses. Excuses are the antithesis of accountability.

It is normal to make mistakes and come up short of expectations. The real trick is to learn to own mistakes and inadequacies and then move forward in a positive manner. You might be thinking, yeah right, who does that?

Accountable people, that's who! So let's revisit the definition of accountability from earlier:

ACCOUNTABILITY: The acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for actions and outcomes.

I like the phrasing of "responsibility for actions and outcomes," but I prefer a definition that tells me *exactly* what to do to be accountable. That is why I prefer to work with this even shorter definition:

ACCOUNTABILITY: Doing what *needs* to be done.

Notice the emphasis? It highlights the idea that you cannot do everything all the time, nor will you *need* to. The most important part of being accountable is identifying and following through on those actions that produce the desired outcomes. Being accountable doesn't mean that you won't make mistakes. Quite the contrary. We are all going to make mistakes; the real question is, will you justify your behavior with excuses, or will you acknowledge your mistake and then step up to the plate by doing something about it? Accountability is ongoing and never-ending. If you make a promise to a client and then forget to follow through, will you give your client some excuse as to why you couldn't complete the task, or will you look your client dead in the eye and apologize, telling her there is no excuse and then going to work on completing the task? Accountability is finding a way to always do what needs to be done, regardless of how many attempts it may take for completion.

That's where the problem lies. On paper, being accountable makes so much sense and looks oh-so-easy, but we all know just how unbelievably difficult accountability is in real life. In the exact moment when accountability becomes important, even downright necessary for our growth and improvement, it also becomes the most eva-

sive. Without accountability, we don't fully experience the need for growth. Apologizing to our clients when we don't deliver is painful and embarrassing, and we want to avoid those feelings. We would rather justify our behavior and let our cognitive dissonance protect us from feeling the discomfort and even pain of our lack of accountability.

I want you to learn to view the pain that comes from underperforming as the "gift of accountability." Allow the pain to serve as the motivation needed to work harder at becoming accountable to improvement. Without the pain and humiliation of coming up short, we have little impetus to change our current way of behaving. However, if every time you come up short with your kids, your spouse, your client, or your boss, you avoid making excuses and allow yourself to own the shortcoming and feel the pain of letting someone down, that pain can serve as motivation to improve in the future.

As you will see, being accountable is difficult. However, it is one of the most effective methods of improving your leadership status and ability. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will introduce you to three mental toughness fundamentals that deliver unprecedented personal and professional accountability and growth. Even before we get there, I encourage you to get going by undertaking one of my favorite accountability exercises:

● **Accountability Exercise:** Commit to full accountability for the next 24 hours. No matter what is on your schedule, make sure you follow through with every single thing you said you would do, and yes when you say to yourself or someone else that you will do something, you *need* to find a way to get it done. That is true accountability. Whether it be a promise you made your kids or spouse or something you said you would do for a client or coworker, find a way to get it done in its entirety. If you come up short, say the following word for word: "I'm sorry, there

is no excuse, and I will work on making sure this never happens again.” Practice saying those exact words now, before you need to use them. Today may mark the first time you have ever given a true apology for being unaccountable. Remember, an apology with an excuse or justification isn’t a real apology. Others don’t feel better when they hear your excuses, so stop giving them.

Increasing Focus

In the 2006 World Series, the Detroit Tigers were unfocused. Unfortunately for Detroit manager Jim Leyland and the fans, the team lacked consistency and underperformed on their potential. Leyland’s Tigers, considered a lock before the Series began, rushed through routine fielding plays and struggled in the batter’s box. They committed error after error (eight in total) and eventually lost to the St. Louis Cardinals in five games.

The Tigers felt an enormous sense of pressure to beat a Cardinals team that had entered the play-offs ready and focused on the right fundamentals for winning. Throughout the Series, Cardinals players kept their emotions under control and remained focused on baseball fundamentals by completing mental workouts. In fact, under my direction, the Cardinals players had been completing mental workouts daily throughout the season, and that investment in preparation paid off in the postseason. The mental workout is a five-step process that trains the mind for high-level focus resulting in improved execution and consistency.

So when people ask what made the most difference for the Cardinals in that 2006 season, I answer: “one mental workout per day keeps failure away.” That’s it. For athletes, that’s all it takes to transform focus from a vapid pep talk into control and skill. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, I’ll teach you concrete and proven tools that culminate in your very own mental workout. The mental workout will take only 100

seconds of your time each day but will inevitably develop your focus, hence improving your execution and consistency, so that you will be poised for championship-level performance.

Before we jump into the details of how to develop focus, let's explore precisely how focus contributes to mental toughness. Most people agree that performance relies on focus. However, few people spend the time to identify exactly *what* they are supposed to focus on. Who takes the time to define focus, much less work on it? For the purposes of this book, let's use the following definition:

FOCUS: Focus involves selectively concentrating on one aspect of your environment while ignoring everything else.

Scientific research confirms that concentration is (1) a learned trait and (2) one that can be improved through proper training and effort.² Nando Parrado demonstrated tremendous focus by continually concentrating on nothing but the next step as he traversed some of the most rugged mountains in the world. You can learn focus, too.

In the business world, focus allows you to execute at or above your potential on a regular basis. Think how great it would be to give your best presentation every time, make excellent sales calls consistently, or have every feedback session you give meet your objectives. By learning to improve your focus, you will greatly enhance your ability to keep your mind directed toward those control points that will most positively influence your audience, clients, and staff so that you generate results.

Let's take Janet as an example. An orthopedic surgeon, Janet used to struggle at times with concentration and precision in the operating room, especially in the late afternoon and evening. "I wouldn't even realize it, but I would be starting to slow down. My vision would at times blur, and I would literally have to step away to collect myself."

After identifying her top three focus points in her most common surgeries, she began completing mental workouts to improve her ability to concentrate longer. Almost immediately, Janet began to experience extended periods of mental acuity and improved focus. “The mental workout is just as it says: it’s a workout that strengthens your mind. I do my mental work, and my mind is stronger. Now I am just so much more centered,” she notes.

Developing performance focus is essential for execution, whether you are a physician, a musician, a technician, a politician—you get the point. Focus applies to every job if the person doing it wants to be great at what he or she does. We all know that losing focus can lead to simple mistakes that in the end can add up to devastating outcomes. First, you’ll determine what tasks to focus on. Then you will improve your focus. Your mind will become a steel trap with the ability to be ready and focused on command.

Becoming Optimistic

Pain pierced the legs and lungs of 22-year-old Justin Hirniak as he competed against 50 other soldiers for the highly coveted admission into U.S. Army Ranger School, known as the toughest, most grueling school in the U.S. Army. A humbled and humiliated Justin had already washed out in his first attempt at Ranger School.

Now with three miles left in the seven-mile run culminating his second attempt at acceptance, Justin held his position in the middle of the pack knowing that he needed to finish in the top five. Over the past three months, Justin had realized that what had been missing on his first attempt was not proper conditioning or strength. It had been confidence. He hadn’t believed without question that he was capable of living up to the honor of becoming a Ranger. He had therefore gone to work on his mental toughness. Even though his body was exhausted and shock waves of pain seared through his muscles, Justin knew he would finish

among the leaders. “I just let my mind take over for my body, and I told myself I would finish in the top five. After a half mile of mentally battling back and forth, my mind cleared and a calm, confident state took over. I felt no fear or anxiety, and my pace continued. The pain and physical exertion went away, and my mental toughness peaked and rose to a new level. I finished the race third, went to Ranger School, and earned my Ranger tab.”

Looking back at his success, he muses, “I believe that a key component is finding the right aim point of confidence. You convey this through mental toughness.” Colonel Justin Hirniak eventually earned the post of Commander of Defense Contract Management with oversight responsibilities of more than 40,000 contractors in Iraq. Colonel Hirniak believes that every person needs to harness mental toughness: “It doesn’t necessarily have to happen on the battlefield, playing field, or in the boardroom. It could happen anywhere—it’s a mental state. The key is to identify it, make a trigger for it, and then harness it. Once found, mental toughness through confidence can be carried for the rest of life.”

While Justin speaks of confidence, to my mind he is talking about optimism. Optimism and confidence go hand in hand:

CONFIDENCE: The belief in one’s abilities.

OPTIMISM: Hopefulness and confidence about the future or successful outcome of something; a tendency to take a favorable or hopeful view.

Optimism causes you to believe in yourself and your potential to bring about a solution. In that way, optimism causes you to become confident. An incredibly important variable for performance, this firm belief in the successful outcome dramatically increases ultimate achievement. Some people think that optimism is a “soft” state of mind that is a part

of your very nature. I disagree. Optimism isn't normal, but it can be learned, and that is exactly what Justin did in his mental training and what you will do in yours.

Of late, optimism is gaining momentum as quite possibly being more than performance-driving. It has even been called the "key to life."

Highly respected researchers like Dr. Martin Seligman, the University of Pennsylvania professor commonly known as the father of positive psychology, further contend that optimistic people are happier, healthier, and more successful than their pessimistic counterparts. For years, we have heard the adage "don't be negative," and yet, we also know optimism doesn't come easily or automatically. Telling a person not to be negative—especially during tough times—is usually wasted breath.

The "theory of dominant thought" offers one reason we get stuck in negative thinking cycles when times get rough. This theory suggests that we will attend to the dominant thought on our radar. For example, if I say to you, "Don't think about a pink elephant with blue running shoes," you will very likely think about a pink elephant even though I asked you not to. When you are caught in the middle of experiencing a negative situation (e.g., a sales call that ended poorly), it's only natural to remain focused on that negative event even though doing so isn't in your best interest.

Let's consider one other psychological concept along with dominant thought, expectancy theory: *that which you focus on, expands*. And unfortunately, human beings have the propensity to focus on problems, so our problems tend to expand. Your day may begin with an important presentation that goes unexpectedly wrong. Knowing that you have potentially lost a major account, you begin to worry. Then you carry that worry like a weight for the rest of your day. By letting your mind focus on the morning's problem, you project that poor performance onto three other sales pitches throughout the day. Not surprisingly, those go south as well. Now you *really* have something to worry about.

Mental toughness isn't for the faint of heart; realize that it will at times require the full-throttle intensity so displayed by individuals like Nando Parrado and Colonel Hirniak. Chapters 9 and 10 will give you a simple yet effective process for developing your own optimism so you can increase your mental toughness and overcome all obstacles to success just as they did. In doing so, you will see for yourself how mental toughness allows each of us to rise to the challenge when the pressure is on and *exceed* our potential in the process.

I encourage you to take your time as you move through this book. Stop to think and digest where needed. Allow yourself to become engaged with the exercises. Put energy into writing down your entries in the spaces provided. In doing so, you will begin your own miraculous journey toward unleashing the power and strength of your mind. As you begin, keep in mind that above all, executive toughness is relatively simple. It is not an elusive secret or a process that will take you hours a day to enact or years to perfect. By following the proven step-by-step plan you have in your hands, you will inevitably and undoubtedly begin winning the battle of the mind and increase your ability to overcome each and every challenge that lies in your path.

To the best of your ability, answer the following questions:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how accountable are you? How accountable will you need to be to accomplish your dreams?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how focused are you? How focused will you need to be to accomplish your dreams?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how optimistic are you? How optimistic will you need to be to accomplish your dreams?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Choose to Be Great

The three characteristics of executive toughness are accountability, focus, and optimism. You will develop your executive toughness through daily practice of these 10 mental toughness fundamentals:

- Define your win.
 - Create your vision of self-image.
 - Set product goals; emphasize process goals.
 - Prioritize the priorities.
 - Complete daily performance evaluations.
 - Control your arousal state.
 - Know your scripts.
 - Prepare mentally every day.
 - Develop a relentless solution focus.
 - Adopt Gable discipline.
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