



XcULTURE

HOW SUPERHEROES ARE BORN

I dedicate this book to you.

Orphans, youngsters, men and women who fight hard to reach tomorrow.

New entrepreneurs, Do-It-Yourself and small business owners who move mountains with bare hands
against all odds, who rise above their condition against all adversities.

Don't lose your faith in the possibility of a clear horizon.

We have many close friends from distant places.

We are a tribe.

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by Georgia Mihalcea

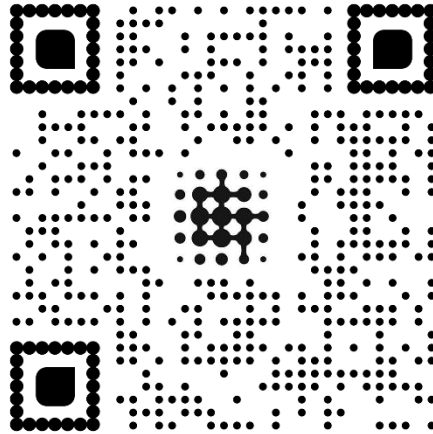
"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



XCULTURE
HOW SUPERHEROES ARE BORN

Bounce Back Collection

XCulture | How Superheroes Are Born



XCulture | How Superheroes Are Born (in its original form being two separate responses to *Patterns for Success* and *Unleash Your Superhero* challenges launched by business consortiums on open innovation and crowdsourcing platform HeroX, in 2016 and 2017) received the grand prize award for the most inspiring and resilient culture program designed for new entrepreneurs, DIY and small business owners by one from this tribe. It competed against 134 programs proposals from all corners of the world.

Bounce Back Collection is a map to better places. Its purpose is to facilitate increasing resilience capabilities, sharp orientation and navigation skills in the globalized complex world, and to develop and shape a strategic, action and problem solving oriented mind.

BOUNCE BACK COLLECTION

- ❖ **XCULTURE** | How Superheroes Are Born
- ❖ **XCODE** | Code of Winners
- ❖ **RISE ABOVE THE CROWD** | My Purpose and Meaning Design

by **Georgia Mihalcea**

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



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SECTION I

STRATEGY

Module 1 | Planning Your Competitive Advantage

Master the arena. It is the core of your competitive advantage.
Knowing your competitors is not the first thing you should worry about.

I. A necessary story.

My adult life has two chapters: being an entrepreneur and cleaning the mess after it.

The first section of my life began with the green me at the age of 22 and lasted for five struggling, but positive years. I never felt them that way at the time, though, I only realized it when the next chapter opened its pages. Through comparison.

In that era I was just exhausted. I can say now that everything was good because nothing was bad enough. I was happy because I was not unhappy. I was just too young to be aware of this nuance.

After these five years on this pathway, one day at the office, while drinking my morning third cup of coffee, I read the statistics and I found out I was on the list of exceptions. Over 90% new and small businesses failed their first year and less than 50% made it to the third year. I somehow managed to rise from chronic poverty to the top of the pyramid's bottom and still standing. However, I needed high tech binoculars to see the line of the horizon.

My turning point unraveled in a beautiful field blushed with poppies, somewhere beyond the margins of Bucharest, our capital city.

The end of my life as I knew it was signed with a Montblanc pen on an ordinary piece of paper filled with numbers.

In that field I was building a two-floor office building for the biggest client in my personal history by that time. That deal was supposed to be my ticket out to better places. If the client paid until the end, of course. But he did not. He just smiled, lighted up a Cuban cigar and sent me home, but not without pushing me in the undergrounds by cutting my head and my limbs first.

I understood everything from his eyes. I could also see he was a devil for me, but a god for his own people. The question not yet answered was: *how bad will this going to get?* The entire sick series of Guinea Pig rolled in the back of my eyes.

During our ultimate meeting, he cut out the reality piece by piece. Just like in Quantum Physics where they say the reality exists only if you are looking at it. There is no roof. Cut. There are no walls. Cut. There is no fence. Cut. There are no lights. Cut. You were not here. Cut.

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



It was a dusty hot room at the ground floor filled with people who could say something, anything, as they were part of the entire story. They did not, because they would have lost their jobs and privileges.

The only thing left for me to do was to count the number of the worst years of my life that were just coming to existence. The first cut, 2 years. The second cut, 1 year. The rest of the cuts, 7 years.

I could hear the gates of hell opening to welcome me: *Hello, dear! This is your reward. We wish you one hell of a journey.*

There were about 40 Celsius degrees that day. I jumped in my car, windows closed, and drove blindly till the heart of the poppies field. Clouds of dust rose above, while scared crowds were flying out of my way, screaming. I was screaming, too, from the bottom of my being, but it was a deaf sound with a multidimensional echo that was just hitting me back.

My last words from that life were to God: *"Hey man, I give up. Do what you want, but don't count on me. I just died."* And I fainted. The last thing I saw was a crow's wing covering the sun in its flight and the red of the poppies fading away.

"Have we just lost everything?"

"No. We didn't lose. It was taken from us. Everything we had plus what we don't have."

One day, when we evacuated our home that was taken by creditors, my sister asked:

"Will ten years be enough to go back to zero?"

"Yes." I lied.

The reality was that each year valued five years of doing things we never did and taking risks we never thought we could take. On the background of the world's crisis and of the context in our country, five more were to be added for each, for the sake of an accurate estimation.

One hundred years, having nothing to fight with and no guarantee. Years we didn't have.

We wrapped our home in silence and put it all in a pile at the entrance door: forks, spoons, boxes with our dead business, plates, beds, fridge, toilets, and an icon from 1944 painted by a soldier on the war featuring Jesus on the sea helping Peter who doubted and fell into the waters. The only thing my father gave me before moving in the afterlife. I remember nature blooming.

On the background, the voice of my sister told a story I was also fighting hard in my soul with:

"I count the days to meet in hell, bastards! I'll smile and drink Champaign while I will walk over your heads."

And so, a new era began.

And ended.

Happy Birthday.

I did everything. Not everything that I could, but everything that I could imagine.

My only shot to survive was to be the best from thousands smarter and better educated people than myself from all over the world in problem solving competitions; but also, the right person to get the job done in my immediate surroundings. No award, no way. One mistake, no way. I was just another version of *One Million Dollar Baby*. You know, the movie.

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Left with a sling under the roots of a tree in the heart of nothingness, the only thing that made sense was to shoot at the moon. I never made it that far, but I touched a few stars.

Watching how your life and everything you have worked for is taken away is frustrating beyond words. Dealing with nothingness is terrifying.

That day pushed my life over the board. All this time I lived outside the system, on its borderlines and sharp edges, and in the voids between its margins.

During that part of my existence I found out that ethics and integrity are luxury items that only the fallen ones can truly afford.

It was those rough years of living without my small business and not being understood, seen or heard when I discovered the meaning and the beauty of life. It was those years when I found puzzle pieces from the truth. About life and about myself. It is when I found out that my world is not the world, that my truth is not the truth, and that my justice is not the justice.

The depths I reached showed me the dimensions of my own measures, beliefs, values, strengths and weaknesses, my full potential on both side of the spectrum, positive and negative. They offered me a map about my own human nature and about the nature of the world and systems.

While sitting at the bottom of myself and of life, without being dead but neither truly alive, without being sane but neither insane, without being healthy but neither irreversible ill, it hit me:

'If I could fall so deep, it means I could bounce back with the same intensity, speed, force, and measure. Maybe even more.'

'So, why did I choose all the things that led me here?'

The intention. All I wanted was to make money and to have a better life. Meaning more. I was not happy with what I had. This led me to a very dangerous place and to my self-destruction.

'How could this ordinary intention have such a dramatic effect?'

I wanted something with clarity without knowing the system and myself with the same clarity. It was a fundamental error and a powerful imbalance. Naturally, I lost.

That discovery showed me what I must do to reborn and how to do it. It taught me golden techniques. Things that Spartans like myself did not know. I stepped on this pathway before the *open* era, I started life with no resources and support. I had to learn while doing.

The only goal I set for myself from that point forward was to defeat the odds and stats. And I did. One by one.

Defeating statistics is success. Being able to reach from point A to point B is how success is defined in the dictionary. Anything else is interpretation.

In my context at the time, everything broke down to a fundamental challenge: *How to defeat opponent much more powerful than me and how to escalate a complex and overwhelming system when I had nothing left?*

The answer was obvious. *I need to better learn the systems. I need to master the arena.*

by Georgia Mihalcea

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The world is the ocean. Your country is the sea. A business is the boat. Your small business is a raft.

What is the strategy and what are the mechanisms of the arena? Confront your opponents as soon as you feel prepared. If you survive fighting with lions, including and especially your own, you will have the most valuable competitive advantage in all situations. It gives you invaluable knowledge, training and skills. Never avoid a necessary confrontation.

Coming back to ordinary circumstance and to the ideal world where we should all know our competitors, I will tell you this: if your competitors are more powerful and more experienced than you, the only way to really know them is to know the arena first. Otherwise, you will misevaluate or totally miss a lot of things from your strategy. You will not know where to look at and what to do when you do not know what to do.

II. The plan before the plan. Sharpening precision.

To thrive in the mechanisms of life we must collaborate with the systems, to incorporate our visions and business plans in the bigger plans, to be always on and ready to respond to attacks and crisis situations, but to also resist and challenge the system when it becomes abusive or when it goes wrong or redundant.

We must find out what are the plans of the bigger strategists, how do they think, what are their rationales and how the system really works. To understand the mechanisms of the arena. That place where we want to conquer with our small business, with our product or service.

This type of knowledge gives us the golden keys to a much better and precise way of acting, to better chances for success.

Small businesses are always on the first line of fire.

As players in the first line of fire, because we do not have saviors to pay for our errors and failures, and because our lives depend on our quality of performance, we need to learn more than anyone else. We need to invest more from our time and resources in learning and experimenting.

We also have the moral obligation to react when other players cross the lines and causes us prejudices. You may wonder why, probably Everybody wonders it comes to this. But think about it.

If not us, then who? Who will protect the borderlines and who will push them further and further? We are hyper action people, seldom with available time to also do good directly, personally. From this perspective, the best chance we have, to do good, is to turn into warriors fighting against wrong doings. It is the only way we have, to contribute to the greater good.

On another note, do the Math. If one crosses the line with your small business, it hits in everyone else, it hits in the society, it hits in your family and in all the people, employees or contractors, who depend on your decisions and capabilities to make things work always.

There are also times when crisis hits, and you cannot run away from your opponents. You must fight the lions and you must learn how to defeat opponents more powerful than you, to escalate very complex situations. It happened to me and it happened to many other entrepreneurs.

It is a highly competitive jungle out there and there are many dragons willing to get rich easily.

by Georgia Mihalcea

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Knowing the system gives you a powerful tool kit to defeat your opponents without destroying them and without causing collateral victims and damage, without compromising your values and without crossing the lines. It also gives you the power to handle the unpredictable and the unknown, to manage crisis at your full potential. This means one vital thing: business and life continuity. Your survival.

Above everything, it teaches you clarity. Clarity sharpens your precision. It gives you character strengths and the peace of mind you need to thrive in your personal life and to inspire your people. It teaches you to master yourself and it gives you a key to happiness.

***Learn the system by becoming familiar with two things:
the moral frame and the legal frame.***

It is vital to learn the basics of both, because you need this knowledge when you design your vision, mission and unique value proposition statements, your strategy and operational plans.

It is also critical to know where morality and legality meet, and where they split ways. It is critical because as a business owner you wear many hats and your decisions must fulfill your expectations on all plans of your life: as a human, as a parent, as a social activist (if you also get involved in common good issues), as an entrepreneur.

The knowledge you win through investing a little bit more time in preparation, in learning how the system works, sets the foundations for you to become a top player. It sharpens your instincts, your intuition – that side of intelligence you need the most in business and life, something that nobody teaches you in any kind of school.

There are two core reasons why small and new businesses fail so fast. Both are avoidable:

1. **Not knowing the arena (legal frame / system frame)**
2. **Not knowing how to fight without crossing the lines (moral frame / world frame)** when it comes to the unfair or broken parts of the game and of yourself. Implicitly, not knowing how to overcome crisis at full potential.

Whether the game is in ordinary or extraordinary mode, knowing these two fundamental frames makes the difference between to be or not to be.

Entrepreneurship is life on your own, not life as an outcast. If you do not master the rules and yourself, your life may fast turn into a very painful way of life outside the systems and on the margins of existence. It is already hard enough that we are often misunderstood and alone on this pathway. It should not go beyond that. Especially because it is avoidable.

I have been there for over a decade of my life, I have met smarter and powerful people than me falling in very deep and dark places. None of us could see the light at the end of the tunnel because we could not even find a tunnel. Few escaped and came back in the world, most of them did not.

This is an algorithm.

by Georgia Mihalcea

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If you start playing this game or if you continue the game without consolidating your foundations, there is a precise formula that will lead you in precise places. And none of them is heaven.

Getting the support you need is like treasure hunting. You only get in life and business what you can. Better maps, better skills, better places.

Your fundamental competitive advantage comes with learning the maps and understanding very well the frame of the system.

Here it is a short writing from my times back then. Times when life turned me into words.

If you crawl fast enough, you can fly

"How did you get here?"

"I doubted."

"About what?"

"The judgement of the world that made me."

"What made you doubt it?"

"Another world I came to live in."

"What kind of world?"

"A world where between nothing and everything there is no difference. A place where we all have the same face.

I have seen kings falling from the skyscrapers and people falling from the highest levels of the underground. But down there, in that place, beyond any ray of light and doubt, for a moment or more, we were all equal.

You could not tell the difference between one born poor and one lowered by himself or by predators, between a wealthy paralyzed and a needy one, between the healthy ones and the mad ones. However, you could discern between the truth and its absence."

"Is lie the lack of truth?"

"No."

"But what is it?"

"Darkness."

"What is a lie, then?"

"Smoke in the eyes."

by Georgia Mihalcea

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III. Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar. The planning mindset.

No plan will ever equal the power of action. The planning process at its core is nothing fancy. What is relevant is planning with the mindset of execution. With your mind fully focused on action, you can design a very realistic, feasible and clear business plan, a straight forward map and execution schedule, a well estimated implementation budget.

Maybe you think that planning is just thinking hard and putting it all down on paper in a structured way. It is much more than just that.

A good planning process involves a lot of action: research, market analysis, making lists with supplies, sending them offer requests so you can design a realistic budget and make realistic time evaluations, and much more.

Good strategy and operations plans are instructions manuals.

By following it, step by step, you get from point A to point B smooth, in your own terms, and in the estimated time. If it is not perfectly clear, then it requires more refinement.

Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar is a strong surviving teaching given by Jesus to people when they asked him if they should pay the tax to the emperor or not, while showing him (hoping to catch Him on a wrong foot) a coin with emperor's head on one side.

This teaching is not a metaphor. It is a pure technique. It means to give each thing the right importance.

My own battle turned out to be a disaster in the first couple of years after that violent episode which drastically reduced my circumstances, leading to long, painful and unbearable years.

I lost everything overnight. My homes, my cars, my offices, all my things. And I kept losing things I forgot I had without being able to stop anything, until I was left with myself dressed in what was to become my uniform for the years to come: a shirt, a leather jacket and a pair of black boots.

[I wore those boots until I gave them away. My feet were most of the times covered with blood because of how bad they deteriorated from overuse in all seasons. But they were good quality leather boots, as my father's saying stocked itself on my memory: *we are too poor to afford cheap things*, and I always bought good quality things. On the outside, they looked new. I also used a lot of shoe cream to make sure I will keep alive that appearance as longer as possible. I did the same with my hair, I made sure it looks good.

Why? Because people don't want to hear or see your problems, they have their own. You need to always look great and be in good shape. To make yourself digestible for society and help people to easier connect with you. You need to stay in the game or at least to project your presence in the game, while in the backgrounds you reassemble yourself. The truth is for books, speeches and movies. The truth is your business. When you are in such places, you are invisible for most of the people in your life. Paradoxically, some strangers can see you and help you. Usually, the ones who suffered more.

The world is one big Caesar and you must give it what it needs. It is how you will also get what you need from it. This is an exchange and this is how the world functions from the beginning of mankind.]

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The only question remained on my table became: **who am I?**

The answer to it felt to be the key to my way out. No business, strategy and any other question felt more vital than this one. Deciding, accepting and being clear about my identity was the only way to put a better foundation to a potential salvation.

I realized I had to fully accept my new condition.

You cannot conquer a castle, if you do not fully accept its existence as it is, and, if you spend your energy on thinking about how you would have liked it to be.

Leading a small business is an occupation that fills all your days, from dusk to dawn. It is crucial to be well in your own skin and to be aware of how this game affects you, to understand where you two emerge and where you split ways. This awareness helps you adjust your position continuously and integrate good support elements in your life.

You chose business to be your own master. Any self-deceiving thought or action and unresolved confusion about your identity, about who you are, will not take you there. It will take you in the opposite direction. At first, being your own slave, then being your business slave and ultimately being someone else's slave. It is another algorithm.

I accepted my condition and every outcome of both me and my partners' choices, newly turned into my opponents in the courts of law. I took full responsibility for it and I decided that I am an explorer and a warrior more than other things, and so I chose to own my human nature.

I stopped complaining (to myself) and this small adjustment in behavior saved me a lot of energy and gave me the clarity I missed. It showed me where to look and what I need to learn to better understand the situation I was in, and hopefully to also rise above it. To conquer the castle.

For me, the only way to move forward was to act backwards.

That repositioning in myself set me free. It taught me unique human nature and life lessons, and, it pushed me in a totally new dimension of consciousness and towards better circumstances.

It was an unimaginable story that led to a structural personal reinvention.

I realized that my small business was nothing else but a vehicle to navigate in life and to find, explore, grow and enjoy my own selves, whatever makes me who I am. My business was never my identity. It was never a destination.

As a small business owner identifying with your work happens silently and subtly. You do not know it until a crisis happens and challenges everything, including yourself in your deepest forums.

Looking back in time, I realize that dreaming to be small is a big dream for many people alike.

If I knew how unbearable running a small business can become, I would have considered everything else before stepping on this pathway. However, without this journey in the book of my life I would have been a much poorer person and performer.

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After this long experience I can tell you this: a monumental part of pain, long spirals of falling and failure impact can be avoided by just giving Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Simple as that. Literally.

My Caesars were the world as it is, my new reality and my new condition. Results of not knowing the system and not understanding the human nature good enough.

You can save a significant part of your future and of your vitality by giving outer and inner systems the right importance in your planning process.

Key areas.

1. Scan the system and plant the seeds of continuous learning reflex. Do the research.

The key areas you need to inform about, no matter the stage of your business, are:

A. The legal frame of the system

- a. Constitution
- b. The codes that govern your country legal frame, the main laws of the arena (Civil Code, Criminal Code, Labor Code, Fiscal Code etc.)
- c. Special laws related with the sector of your business/revenue generating activity
- d. Laws governing the virtual space

B. The architecture of the system. The structure and the hierarchy of the public institutions in your country. What public authorities there are and who does what.

C. The strategies of the system. The national strategies of your country for each sector. Visions, operational plans and resources. The regional and global strategies.

D. The annual reports and statistics generated by the system. They offer you crucial information about the ecosystem where you are playing the game. You can find there, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Your competitors and your own.

Outcomes. What do you get at the end of this process?

- ❖ The mindset, the skills and the tools to design your best strategy for short, medium and long term.
- ❖ The knowledge to write a precise action plan for each scenario
- ❖ Broader horizons. You get the mindset of a big thinker, of a visioneer.
- ❖ Turn the unexpected into predictable scenarios. You know now what challenges lie ahead, challenges that may affect your business directly and the ways they can affect you.
- ❖ The patience and the ability to crunch the numbers and to better project and implement your budgets, your resources.

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To break it down, this is how the natural journey of your business flows:

- ❖ Idea
- ❖ Identity
- ❖ Values
- ❖ Mission
- ❖ Vision
- ❖ Strategy
- ❖ Plan
- ❖ Budget

All these steps are directly related to your own person and life vision. The clearer your identity, the clearer your vision.

As a small business owner, you are Jack of all Trades, a one man show. The clearer you are about yourself and about the system, the clearer and sharper you will be about your business.

Give Caesar what It needs and you will thrive in any type of circumstance. You will also be a hard to ignore competitor.

2. Scan and Squeeze the data about your competition. Do the research.

As the global strategies give you insights about the ocean and the national ones give you the knowledge about the sea, the knowledge about your competition gives you the knowledge about the lake you are planning to navigate and swim for a long time.

It is a lake crowded with small fishes like you, but also with sharks, crocodiles and other creatures you did not even know that exist.

Besides that, today, our competition is no longer made of humans and companies only, but also of robots and machines. We no longer compete at a local or national level, we also compete with international players. It is globalization. It is a reality we must accept. Especially because it won't go away any time soon.

The game became much more complex, and it gets ruthless for small businesses.

It is your vision, knowledge and skills that will keep you on track and longer in the game.

Your vision must be higher than your own life and business vision.

Why? Because tomorrow you may be pushed to start it all over again, to begin a new activity and at the end of each day, the big question will always rise above the surface: **What am I working for?** And you should have a good answer to that one. Good enough to have the force to keep it going and to hold on when it gets rough.

Study your competition with passion and curiosity. With respect and admiration. With fair play. Just like in sports.

Have a look at their past and present leaders. What kind of people are they? How do their lives look like? What are they working for? How do they think?

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Study your competition annual reports of activity.

Study your competition positive and negative study cases. Things that happened and how did they handled them, how did they act.

Scan your competition through the lens of a due diligence process:

- ❖ Map it
- ❖ Categorize it on various key criteria
- ❖ Look into their public records
- ❖ Read articles they write/about them
- ❖ Look in the history, similar competitors who lived in the past, but they are no longer in the present (who played this game before, how, why they are not here now, what happened)

There are bigger opponents and smaller opponents. There are the opponents next door and there are the opponents in far away countries. There are markets, there are stats, there are odds, and there are trends.

Get your inspiration from the diversity of your competitors 'strategies, methodologies, tools, cultures and leadership. Collaborate with them in this *secret way* to better know how to build or shape your product or service, how to make it fulfil its potential and to (re)position on the market each time it is necessary. Take the best from each and incorporate it into your own strategies.

Outcomes. What do you get at the end of this exploration?

Better understanding of the market. More knowledge. More skills. Better precision.

3. Position and reposition yourself and your business

As a small business owner, the innovation side of your business stays in your uniqueness. In your particular fusion of emotions, values, skills, knowledge, imagination and passions. It also has roots in your intentions and motivations.

Uniqueness is a sword with many facets. It works both for you and against you. You need to dive deep to get to the core of your uniqueness.

As a small entrepreneur your strength is your inner fire. But it can also turn into your greatest weakness, because we risk attaching to our own ideas and business, and, to let ourselves led by that fire. On this pathway, we may also end up in dangerous places where bigger and dangerous threatening creatures live.

It is vital to learn to master your inner fire. It all beings with becoming aware of it. Your passion has its roots in this fire, they are not the same thing.

It is you who should lead the fire and not vice-verse.

Until that turning point in your awareness, you risk spending too much time or too little time in one position with yourself and with your business. You risk falling victim to inertia and to narrow your horizons, becoming your own slave, making yourself too comfortable.

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As a small operator you need to be very dynamic, always on and ready to change. You have to make yourself able to adjust things all the time, to reposition them continuously, to stay tuned to the market, a very volatile and changing realm, to develop your reflexes to pay attention at all key elements.

Keep an eye on your inner fire. When it is not your master, but a sword in your hands, you will get a much clearer view and the detachment needed to adjust your blood at the right temperatures, each time it is necessary. You will become more flexible at the level of your tactics.

Now, you may wonder: **How to do everything with passion without attaching myself to the process and to its outcomes? I am a human, right? I am not a guru or some Zen monk living in the woods, far away from the hustle of the world.**

It is all about moving your attention from the things you do and the outcomes you dream at to the process. Nothing more and nothing less.

If what you sell is peanuts, make a paramount from the process. It is not about how to sell more peanuts, but how to have more fun and learn more things from selling peanuts?

4. Rethink your cashflow. Cashflow is at the core of most of the failures in the world of small and new businesses.

One of the reasons most of the small entrepreneurs do not survive their first year of business is cash flow. The lack of well calculated cash leads to bankruptcy even in the case of big companies. Cash is everything in all business stages, but its estimation plays a decisive role in the beginning, especially when you start from a small or nano premise.

The cash needed to cover the beginning is usually calculated by small entrepreneurs to cover 6 – 12 months and it seldom covers with fidelity the costs with not good enough preparation and research, crisis and other unexpected costs. In the case of start-up entrepreneurs and small business owners these costs are always higher. For this reason, the money expected to cover 12 months hardly covers 4-6 months and somewhere by the 8th month, the business is out of the game.

In corporations and in places based on auctioning offers, the principle applied is to make an *accurate* budget, meaning that a lot of costs are not approved, or, in the auction case, you risk losing the deal in the favor of a better offer, regardless the fact that, after winning the auction, the price usually goes up exactly because of the 'accurate' rule. It is a nonsense I never understood, one that is not helping you too much in the cost control area.

In nano businesses, if you make an *accurate budget* you set yourself for a very fast failure.

Tempted by your idea and skills, by your team and/or by keeping the costs and risks low, many investors push for small business budgets, hoping that putting enough pressure (dressed as *motivation*) on the entrepreneurs, magic will happen.

Magic does not happen on this route.

With all major investment funds, mentors, networks and all sorts of accelerators and incubators all over the world (business angels, VC, hackathons etc.), stats and facts look the same as always. Horrible. Over 80%

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



fail in their first year and less than 50% reach their third year of business. Some of these investors live in bubbles and some are hunting the jackpot and the unicorns, because they focus on portfolio management (if we bet on 10 startups, 1 may be the unicorn and 2-3 will be ok, we win). If they focused to make businesses work, to create the infrastructure needed for that purpose, things would have been much more differently.

They are not, so you are on your own.

To make sure you cover your beginning phase in controllable conditions and that you do not get stuck in the middle of the road, operate the following adjustments to your business startup budget:

- Crisis fund: 5-10% of the total budget
- Unexpected expenses fund: 5-10% of the total budget
- Put over 30% more time over what you initially estimated as duration (if you think it will take 6 months to be ready and fully authorized to sell, then estimate 10-12 months)
- When you estimate your revenues, cut off 50%

Now, do the cash flow for 12 months (money coming and going day after day and month after month). Once you start your business, schedule your in/out cash day by day or according to your business profile. The more detailed, the better. The cash flow is nothing fancy, it is just the calendar of your in/out money.

Once you finish your 12-month cash flow, do it for 24, 36, 48 and 60 months. You can see better where you can operate changes, as they will directly affect your cash flow.

By doing the cash flow first, you will see better at what point on your business timeline you can afford buying more things to increase or diversify your selling capacity, your revenues.

Now that your budget and cash flow are more realistically estimated, you have a clearer vision about the real amount of money you need to start and to survive in reasonable conditions until you reach the breakeven point (profit=zero) and where and when you will manage to go above it.

Knowing that, it makes you more resilient and resourceful in finding the money you need for your business, but also to better plan your implementation phases.

You would not want to spend it just to fail during action. Once you set yourself for action, for execution, you want to make sure you have what it takes to get over the most difficult phase: the beginning.

When you make your own budget, you are also tempted to overestimate revenues and underestimate costs and time. Detach yourself from it and imagine you are doing it for somebody else. This part of planning will prove crucial in the actual game.

5. Design and optimize your operations flow (action plan)

Numbers have the quality to align your neurons in your head. They get the clutter down and allow you to stick to the facts, they help you be a good navigator.

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In the absence of numbers, you think you will implement things in a way. Once you crunch the numbers, you will realize there are better moments in the process to do some of the things you planned.

Making your action plan as detailed as possible, it will uplift your clarity. Clarity sharpens your precision and precision leads you faster and better to achieving your goals in the estimated time. It will also help you anticipate threats and vulnerabilities in due time, so you can take proper action to avoid unnecessary risks and crisis.

Make more than one action plan scenario and recalculate the budget and the cash flow for each version. You will notice substantial differences and you will better understand what the best route is to take for implementation.

6. Keep an eye on the wallet and do not mix business expenses and money with your own expenses and money

Now, once you get down to action, keep a very strict evidence of each penny. Money is volatile, you do not feel when it is gone. Now it is here, now it is not anymore.

When you are nano, money is not enough to cover both your business and your personal life necessities, but you need to find a balance, to improvise and to maintain a very strict distinction. Set up the *Me* rule and *My Business* rule.

Keep an eye on the wallet. Exercise your money discipline. Day by day by day until it becomes reflex, until you master it. What makes it or breaks it here, it is your vision. That is what will give you the strength, the wisdom and the inspiration needed when adversities confuse you and life puts you down. Your vision fuels your motivation in the most challenging times and lights your way out of darkness.

7. The debts paying rule that sends down your stress levels and makes wonders for your healthcare

As a small business owner, you know very well how hard it is to finance both your personal life and your business at the same time, and, be happy in both. Failing to find the good measure in overcoming this challenge often alters the quality of your life. In my opinion, it is also a factor that directly influences failure. You burn yourself too fast. When you reach the burnout level, your life and business follow the same direction. You are the nucleus. The most important asset of your life and business. The only source and resource you have. Put yourself first to conquer stress. Make it a rule.

In case you have debts like 99% of us still living on this planet and only 3 cents in your pocket, this is my rule: split it in three. For past (debt), present (your life now), future (your life tomorrow). Invest 1 cent to push yourself forward one millimeter. Diminish the debt with 1 cent. Increase your savings with 1 cent. Hold on in this tight place. It will pay off.

With this mindset well aligned, you will do a much better planning of your strategy. You will better estimate timelines in your action plan and other things the business will require. You will make the implementation plan of your strategy realistic.

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Final thoughts

Your uniqueness is your main competitive advantage. This is the core aspect that should be reflected in planning all details of your strategy and its *what if* scenarios. From a crisis perspective, your uniqueness it is what will push you out of any situation, including the ones that seem impossible to conquer. Trust that!

Planning your competitive advantage means to position yourself, your product/service and your business in the context and to know what to do and when to do. To have a sharp good measure in everything. This good measure helps you make brilliant strategies, action plans and decisions.

The more you know about the context, about its mechanisms, rules and strategies, the better your planning and performing becomes, and more abundant your small business.

To expand your life span in the jungle, you must connect your world to the world.

For small players defeating odds and stats means success.

by Georgia Mihalcea

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STRATEGY

Module 2 | Branding Your Vision and Your Business

There are three things needed for a good film: the script, the script and the script.

Everything is rooted in Module 1 | Planning Your Competitive Advantage. It is why it is also the longest one. If you did your homework, it will lead your way. If not, you have to go back to the roots and clarify yourself.

The essence of branding is to give your script the right visual identity.

It is just like in cinematography: a good script leads to a good film and to all the venues, people and resources you need to make it.

The branding challenge is very much about your personal core as a leader more than anything else. Who you are as a human directly reflects on the quality of your services, on your performance, on your people performance and on customer's level of satisfaction and loyalty. Ultimately, on your own life and wellness.

No matter how many options a branding specialist will offer you in exchange for a fee, the one you choose is the mirror of who you are. The same happens when you do it all by yourself. You will look for those elements where you can mirror in.

Escaping our egos is the hardest human challenge, especially when it comes to image, the mother land of illusion.

In the process of building your visual identity there are personal nuances that need clarification first, especially if you do not have the resources to pay a specialist in this area:

Who am I?
Am I my business?
Am I my product/service?
Am I my aspirations?
Am I my dreams?

Reflecting your business through branding challenges your clarity about your own identity at its deepest levels.

The branding moment is a great opportunity to test if you did a good job in planning phase, if the foundation and directions you set for yourself and for your business are strong and clear enough.

The branding concept is not wrapping your overall business strategy into a relevant visual message, it is the extraction of your uniqueness and core values from your strategy plan under the form of a simple set of visual messages and key defining elements.

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The way you positioned your business in the overall ocean of players and possibilities, offers you all the keywords for a unitary branding concept:

- ❖ the name of your company
- ❖ the URL of your company on the web
- ❖ the logo
- ❖ the slogan (your business tagline which can also be your unique value proposition)
- ❖ the website overall structure and graphic design
- ❖ the visuals for your online and offline presentations
- ❖ the nuances to apply when it comes to branding your products, services, promotions, events and campaigns

The way you brand your vision indicates your success probability.

The clarity of your own personal position in the sea of life directly reflects in the way you design and project your business image in the world.

We see today big brands facing profit issues just because today's generations of costumers do not really care about the brand. They care about the quality of service/product and a correct price.

You also see big brands losing ground on the background of globalization when no-name brands sell similar product at a much better price. We also see big companies with lousy branding and small companies with highly creative branding. For some, it makes a difference, for others it does not matter at all.

The main challenge during branding is to detach yourself from your business.

The creation of your branding concept is all about making complexity simple and clear.

My way to cut the clutter and allow clarity to step in is using the venue of **flash fiction**. I give myself challenging homework, like: wrap my life in 100 words, wrap my service description in 30 words. I take pieces from the business strategy and turn them into flash fiction. It is not easy, I warn you, but it does magic.

As a small business owner, it is highly probable you will change many times your approaches, your services and products you sell, while at the same time, you will have to secure your personal life and to struggle constantly with limitations of resources. You will have to adapt very often.

For these reasons, you cannot afford the luxury to keep changing your basics each time you are pivoting. Your brand design needs to be part of your map.

One secret to the right branding concept is to create a direct link between your values and visions and your business values and vision. Then, you need to find the way to reflect that link clearly in your branding concept, so it can mirror and project your essentials at all times.

Branding is not about the image, it is about what lies behind it. It is the mindset that lies at the core of your strategy. Everything else is details. Your basic script leads your way.

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If you look, for example, into LG branding history, you will learn something. Its original name was Gold Star. Back then, the founders wanted to save the Korean economy after the war through producing and consuming national goods. Gold Star is a great name for their purpose during that time. I am not a fan of how they rebranded themselves after that, as I feel their identity got blurred on the way.

I have the same feeling about many players. If you only look in the car industry, for example, there are no longer differences in the products designs. Before globalization, you could recognize a brand instantly by its product design, a symbol of branding in this industry. Now, they are all the same.

However, if you look at the top players, you will notice they put a great emphasis on the uniqueness of the design. And if you look who they are, you will also notice they are here for a very long time. Their uniqueness is a powerful force at the foundation of their strategy. No matter how many times their leaders change, or times or markets changed, it always rises above because it reflects the good leadership essentials.

At the end of the day, branding is valueless, if your business is not consistent and if it does not deliver the things you say it delivers. But if it does, be sure that no army of well branded competitors can go in front of you. Even if they manage to break through for a while, the better their branding, the worse the outcomes if they do not deliver.

Branding, like also marketing, can work for you or against you with the speed of light. It all depends on the correct report between quality and price. If you can also get involved more often in solving common good problems or in societal issues, that can only add more weight and value to your brand.

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STRATEGY

Module 3 | Selling To Generate New Costumers

More sales means more precision.

Happy costumers lead our sales. We must correctly identify them, reach them and connect with them. Being small players, we need to do one more thing: to turn transactions into relationships.

It sounds easy, but when you think that big companies pay loads of cash to access the right data and software to make sense of the realities, to make better decisions and to be able to design more precise sales and marketing strategies, you realize you do not afford such expenses too soon.

So, the question is: **How to be more creative? How can I improvise? How can I make scientifically smart guesses without being a scientist and without having the resources to follow the big trails?**

There is only one answer to this question and you already found it, if you respected the first rule: **invest in preparation**, in other words, if you did your homework in Module 1 | Planning your competitive advantage. Yes, nothing changed. All the answers are in the roots.

That answer is: **authenticity and consistency. It is what makes your strategies and tactics precise.**

Contrary to many marketing and branding believers, marketing and branding will not bring you more sales. Your authenticity and consistency will.

Of course, you need to invest time and some resources in making your voice heard, but not so much as you read on the web. In fact, you will be amazed how little you will spend on marketing with the right blend and right concepts of promotion strategies.

I give you an example of a fatal blend from my recent real estate industry history and how failing to do your homework in Module 1 affects you all the way, at every step, in all possible unfortunate ways, how it sets you for failure.

A competitor agent began a video presentation campaign for the properties he has in the portfolio of his small agency where he was also an owner. Great idea, considering the power of the visuals and of the video nowadays.

Because he fell into the trap of making savings, he gave up on hiring a producer to guide the video format and the video content. Instead, he chose to pay a small fortune on marketing ads, image quality and post-production, and, to get in return beautiful images with shitty content.

In the middle of the content he placed himself, instead of placing the property and to use himself as a venue to that property. So, he used properties as locations for his own bad show.

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This not very smart approach backlashed. People called. A lot. But not to buy the properties he *presented*, but to ask the contact details of the camera operator and video editor. This is a small example the deviated monumentally.

Now, a bigger example from a tv reality show production where I was the executive producer, a show that was broadcasted on prime time at a big tv station in our country. I was on operations flank and had no connection with the content side, but I could see how bad it will get from day one. I tried to rise a red flag, but I only attracted antipathies, so I minded my own business.

Such production, if successful in front of the audience, it turns into a huge cash machine.

The content team invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in high quality equipment and in script writers.

Being a reality show, putting all your emphasis on equipment and script writers will not lead you too far. Because it is a reality show and the whole point is to unlock and uplift the real content, not to produce fake one. They ended up creating false emotions and fake stories. A very poor content that totally lacked authenticity. The public felt it and left it after the first episode. The show was a massive failure. Indeed, it had a great quality image, but it was the content that needed to be sold, not the video cameras.

Evaluate correctly your sales capacity.

It will lead to a correct dimensioning of your marketing efforts and resources.

There is offline marketing and online marketing, and we must do both to sell. Alone, most of the times.

There is also an ocean of information that keeps growing from one day to another and tones of tips and tricks on how to sell faster, better and more. It gets suffocating and it absorbs all your time. More, if you start spending your money and time on this route, the outcomes are ridiculously and frustrating modest.

At the bottom of reality, things are much simpler.

Before starting to act upon sales, always keep in mind your capacity of sales, your actual possibilities. This will help you in the dynamics, in connecting and correctly balancing your sales capacity with the market request, but also your private life with your business life.

The digital/online marketing is the biggest challenge. Nowadays if we are not online, we hardly exist. The realm is vast and the info you need to know seems to be endless and an impossible mission.

In reality, it all gets down to the heart of the web: **content**.

The internet is a hungry monster.

To keep yourself at sight, you must feed it constantly with a blend of text, video, audio and visuals.

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The power of copywriting.

Copywriting. Now, the way you write is another factor that influences this process. Your storytelling skills. Most of the times, the best way to tell a story is by acting natural and relaxed, detached from what you think it's best.

It allows you to make better research on the topics you write about. This gives you objectivity and allows you to tell the story also from the viewer's perspective.

Copywriting helps you match the best features of your products and services with the most ardent needs of your costumers. From a wider perspective, it also allows you **to educate your clients** about the market and about your business.

It is essential to **turn your “looking for” clients into “ready-to-buy” clients.**

The tool to achieve this purpose is copywriting. You need clients ready to buy, willing to come back for more and happy to spread the word about it.

Daily writing for your business shapes your skills and turns you into a great pitcher, into a much better sales person. While you grow, it will all become your employees “training program” about the market and the business, about the way they should keep doing it when the time comes to delegate this task.

Your business presentations and brochures. A key factor in generating a sale now.

A very common thing I meet among business presentations is the lack of **market statistics** in key areas of high interest and relevance for the clients.

Numbers sell. Numbers help the clients to put things into perspective, to make their mind. They give them the information needed to make the choice in your favor from dozens of similar products and services.

The quality of your performance. Another guaranteed element for more sales is the quality of your service, but mostly the quality of your performance. I met not so qualitative products and services better sold due to the quality of the overall performance. Clients need to know they can count on you and trust you. If they trust you, they will trust anything you sell, and they will buy it.

The correct report between price and quality. Whatever you sell, make sure you will not price it with the value that you need, but with the correct value for its features and capabilities.

Fairness and good balance always attract. Naturally.

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SECTION II

LEADERSHIP

Module 4 | Resilience and Conquering New Territories

Resilience.

Smart enough to be lucky. There is this very clever and skillful ad that conquered my heart forever. *“Johnny Walker – The man who walked around the world”*.

...but he, and his family that followed him, were possessed by a fiery ambition, with the skill and intelligence to match.

Many people feel intrigued when I state that common sense is the platinum key for a fine-tuning leadership.

In fact, common sense is not so common, as Voltaire greatly put it. Common sense is a very refined form of intelligence. It is your spiritual DNA, the very foundation of yourself. Your software, and exactly like an application, it can be upgraded and why not, scaled.

Science shows that under certain circumstances our personality and character can suffer modifications, they can be altered or changed.

These two traits are the most elastic components of your solid part, but common sense is intelligence in its purest form, the basics of who you are. At its best, it gives clarity, humbleness and a healthy attitude. It gives equilibrium.

There is nothing as powerful and sexy as a balanced individual.

It is common sense you must bet on from a leadership perspective. It is what make people feel connected instantly with you. It is what inspires and motivates them. **It is what makes you a vital leader.**

There are two places where we can find knowledge:

- in the laboratory or on the benches of expensive schools;
- at the grassroots, in direct interactions with the mechanisms of life and markets, and with people of all breeds.

Both types of knowledge are necessary, but in many occasions, we cannot afford both. At least, not both at once.

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When you are on your own and there is nobody to hold your hand or to protect you and to invest in your development, you must work hard to win your living and you must learn on your own day by day.

Thanks to the open era which offers us the unique opportunity to access for free a variety of business and science materials, we can teach ourselves how to learn and we can do it continuously. Doing it long and smart enough, we can also start teaching, start inspiring and guiding each other. We can become smart enough to be lucky. This is the core of resilience in both familiar and unknown places.

From this perspective, there are two basic types of leaders in this world from the beginning of history: **Spartan Leaders** and **Scholar Leaders**. They should team-up or teach each other to become The Leader.

Spartans need to learn more, Scholars need to live more. **As small players, most of us are Spartan leaders. Action people.**

We spend most of our lives at the grassroots, where nobody gives us the first dollar and the mentorship we ideally need to succeed fast, where we must improvise on a constant basis to survive one more month. It is rough, but it is also an experience like no other, a knowledge that no superior school teaches it.

Spartans are emotional, led more by passion than by reason, are blunt and less technical. They cross through fire every day. It is exactly this fire that boosts the inner fire that gives them this extraordinary force to survive and find ways to move forward and overcome adversities in such tough circumstances, but this fire is also the one that makes them fall so often and so hard. They burn at all their ends.

Controlling this fire and learning when to hold it back and when to release it, is a great challenge and one of the keys to leadership success. At least down there, at the bottom of the pyramid where we are.

Spartan leaders are people with lava hearts. Their strength lies in their basic intelligence, in the force of their common sense. Their force is similar with the force of nature.

Scholars Leaders on the other hand are fascinating due to their refined knowledge. They know things from the books and from the lives of others. They are not so much action people. They are more like thinkers.

The 2007/2008 world crisis showed us all that books and other people stories are not enough to be a good enough leader.

They don't depend so much on their basic intelligence, on their inner fire and on the force of basic common sense because their knowledge pushed them faster in better positions, circles of influence and circumstances.

Scholars have a different kind of inner fire. They are less emotional and more reserved. Present time also shows that our world face incredible crisis in leadership and creativity zones. Scholars could not fill that gap. This crisis is nothing else but a chance for the Spartans to raise and for the Scholars to shape their action skills.

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These two types of leaders should always walk hand in hand and teach each other, learn from each other, no matter the dimension of the business. Their knowledge is complementary. They need each other.

As a small business owner, resilience is guaranteed by your basic intelligence and by some reflexes you must develop continuously to turn yourself into a "field general", to develop also your strategic side, your scholar side:

1) The major one is to not take anything personally. This one is the toughest one.

When a stressful situation happens, it happens to you and it affects you emotionally, physically and even mentally. Whatever, whoever or however happens, you must treat it with maximum detachment.

Imagine that life is like a highway full of cars with drivers. Your small business is your vehicle on this highway and you are the driver. Even though you are an excellent driver, at some point something happens. The nature, the random factors or someone else. Anything can happen, anytime!

Whether the cause of the accident is you, your closed ones or a stranger, the effect is the same. It doesn't matter what the intention was of the other side, all it matters is the state of facts.

You end up with a damaged car and even with a damage self. You will never be who you were. Still, you can become worse or better. A full focus to solutions is all that matters. Nothing else counts.

Now, you can go and fix your ship, you can go and replace the pieces with better ones ending with better functionalities, you can throw it or sell it and start over your driving adventure. The point is there are always ways out. There are always choices.

Science shows that statistically we cannot control 50% of the things that happen to us. But the great news is that we can control the other 50%. I would say the proportions are bigger in the things we cannot control department. Still, the principle applies.

By not taking anything personally, you protect yourself from deep frustrations, from nervous breakdowns, and depression, especially for the things that are out of our reach and understanding. You secure your clarity, you save your energy and vitality and you get the power to pivot and to redirect yourself to more learning, to new solutions, to new ways out. On short, to crisis exit doors.

It may happen to you like it happened to me.

To see no open doors available and no ways out for 7 years, to live an imprisoned kind of life for endless moments. By channeling all your energy to finding solutions, you may realize that also imprisonment teaches you something vital and has its own stories and joy in the package.

It teaches you patience, technique, it teaches you to be at your full potential whatever you must do. It teaches you how to build yourself exit doors. It teaches you to live in the present, to pay attention at the

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things that are truly valuable in life, it teaches you priceless things about yourself. All these teachings will make you a rocket once out. You may feel you lose time, but on the bigger equation of life, you save time and you win time.

What if something happens and all you can do is to sit on a chair facing a wall? Without knowing how many years you must endure that? Maybe it's till tomorrow or till next year, but it could be also for ten years.

What then? Ask yourself this question and play the actor, the one who survives by living someone else's life. The answers to this question helps you to position correctly and successfully towards any type of situation and it leads you to yourself and to spectacular ways out.

2) Are you madly in love with your business? Great! Let it go!

I don't mean to give up on your business, but to give up on your attachment to your business.

This is another tough one, as it means to give your best to something, to do it with your highest passion and commitment without allowing yourself to attach to it. You must be ready to let it all go at any given time. To secure your mobility, flexibility and clarity. To secure your surviving.

This technique protects your life and your identity. It protects you from a dangerous weakness which often becomes a source of failing and falling, the weakness that comes from a **confused identity**.

How can you give it all, remain complete and grow at the same time?

You and your life are not your business. Your business is not you and your life. Today you have one business, tomorrow you may have another one.

The letting go approach teaches you to separate the plans of your existence and to feed each, without separating them from each other. It helps you to thrive in all. At the same time, it helps you to not give your power over your life to something or someone else.

Not attaching yourself to the things you create or do keeps you safe when you cross through fire and through most challenging times. It doesn't mean you give up emotions and passion, it only means that you are their master and not vice-verse. It is you who control the game.

While you learn to not attach to people, things and processes, you become incredibly resilient. You can adapt very fast to all sorts of changes, you come to predict and feel the changes, and, you start to better anticipate and act, you become a talent navigator and a much better player. Because you are free. And freedom brings clarity.

On this process, from time to time, bad things and people continue to happen. It's part of life. It's inevitable. They'll hurt you, they'll broke your lava heart and they'll make you bleed. But they won't put you down anymore. In the worst-case scenario, they'll just slow you down.

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Another thing you will discover on this way is that you start feeling happiness unconditionally. You learn to take it as it comes and get the best out of it. You learn to live life one day at a time.

This technique helps you to accept your present condition to open to the knowledge that flows from it and to conquer it, to rise above it.

Living open in the open is a beautiful and terrifying thing. It teaches you to not force things, to live in your own rhythm, naturally. It teaches you stability and precision when everything else trembles and moves around.

Make sure that your business is not you and your life. Count on your basic intelligence, on your common sense, on the voice of your consciousness. Looking back, do you realize how much and how great you did? How far you got? What a long and twisted road you walked on? Count on that force, wisdom and intuition that guided you until here and now.

That's pure strategy. It comes from who you really are, someone much bigger than you can imagine. Remember you do not know what you do not know.

Conquering new territories

The first territories you must conquer are your own. It is your own limits and limitations you must acknowledge and overcome. Your darkest side.

The greatest leaders I know accepted the challenge of the truth, of the truth about themselves. Of the darkness, in their first episodes. Many started as smaller leader and ended up as significant ones.

Life is beautiful and hard, and from time to time it is also bad. Before seeing its beauty, we often let ourselves blinded or conquered by its hardness.

If you don't run away from yourself and if you accept your mirror through life, business and personal challenges, life has significant chances to also become beautiful, and maybe also easier or bearable from time to time.

Being hard is not the same with being bad. Hard is the natural state of life for the most of us. Bad things are a totally different story. Hard is just hard.

Acknowledging your vices, weaknesses, limits and limitations can be done by accepting the truth about yourself when you realize it. Conquering these territories happen by learning continuously and by listening.

The beautiful thing about this very personal process is that you conquer new territories on business level at the same time. One directly influences the other. Of course, you can conquer new territories without paying so much attention to your inner movements, but only to a point. In this scenario, the evolution is limited by your own choices, and your choices are limited by the level of growth you allowed.

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The more you open to yourself, the more you open to possibilities. The more attention you pay to your inner conquering process, the better chances there are for conquering exterior territories. There are existing possibilities you can see at the level of your present consciousness and possibilities you cannot see or achieve.

When you grow, the number of possibilities that you can see or achieve grow, and implicitly, also the number of chances to success grow. If you think about it, it's a fundamental logic in the middle. The more you become, the bigger your business becomes and the chances to success.

It may sound too motivational, but it's a truth I lived, and I can tell you 100% hesitation free that there are no shortcuts here.

We get better and better while we become great characters, the superheroes we dream to become.

As small business owners we don't have the support and tolerance that big leaders get from their mother-companies when they screw it. Whatever we do or decide wrong, we pay for it. It is us who must clean the mess.

Our only shot is to be vital leaders, that breed that makes people breath and feel understood. Being just a good leader is not enough for us, for our teams to thrive and for our families to feel secure and happy.

In our tribe, we only survive by being the best.

by Georgia Mihalcea

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LEADERSHIP

Module 5 | Building Your Team and Your Key Partnerships

Small business owners cannot afford a complex team. They are obliged to develop complex skills and to permanently broaden their horizons, to constantly learn to cover all aspects of their business, to keep it on track and grow.

Building Your Team

Theoretically, you should build a team. It is how it should be done. Good leaders do that. If they can afford it.

Great leaders let it go and allow the team to create itself naturally, organically, to attract the right people and people alike. Not clones, as many do.

They open themselves to possibilities and they embrace diversity, they don't perceive it as a threat, but as an opportunity. They are reachable, natural born listeners and they spread their message with never-ending passion, conviction and joy.

"People alike" and "Diversity" may seem a contradiction of terms. It is not. It is about people alike in the core, open and ready to team up with you, push the limits and cross the borders to achieve your common purpose. It is about people alike at a human nature level, at the basic common-sense level.

It is critical to build a team you can count on in the midst of fire. If for the big ones this means extreme situations, for small business owners it is how ordinary days look like. Every day is overwhelming and seldom you know how you'll overcome tomorrow. We are roses of Jericho.

To create strong and reliable foundations, we need to build our teams organically. I attract you, you attract another two, they attract another, and so on. We must allow ourselves the space and time to attract people alike.

Any skill can be learnt and developed in a fertile environment. We are like plants. If we receive water, light and a little attention, we bloom.

More than building you team is making your team grow.

Small business owners cannot afford a complex team. They are obliged to develop complex skills and to permanently broaden their horizons, to constantly learn in order to cover all aspects of their business, to keep it on the track and to grow.

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



Being overwhelmed with millions of things we must do daily and usually with the lack of sleep due to insufficient time to cover it all, self-development is a major challenge.

The lack of self-development leads to disconnecting our world from the world, and soon enough, it leads to failure, to an inability to connect problems with solutions.

If small business owners don't find the way to conquer this challenge for themselves, they propagate it further to their team. A team that doesn't have the space to grow becomes a less and less reliable team while the things become more and more complex. Naturally, it leads to suffocation.

It is critical to allow at least one hour a day for learning, reading and mapping opportunities for you and your team.

It should be a “law” in your business yard. Whether you do it as a team by going to networking events, workshops, training classes or just do it online through MOOC (Massive Online Courses or LMS (Learning Management Systems) platforms, you must do it.

Another way to keep yourself in good shape, tuned to the latest and future trends and well informed is also solving problems in open innovation platforms.

You can engage your team in this process and make a habit out of it. It will make you function much better, but most importantly you start developing a portfolio of solutions and premises for extra revenues. It's an incentive possibility. A beautiful and surprising one, in fact.

Being incentivized, the learning process and all the research you must do in to win a competition becomes a strong motivator.

Fortunately, open innovation is a great venue for self-development, collaboration and for bounding with people and potential partners alike. It is also a good venue for generating sales, as many seeking organizations launch also collaboration calls in their problem solving and innovation process.

No matter how busy it all gets, give a high priority to self-development for both you and your team. It is vital. In crisis, it is what breaks it or makes it.

Building Your Key Partnerships

The way you designed your strategy in the beginnings gives you a clear map on how to build your key partnerships, but mostly to attract them naturally.

Usually, partnerships are built on two considerations: **vision match** and **benefits exchange**.

Whenever you want to ask something from a potential partner, prepare also a fair offer in exchange. We tend to ask more and offer less. For this reason, we fail to team up with the partners we want the most.

by Georgia Mihalcea

“The universe gives you dreams because you can have them.”



Scan the partners you target and spot the areas where you can offer them something in return for their support or facilities. Entities and people team up in partnerships based on expectations like **common growth, prosperity reasons** and **objectives**.

To become attractive as a partner, you have to make sure you offer a competitive advantage in at least one of these zones:

- your products & services
- your marketing and advertising power
- your network
- your expertise

Whatever it is that comes at hand first, you need to build a vital point because that is what you'll sell first to make others willing to work and partner with you further.

Turn your vital point into numbers and opportunities for your partners to size the potential, to see things into perspective. Vital points can be anything from a popular web page or blog about something you know, to your core skills, your uniqueness.

There are two key areas where we usually need partners:

- *in the foundation zone:* for the things we do not have the expertise or budgets for;
- *in the development zone:* for growing our business through marketing and sales.

"Module 1 | Planning Your Competitive Advantage" puts the mark on it. Practically, it is you from the planning phase teaching you from this phase how it's best to do it. And it is you know improving the originals.

Whether you are a new business or an existing one, and whether you did this planning or not, doing it now is very important. It gives you all the keys you need, or it will teach you where to find them and where to look.

The Contract: everything gets down to it. It is a vital chapter.

Partnerships are like relationships. They can be happy ones or toxic and abusive ones. In life we get what we negotiate, what we can. It applies on both directions, for us and for our partners.

Since I began to apply the judges 'number one rule and frame of thinking – to not offer more than requested – my life changed substantially for the better. In the beginnings, I was tempted to offer more to get what I wanted now. It proved wrong, as I gave the partners a too big advantage over my business or myself. Now, I keep it tight. I negotiate everything. I put more emphasis on the preparation and planning phase. Then it all becomes technical. There is no room for turning around. The law that applies with high priority is the contract.

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



The contract is the law between sides. It's a universal rule, as long as it is designed inside the legal frame. It is what makes the difference between success and failure in most of the cases. Between to be or not to be.

I noticed that many small business owners face big problems because they rushed too fast into unbalanced contracts. Then, because they don't know how to use the contract tool into their favor in crisis times. The contract is a very sharp sword.

The essence of any partnership lies in the contract. The contract is the law you vote, and you sign for.

Make sure you are a precise law maker and the procedures are clear in your contracts. Don't keep it in general terms. It is what will save the day when things go wrong or confused, and they very often go wrong and confused.

It is not enough for the law to be on your side in bad times, it is the speed of justice that makes the whole difference. Justice systems are rigid and slow, and a trial can take forever, and it can ruin you financially, emotionally and physically.

The only way you can influence the system and speed it all up is by thinking at precise proceedings in your contracts for each clause, by turning them into numbers and exit ways. By doing this way, you don't let your whole cause and future in the hands of a stranger.

I have been there. Contracts are living creatures. The work you do in the Strategy phase teaches you everything about it. **Avoid letting others interpret your life and future. It can be devastating. Sign S.M.A.R.T. contracts.**

When you sign a contract, think at it this way: if one day, my partners will cross the line, how much of this contract is open to interpretation in a trial court? Which clauses are not clear? Which scenarios are not well enough defined? Are they SMART? (Specific-Measurable-Assignable -Realistic-Time-related). How do they correlate with each other?

Most people misinterpret justice. This happens because justice logic is different that daily life logic. It is not relative. Judges cannot interfere in the mutual agreements. They are technically limited to what you chose and signed for, and then, to what you ask for in the court of law.

If you didn't define well your terms, you get what's left and very often what's left is nothing. When you sign a contract, you sign for the future of yourself, of your life, of your business and of your people. A future that starts now when you sign. There is no turning back.

Many good businesses fail because of poor contracts, because of their lack of precision. Once the contract is signed, everything goes down to it. Everything. No judge can save you from yourself, from what you signed for. Make sure your partnerships are well framed.

by Georgia Mihalcea

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LEADERSHIP

Module 6 | Commanding Presence

There is no commanding presence as powerful as the humbleness and force that comes from the authenticity.

I meet very often the “terror” approach - an approach that's coming from desperation in my view, leaders who speculate the weaknesses from other people's lives (i.e. the need for a job) and they play the game on fears, frustrations and desperation cards.

It's the worst kind of approach and I've never seen it succeeding on the long run.

Lines like “if you don't like it, there is a crowd waiting at the gates” come from the failing paradigm that we all witnessed at 2007/2008 crisis. The entire system was based on fear and of lack of respect for the human factor. Fear of losing the job, the house, the car, the entire life.

In reality, you cannot replace with ease a good companion. It slows you down and it is costly in ways you often cannot predict.

As a small business owner, becoming a vital leader is what it takes. Your authenticity is mirrored in your strategy, in your branding, in your resilience and conquering new territories, in the way you build your team and partnerships, in the way you allow yourself to grow and to fulfil also your personal life.

Your integrity is the spine of your authenticity. Your moral values, your love for the law, the respect you practice for people and for the environment.

Your commanding presence is the child of your inner balance. It is the effect of who you are.

Your people should feel they team-up with you to reach their highest potential and to be safe. They expect precision and clarity from you, but they also expect protection. If they had your craziness to live life on your own, they would have chosen that. They don't want that. They want simplicity. A decent, stress free and peaceful life.

Your inner balance and integrity are strong and inspiring motivators to naturally make them take the risks next to you, to join you in your endeavors instead of choosing another.

The time spent in your business is over 50% of their life time. You must learn to make your people feel like home. You have to make them feel there is a sense in everything they do. They dedicate to your business growing in exchange for a fee or salary that is often modest in small businesses realm. Most of the times it is not about money, if the salary is correct.

by Georgia Mihalcea

“The universe gives you dreams because you can have them.”



As a small business owner, you cannot count on money to make your people thrive for your business and for your overall wellness. It's a losing card.

You must learn to touch their hearts. To make them overcome their fears, to make them strong in their weak spots. Your way of being and of doing things is what keeps their dreams alive and what makes them wish to come to work day by day for endless days. With joy, restlessness and happiness.

Business is a story with unclear ending. As a leader you wear many hats. Your own hat is the last that matters when you sign up for this role.

Work shouldn't feel like something your people want to escape from. It should feel as part of their lives and of their growing process. Like a vehicle to their own wellness.

Your business may be small, but this does not mean that your leadership couldn't be great.

As a leader you have many hats: your own hat, your business hat and others. Your own hat is the last that matters, though you must find a way to align them all. The thing that creates this alignment is your integrity. It is the card that guarantees smoothness and that makes all things to emerge, especially in those times when you don't know much about how things will end up.

To convince people to embrace with joy and passion such amount of uncertainty and difficulty, you must be clear in front of yourself that no matter what happens on the way, you will find a way out. You must commit to this kind of faith. It is a paradigm. A way of being in the core.

It is this kind of inner commitment that has the power to transcend your words and image and to naturally attract people on your side and make them give you their best.

Your commanding presence has nothing to do with commanding. It has everything to do with your genuineness. People always feel hesitations, second thoughts, unclear or hidden intentions. They won't follow you beyond the lines, if they don't feel you are straight in yourself. People always know.

You must train yourself to be unshakable in your message and in your beliefs. Everything there is beyond your words must be *aligned: your intentions, your motivations, your thoughts*.

You must be unshakable in your vision about you, your life and your business. Everything there is beyond your vision must be harmonized and *aligned: your heart, your mind, your spirit and your soul*.

These are the two equations that give you the natural force and give your vision the clarity, overall the precision you need to thrive, and the strength to overcome whatever comes on the way.

It is this kind of alignment that gives power to your command. Naturally. Not by forcing things, not by constraint, not by words. This inner alignment is what gives a leader charisma and a sort of unnatural power in times of doubt and crisis. **It is what makes you a superhero.**

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



SECTION III

CULTURE

Module 7 | Creating Great Company Culture

I started my business very early in life when things like company culture were abstract theories and when I didn't know what exactly I am doing and what the results will be.

I had no clue that I created a whole culture around myself until things went wrong and pushed us over board. Life was hard anyway and I couldn't imagine it could also become unfair. I knew nothing about life outside the ship, I didn't even know there is life outside life.

It was such a rough time that everything I wanted was to abandon everything, to run away and let everybody figuring out on their own what happened. Ghosting was my only thought. I felt I couldn't take it.

I didn't show it and I thought very hard about it for a while.

My next decisions were about to influence not only my entire life, but also the lives of the people who worked in the company, the lives of all my suppliers who expected a paycheck from us, and the lives of all the others who depended on them. In a very direct way.

The consciousness of this impact felt overwhelming.

At one fling, I didn't want to lead anything. I woke up being someone who is about to impact the destiny of other people just like the client who cut our head off did.

The difference between me and that client who became an opponent overnight was a fundamental one: the consciousness of the impact left a mark on me while in his case, it didn't. Maybe he also acknowledged it, but he didn't care about the consequences of his actions upon our lives and upon all the lives that were linked to ours.

Those were the days when I had to fundamentally choose who I am and what I stand for. Life challenged my core.

To take full responsibility for my role, especially for the unseen, unknown and unpredictable sides of it. Things I never experienced until then. My only goal until that point was to make as many sales as possible and to develop the company. It was never about becoming a film with protagonists, antagonists and superheroes. It was simple, straight forward and ordinary.

Overnight I woke up owing so much money that it could take at least a decade to make it.

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



And not in ordinary circumstances, but by taking risks I never dared to take and by making things I never thought I could or would do.

Just because one anonymous guy decided to cross all the lines by breaking the contract on the last minute, our entire life became a nightmare instantly. Everything we built, all my work in the last decade fell apart and turned into stones and dust. It all became hemorrhagic.

Can I run away from this nightmare? Where?

It was a moment when I could pack everything and run away on a nice island and start it all over. I could use the last money exactly for that, instead of starting to honor the worst paycheck of my life.

The perspective of spending my next 10 years in conditions worse than jail and without being able to see any horizon felt unbearable and unacceptable.

The frustration that my entire life was influenced by some irresponsible and unaware client made me suffocate with anger. I was furious like I have never been before.

But what felt more unbearable, unacceptable and suffocating was the littleness of these thoughts and emotions. I couldn't be so little, I said to myself. This couldn't be. Not in my own life.

How shall I live with myself from now on, if I ran away to save my own ass just because some idiot crushed us? Really, will that deep frustration and anger go away just because I go away? And if I go away, where my people will go and what kind of standard I set for them and for myself? How will I leave in peace with myself? How will I live?

I am not a coward.

If all I can do is being a pharisee, my worth is under zero and I have no room in the game, in any game. If I don't survive this, I won't survive anything. I don't want to live in a world with irresponsible people and run away. It's pure hell and I won't take it and won't be part of it. The only way to go is the roughest one. There are no shortcuts. That's it! Whatever will be, will be. God help us on this one.

It is when my own personal journey really started.

I came back to the office, I gathered my people and my suppliers, I told them how we stand and what is next, including the fact that I won't be able to pay them for an unknown time. I told them that no matter what happens, each cent I manage to recover and make, it will go into their accounts and I also told them it could last years to fully pay.

I gave them the choice to understand, to hate me, to judge me, to suit me, to leave or to stay. The falling began and that was the moment when they could jump off the boat, leave it and find something or someone better, somewhere else. Most of them stayed.

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



It was the beginning of my discovering the beauty of humanity and life itself. Something I only saw in movies.

We helped each other day by day with everything we could. At some point they gave up one by one, as it all became too rough to take it. I understood and tried to make them feel all right about it. In that situation each second, they offered me was an eternity, a priceless gift.

In time, only me and my sister remained left to finish the game and to clean the mess.

We ended it all up together. We passed through unbearable hardships, we hold each other back, my mother stepped in with her prayers and with everything she could do a mother. We learned continuously, and we did everything we had to do and stood in our power. No step backwards.

It took years to pay most of the debts and after one point nobody expected us to pay anymore. Everybody knew we lost our homes and everything. But we did. Each time we could, we did. And sometimes they cried. And sometimes we cried. Connections for a lifetime were born from this unexpected story.

In those moments I knew I made the right choice. Nothing could feel more fulfilling and better than that. No matter how hard it was, these kinds of moments gave us the power to continue and to hope that one day, our life will change, and everything will turn around, that one day we will manage to get something out of it.

I had no clue that by choosing to stick to my core values and by risking wasting my life at all its ends, a culture bloomed around myself. A culture of authenticity, of human nature beauty. All the things I dreamt about in the depths of my heart.

No business and no fortune can equal the value of these things. It is what you take with you when you leave this world, what follows you on the path of life and what inspires you on the way. It is what makes you rich. It is pure wealth.

The values of one company have nothing to do with statements on a website or business flyers. It is a way of being and acting. **Taking full responsibility for our roles it's the best we can do and the greatest culture we can teach.** Sometimes we must give up and let go to everything to protect our values. In those moments our worst fears turn on. No matter how terrifying these fears are, it is the only choice that has the force to keep us on track, to give us clarity and strength to find new ways out, solutions. To keep us away from the true failure, the one of not living life at our full potential.

“Life is too short to be little. Man is never so manly as when he feels deeply, acts boldly, and expresses himself with frankness and with fervor.” - Benjamin Disraeli

Our life changed eventually. Bit by bit. Subtly. Imperceptibly. We are still working on it. Looking back, though, we reached so far that we cannot see those horizons anymore.

by Georgia Mihalcea

“The universe gives you dreams because you can have them.”



CULTURE

Module 8 | The Value Of Simplicity

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”

Leonardo da Vinci.

Many quotes it, few have it, everyone can get to it.

In cinematography, the scriptwriting field has this mantra as central essence as they must create emotion and unforgettable stories through the composition of image, sound, light, and all the other elements. Literature is out of question. As the action in film happens now, present tense simple is the only tense they can use. Writing a script in that format makes you feel like a squeezed lemon.

They call this process of reaching simplicity in their storytelling “Kill your darlings” or “Cut the clutter”. It is a great exercise and challenge. It cuts out everything until all the seeds get out of it. It's pure surgery of self, of thoughts, of emotions and of words. At the end of the process, it survives only what matters.

Simplicity is very hard to achieve. You cannot achieve it just because you set a goal out of it. It is a process that requires daily practice. Eventually, it is a way of living. A mindset.

Simplicity was never so important as today because we were never exposed to such overwhelming and never-ending volume of information like today.

Simplicity is not just a principle anymore. It is a tool. A tool we have to master in order to get above the crowds. It is the straight and direct line between us (as transmitters) and our customers, employees and business partners (as receivers). If I look back and trace my evolution, simplicity came with time, with practice and experience. With the challenges I allowed to shape me. It is a never-ending process.

Reaching simplicity is not an easy or simple process. Paradoxically, it is a very complicated and complex one. It is about being very specific and clear. It challenges generalizations and literature. It challenges confusion.

In the strategy phase, simplicity is challenged the most. It is that phase that teaches you the most about simplicity and its power, that challenges you to simplicity all along the way.

I challenge myself always to define everything I must define in less than 100 words and long projects in less than 1 page.

This technique helps me a lot in keeping it all as simple, precise and clear as possible. To keep my practice going, I challenge myself to do the same with everything I read or see. To make short synopsis out of everything, on various tones and voices: books, films, science materials, anything.

It helps me a lot in getting the skills and speed needed for writing my daily articles and posts for content marketing, do my copywriting, write compelling strategies, presentations and solutions.

by Georgia Mihalcea

“The universe gives you dreams because you can have them.”



Simplicity is a craft and like any craft it demands practice. The more you practice, the more you fell in love with it and the sharper you become. Walking on this path it becomes also a way of being. But also, a very sharp and valuable skill and tool.

Simplicity is what gives your business force, speed and precision at the same time.

I leave you with an example. A poem I wrote during those times.

I dreamt

your love
for me
bloomed
in your
heart.

it warmly
melted
all my
walls,

it softly
lighted
all my
darkness,

it tenderly
woke
me
up.

and then
it took
my
breath
away.

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



CULTURE

Module 9 | Work-Life Balance And Stress Management

Work-Life balance is close to utopia in our world today, especially for small business owners. And stress management...that is more like a spiritual challenge nowadays. It takes a lot of breathing to constantly beat stress, burnout and all the depression and health problems that come from it.

The only way I managed to stay on track was to change my DNA thinking pattern. It may sound abstract, but it is not.

As small business owners we must do both the things we like and the things we don't like. The most stressful, energy and time consuming are the things we don't like, and/or we are not skilled enough to do them. Because our entire wellness depends on our performance in all aspects of our businesses, we are challenged to find pleasure and joy in all the things we have to do, especially in the ones we don't like at all.

It is not enough to do with passion only the things we like. It is vital to do with the same passion also the things we don't like. With this technique we start to master much more, to learn more, to get new skills and to end up being very good in areas that are not even our core areas.

When we train ourselves to become passionate about work and not for a certain work, it is when we give life-balance and stress management a completely different dimension.

I profoundly doubt that we can switch on and off like machines. Mapping opportunities wherever we go, including during vacations, it's a reflex for entrepreneurs. It's our nature. Restlessness is what keeps us going. As for our teams, we just have to be reasonable.

For small business owners balance is what circus performers do with balls. While they keep smiling to the public and moving in all directions, they must focus on not dropping the balls. We have to learn and to teach our team how to master juggling.

As small business owners we walk on very thin trembling wires. Each day has its own balance intervals when we can act upon. Some days offer only small dots when we can achieve that balance.

Balance is not a point or turning point, it is something very organic, it is never in the same place you left it, it always changes, and it always moves. Like a living entity. It is an everyday decision.

The primary balance we must focus on is our inner balance. It is that balance that balances all the other plans of our life. It is us who must decide to feed all the plans of our life on a daily basis. To give each Caesar what's Caesar's, when time comes.

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



It is this kind of balance we need to preach and teach further because no matter what storm comes, it is what makes us stand.

When we design the strategy of our business, we practically design also the strategy of our own self-development and personal life.

Planning our strategy is a moment when we design the software, the program for our success, when we set up the odds. The strategy leads to action, actions leads to more actions. The three plans of our life have to be in constant balance at all times, especially in the overwhelming times.

The factor that directly influences the quality of our performance in the balance and stress management areas is the clarity we have regarding the meaning of success and the emphasis we place on the things we value the most in our lives.

If the strategies we design for our businesses lead us to actions that estrange us from ourselves and from what matters to us most, then we must redesign them, go back to the roots and rethink our approaches. Otherwise, it all leads to alienation, to dissatisfaction, to an overall imbalance that inevitably leads to failure of all kinds.

There is never enough time to cover all aspect of our business and life. We must improvise constantly and find it. We must make room for everything that has value to us. Sometimes we can more, sometimes less. But it is critical to be than not to be at all.

Life is not about accumulating wealth, but about adding value, about enjoying the people we love and life more. About discovering, exploring, experimenting.

I wake each morning asking myself this question to not allow myself to forget the things closed to my heart in the torments of life: **What am I working for?**

Each time I stress myself out or something too pushy happens I ask myself the same question. It is a question that helps me reposition instantly, to calm and to slow down when that is the case.

Learning how to choose our battles, I believe it is the main key for stress control and a good life-work balance. Everything else is all about integration.

by Georgia Mihalcea

"The universe gives you dreams because you can have them."



Closing thoughts

from the opening of the book
XCode | Code of Winners

“Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.”
Potter Stewart

Vital Thing 1 | Make sure you have on your table the two Bibles that matter.

There are two Bibles that form your foundation, set your success rate and odds, and shape your transformations. Two ‘Holly Books’ that meet each other in all courts of law. The knowledge you find in them makes it or breaks in any circumstance, but mostly in challenging and crisis times.

Whatever your religion and/or faith is, make sure you read at least once the Holly Book that governs the place where you live. That is the Moral Code.

Wherever you live, make sure you know what your Constitution says. That is the Legal Code.

By having an idea about what teachings these two Holly Books offer, you gain vital powers: **the power to discern** and **the power to understand where morality and legality overlap and where they split ways**. You offer yourself a very powerful navigation tool kit: **a clear mind**.

A clear mind leads to clearer visions, strategies and tactics. To precise action.
It substantially improves the quality of your life and your success odds.

Try it and see it for yourself.

by Georgia Mihalcea

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