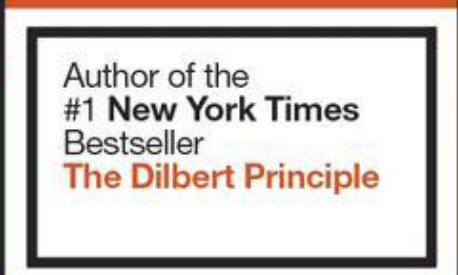




How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big

Kind of the Story
of My Life

Scott
Adams



Author of the
#1 **New York Times**
Bestseller
The Dilbert Principle





Scott Adams

HOW TO FAIL AT ALMOST EVERYTHING AND
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Adams is the creator of *Dilbert*, one of the most popular and widely distributed comic strips of the past quarter century. He has been a full-time cartoonist since 1995, after sixteen years as a technology worker for companies like Crocker National Bank and Pacific Bell. His many

bestsellers include *The Dilbert Principle* and *Dogbert's Top Secret Management Handbook*. He lives outside San Francisco.

HOW TO FAIL AT ALMOST EVERYTHING AND STILL WIN BIG

‘I’m not an expert in any of the topics I’ll discuss here. But I am a professional simplifier. My main job for the past few decades has been creating the *Dilbert* comic strip. Making comics is a process by which you strip out the unnecessary noise from a situation until all that is left is the absurd-yet-true core. A cartoonist has to accomplish that feat with as few as four short sentences. I’ve performed that trick nearly nine thousand times, sometimes successfully.

‘Later in this book I will describe a simplification that can inform all of the steps you take toward your own personal success. It’s the human equivalent of profit. It’s the one simple thing you can measure that will give clarity to all of the complicated decisions in your life.

‘I wish I could give you a surefire formula for success, but life doesn’t work that way. What I *can* do is describe a model that you can compare with your current way of doing things. The right answer for you might be some

combination of what you’re already doing and what you read here. You’re the best judge of what works for you, as long as you acquire that wisdom through pattern recognition, trial, and observation.

‘In summary, allow me to stipulate that if you think I’m full of crap on any particular idea or another, there’s a healthy chance you’re right. But being 100 percent right isn’t my goal. I’m presenting some new ways to think

about the process of finding happiness and success. Compare them with what you know, what you do, and what others suggest. Every person finds his or her own special formula.'

Introduction

If you're already as successful as you want to be, both personally and professionally, all you are likely to get from this book is a semientertaining tale about a guy who failed his way to success. But you might also notice some familiar patterns in my story that will give you confirmation (or confirmation bias) that your own success wasn't entirely luck. That's the sort of validation you can't get from your family and friends who see you as a hot mess.

This is the story of one person's unlikely success within the context of scores of embarrassing failures. If you're just starting your journey toward success—however you define it—or you're wondering what you've been

doing wrong until now, I expect you'll find some novel ideas here. Maybe the combination of what you know plus what I think I know will be enough to keep you out of the wood chipper.

Was my eventual success primarily a result of talent, luck, hard work, or an accidental just-right balance of each? All I know for sure is that I pursued a conscious strategy of managing my opportunities in a way that would make it easier for luck to find me. Did my strategy make a

difference, or is luck just luck, and everything else is just rationalization?

Honestly, I don't know. That's why I suggest you compare my story with the stories of other people who found success and see if you notice any patterns. That's exactly the process I have used since childhood, and either it worked for me or I simply got lucky. I'll never know which it was. If you pick up some ideas in this book and go on to great success, you won't know exactly what made the difference either. But you might think you do, and that reason will probably have something to do with your many levels of

awesomeness. That's how human brains work. But hey, maybe in your case it's true. In my case, I prefer to embrace my ignorance and leave it an open question.

This is not an advice book. If you've ever taken advice from a cartoonist, there's a good chance it didn't end well. For starters, it's hard to know when a cartoonist is being serious and when he or she is constructing an elaborate practical joke. I've crafted pranks that spanned years, sometimes when no one was in on the joke but me. Some of those pranks are still percolating. I have posed as other people online and even in person. I once wore a

professional disguise and infiltrated a high-level business meeting just to get material for the *Dilbert* comic strip.

On top of that, I'm getting paid to write this book, and we all know that money distorts truth like a hippo in a thong. And let's not forget I'm a stranger to most of you. It's never a good idea to trust strangers.

By any objective measure, I might be one of the least credible people on earth. I'm not too proud to admit that given a choice between saying what's true and saying what's funny, I'll take the path with the greatest

entertainment value.

I'm also not an expert at anything, including my own job. I draw like an inebriated howler monkey and my writing style falls somewhere between baffling and sophomoric. It's an ongoing mystery to me why I keep getting paid.

To make matters worse, there are inherent problems with the whole idea of one person giving advice to another in book form. One size doesn't fit all. I'd be surprised if there's anything in this book that makes sense for all people all the time.

This is a good time to skip ahead and give you a preview of the failing-toward-success topics that will follow. I do this because I anticipate your curiosity. You won't learn much from my abbreviated list, but if it gooses your interest it might give you a reason to finish the book.

Book Tease

1. Goals are for losers.
2. Your mind isn't magic. It's a moist computer you can program.
3. The most important metric to track is your personal energy.
4. Every skill you acquire doubles your odds of success.
5. Happiness is health plus freedom.
6. Luck can be managed, sort of.
7. Conquer shyness by being a huge phony (in a good way).
8. Fitness is the lever that moves the world.
9. Simplicity transforms ordinary into amazing.

If I do my job well, I won't need any credibility to pull this off. In chapters in which I refer to studies, I'll show my sources. I'll be like a race-car driver drafting off the credibility of people who earned it. (Good work, credible people!) But most of the time I'll be describing my personal experiences, and I promise those are real. I love a good practical joke, but a promise is a promise. Everything you read about my life in this book is accurate as far as I know.

When I was in my twenties, I didn't know anyone who could tell me how to become a cartoonist, how to write a book, or how to be successful in general. This was a big obstacle to my success. It seemed as if other people were benefiting greatly from the wisdom of their friends and families.

That's exactly the sort of inequality that pisses me off and motivates me at the same time. As a result, I've spent decades trying to figure out what works, and what doesn't, on the topic of success. If you want to be

successful, in just about any field, let me be your starting point. I'll describe over the course of this book a sort of template for success that can serve as

your launching pad. I won't always have the right formula for your specific situation, but I can help narrow your choices.

Before you decide whether anything I say in this book is useful, you need a system for sorting truth from rubbish. Most people think they have perfectly good bullshit detectors. But if that were the case, trial juries would always be unanimous, and we'd all have the same religious beliefs.

Realistically, most people have poor filters for sorting truth from fiction, and there's no objective way to know if you're particularly good at it or not.

Consider the people who routinely disagree with you. See how confident they look while being dead wrong? That's exactly how you look to them.

When it comes to any big or complicated question, humility is the only sensible point of view. Still, we mortals need to navigate our world as if we understood it. The alternative—acting randomly—would be absurd. To

minimize the feeling of absurdity in your life, I recommend using a specific system for sorting truth from fiction. The system will be useful for reading this book, and it could be even more important in your life. The system recognizes that there are at least six common ways to sort truth from fiction, and interestingly, each one is a complete train wreck.

The Six Filters for Truth

1. Personal experience (Human perceptions are iffy.)
 2. Experience of people you know (Even more unreliable.)
 3. Experts (They work for money, not truth.)
 4. Scientific studies (Correlation is not causation.)
 5. Common sense (A good way to be mistaken with complete confidence.)
 6. Pattern recognition (Patterns, coincidence, and personal bias look alike.)
- In our messy, flawed lives, the nearest we can get to truth is *consistency*.

Consistency is the bedrock of the scientific method. Scientists creep up on the truth by performing controlled experiments and attempting to observe consistent results. In your everyday, nonscientist life you do the same thing, but it's not as impressive, nor as reliable. For example, if every time you eat popcorn, one hour later you fart so hard that it inflates your socks, you can reasonably assume popcorn makes you gassy. It's not science, but it's still an entirely useful pattern. Consistency is the best marker of truth that we have, imperfect though it may be.

When seeking truth, your best bet is to look for confirmation on at least two of the dimensions I listed. For example, if a study indicates that eating nothing but chocolate cake is an excellent way to lose weight, but your friend who tries the diet just keeps getting fatter, you have two dimensions out of agreement. (Three if you count common sense.) That's a lack of consistency.

Once you have your bullshit filter working, think about how you begin the process of tackling any new and complicated problem. There's one step



you will *always do first* if it's available to you: You'll ask a smart friend how he or she tackled the same problem. A smart friend can save you loads of time and effort. Many of you have a smart friend or two already, and you are lucky to have them. But my observation is that a startling percentage of the adult population literally has no smart friends to help them in their quest for success and happiness.

I hereby deputize myself to be your smart(ish) friend in the form of this book. If you already have some smart friends, that's great. You can't have too many. What I bring to the party is a willingness to discuss a wide range

of success-related topics that your in-person friends might consider awkward dinner conversation.

I'm not an expert in any of the topics I'll discuss here. But I am a professional simplifier. My main job for the past few decades has been creating *Dilbert*. Making comics is a process by which you strip out the unnecessary noise from a situation until all that is left is the absurd-yet-true core. A cartoonist has to accomplish that feat with as few as four short sentences. I've performed that trick nearly nine thousand times, sometimes successfully.

The best example of the power of simplicity is capitalism. The central genius of capitalism is that all of its complexities, all of the differences across companies, all of the challenges, decisions, successes, and failures can be boiled down into one number: profits. That simplification allows capitalism to work. The underlying complexity still exists in business, but creating a clear and simple measure of progress makes capitalism possible.

No smart investor would buy stock in a company without knowing its past and projected profits. Profits tell management when they are doing something right and when they need to do something different. That one simplification—the idea of profit—sits atop the engine of capitalism and largely steers it, albeit sometimes in the wrong direction. You can debate the morality of viewing profits as the top priority in business, but you can't argue that it doesn't work. At most, you can argue that some companies take it too far. But that is the risk of any tool. A hammer is good only if you stop pounding after the nail is all the way in. Keep pounding and you break the wood.

Later in this book I will describe a simplification that can inform all of the steps you take toward your own personal success. It's the human

equivalent of profit. It's the one simple thing you can measure that will give clarity to all of the complicated decisions in your life. But that's later.

I wish I could give you a surefire formula for success, but life doesn't work that way. What I *can* do is describe a model that you can compare with your

current way of doing things. The right answer for you might be some combination of what you're already doing and what you read here.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Time I Was Crazy

In the spring of 2005 my doctor diagnosed me with a form of mental illness. He didn't use those exact words, or anything like them, but he did refer me to the in-house psychologist at Kaiser, my health-care

organization. I can take a hint.

The psychologist listened to my story and came to the same conclusion: crazy. But like my doctor, she didn't use the actual word. The psychologist suggested Valium and offered her educated guess that reducing my stress level might return me to some sort of normal behavior.

I declined the Valium because I didn't *feel* crazy. I didn't even feel all that stressed, or at least I didn't feel that way until a doctor and a psychologist agreed that I was probably losing my mind. I certainly

understood why both of these professionals leaned toward that diagnosis.

By any measure, my recent behavior *appeared* crazy, even to me.

My symptoms were that I had suddenly lost my ability to speak to human beings, even though I could speak normally while alone or when talking to my cat. My regular doctor and Kaiser's in-house specialists had

systematically eliminated each of the more likely causes for my speech problem. Allergies? Nope. Common respiratory problem? Nope. Acid

reflux? Nope. Tumors or polyps in my throat? Nope. Stroke? Nope.

Neurological problem? Nope. I was in seemingly perfect health, except that I had suddenly lost the ability to speak to other humans. I could speak normally to my cat. I could speak normally when alone. I could recite a poem. But on the phone I could barely squeeze out an intelligible sentence.

I had some sort of weird social laryngitis. Bottom line: crazy.

Insanity is always a reasonable diagnosis when you're dealing with writers and artists. Sometimes the only real difference between crazy people and artists is that artists write down what they imagine seeing. In the past few decades, hardly a week has gone by without a reader of my blog

questioning my mental health. I understand that; I've read my writing too.

The rational part of my brain knows that if enough people suggest I might be crazy, I need to consider the possibility.

I also have some craziness in my genes. My mother's father spent some time in the loony bin, or whatever it was called at the time. If I recall, he was the recipient of electroshock treatments. Apparently they didn't work, because my mother and grandmother later left him forever, taking nothing but the clothes on their backs, as he chased them down the road with a blunt object in his hands and, apparently, homicide on his mind. I couldn't rule out the possibility that I inherited whatever caused Grandpa to flip out.

Living as a presumptive crazy person was hard work. When I tried

speaking to humans, my vocal cords clenched involuntarily on certain consonants, giving the impression of a very bad cell-phone call that drops

every third syllable. Asking for a Diet Coke at a restaurant turned into “...

iet oke.” I usually ended up with a sympathetic look and a regular Coke. Or worse, the server would say, “I’m fine. Thanks for asking.” And I would get no beverage at all.

It was a confounding, maddening problem. I could sing fluently, albeit hideously, which was entirely normal for me. And I could recite memorized pieces without much of a hitch. But I couldn’t produce a normal, intelligible sentence in the context of a conversation.

Like a stutterer, I learned to avoid problem syllables that would trip me up. If I wanted gum, I knew it would come out as “... um,” so instead I would try a work-around, such as “I want the stuff you chew.” That

approach generally failed. People don’t expect riddles in their casual conversations, and no matter how clearly I laid out the clues, all I got in return was a puzzled expression and “Huh?”

Losing your ability to speak is obviously a social nightmare. It’s so surreal that you feel like a ghost in a crowded room. And I mean that

literally; it feels like an actual ghost experience, or at least how you imagine that might be. The loneliness was debilitating. Research shows that

loneliness damages the body in much the same way as aging. [1](#), [2](#) It sure felt

that way. Every day felt like losing a fight.

I learned that loneliness isn’t fixed by listening to other people talk. You can cure your loneliness only by doing the talking yourself and—most important—being heard. For the next three and a half years I experienced a total disconnect from normal life and a profound sense of aloneness, despite the love and support of family and friends. My quality of life was dipping below the point of being worth the effort.

In the early months of my voice problems I had a more immediate

problem than my loneliness. In addition to being a syndicated cartoonist for *Dilbert*, I was a highly paid professional speaker. And I had an event scheduled in a few weeks, the first since I'd lost my ability to talk. I couldn't predict whether my voice would work for my canned speech in the same way I could sing or repeat a poem. Would my vocal cords slam shut on stage and stay that way? Would I stand in front of a thousand people and yammer incomprehensibly?

I informed my client of the situation by e-mail and gave his organization a chance to cancel. They decided to forge ahead and take the risk. I agreed to take the chance too. Luckily for me, I don't feel embarrassment the way normal people do, which I'll discuss in an upcoming chapter. The prospect of humiliation in front of a thousand strangers, many of whom would likely be video recording the disaster, wasn't as much of a showstopper as you might think. It was worth the risk to me because I needed to know what would happen with my voice in that context. I needed to find out the pattern. Would my voice work if I presented a mostly memorized routine in front of a thousand people? There was only one way to find out.



CHAPTER TWO

The Day of the Talk

I'd given a hundred similar talks. On some level, every speaking event was the same: Sign the contract. Book a flight. Show up. Make small talk with the organizers. Hit the stage. Make people laugh. Sign some autographs.

Pose for pictures. Rush to a waiting car service. Ride to the airport. Fly home.

This time the small talk wasn't working. Backstage, minutes before I was introduced to a packed ballroom, the organizers tried to engage me in conversation. I did my best, but they couldn't decipher much of what I was trying to say. I whispered and gestured and used my work-around sentences, trying to assure them that things would be better onstage. But honestly, I

didn't know that to be true. And I could see the panic in their eyes. The odds were high that I would walk onstage and my throat would snap shut on every third syllable.

Experts say public speaking is one of the most terrifying things a person can do. That wasn't generally the case for me. I was well trained,

experienced, a natural ham, and my audiences were generally full of

friendly *Dilbert* lovers. But I had never before stood backstage waiting for an introduction while wondering if I possessed the ability to speak.

This was new.

As the host launched into my introduction, I climbed the metal steps to the side stage. The sound technicians fiddled with the mixer and prepared to go hot on my microphone. The event organizers faded into the backstage darkness. The audience was restless with anticipation. My introduction seemed to last forever.

I peeked out to see the audience, to get a feel for the room. These were my people: technical folks and office workers. I took a few deep breaths.

The moderator used a joke I'd supplied for my introduction and the audience laughed. They were primed and ready.

I fidgeted with my shirt to get it tucked in just right. I checked the microphone cord to make sure the excess was neatly hidden under my belt.

The moderator raised his voice for effect and bellowed, "*Please welcome the creator of Dilbert, Scott Adams!*" My heart pounded so hard that I could feel it in my shoes. I walked into the blinding glare of the stage lights. The audience went wild. They loved *Dilbert*, and by extension they were happy to see me. I crossed the stage and shook hands with the host. We made eye contact and nodded. Everything moved in slow motion. I walked toward the ELMO—a digital video device that would display my comics on the big

screens. I placed my materials on the table and took two steps to the side. I put my hands in front of me, fingertips together, as speakers do, while I absorbed the applause and converted it to positive energy. The energy felt good. I was jacked in to the audience, for better or worse.

In an instant, and right on schedule, my heartbeat dropped to a normal state, just as it had a hundred times before in front of a hundred other crowds. My training was kicking in, and with it came my confidence. In my mind I owned the audience, and they would have it no other way. They had come to surrender, in a sense. All I had to do was show them I knew it. And to do that, I needed to be able to speak.

I took two deep breaths and looked around. I smiled at the audience. I was happy to be there—genuinely happy. I was born for this. The stage always feels like home.

I waited for the applause to stop. And when it did, I waited a little longer, as I had learned. When you stand in front of an audience, your sensation of time is distorted. That's why inexperienced presenters speak too rapidly. I mentally adjusted my internal clock to match the audience's sense of timing. I also wanted them to wait in silence for a beat or two, to engage their curiosity. I knew from experience that audience members often

wonder what the creator of *Dilbert* will sound like. That day, I wondered the same thing.

At this point in my story, you might have the following question: What kind of idiot puts himself in a position to be humiliated in front of a thousand people?

It's a fair question. The answer is a long one. It will take this entire book to answer it right. The short answer is that over the years I have cultivated a unique relationship with failure. I invite it. I survive it. I appreciate it. And then I mug the shit out of it.

Failure always brings something valuable with it. I don't let it leave until I extract that value. I have a long history of profiting from failure. My