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## The Flip Side

by *Flip Flippen*

### Something Is Holding You Back

I learned everything I know from my clients. After seeing more than seventeen thousand patients through my practice as a psychotherapist and working with thousands of educators and many of the largest and most successful companies in the world, I had to learn *something*.



One thing I knew early on was that I wanted to spend my life helping people. After finishing graduate school I decided to work with underprivileged kids and street gangs, so I started an outpatient free clinic that served anyone who walked in the door. We were poor, but we were making a difference, and that was what mattered most. I started with an all-volunteer staff, then slowly added professionals to care for the more difficult needs that people brought to us.

Janice and Tony showed up within one week of each other at the clinic. They were both extremely likeable teenagers with a lot in common—they each came from dysfunctional, alcoholic families and grew up struggling to survive from day to day, well on the way to following in their families' footsteps. On the brink of destroying their lives before they had even begun, they enrolled for counseling.

Janice and Tony had more in common than just their backgrounds. They were energetic and curious about the world around them, demonstrating intellectual and creative abilities that had not been cultivated by the urban schools they attended. And they were both burdened by a profound lack of self-confidence—no surprise given the challenges they'd already faced, but heartbreaking nonetheless.

Ten years later Janice had completed college and law school and was working as a senior attorney at a university chancellor's office. Tony, on the other hand, was in prison on manslaughter charges stemming from a drug-related shoot-out.

### Searching for the Keys

The question haunted me like no other.

*What made the difference?*

Why was Janice able to embrace the opportunities presented to her, while Tony could not escape the disadvantages? In my years at the clinic, I saw countless cases like Janice's and Tony's—people of comparable backgrounds and abilities who attained

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dramatically different levels of success.

Within a few years I found my clinic and my home (so much for the “outpatient” part) overflowing with kids carrying pain my textbooks had never mentioned. My graduate-school classes had introduced them as case studies for dissection and analysis, not as real, breathing, bleeding human beings.

Despite my dedication and noble intentions, not all of them turned the corner. I have cried more than I would have imagined when I think of what became of some of them. Several young men and women were murdered within the first year that I worked in the clinic. All of the deaths were drug related, and each story echoed many of the same issues.

Yet a lot of the kids coming to the clinic had great potential. Many have been able to do tremendous things with their lives, while others have known nothing but struggle and disappointment. Some overcame major obstacles, while others, in almost identical situations, perpetuated the cycles of self-destruction—their progress simply stopped, as if something insurmountable was holding them back. For these kids the alternative to success was often prison, drug addiction, or even death. With the stakes that high, I couldn’t stand by and watch them go down without a fight. I had to discover why their lives could go only so far—and what, if anything, I could do to help them make their lives better.

I started down the road that has been my life’s journey for the past three and a half decades, and it turned out to be about much more than street kids and gang members. It turned out to be about business executives, and schoolteachers, and athletes, and *me*.

My work expanded quickly, putting me in regular contact with people who pursued excellence in a variety of fields—from salespeople trying to hit quotas to athletes trying to break world records—and their experiences revealed a common theme: *real success demands more than talent and ability*.

What is real success? It is far more than making money or getting to the top. It is about a person becoming EVERYTHING he or she can be. It’s being a great son or daughter, parent, boss, or employee. It’s becoming kind, and thoughtful, and taking initiative in life to make the world a better place. Being successful is being able to see past your private agenda and learning how to manage innate tendencies toward selfishness and greed to become more sensitive to others who share your journey.

Real success is being known as someone who improves the lives of those you touch—which also means that we strive to touch more because internally *we know that we can make a difference*.

So many people are only a fraction of what they can be, accomplishing so much less than their potential. They dream about doing more and being better, but something bigger than their talent seems to be holding them back with invisible ropes and heavy weights. I was driven to figure out what that “something” was. If I couldn’t find out what held people back, how could I ever hope to help them?

Soon after I committed to searching for answers, the critical questions turned inward, and I had to ask myself what was holding *me* back. I looked at my life and saw plenty of room for improvement—as a father, husband, friend, business owner, entrepreneur, and human being. I realized that if I could overcome the things blocking me from fully using my abilities, I would be miles ahead in the game of living.

As the clinic grew to be one of the larger mental-health clinics in Texas, I learned the hard way that some parents didn't care much, if anything, about their kids. Many of the children we saw were homeless, or abused, or simply ignored as they tried so desperately to find their place in life. In 1988 our foundation built a five-hundred-acre boys' ranch and, later, a ranch for girls. To this day that work continues, and I never cease to be amazed at how the kids flourish in the presence of "family" and parental care.

Over the next few years, I had the opportunity to work with many corporate executives through the Center for Executive Development at Texas A&M University, in College Station, Texas, where I live. These invitations came because others were hearing of the difference we were making in the lives of young people. The interim president of Texas A&M, Dr. Dean Gage, wanted to expose our work and way of thinking to corporate executives around the country. It was a tremendous time of growth and intellectual challenge for all of us. For one thing I learned that many corporate executives are a lot like enthusiastic kids. In fact, in some cases I couldn't find any differences at all, other than age! So often they grappled with many of the same issues; they just called them by different names. For example, in school you can be labeled ADD or ADHD, but then as an adult you are called an entrepreneur. Interesting how that works, isn't it?

### **Growing Greatness**

Meanwhile, my two boys were growing up, and I wanted them to do well, too. One night the boys got into an argument, and the next thing I knew, a lot of yelling was going on. When I confronted them about it, one of them said, "Well, he isn't doing what I told him to do!" And there you have it. The same thing I had heard a business executive say that very morning—*You're not doing what I told you to do!*—before he started yelling at his employees. Lack of self-control didn't work for Matthew and Micah, and it didn't work for the executive, either, who soon discovered he was approaching an unexpected career crisis. By addressing the issue with my boys early on, I was hedging my bets they would not be doing the same thing at forty years of age! As a parent I wanted my sons to be the best they could be, to play at the top of their game—not just in business, but in life. *I wanted to grow greatness in my children.*

Today they are partners in a thriving company they bought together. As they put it, "Pop, we are having the time of our life."

For several years I presented lectures to graduating seniors at Texas A&M. A typical presentation would start with a question. As I walked in I would ask, "Why are you here?" The response was a roomful of blank faces. Then a lone voice would invariably pipe up.

"Do you mean here at A&M, or here in the auditorium, or here on the earth? What are you talking about?"

"Here."

"To get a degree!"

"Why do you want a degree?"

"To get a job."

"Why do you want a job?"

"To buy a car!"

"Hmmm, let me see if I have this right. You came to Texas A&M four years ago and spent about one hundred thousand dollars so you could buy a car. *Is that right?*"

In that light the investment didn't seem like such a smart one.

Of course the next questions were the *real* ones: "What are you here for? What are your talents and gifts? What are your dreams? Why would you focus on a car rather than a purpose? What would happen if you lived your life to its fullest? *What could you become if you identified your greatest strengths and removed your worst constraints?*"

And that last question, my friend, is the question of your life.

I learned many years ago that it didn't matter how many hours I put in, or how hard I worked, I still couldn't get that much MORE out of my efforts. I was working as hard as I could at being my best, but I was still stuck. The growth I experienced was incremental—which was better than no growth at all—but it was not taking me where I wanted to go.

My clients and patients were being stifled by behaviors and thoughts that I believed they could and would change—if only they recognized them and the damage they were doing. They had plenty of talent and resources, but they let their attitudes and actions get in the way of using them. I also saw that specific behaviors were holding me back from becoming my best. I recognized the similarities between myself and other people who were struggling with their constraints: the distance runner who possessed great speed but lacked mental endurance, the promising junior executive who was too deferential to take charge, or the gifted young student who was simply too self-critical to see her true worth.

My goal was to identify the obstacles in our way and provide the skills to plow through them. I discovered that most limiting behaviors can be traced to a handful of distinct, measurable constraints. I began to develop strategies to release people from their constraints. This evolved into Overcoming Personal Constraints (OPC), the simple program I have used to help thousands of people from all walks of life.

## **Understanding the Secrets of Personal Success**

Consider again the stories of Janice and Tony, the teenagers who arrived at the clinic facing such similar challenges. Working with our counselors they both exhibited what we've come to recognize as signs of low self-confidence, such as difficulty initiating action and making decisions, and periods of crippling self-doubt. But there was one big difference. Tony also demonstrated a lack of self-control that had a profoundly destructive impact because it was coupled with his anger. In his case the results were devastating: too impulsive to rein in his aggression, Tony got caught up with a violent, drug-dealing crowd and eventually landed in prison.

Janice, on the other hand, had enough self-control to stick with an action plan. Following the confidence-building steps mapped out by her counselor, she bonded with a group of other kids who were willing to be supportive and share their lives with her. Janice learned that she wasn't the only one with problems and that being vulnerable could ultimately empower her. As she practiced simple esteem-building skills such as making eye contact, affirming others, and allowing herself to relax and smile more often, her self-confidence began to increase. She recognized that her behaviors were compromising her potential, and she committed herself to working hard for the brighter future she now felt she deserved. With her self-confidence on the mend, Janice's natural abilities were finally able to blossom. In Janice's words, "I began to taste success, and I wanted more of it."

### **Two Diverging Roads**

OPC is designed to help each of us enjoy the success that our self-defeating behaviors have hindered in our lives. Our personal constraints can define us only if we let them. When we ignore our constraints, we allow them to limit us; but when we identify and seek to overcome them, we dramatically improve our chances of success.

Daniel was a successful young executive with little ability to nurture others. About the time I began working with him, I was also hired to consult by a philanthropic organization run by a dynamic young executive named Peter. Interestingly, both men demonstrated remarkably similar strengths and constraints. Even though Peter ran a nonprofit organization, he had little desire to nurture others. How they handled their personal constraints, however, couldn't have been more different.

When I met with them individually, Daniel and Peter had the same reaction: each argued that his issues must not be that important or he wouldn't be so successful. In response I asked each man what he thought would happen if I brought in his wife or his closest associates. Would they agree with me? What would they say?

Daniel was quick to answer. "I guess they would tell you what I told them to tell you," he said jokingly.

Peter, on the other hand, was speechless, and as I watched him imagine the scenario, I could actually see tears well up in his eyes. "Oh, my gosh," he finally said, visibly struggling with the unpleasant realization of how others saw him. He looked at me with understanding. "I will change this," Peter said. "I promise."

That promise was the beginning of a wonderful new journey for Peter, and I was honored to lead him through each step of the process. First, he sat down with his top staff and asked for their honest feedback, resisting the impulse to argue, and requesting specific examples of any constraints that they agreed upon. He had deliberately planned the first meeting with his colleagues, rather than his wife, so he wouldn't be tempted to start a family argument. He came back with the examples they gave him, and we developed a personalized plan to address his constraints. He began to build affirming and nurturing behaviors into his life, giving genuinely supportive compliments to his staff and asking them how he could help them grow and be more successful.

Next, he asked his wife for her feedback. In response to her words, he made several changes. He cut out unnecessary travel, traded his golf weekends with his buddies for date nights with his wife, and committed to hugging her each time he left and returned. He chose his words more carefully, rather than giving in to his tendency to be critical, and began spending more time with his children. Within a few months he was back in my office with tears in his eyes once more—however, these were tears of joy. He told me the experience had changed his life. "Everything's different now. I'm in love with my wife, my children, and my life."

Daniel, however, has not fared so well. Rather than address his constraints, he instructed us to focus more on the people around him and in his organization. He knew that the people in the field, who didn't know him closely, would give a better report. They had such positive feelings about the organization's work that they felt good about Daniel, as well. But he didn't realize how little respect some of his key staff members had for him. As a result four of his top leaders have left the organization in the last year. As long as he can keep people coming up the ranks and filling in the slots, his organization will appear to be okay, but the constant departures are taking a toll on Daniel and on his firm. He is undermining his achievements by ignoring his constraints.

While everyone is on a life journey, not every traveler is willing to read the map to take the best route. You can choose to live life as you always have, or you can choose to identify and overcome what has held you back.

As a psychotherapist, I've learned what works—sometimes painfully. After seeing many thousands of patients over three and a half decades, building a nonprofit clinic and residential treatment facilities, building several successful privately held companies, having privileges at two psychiatric hospitals, and having clients that ranged from drug addicts to world-class athletes to corporate moguls running multinational companies, I've discovered five foundational principles that determine where a person goes with his or her life. I've also discovered the ten most deadly constraints that can absolutely destroy you if left unchecked.

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