Dr. Bob Nelson

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Editor's note: Bob Nelson, Ph.D., is President of Nelson Motivation Inc. and considered the leading advocate for employee recognition, motivation & engagement worldwide. He has sold over 5 million books on those topics, and has been featured extensively in the national media including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, CNN, CBS 60 Minutes, MSNBC, ABC, PBS and NPR about how best to motivate today's employees. He has presented on six continents and worked with 80% of the Fortune 500 companies. Other notable recognition includes:

- Named the #1 Management Guru in the World for 2024 by Global Gurus
- Distinguished Fellow, EBSCOlearning
- Senior Fellow, Human Capital for The Conference Board
- Top Thought Leader by the Best Practice Institute
- Leading Global Employee Engagement Influencer by EE Awards
- Leading Authority & "Consultant's Consultant" for Recognition & Rewards Consulting by HR Tech Outlook
- Top Ten Keynote Speaker by ManageHR
- One of the Most Influential People to Follow by peopleHum

Kindly brief us about the outset story of your career.

I couldn't have been successful without growing up in a loving, supportive family that instilled in me crucial values for success such as working & studying hard to make the most of life. Once in a high school English class I remember my teacher distributing papers we had written and she stopped at my desk, waived my paper over her head and said: "Best paper submitted in five classes!!" I felt a bit embarrassed, but I reread the paper to try to understand why she felt it was so special. This was perhaps my first inclination that I could write well. I went on to self-publish my first book at age 25 and have written 32 other books since, which in aggregate have sold over 5 million copies, as well as upwards of 1,000 articles, columns & blog posts. Also while in high school, although I was a bit introverted, I determined that it would be good if I could learn how to speak well, that is, in a logical, convincing manner, so I signed up for the debate club after school. The first time I debated, I was so nervous that I got sick to my stomach afterword. I later joined Toastmasters International, which gave me weekly practice in speaking both formally and spontaneously. I even helped to start a new Toastmasters Club when I worked in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Over my career, public speaking has served me well, and some years I have earned over $1 million in speaking fees alone.

Can you share a story that helps to define your success?

When I was attending graduate school in management, I took a class in Control Systems and one night my professor was lecturing about Informal Control Systems and mentioned positive reinforcement. He made an off-hand comment that “As important as this principle is, there really hasn't been much application in the world of business.” I said to myself: “I'm going to do something about that” and when I got home that evening I typed out a letter to a New York City publisher, which I sent the next day. I spent several weeks trying to get the CEO of that publisher on the phone and finally I could hear his assistant say “Would you talk to this guy? He keeps calling.”

Peter Workman, CEO of Workman Publishing took the phone and said: “What do you want?” I told him that I had recently sent him a letter about a book I wanted to publish… and he cut me off: “We won't respond to a letter. If you are serious about this book, you need to do a proposal as to why of the 70,000 books that are published this year, your book has got to be one of those, and why we're the ONLY publisher that could possibly get it right.” He concluded: “We receive 10,000 book proposals a year and publish 24 books.” CLICK.

Although this could have been the end of it, I thought to myself: “Game on! Time to get serious about a book proposal!” The next time I spoke to Peter Workman I was sitting across from him in his office in NYC, which I had paid my own way to get to. He opened my proposal to a sample spread I had created of the intended book and said: “THIS could work!” So he was sold on the project, but didn't know me from Adam and asked me about myself. I said I was working as an administrator for a management training & consulting firm, but that wasn't what I most wanted to do. Peter said: “What do you most want to do?” I replied: “Be a bestselling author.” I could see a twinkle in his eye and we had a deal!

As a successful leader, which three personal qualities do you believe contributed most to your success?

Having a zest for learning, a curiosity to experiment and a determination to never give up are three attributes that come to mind. When you stop learning, you stop growing and risk stagnating. If you constantly experiment, trying new things and pursuing new ideas, this also keeps your life full and exciting. In fact, in any given year I might pursue 3-5 major strategies for myself and my company, with the expectation that 2 or 3 of those will be successful, which has typically been the case.

And determination alone can help anyone be more successful! For example, after 1,001 Ways to Reward Employees was published, a CEO of a publicity firm in Los Angeles called me and wanted to take me out to lunch. He was impressed with the book, which had only been out a couple of months at the time and asked me “How many copies do you think it will sell?” Although I had never thought to ask that question, I immediately replied: “A million copies” to which he asked “Over what period of time?” and I replied “Three years.” I knew the book would sell at least a million copies because I was not going to rest until it had. It reached that milestone at 3-1/2 years, and is now in its 64th printing with over TWO million copies sold.

What are the aims and ideals that guide you as an individual and a professional?

I try hard to have an “abundancy” mindset vs. a “scarcity” mindset, that is, always looking for the positive in others, in opportunities and in the future. A person with a “scarcity” mindset tends to be negative, and often becomes cynical, and perhaps even bitter. They blame others for all the

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disappointments in their life and tend to take little or no responsibility for what happens to them. Of course, you can't control many if not most things in life—but you can always seek out the positive and in the process more good things are likely to happen to you!

What have been the toughest obstacles you faced in your career?

Fear of rejection; fear of failure. These fears are natural for anyone to have, but can permanently stop you in your tracks if you're not wary! As an example, for one summer while in college I sold books door-to-door, which provided a front-row seat in dealing with rejection. We used to practice slamming doors in each other's faces to get used to facing point-blank rejection. The first time that happened to me while I was selling, I walked to the curb, sat down, and cried. But I also got up and went on to the next house and knocked on the door! Of the 6,000 student salesman that worked selling books that summer, I was ranked #12 in just my first year selling.

What keeps you motivated to give your best every day?

One definition of success is “when preparation meets opportunity” and opportunities come to me almost daily, and I seek them out as well. Every day is a new adventure! My wife says if I ever want to earn more money, I either sit down and write or pick up the phone and start calling.

Who in your life inspires you the most? Is there a particular person who you are grateful for who helped get you to where you are?

I was blessed with parents that were both loving and supportive, setting a good example whenever possible. I've also been blessed with having worked with some incredible people. My first boss was Jim Reller, who taught me how to delegate effectively; after receiving my MBA from Berkeley I went to work for Ken Blanchard, co-author of The One Minute Manager, and we had ongoing discussions about what makes a book successful; I came to know the late, great Peter Drucker while working on my Ph.D. at the Drucker Graduate Management School in Los Angeles; and I became a personal coach for Marshall Goldsmith, ranked as the #1 best executive coach in the world. I learned so much from each of these gentlemen, that you could say I've stood on their shoulders to see farther than I would have without them in my life.

What would be your future endeavours and where do you see yourself in the near future?

At this stage in my career, I'm focused more on “giving back,” so I'm working more with companies to improve their Skills Training and Career Development programs to better help employees in their organizations to advance. (In my research I've found that “Career Growth & Development” is the #2 top motivator of employees after timely Recognition for work well done.)

I'm a Distinguished Fellow for EBSCOlearning one of the best providers of soft skills learning and “just-in-time" asynchronous online training called Accel5 that offers expert videos, articles and book summaries from over 50 subject matter experts. They have the most extensive offering of my expert content for anyone who's interested. For more specifics, http://ebscolearning.com/dr-bob-nelson.

I also serve as a volunteer coach for The Honor Foundation, helping elite military personnel (Seals, Rangers, Green Berets, etc.) transition to civilian life. My father was a career officer in the Air Force who served in three wars, so this is one way I pay tribute to him.

Your journey has been inspiring, and it sets a great example for aspiring leaders. What advice do you have for them?

You are most likely to become the type of person you most associate with, so choose your friends and associates carefully. Are they positive? Do you share mutual respect with them? Do they inspire you? Are they supportive of you? Likewise, if you go to work for a company, are those you work for and with supportive of you? Is this a job where you could learn & grow? This is a far more important to your long-term success than what any job pays.

For more information about Dr. Bob Nelson or to book him to present or consult for your organization see: https://www.drbobnelson.com or contact him directly at: bob@drbobnelson.com or by phone at 1-858-218-5049. You may obtain any of Dr. Bob's books at discounted prices via his online store at: https://www.nelson-motivation.com/bestsellers.html.