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Author
“Success Built to Last”
Interviewed by National Public Radio

Success Built to Last is a Wall St. Journal and BusinessWeek bestseller. It was in the Top 3 of Amazon’s Best Books of 2006. BusinessWeek, Leadership Now and 800 CEO Read selected the book for their best of 2006 rankings.

NPR: There are a lot of clichés that have to do with business. ‘This job is going to kill me’. ‘I get sick to my stomach every time I think about going to work’. There seems to be a relationship between happiness and a sense of fulfillment and mission at work and staying healthy.

MT: If you look in the dictionary it’s defined pretty much universally as money, fame and power. And yet when we ask people all over the world who are enduringly successful, who had been successful for decades at a time, people who were still alive, people who are healthy, people who are vibrant – they define it as making a difference and having impact. Having impact. Being engaged in something larger than yourself seems to have a very therapeutic effect. And we wonder why we’re feeling sick when we’ve taken all our toys away.

NPR: You call it the secret of life. There is a good chance, you feel there is something missing in life where you are on an incessant search for meaning until you make one simple choice. And what is that simple choice?

MT: Frances Hesselbein - she is 92 years old - she’s been making this choice for her whole life. And that is to do what matters to you and to focus on doing what you love rather than worrying about being loved.

NPR: The key to fulfillment she said is service and the key to leadership is not how to *do* but rather how to *be*. Serving others is part of the how to be character of a great leader.

MT: Yes. What we found in the research, talking to hundreds of enduringly successful people for Success Built to Last was that there are really two areas that people need to focus on in terms of finding success and making it endure. One is meaning. Finding something that is service that is bigger than yourself. But at the same time not forgetting that it also has to be something that you just love for its own sake even if you weren’t changing the world. That you’re just passionate about, that you love.

NPR: Robert Kiyosaki, author of Rich Dad, Poor Dad....should be Rich Me, Poor You... said, “We spend our health building our wealth. Then we desperately spend our wealth to hang on to our remaining health.” What does that mean?

MT: He’s talking about how we will totally martyr ourselves to that terribly pathetic and maybe pathological definition of success, of money, fame and power. And when you surrender to that, then you’re surrendering to something other than yourself or other than serving other people. It’s not that those are bad things. It’s just that they don’t make a good goal. They’re nice outcomes.

NPR: And you could die in the process.

MT: Exactly. So as you’re on this journey to answer somebody else’s definition of success you could kick it yourself.

NPR: Warren Buffet, II, the richest person in the world after Bill Gates, discovered perhaps that he couldn’t take it with him. That, as the old saying goes, I’ve never seen an armored car following a hearse. And he just donated the equivalent of 30 billion dollars to Mr. Gates’ foundation. Interesting enough, in the new philanthropy it’s all about health, health, health on the theory that if one has one’s health then education, as you call it success, would seem to emanate from that quality. Would you agree with that?

MT: Warren Buffet was one of the more amazing individuals to meet in this journey because he’s the kind of guy who tap dances to work. It’s no surprise that he is getting on in years and is as healthy and vibrant as he was 40 years ago because he loves what he does. He says most people pursue their work in a kind of backward way. He says that basically they’ll say, “I’ll do this for a few more years. I’ll work as hard as I can to get that objective. I’m surrendering to that goal. I’m sacrificing my health. I’m sacrificing my family. I’ve got to make this ... I can sacrifice everything to reach this goal. And I’m just killing myself.” And he says that’s like saving up sex for old age. Not a great idea. You’ve got to do it now. You’ve got to be engaged now, and every day needs to be a source of joy or there’s no way to be healed. There’s no way to stay healthy.

NPR: Our close personal friend Joseph Campbell said, “We must be willing to get rid of the life we’d planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us.” What do you think he means by that as it would relate to Success Built to Last?

MT: Success Built to Last is about creating a life that matters. And that’s what he’s talking about. He’s talking about how it’s so easy to get in a place where you may want to steal some other guy’s roadmap for wealth, fame or power. And when you do that you’re sacrificing your health, you’re sacrificing your well being, you’re sacrificing often relationships with other people. And if you can get back to what really matters to you and that you’re passionate about then you’ll be able to go for the long haul. That’s what

we were caring about. In Success Built to Last what we really differentiated was you can get success short term until death if you rail against trying to create success in the form of money, fame and power. But if you want it for the long term it's got to be about passion.

NPR: Patty Dunn, the former Global Chief Executive of Barclays Global Investors responded to a question from me after she was diagnosed with a malignant melanoma breast cancer. I asked her, "Did you take better care of others than you took of yourself?" And she very reluctantly nodded yes. She said, "I couldn't figure out how to be a CEO with less than 110 percent effort." And in the process she let her health deteriorate – a poor choice. Would you agree?

MT: One of the things that surprised us the most in Success Built to Last was that while successful people appear to be like these race horses with blinders on, sacrificing everything, themselves and others to achieve what they need to achieve, the people who can go for 30 or 40 years have what we call a portfolio of passions that extends to other things in your life that actually made them better at their work. If you can get in a place where you have a portfolio of passions, get off the main topic occasionally and pursue something for its own sake of joy. It's good for your health. It's actually good for your business because you'll be able to come back to that work fresh, and you'll be able to come back to that work often with insights you can't possibly get when you're just railing against the wind.

NPR: One of my favorite questions to ask a CEO – and I've asked this of everyone I've ever interviewed – when did you realize that you had achieved critical mass? When did you realize that from a purely financial standpoint that you did not have to work for a living? That you were financially secure? That it really wasn't about the money? And then the follow-up question, after we get over the fact that I'm rude, that I ask invasive questions

MT: That's a politically incorrect question, right?

NPR: I sandbag people, yes.

MT: It's easier to ask people about their sexual orientation than what kind of money they make, that's for sure.

NPR: Well, that's what I said to Representative Foley but he didn't listen. Once we get over that, the fact that people, a lot of people who work for a living in extraordinarily demanding jobs, don't have to work in the classic sense, then why do you do it? It's essentially because it's so exhilarating. When you don't have to work for a living for reasons of money it changes your entire orientation to the world.

NPR: And there are a lot of people who feel that their worth is measured by that along with other measurements they may have that they feel are significant. But it is fascinating to chat with people who really get their kicks from watching other people succeed. From extending their own capabilities through the capacities of others. I watched this great DVD that I bought with Frank Geary and what's his name? Pollack, the director.

MT: Right, Sydney.

NPR: Sydney Pollack. It's fascinating stuff. But here is a guy who finally realized that the way to be an effective artist, an effective creator was to put together an extraordinary team of people so he could really achieve his potential and eliminate a lot of the bullshit in life. Interesting enough, as a group, CEOs who have retired have always told me that what they missed most is what I call the seamless life. No bullshit. The car gets serviced. The laundry gets done. Cooking, shopping, all the frivolous stuff in life that we always spend so much time on, is all taken care of. All you have to do is be creative and work. I think that's very cool. And they know that. And that's what they really dig. Front row seats at the Olympics, stuff happens. It's wonderful. What a way to live. That's part of the appeal, isn't it?

MT: I think it is. I mean, we all ... it may be politically incorrect to say that the definition of success isn't money, fame and power – but that's power. And when you've got the fame, certainly position, you are able to have some leverage. Although most of these people have the resources to get all those things without needing to be CEO to do that. You know, when you have the resources then you can afford some nice tickets, you know, and laundry being done for you.

NPR: So what did you take away ultimately, bottom line, from the book? What's the big grand lesson that you picked up from all of this?

MT: You've got to define success your own way. After having visited with hundreds of the most enduringly successful people on the planet Earth, determining that the definition of success – money, fame and power – doesn't work for you. It is an outcome, a possible outcome, but it's not the cause of your life. It's not the purpose and passion of your life. So for me what I learned more than anything is that in order to have Success Built to Last you've got to create a life that matters to you. You uniquely. You've got to define this for yourself. And when you do that you're healthier, you're happier, you live for decades, you live to see the joy that you've sewn earlier in your life. And if you do that and you live with integrity around your passions, and always know the meaning behind those passions, then you're going to be a happy guy, or a happy woman for your whole life. That's really the secret to success.

Mark Thompson is coauthor of the international bestseller, Success Built to Last. He brings to every speaking engagement two decades of experience as a senior executive, board member, management coach, producer and investor in growing businesses. Mark helps your team embrace rapid change, ignite growth as leaders and engage with influential people who are driving the future of your brand. He has been a speaker at London Business School, Stanford University, U.C. Berkeley, The Economist and Fortune Magazine conferences, the New York Stock Exchange summits with The Churchill Club and Financial Executives Institute. He served on the Council of The Heartland Circle Thought Leaders Gatherings. At the World Economic Forum, he has served as a Lecturer/Member at their annual meetings in Davos, Switzerland.

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