

Excerpt
Make More, Worry Less by Wes
Moss

Chapter 14: Reminisce about the Future

One of the most interesting and revolutionary people I've ever talked to, Bob MacDonald, says the key to his success—or anyone else's—is the ability to reminisce about your future. It's a mantra he lives by and writes about in his fascinating books *Cheat to Win* (Paradon Publishing 2005) and *Beat the System* (Wiley 2007).

Most people, he explains, reminisce about memorable events in lives: their first kiss, the day they got married, or the birth of their first child. "And you reminisce in pictures. It's so vivid you can explain it to others and get them to understand it," Bob says. "Imagine how powerful you could be if you could reminisce about the *future* the way most people reminisce about the *past*."

Bob isn't talking about predicting the future in some kind of visionary way; he's talking about *making* the future. Most successful entrepreneurs, he says, have the ability to see in their minds what they want to accomplish, what they want to happen. For Bob, he saw himself heading the division of a large, successful company by the time he was 30—and being president by the time he was 40. And even though he saw himself working his way up in a large organization—not starting his own company—he always saw himself as an entrepreneur.

"You don't have to go and start Microsoft to be an entrepreneur," Bob says. "You can be an entrepreneur managing a gas station or managing a department in a large company."

Bob said all this to me in the first 5 minutes of our talk, and he embodies much of what I'm trying to get across in this book—that it's possible to have the best of both worlds. While still being part of corporate America, Bob was at the same time in charge of his own destiny—without the startup risks of having his own

business.

"The reason people want to be entrepreneurs is they want to control their lives," Bob says. "They want to have ownership of what happens to them. Many times where people aren't entrepreneurs they let others have control over their future, over their careers. If you allow that, you become bureaucratized, and other people control you."

After working for 10 years as an insurance agent in California, Bob saw that the path to the future he was reminiscing about—running his own division—would lead him to join the corporate world. So he took his first corporate job at age 32 as second vice president of marketing support at State Mutual. Even though he had a corporate title, Bob was determined to be unique. It was something he would swear by— and other people would swear at.

Starting from Scratch

In the staid, rigid culture of the financial services world, Bob knew he didn't fit in. First, he didn't have a college degree. Second, moving from Southern California to State Mutual's headquarters in Worcester, Massachusetts, Bob was an outsider from the West Coast in a world of Easterners where "out west" meant a trip to Buffalo. Instead of trying to fit in, he had another approach. "I had to go against the grain," Bob said. "I had to use entrepreneurial tactics within a large organization because that was the only thing that differentiated me from oilier people, the only thing that gave me a chance to be successful."

The problem at State Mutual, Bob found, was that most of the bright young staff were segregated from managers and executives. Anyone who entered the corporate offices encountered its rigid system, where executives sat in lavish offices at the center of the building, known as "the core," while everyone else sat in the surrounding cubicles. For most of the younger employees, the goal quickly became "to get into the core." Bob was different. He started in the core—in a lavish office with its own bathroom—but quickly wanted in get out.

Here's how he saw it: State Mutual's stuffy, structured system— where he felt so much an outsider—wasn't just getting in the way of his career aspirations. The rigid system was also getting in the way of teamwork and productivity at the

company. And as second vice president of marketing support, Bob wanted to make his team shine.

"I'm trying to build this marketing organization within the company, and I had this philosophy that the people who are working for me are the ones who are going to make me successful," Bob says. But resentment toward the core created tension that undermined teamwork between him and his staff. So Bob decided to challenge the whole "core" office system.

This is what I love about Bob's story: He shows simple ways to be entrepreneurial even in a large organization. Instead of going with what's always been done, you can look at your job and ask yourself, "What are the problems here and how can I solve them?" Bob saw one of the biggest problems in his staff was morale. People couldn't stay focused on day-to-day goals because they were obsessed with a demeaning culture that told them they weren't worthwhile unless they were a manager. So instead of keeping track of marketing goals, his staff just wanted to find a way to "get into the core."

Bob's first entrepreneurial action started out small: He moved into a cubicle alongside the rest of his staff of 20. "I'm not worried about offices," he told the other executives. "I'm trying to get this job done. I felt the best way to do this was to get people unified."

On the day Bob moved into his cubicle, someone jokingly moved a porta-john into the cubicle—as if to substitute for the office with a bathroom that he had just moved out of. Bob took it all in stride, laughed, and took a photo of the porta-john. He still has that photo today.

Bob could laugh because that simple gesture of moving out of the executive offices gave him the building blocks of his corporate career. First, he learned an important lesson about how to win the loyalty of his staff; after he joined them in the cubicles, his staff was proud to work for him and was willing to work hard. Second, he brought reality into line with his "reminiscing" about being head of his own division. Instead of being an outsider, Bob became a cult hero among the State Mutual staff. Everyone knew about Bob, even the dismayed executives who liked being separate from the staff. With notoriety and a strong team, Bob was on his way to being a leader.

Underestimating Obstacles

"If you can't be one of them, beat 'em," Bob tells me. He is in his 60s now, but the exuberance in his voice gives me a glimpse of how much he enjoyed bucking the system during his career. You may not have to be as much against the system as Bob, but his energy and the way he approaches obstacles are essential to an entrepreneurial mindset.

Not everyone in this book tells stories of bucking the system—with gusto—as much as Bob. In fact, some people—such as Mylle Magnum in Chapter 16, "Ask Without Asking"—are clearly team players who honor company traditions. But while Bob and Mylle seem like they take opposite approaches—one against corporate tradition, and the other embracing it—they have this in common: tackling obstacles with energy and optimism. Obstacles are for jumping over.

Here was Bob, sitting in his cubicle and working with his team to market a new insurance product called TLC, Total Life Coverage. And he was planning how to get his career moving. Bob had a team that was willing to work hard, thanks to his gesture of sitting among them. "They worked their asses off!" is how Bob puts it. He loved going to work, and he had fought against a system that other employees felt controlled by. But it was also becoming clear to him that State Mutual had a long line of people in front of him who wanted to be president. And even if he could do a great job marketing Total Life Coverage, he wasn't going to get to the top anytime soon.

Instead of cursing his fate—an outsider with no college degree—Bob leapt right over that obstacle. "I'd achieved a lot but wasn't going to be president," he says. "I knew I was going to have to go somewhere else."

So Bob set about a campaign to get more visibility within the insurance industry. He did this by going to conferences and conventions and speaking about the Total Life Coverage concept and by writing articles about it. Again, Bob didn't make the traditional step of contacting a headhunter and trying to chase after a new position. "It's like that old saying: 'When you're getting run out of town, get in the front and make it look like a parade,'" Bob says. "I wanted to make it look like *they* were chasing *me*."

Building Momentum—Heroically

Of course, Bob did get chased.

After only two and a half years at State Mutual, Bob was hired as chief marketing officer at ITT Life in Minneapolis. Although the company wasn't as stodgy as State Mutual, ITT was like most financial services and insurance companies at the time: pretty bureaucratic. "The only way that we could make ITT Life successful was by making it an entrepreneurial culture within a very bureaucratic system," Bob says.

His first innovation: Once each quarter, all 640 employees would go to a theatre in the buildings basement where they would be presented with the company's financial report. Not everyone liked that. "They said, 'Don't do this. People shouldn't have this kind of information. They should just be happy to have a job,'" Bob recalls. "I just ignored them. The thing with the bureaucrats is if you're successful, they have no power over you. Only when you fail do they have power."

And Bob didn't plan on failing.

"One of my philosophies is, you don't move up in a corporation by kissing the asses of the people above you, but by supporting the people you work with and allowing them to push you up," Bob says. So, still the cult hero, Bob kept up the financial meetings and other innovations aimed at uniting everyone in the company toward a common goal: getting a bigger chunk of the life insurance business.

At the time, 1977, ITT Life was "the dregs of the insurance business," as Bob describes it. They were outside the mainstream of the industry and made most of their money from long-term care, Medicare supplement policies, and cancer policies—things that Bob calls "scraps from the dinner table."

Bob's leadership style worked, and he achieved results. And the small, struggling company was a great place to rise to the top. As he provided results, he quickly moved up to chief marketing officer and then chief operating officer. Two and a half years after taking the job at ITT Life, Bob was president. (Two years ahead of his plan to be president by age 40.) It was the kind of fast movement that he couldn't have made at top-heavy State Mutual. Even though ITT Life was struggling, Bob saw it as an opportunity—in true entrepreneur style.

"My job was to turn the company around. Have it grow and

become much more successful," Bob says. So he rolled up his sleeves and started living the job he'd been reminiscing about all his life.

Taking the Next Leap

Even though Bob was president, ITT Life was just a small piece of a large conglomerate: ITT Holdings. The group owned several mostly unrelated businesses, such as Sheraton, Hartford Insurance, and Interstate Bakeries. ITT Life was under Hartford's management because it was in the same industry, but the relationship wasn't always in ITT's best interests; at least not as Bob saw it.

Even though he'd made his goal of president, Bob wanted to be president of something great, something successful. He wanted to change a company that wasn't even in the mainstream into a company that was a focal point of the life insurance industry.

His approach was classic: He made an enemy. And (his enemy was the insurance industry itself.

Back in the early 1980s, it was an open secret in the financial industry that whole life insurance wasn't a very good product any more. Many financial institutions and investment firms were selling more updated products. But within insurance companies whole life was still the Holy Grail. Bob likes to say that insurance companies were competing *with* each other, against investment firms and financial institutions. Bob was about to change that and have the insurance companies compete *against* each other.

So one morning in 1982, Bob stood up at a press conference and made an announcement that turned him into the "antichrist" of the insurance industry. "I announced that whole life insurance, the back bone of the insurance industry, was obsolete, out of date, and in fact, a consumer rip-off," Bob recalls. "We're going to stop selling it because we think it's anti-consumer, and we're going to see a different product."

Bob was bucking the system yet again.

He was even thrown out of an insurance industry association. Did he care? It doesn't sound like it. "Suddenly this company that no one knew about was getting front page stories in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, saying that whole life is

no good," Bob says. "Well, people outside the industry had been saying that for years. But when the president of a life insurance company comes out and says this product isn't good, it makes news."

All the personal attacks didn't bother Bob because he wasn't being dishonest. In fact, he figures the counter attacks showed that he was right. "The irony is the other insurance companies attacked what we were saying, not because we were wrong but because we said it. That just created more publicity. If someone is raving and raving and everyone ignores them, it goes away." So the more Bob and ITT Life were attacked, the better business became for ITT Life.

"Our insurance company started growing. It became highly recognizable. It was considered the leader of the revolution," Bob says.

Many people were probably surprised at this upstart, but Bob really wasn't. Early on in his career he had "reminisced" or envisioned himself at the helm of a successful company or division. A luxurious office didn't lull Bob into a false sense of complacency. He remained driven by the image of himself running a successful company. He's really not surprised that that's what happened.

After 7 years at the helm of ITT Life, Bob did eventually go on to start up his own insurance company (LifeUSA), grow it, and sell it. The last position he held was CEO of Allianz Life, a post he retired from in 2002. I think the way he jumped from mid-level management to upper-level shows the power of reminiscing about—and owning—your future. So go ahead and make some "memories" about the future you want for yourself. As Bob says: "*Make history, or you'll be history.*"

Think Big. Really Big!

Take a page from Bob McDonald's playbook and learn how he "reminisces about the future." He sums it up in these steps:

Write it down. The legendary Lou Holtz is the only coach in the history of college football to take six different teams to a bowl game, win five bowl games with different teams, and have four different college teams ranked in the final Top 20 poll--not to mention winning a national championship in 1998 while coaching the

Notre Dame Fighting Irish.

However, at the age of 28 he found himself unemployed, out of money, and completely dejected with life. After reading *The Magic of Thinking Big*, by David Schwartz, in 1966, he decided to write down all his wildest life goals. The goals included meeting the president and the pope, coaching Notre Dame football, winning a national championship, appearing on the Johnny Carson show, and hitting a hole-in-one. In total, Holtz wrote down 107 goals. Pretty ambitious for an unemployed 28-year-old.

Last time I checked, Holtz had completed 81 of his life goals—the pope, the president, Notre Dame, a national championship, and a pair of holes-in-one!

Visualize it. If you can see it, and believe it, it will come. Each night before you fall asleep, visualize your top three business or career goals. See them and go through them in your mind as if they have already happened.

Read about it. In the best selling book *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne, she and a vast array of leadership experts describe the power of belief and visualization and how they allow you to "attract" anything and everything you want. It's hard to argue with the results.

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