



**WANT TO 'JUST DO IT' ?**

**Here's how: Strategies for self-motivation** ▶▶

by **MARGARET WINCHELL MILLER**

# ONE THING

We have to do something. We have to do the best we know how at the moment. If it doesn't turn out right, we can modify it as we go along.

— Theodore Roosevelt

What do you really want? What's keeping you from going after it? Most of us could name a dozen things we want to accomplish and, if pressed, could also list as many reasons why we haven't gotten around to doing them. It's never too late to revive the spirit of enterprise you were born with. Here's how:

#### TAKE CHANCES

Dave Pottruck, author of *Clicks and Mortar* and President and Co-CEO of the Charles Schwab Corporation, attributes his strong sense of self-motivation and willingness to take chances to his parents' lifelong encouragement. "I had very little fear of failure as a child," he recalls. "I can't ever remember being criticized or made to feel bad for giving something my best shot."

Still, Pottruck learned the hard way that you can't win if you don't play. A missed opportunity to try out for the National Football League changed the course of his life.

"I was voted Most Valuable Player on my team at the University of Pennsylvania, and when I left college, my goal was to be a pro football player," Pottruck recalls. "As it turned out, I didn't get drafted into the NFL, but I did have an opportunity to try out as a free agent with the Miami Dolphins. I didn't do that. I went on to graduate school and got my MBA. Meanwhile, I learned that a fellow from Amherst I'd once played against got the same kind of letter from the Dolphins, tried out, and played for 10 years in the NFL, including two Super Bowls. He even played my position. I thought, 'That might have been me.'

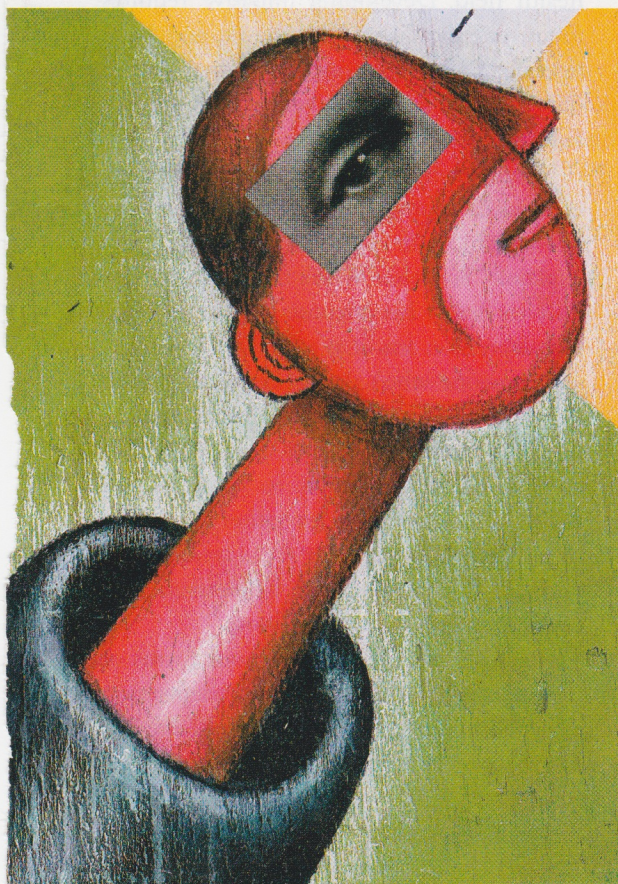
# IS SURE.

“The reason I didn’t go out as a free agent was that, despite my success in college, I felt that not being drafted meant that I wasn’t good enough. I told myself, if I go out as a free agent, I’ll work hard, I’ll train hard, and then I’ll be cut, so what’s the point? I’ll just go for the MBA. I rationalized my way out of trying.”

The moral of this story is: If you don’t show up, you have no chance of success. It marked a turning point in Pottruck’s life. “I decided that I’d never let that happen to me again,” he said. “I’d never fail as a result of not showing up. I’d make the effort. I didn’t want to look back and wonder what might have happened if I’d given something a chance and not been so afraid of failing.”

Pottruck believes that people need to have a vision and a sense of purpose in their lives, their families, and their companies. Recently he and his wife Emily partnered with The Community Revitalization Project in California to develop a foundation that has begun work in one of the most impoverished areas of San Francisco. Through this partnership, they hope to develop a model program that can be used to turn around disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout the country.

Initiative and change are the keys to revitalization, whether it’s your community or your character that needs fine-tuning. Pottruck explains that the San Francisco project helps people stop doing the things that are causing them to fail and start doing the



## TAPPING EMPLOYEE PASSION

Almost everyone has personal initiative and a work passion. The good news is that managers and supervisors can tap into that wealth. By creating an atmosphere in which employees are encouraged to discover and apply their own work passion, you can create an environment where staff members use their initiative for their own benefit, as well as that of your business:

- Allow employees to determine how and where they work best (the atmosphere in which they’re most effective) and establish an environment that’s conducive to efficiency
- Help them identify their individual aptitudes and strengths
- Encourage them to identify other unique or special skills and abilities that might be of use to the company but aren’t called out in the narrow confines of the standard job description.

When people become involved in creating the essential elements of their job, employee buy-in increases and the environment becomes one in which everyone is encouraged to discover and apply their own work passion.

(Adapted from writing by Don Burrows, President, Acorn Consulting, Inc., [www.AcornConsultingInc.com](http://www.AcornConsultingInc.com).)

Theodore Roosevelt also believed in thinking big, having a worthy cause, and learning to adapt.

*Adaptation is a key component in forward thinking and cultivating initiative.*

things that will allow them to succeed: getting off drugs, dressing with dignity, getting into a job, and developing a positive attitude about themselves. To move beyond despair, he says, you have to learn to take chances and approach the world believing you can succeed.

What does risk have to do with initiative? Everything, whether you're in the investment business or the equally risky business of life. You can't win if you don't play, and when you play there's always a chance you'll lose. Becoming a risk-taker means conquering your fear of failure and replacing it with the satisfaction that comes with putting forth your best effort.

#### IS IT POSSIBLE TO OVERDO IT?

Of course. "You don't want to be a courageous risk-taker who drives off a cliff," laughs Pottruck. "But if you want to excel, you can't play it safe. You'll be left behind."

#### THINK BIG

In 1961, Joe Roach was born to average-size parents. But he had the genetic irregularities that cause dwarfism and was diagnosed with hydrocephalus, or water on the brain. Doctors told his parents they couldn't stop the swelling in his head and he would have to be institutionalized.

They were wrong. Today, at 4' 7", Roach is a successful litigation lawyer and the married father of three children. Having served two terms on Houston's City Council, he's also the first dwarf ever to hold public office in a major city. A feisty man with a fierce sense of humor (and an Eagle Scout to boot), Roach is a role model for anyone who dares to blame lack of initiative on physical limitations. Attitude, he says, is everything.

Like Pottruck, Roach credits his parents for his spirit of resourcefulness. "They acknowledged my limitations but focused on my strengths," he says. "I tell my children the same thing my parents told me: You can do anything you want to do in life."

Roach and his wife Becky, along with their three adopted children — all born with

dwarfism — live in a brand new, standard-size house. "I want my kids to realize that they have to adapt to the world," he explains, "because it's not going to adapt to them."

Perspectives like Roach's are guaranteed to cultivate a spirit of initiative and self-confidence in his children. In fact, adaptation is a key component in forward-thinking. If you're looking for a jump start in this department, consider trying a program like Outward Bound ([www.outwardbound.org](http://www.outwardbound.org)), which exports people of all

ages to a world much bigger than they are and challenges them to adapt to it. Can't afford an excursion? Even a weekend of primitive camping on the beach or in the woods can give you the confidence to tackle the more manageable challenges that life in the workaday world brings.

#### SEEK HELP

If these steps seem too difficult to take, depression may be at the root of the problem, according to Sandra Lopez, Clinical Assistant Professor at the University of Houston, who has over 20 years of experience in the mental health field. Developing initiative requires focus, energy, direction, interest, and confidence. Lopez cautions that when one is depressed, these are the very things that are failing or absent in one's life.

"Depression is often characterized by lack of focus, lack of energy, lack of interest, poor self-esteem and lack of self-worth," she explains. "Someone who's trying unsuccessfully to define his purpose in life may find that depression sets in as a result of the struggle. Someone who's already depressed and in the process of trying to set goals may lack the initiative required to pursue them. In either case, when you're unable to set goals and follow through with plans, either personally or professionally, you may feel a tremendous sense of hopelessness and helplessness and begin to question your self-worth."

Research has identified various forms of treatments that help alleviate the depression that makes people feel stuck. Physical exercise can counter depressed moods. For some,



psychotherapy provides a useful way of moving out of emotional recession. Antidepressant medication, or a combination of therapy and antidepressants, have also proved successful in helping individuals regain focus and a sense of purpose.

Life is short. Don't be afraid to ask for help when it doesn't seem worth living.

#### CHANGE YOUR MIND

When someone is ill or facing death, it may seem that opportunities to exercise initiative are a thing of the past. But The Reverend Chuck Meyer, Episcopal priest and counselor to the bereaved, stresses that as long as we're alive, we can continue to make choices — about how we want to live, and how we want to die.

Although Meyer's training as a priest prepared him for his position as vice-president of operations at St. David's Medical Center in Austin, his acquaintance with illness, death, and dying is highly personal. His wife Debi has lived with recurrent leukemia since 1991; his first wife died suddenly at age 34.

Meyer speaks from experience when he admits that reaching out to someone who is sick can be daunting. "When in doubt, tell the truth," he counsels. "Admit your anxiety. Tell them you don't know what to say. Ask what would be helpful. Then pay attention."

Poor health and old age may threaten to sabotage a sense of resourcefulness, but they don't have to. Meyer's book, *Surviving Death: A Practical Guide to Caring for the Dying & Bereaved*, identifies opportunities for personal initiative even in the last phase of life. These include obtaining information, making decisions, and clarifying choices. While the answers are more imperative, taking initiative at this point means continuing to ask the same questions we've wrestled with all along: "What should I do? How should I do it? What are my options?" Meyer's experience is that dying people aren't always aware of their alternatives. "Exploring treatment options, writing wills, preparing medical directives and durable powers of attorney, making plans for organ donation, and communicating openly with physicians, caregivers, and loved ones can give patients and their families a sense of purpose and authority in their lives when other circumstances seem beyond their control," he says.

#### LIVE WITH ENTHUSIASM

Theodore Roosevelt held that "the credit belongs to the man who, at the best, knows the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Roosevelt's statement embodies the keys to a life distinguished by confidence, courage, and resourcefulness. Living with a spirit of initiative means, first of all, daring to try. Finding a worthy cause. Making the effort. Learning to adapt. Encouraging one another. Believing you can succeed. Thinking big. Asking for help. Changing your mind. No matter what your age or stage of life, one thing is certain: The best you have will be enough to get you started toward anywhere you want to go.

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*Writer Margaret Winchell Miller lives with enthusiasm in Houston, Texas.*

#### THE GOOD STUFF

Not everyone feels comfortable expressing new ideas, suggesting an unusual approach or proposing a novel solution to a problem. Yet success in business frequently hinges on staying ahead of the competition and initiating change. As a manager, how can you increase a spirit of individual initiative in your employees? Just as children thrive on being given permission to try and fail, a certain amount of latitude and "freedom to think outside the box" in the workplace fosters confidence and resourcefulness among those who collaborate. Creative genius Walt Disney valued innovative thinking and encouraged it among his staff. Biographer Bob Thomas recounts that Walt frequently stopped by the animators' offices after hours to see what they had accomplished during the day. Although the artists often left what they thought was their best work on the tables, sometimes they arrived the next morning to find drawings they had crumpled into the wastebaskets pinned on a storyboard with the notation: "Quit throwing the good stuff away!" Eager as he was for originality, Disney could empathize with the artists' reluctance to show off their more unusual ideas. A talented cartoonist in his own right, he'd been frustrated at an early age by teachers who mistook his creativity for rebelliousness. In the fourth grade, the class was instructed to sketch a bowl of flowers on the teacher's desk. When Walt drew human faces on the flowers and arms in place of leaves, he was scolded for not following the assignment.<sup>1</sup> But changing "the assignment," encouraging vision, and inviting others to share more of their "good stuff" is a move that will produce positive results in any environment.

<sup>1</sup>*Textual excerpts from Walt Disney: An American Original by Bob Thomas published by Hyperion.*