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Introduction

I KNOW WHY THIS BOOK is in your hands: you have that fire within—a compulsory desire to create something new. You want to step over the boundaries that surround your current daily existence, to break away from a career path clogged with people seeking the same predictable, safe, and unremarkable destination. Whether you're a cubicle worker, a small business owner, or a corporate leader, you want to enter new territory—to incubate ideas, break down the walls of risk aversion that surround you, and clear a trail toward something only you can imagine and achieve. I know the journey you're contemplating, because I've taken it, and I remember how little real, practical advice I could find to help me on my way. I didn't read entrepreneurial success stories and wish that I was the guy or gal who'd made it to the top. I wanted to know *how* they got there, so I could do it myself—to start something from nothing and realize success. I think that's what you want, too, and that's why I wrote this book.

A Brief Travel Story

So where did my journey take me?

Its ultimate destination is an attractive multistory office building situated in the very northern tip of the North Shore of Chicago, where I worked as the director of business development for a Fortune 100 company. Every day, after leaving my car in its secure garage, I would enter the cathedral-like granite and chrome foyer of this building and step into an oak-paneled elevator that delivered me to my upper-level floor and expansive office. I often spent the entire day there, making use of the penthouse level's state-of-the-art conference rooms and elegant cafeteria, enjoying its scenic views of the forested suburban landscape that surrounded me. As I gazed out at those views, I often thought of how different this corporate environment was from that of the company I founded, a company acquired by this behemoth back in 2006.

My surroundings there had been far more humble—*far* more humble. But the organizations shared one critical similarity: they both held row upon row of cubicles filled with people dreaming of one day rising to the top of their own organization, where they would enjoy the perks and lofty views of the C-suite class. And, in both organizations, few of those people would ever pursue their dreams. Blocked by fear and uncertainty, they would remain prisoners, unwilling to risk the security they had acquired for the adventure of discovering what they might create.

It's the same story in office buildings all across America, just as it was for me as I put in my time at a different Fortune 100 company back in 1989. It was my first job out of college, and I was working at the headquarters of a nationally known insurance organization—a big, safe company with great benefits and a promise of a long and predictable career. But I was restless. I began going to graduate school at night, and in 1993, with a freshly minted MBA in hand and a young wife and new baby at home, I struck off in a new direction, to become the plant manager of a small textile manufacturer in Chicago, a business that was unlike my previous employment experience in almost every way. I knew nothing about the company's industry, products, or customers, but I jumped in and hoped for the best. My first adventure! After seven weeks of dog-paddling in those foreign waters I was fired, giving me another totally new experience—my first career failure.

As it turned out, that pink slip became my golden ticket. I landed a job with a rapidly growing catalog-based company that provided computer technology products to the primary and secondary education market. Still stinging from my dismissal, I studied hard to learn everything I could about the organization's products, processes, competitors, customers, and marketplace. I rose quickly in a company that was experiencing its own fast-track growth during an unprecedented technology boom.

Eventually, I became one of the organization's top knowledge leaders. I discovered my strength in strategic thinking and innovation at this firm and was able to institute organizational restructuring and corporate partnerships that helped drive my company to the top of its industry. When an idea I had developed for expanding into previously untapped markets was rejected out of hand by the organization's leadership, I decided that I'd do it myself. I used every spare minute to form and launch my own company, initially maintaining my day job while I got my own operation up and running. I incorporated my new business in 1995, while still working both jobs.

I bootstrapped my way through the planning and startup phase, working out of a tiny basement office, writing a business plan, recruiting essential

personnel, and pulling together my product line—by the time my first catalog came out, I already had orders waiting. I quit my other job and turned my full attention to the new business. My company grew rapidly, as did my skills as an entrepreneur. I learned what worked to fuel the organization's success and what slowed its growth; when to grab on to the reins tightly and when to let go. By 1998, my startup had grown into a \$3 million business. We continued to grow through the storms of the first few years of the new century, reaching sales of \$25 million by 2005. But by then, I knew I was ready to move on. That leg of my journey was over.

This time, the company made my exit much easier. During a major round of layoffs in 2009, the home office was trimmed dramatically, and I was given the golden parachute that would mark the end of my adventure—I should say, *that* adventure. As I began mapping out my next entrepreneurial journey, I realized how much better prepared I was for the road ahead. I thought about how much I'd learned, how many other successful entrepreneurs I'd partnered with, and how many tools and techniques I'd mastered over the previous seventeen years. I began writing down my experiences and the insights and ideas they taught me. And that became the first step of my next journey.

Today, I'm an experienced entrepreneurial adventurer. I know the terrain; I know how to anticipate and avoid the pitfalls that can stop entrepreneurs dead in their tracks; I know how to pack for the journey, when to push on, and when to take a moment to re-energize. And because for most entrepreneurs the journey is the thing, I know how to tell when it's time to say good-bye to this destination and begin planning the next. In other words, I've mastered an important set of entrepreneurial skills that serve me well in just about every aspect of my life. I've formed another successful business, speaking in seminars and private consultations, sharing my entrepreneurial processes with individuals, organizational teams, and businesses of every kind. In *From Idea to Exit*, I've collected those ideas, practices, and processes together, to serve as your field guide to the entrepreneurial journey.

The *From Idea to Exit* Framework

We humans are born with the entrepreneurial spirit. By nature, we're curious, innovative, and driven to build and create. Those qualities are essential to our ongoing growth, happiness, and success in every aspect of our lives. Unfortunately, our entrepreneurial nature can become weighed down by other forces: our need for security, our reluctance to take risks, and our dwindling assurance that we can do the things we set out to do.

In *From Idea to Exit* I've drawn upon my own experiences and in-depth research to construct a framework of ideas and practices that will strengthen and sustain the entrepreneurial experience, no matter what shape it might take. In the chapters that follow, I'll outline proven methods for mastering the demands of your evolving enterprise, even as you build the skills of an evolving entrepreneur. I'll show you how, by channeling your innovative drive through the sound practices and logical, planned processes I describe in this book, you can achieve even your most daring goals.

I'll outline the critical ideas and practices that can guide you through the four main phases of the entrepreneurial journey and form a strong framework for its success:

- **Phase I—Idea.** Here, you incubate innovation, determine what form your entrepreneurship will take, and identify what obstacles you must overcome in order to launch your idea. In the chapters that describe this stage, I'll help you clearly face and evaluate the risks that most threaten you as you confront your unique Risk Box and the high-value assets you've locked within it. You'll also learn how to use your own feasibility study and plan to permeate the barriers formed by risk and design a road map that will guide you through the journey ahead, from startup to exit plan.
- **Phase II—Startup.** This is the most exhilarating—and demanding—stage of the entrepreneurial process. Here, you'll be wearing many hats and going all-in with total commitment to launch your innovative idea. Although the work involved in moving from idea to actuality can seem daunting, I'll show you how to break the passage down into logical, manageable steps, from planning (and adjusting) your goals to creating and executing a formal business plan, generating leads, and refining your evolving business priorities. I'll help you harness your urgency to innovate and transform it into an engine that will drive startup success.
- **Phase III—Running.** Now it's time to strip away those many hats you've been wearing and focus on leading your enterprise. In the chapters that describe this stage of the entrepreneurial journey, I'll guide you through the process of pulling together your management team, whether that means an in-house group of experts or an outside crew of trusted mentors and advisors. Here, you'll also learn important practices for building the valuation of your company; scaling its revenue, profitability, and processes; strengthening your organization's ongoing innovative energies; and mastering the

demands of fulfillment, cash flow, and an evolving organizational culture and bureaucracy.

- **Phase IV—Exit.** This is perhaps the most critical passage for any entrepreneur, and it is often the most overlooked. Every step you've taken up to this point in the journey has been in preparation for this ultimate destination—your exit plan. In the chapters that describe the Exit stage, I'll coach you through the process of maximizing your organization's value and offer calm, expert guidance through the emotional and financial minefield of finalizing the transaction. If you are leading an entrepreneurial project within a larger organization, I'll show you how to prepare to turn over the reins, so you can devote more of your time to incubating and staging your next idea. You'll learn how to recognize when it's time to go and why, and how to weigh and evaluate your exit options. From maximizing shareholder value to visualizing your "next" life, the chapters in this section of *From Idea to Exit* will give you the survival skills you need to bring this entrepreneurial journey to an end—and to begin planning the next.

Throughout the book, you'll find valuable formulas, checklists, exercises, and planning tools to help guide you through each of the defining moments of your entrepreneurial experience. From understanding your influences and evolution to recognizing and managing risk and assessing your opportunities, the information you gain here will help you apply your entrepreneurial spirit to everything you do—in both your personal and professional life.

So What Can This Book Do for You?

Although the view out my window has changed with each new journey, on one corner of my desk is taped a creased and torn square of paper that I've carried with me for many years—a page from a daily aphorisms calendar I received from my wife while I was still a struggling cubicle worker at my first real job after college. It reads, "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten." These words, which have appeared in many versions and in many places, symbolized my situation at that early point in my professional life. I was working, but it was that job—and the tall, thick walls of risk that surrounded it—that kept holding me back from my true passion. As I looked at this page back then, when it was crisp and new, I realized that I could continue to work for someone else and get what that effort could provide: a predictable salary, benefits, and a long, preordained trudge through regular, stepped promotions and advancement. I

also knew that would never be enough. I wanted to control my destiny and have the freedom to create my future.

When I tore off that day's calendar page with its insightful message, I decided to keep it with me through every step of the journey ahead. I taped it on every desk I had throughout my career. It was there on my crowded desktop when I was the president of the company I eventually founded, just as it was on the broad, polished surface of my desktop in that towering building on Chicago's North Shore. It has been my driver, even when I have had no clue as to just where it is that I want to go. I was an entrepreneur-in-waiting back when I first read this calendar page, just as you are now. As you turn these pages, I hope you'll be inspired to carry the stories, tools, and techniques they offer with you on your own journey, and use them as your expert guide to the road ahead.

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