

## **Ten Overlapping Principles of Successful Business and Killer Magic** **By Mitch Praver, The CEO Magician ([www.theceomagician.com](http://www.theceomagician.com))**

Eugene Burger said that “The House of Magic (the art of magic) has many rooms (genres)”. During the pandemic, I did a deep dive into the pros and cons of each of those rooms and what made magic impactful in those environments. The end result: I came to realize that there were success principles of killer magic across these different rooms – and also a surprising overlap with the principles of successful types of businesses.

How much overlap is there? Surprisingly, quite a lot:

### **#1 of 10: Importance of brand clarity, differentiation, perceived value**

In both magic and business, brand definition and differentiation are key ways for customers to understand the product-market fit. For magicians, creating a unique persona and style sets them apart, and will likely lead to more engaging and memorable performances, more loyal fans, word-of-mouth referrals, repeat bookings, and the ability to command premium prices.

In business, brand definition and differentiation also have a direct impact on product and service selection and development, marketing strategies, customer engagement, and overall decision-making. In magic, this also holds true: definition and differentiation of brand and performing persona helps to focus effect selection, scripting, routining, and performance style.

At Lifetime Television, as head of programming acquisition and scheduling, I recall when there were substantial fears across the organization that rebranding Lifetime from a general interest entertainment network to a narrower focus “Television for Women” would alienate men and the overall adult demographics. But, instead, the opposite

occurred. This brand refinement and differentiation boosted viewership dramatically, attracted top talent, drew advertisers, and increased distribution. This clear brand identity transformed Lifetime into a must-have network.

### **#2 of 10: Importance of creating an environment of collaboration and teamwork**

In business, a culture of effective collaboration and teamwork are vital to break down silos and achieve even greater success in less time. Some businesses are stronger with external collaboration than with internal collaboration. At National Geographic, as head of its digital businesses, I saw this firsthand. There was greater external (than internal) collaboration with scientists, explorers, and photographers which enhanced the brand's global reach and commitment to exploration and conservation and, as a result, uniqueness in the world.

In magic, creating a successful one-person show often involves a lot more than one person: it requires a team of 20-30+ individuals each with specialized talents, whether that be scriptwriting, choreography, directing, lighting, music, etc. Just check out the Playbills of "one man shows" like "Inner Circle", "Six Impossible Things", "Secret" and "In and of Itself". Collaboration might be the most important decision you make today to propel your magic to the next level.

### **#3 of 10 - Importance of turning challenges/failures into opportunities and knowing when to pivot**

Some of today's most iconic products originated from overcoming market challenges to meet new consumer needs: a) Corn Flakes - invented by Will Kellogg in 1894 for patients at the Battle Creek Sanitarium to aid digestion, it became a breakfast staple when patients requested it for their morning meals, b) Post-It Notes - in 1973, a 3M scientist developed a weak adhesive, initially deemed a failure. A junior developer found a use for it as removable bookmarks, leading to the birth of this successful product, and c) Play-Doh - originally a failed wallpaper cleaner, it was reimagined as a modeling compound for children and popularized by Captain Kangaroo, who turned it into a household name.

In magic, several notable magicians had to face significant personal challenges – but repurposed their magic to turn a challenge into an opportunity. Some of the magicians in this regard that I admire most are: a) Mahdi Gilbert, despite being born without hands or feet, Gilbert has become a renowned card magician, showing that nothing is impossible, b) Wayne Dobson, diagnosed with MS in 1988, Dobson reinvented his act to make magic happen in the minds of spectators, not just in his hands, c) Richard Turner, lost his sight at age 8 but, mastered card manipulation through sheer perseverance, becoming one of the greatest card mechanics in the world, and d) Rene Lavand, a popular and talented card magician in Argentina, only had one arm due to injury. But, that didn't stop Lavand from creating amazing magic – using only one hand.

#### **#4 of 10 - Importance of continually surprising and delighting customers**

The element of surprise and delight is highly valued by audiences, both in magic and business. It creates strong emotional connections and lasting impressions. In magic, surprise and delight are even more impactful than technical skill, comedy, or theatrics.

In business, the Ritz-Carlton Maui once surprised my wife, my then one-year-old son, Cole, and me with personalized touches – handwritten notes, a playpen filled with toys and stuffed animals, free Hawaain drinks for us tired parents and, in the bathtub, there were water toys and the hotel even cut out the letters C-O-L-E from colored sponges! These simple gestures surprised and delighted us – and we still remember 25 years later. It turns out that Apple models its superior retail customer service after Ritz-Carlton's methodology, training employees to create memorable experiences that foster brand loyalty.

#### **#5 of 10 - Importance of continuous improvement and innovation**

Continuous improvement and innovation give both businesses and magicians the ability to adapt to changing tastes and expectations. A culture of continuous improvement

becomes a key competitive advantage. Those companies that don't evolve...generally die. It's only a matter of time.

Embracing change and innovation keeps both magicians and businesses ahead of the curve. In magic, there was a "cutting edge" book in 1876 titled "Modern Magic". It featured the secrets of the latest and greatest tricks using cigarettes, brass pillboxes, lanterns, thimbles, top hats, silk foulards, bobby pins, coin purses, walking canes, and dollar bill magic – for the most part, less relevant, even outdated. If you'll permit me to predict the future: even 50 years from today, magic done with coinage, dollar bills, rabbits, walking canes, newspapers, phone books, cigarettes, lighters, or stage props designed to mutilate women (spikes, daggers, saws) or change them into animals may also be considered quaint, outdated, non-PC, out of fashion, maybe even no longer relevant at all.

#### **#6 of 10 - Importance of possessing characteristics of a magical CEO**

CEOs need to possess almost magical qualities to lead organizations: to engage, captivate, inspire, and create trust to unlock potential. Some qualities you're born with, while others you develop over time. Magical CEOs are visionaries. They see beyond the obvious, create environments where innovation flourishes, and lead their companies to places they never thought possible – much like magicians do with their audiences.

#### **#7 of 10: Importance of seeing both "inside" and "outside" the frame and trusting your senses**

For magicians and CEOs alike, avoiding blind spots requires seeing both "inside the frame" and "outside the frame." Solutions often lie "inside the frame," where current situations and limitations are evaluated. Magicians, for instance, refine their craft through meticulous attention to angles, direction, and misdirection.

However, true magic happens "outside the frame" — in the spectators' minds. It's about presence, communication, timing, and audience interaction. Similarly, successful CEOs

must trust their instincts and observations to make informed decisions, ensuring no potential failure is overlooked.

Just when you think you can trust your senses, enter “The Mandela Effect” which shows how our memory can deceive us, much like a well-executed magic trick. It can fool your eyes: a) The Monopoly man never had a monocle, b) there’s no cornucopia in the Fruit of the Loom logo, and c) Curious George never had a tail. It can fool your ears: a) In “Snow White,” the line is “Magic mirror on the wall,” not “Mirror mirror.”, b) the seven dwarves sing “Heigh ho, heigh ho, it’s home from work we go,” not “off to work.”, c) Sally Field never actually said at the Oscars, “You like me, You really like me!” and d) the famous “Casablanca” line often attributed to Humphrey Bogart, “Play it again, Sam” was never said by Bogart – but, instead, by co-star Ingrid Bergman.

It is not uncommon for audiences of feats of magic to exaggerate what they supposedly witnessed, leave out key facts, or even totally misremember what they saw. They saw Indian street performers who did feats of magic “too good to be true” – and that’s because they were! Take for example The Indian Rope Trick, where a rope seemingly rose by magic and a boy climbed it, only to disappear into thin air. Or, the snake charmer who appeared to hypnotize a snake by playing a flute – but, in reality, the snake followed the movement of the flute.

### **#8 of 10: Importance of embracing change**

The phrase “That’s the way it has always been” can doom both businesses and even magicians, too. Embracing change is important for long-term success and relevance. We all can remember market leaders that remained internally focused on their current, legacy business...and took their eyes off the evolving external market conditions: Netflix outpaced Blockbuster by focusing on video entertainment, not just rental tapes, b) Amazon overtook Borders by offering a vast online inventory, c) Airbnb disrupted Hilton by catering to the modern traveler’s need for authentic experiences.

At NPR, where I served as Chief Operating Officer, embracing change transformed the broadcaster's approach. By focusing on innovation and first-hand accounts during the Arab Spring, NPR turned social media into a two-way form of journalism, emphasizing the importance of looking both inside and outside the frame for success.

### **#9 of 10: Importance of mastering a toolbox of skills, and then simplifying the complexity**

In magic, mastery means having a diverse toolkit of sleights and techniques. Despite the hours spent perfecting these skills, a magician's true strength lies in eliminating unnecessary complexities – making them almost invisible to the customer. In business, too, if you want to generate customer loyalty, make a product that doesn't require a thick instruction manual.

### **#10 of 10: Importance of seizing missed opportunities**

Most magicians develop their passion young and never let it go. Worldwide, there are about 20,000-30,000 magicians, but only a small percentage perform professionally. Many successful people who had a passion for magic but never went pro include: Dick van Dyke, Johnny Carson, Steve Martin, Muhammad Ali, Dick Cavett, King Charles III, Paul McCartney, Orson Welles, Jason Sudeikis, President George H.W. Bush, and many others.

In business, missed opportunities quite are common. Around 20% of startups fail in the first year, and 70% fail within five years. They either ran out of cash, misjudged market conditions, misjudged consumer needs, or took too long to validate their place in the market. I encourage you to follow your passions, continue to evolve, innovate, and create unforgettable experiences for your audiences.

It's easier said than done to apply the implications of the ten success principles. Why? Because there are human tendencies many of us share that hold us back from being successful.

## **#1 of 5: The human tendency to stop thinking too soon**

Steve Jobs used to say, “When you start looking at a problem...and it seems really simple...then you don’t really understand the complexity of the problem. That’s where most people stop thinking”. Look what happened to the telephone industry in just the past 50 years: from rotary to touch-tone to cordless to wireless to smartphone. Look, how during this time, television transformed from the big three networks to cable TV, pay-per-view and digital streaming services.

As magicians, we too should keep asking Steve Jobs-like questions to make the impossible seem possible. In magic over the past 50 years, there’s been a dramatic evolution in mentalism since the time of The Great Alexander, The Man Who Knows. He claimed to know the secrets of audience members simply by staring into a crystal ball. But how? Why would a Caucasian-American from South Dakota named Claude Conlin need to wear an Indian turban? wear loose flowing robes of an ancient seer? wear Turkish shoes? stand on a thick rug of great design complexity and coloring? And, more importantly, if “Alexander” was really “The Man Who Knows”, why did he have 14 failed marriages!! Nowadays, mentalists make it possible to read a spectator’s mind: a) to ascertain their iPhone security password, b) to know what Google images they are thinking of, and c) to ask Siri to predict any card at any number.

## **#2 of 5 The human tendency to resist – rather than embrace – dynamic market change**

I think it was Charles Darwin who said, “It’s not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.” In magic or business, there are tendencies (either out of fear of the unfamiliar, laziness or blinders) to simply blurt out, “well, that’s the way it has always been” or “everybody knows you can’t do that” or “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”. These phrases tend to stop people from embracing change or achieving success. For me, it makes me want to show that the “impossible” can be “possible”.

Remember when: a) Kodak owned the photography market, but ignored the market trends toward digital photography to protect the film business?, or b) in video, it wasn't Blockbuster video, it was Netflix?, or c) in the encyclopedia business it wasn't Britannica, it was Wikipedia? or d) in the newspaper business, it wasn't your local newspaper, it was Google News? or e) in transactional payments, it wasn't coinage by The Mint, it was Venmo and Paypal?, or f) it wasn't the Bell Telephone, it was Apple? or g) in the mapping business, it wasn't Rand McNally, it was Waze?. These companies were in charge of their own fates – but refused to change.

In magic, there are people I speak with who refuse to try or experiment with new effects that make use of devious digital technologies or even use simple gaffs! They lose sight of the impact of the effect rather than the means.

### **#3 of 5 The human tendency not to be able to navigate inevitable blind spots**

In business, blind spots to customer needs and market changes usually occur when companies focus inward on corporate issues rather than focus externally on the evolving needs of customers and partners.

There also can be a company psychology or a psychology of a company, where companies tend to believe what they want to believe; objective data is seen through a subjective lens. Most of us remember a) Theranos, where CEO Elizabeth Holmes hid certain labs at the company from employees and diverted attention from the fact that the company's technology was bogus, b) Phillip Morris, where attention was diverted from customers about the horrible health hazards of cigarettes. The company just continued to market the cool lifestyle of cigarette use, or c) Enron, where the illusion was created that the company was successful...but was really \$30 billion in debt. It was a giant sham of corporate misdirection.

In magic, the psychology of magic is a relatively new field. to try to understand the technique magicians use to fool the eyes, fool the ears, fool the memory, and keep the secret moves in the blind spots. Think about how spectators often misremember

magical feats of wonder that are too good to be true (because they aren't). During wartime, magicians were hired to devise deceptions to fool the enemy and to – put it simply – win the war with magic.

#### **#4 of 5: The human tendency to see objective data through a subjective lens**

Companies that have achieved some level of success tend to focus on data that support current strategies, products or services. Unsupportive data tends to be filtered out so as not to negatively impact partners, customers, employees, upper management or the Board of Directors. This can have strong ramifications for diminishing company challenges and missing opportunities.

#### **#5 of 5: The human tendency to allow setbacks to set you back instead of pivoting to success**

There is importance in not allowing setbacks keep you down or make you believe that it can't be done. it's important to learn from these miscalculations for a potential pivot to success. many successful products started with failed products repurposed to solve a different consumer need for a more effective product-market fit. it's never too late; the missed opportunity might have well been too soon, ahead of the market. Sometimes the idea is too far ahead of the market wave; sometimes it misses the first wave. If you think the time is right, now's the time to try it.

So we can see, to achieve success in business or in magic, it's not as easy as following a simple checklist of success principles. It requires a combination of technical skill, contextual theory or analysis, proper implementation, methodical practice and improvement, persistence, and a success mindset that can accomplish almost anything you set your mind to.

About Mitch Praver

Mitch Praver, aka The CEO Magician ([www.theceomagician.com](http://www.theceomagician.com)) combines a passion for successful business with a passion for professional corporate magic to share some of the overlapping principles of both successful business and killer magic. He is a

successful C-level executive, who held leadership positions at some of the strongest established brands and early-stage companies in the U.S. including NPR, National Geographic, Discovery Channel, Verizon Fios, Lifetime Television, SundaySky, and DEVEXI. He helps businesses turn management offsites/retreats into memorable experiences to help companies trigger innovation ... think differently ... challenge what's possible ... and inspire the impossible.