

# Why Do Some People and Businesses Thrive?

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Historian David Landes recently asked that question about entire groups of people. He looked at entire nations, from Argentina to China, from Holland to Egypt. He pored over books, articles, and treatises whose titles filled sixty-seven pages of the bibliography to his book, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*.

Finally. Landes reached the conclusion and wrote his book, *Why do some people prosper?* The answer should resonate with all of us:

*“In this world, the optimists have it, not because they are always right, but because they are positive. Even when they are wrong they are positive, and that is the way of achievement, correction, improvement, and success. Educated, eye-open optimism pays.”*

The believers win. “They conquer,” as John Dryden said, “who believe they can.”

At about the time that Landes was finishing his book, David Pottruck and Terry Pearce were completing theirs - *Clicks and Mortar* - about another success. In less than twenty years, the authors asked, how did Charles Schwab evolve from a small discount brokerage to one of the world’s most esteemed financial services firms?

It’s in their hearts, the authors argued. More than great products, services, or prices, it was passion that propelled Charles Schwab-the man and his company - to greatness.

Yet another writer, historian Victor Hanson, was puzzled over a related question at this time. Hanson wondered how the United States, which had tried so hard to stay out of World War II, could fight so savagely once it entered? How could American men descend on Normandy like deadly hordes of predators”? Why are some groups so good at fighting, and some so poor?

In his *The Soul of Battle*, Hanson demonstrated that no army has fought well when its objective was to enslave or conquer people. But armies out to save it’s people or to liberate other - think of Patton’s race to the Rhine or Sherman’s rampage through Georgia – fought with astonishing passion and won.

*“Any activity that gives us a sense of purpose and accomplishment, that makes us feel glad to be alive, can help us care for and feed our brain,” writes Dr. John J. Ratey, a Harvard Medical school professor of psychiatry, in A User’s Guide to the Brain. “Passion heals.”*

Passion. Inflamed by belief and purpose - wins. Passion can be found in soul of battle and the heart of a great business. Experts in psychology even contend that passion is therapeutic. “It heals,” one has written.

Belief and passion: Is this any way to run a company? Give me process, a Gant chart, the hardened executive insists. Give me something concrete: Seven steps. Eight keys etc.

We try. But when we search for the hard nuggets that drive success, we don’t find hard nuggets. We find something softer. We find that the equation for success seems elusive, defying all intelligent efforts to reduce it to action steps.

Success, it seems, comes from that mysterious place called our souls.

Several years ago, representatives of seven famous investment banking firms flew into Seattle, Washington, to pitch Starbucks. Each firm made its pitch and impressed the audience so much that CEO Howard Schultz later reported that he couldn't tell the seven firms apart - except for one tiny thing.

"Commitment and passion. That was the difference," Schultz told *Fortune* magazine in 1997.

That's it? Passion? Not skill, acumen, talent, experience - *passion*?

If passion is the answer, what can a business - person do?

Can you "action item" belief and passion?

Can you write "Instill passion" in a business plan? Not without risking your job.

Could you write "Recruit optimists" into your human resources plan? Only at the same risk. And then what do you do - screen for employees who say they loved *Pygmalion* and identified with *Rocky*?

You could struggle for a lifetime to translate these intangibles into your plan. That's why so few companies soar. If every business could reduce belief and passion into easy steps, almost every business would have.

***"No sense being pessimistic.  
Wouldn't work anyway."  
- Bumper sticker***

What would managers do? Build something that fills you with passion, and then spread its flames into every corner of your business.

Belief and passion grow business. Clients love passionate people and passionate business because passion stimulates them. They feel it and feel better too. They know that passion produces great work.

Triumph then, belongs to those who believe. Belief steels us with the courage to take the risks that the faithless avoid, and to reap the rewards that follow - to realize that our lives grow in proportion to our courage.

So the next time two paths appear before you, avoid the one of least resistance, a path with no obstacles rarely leads anywhere. Take instead the path that runs along the cliff - that one, the one without any guard rails.

Take that path, and know that the exhilaration of the ride and the pride you feel when you reach the end will inspire you to take that path again and again.

And that experience, one day, will make you more money. But that experience, every day, will make you more fulfilled, more complete and more alive.

*-Harry Beckwith, October 1, 2002*