

THE PROVEN STRATEGY THAT WILL
LEAD TO THE **CAREER YOU LOVE**

*THE
PROXIMITY
PRINCIPLE*



K E N C O L E M A N

FOREWORD BY DAVE RAMSEY

INTRODUCTION



If it is to be, it is up to me.

—WILLIAM H. JOHNSEN

Every one of us wants to do work that matters—work that aligns with our personal values, talents, and passions. Work that makes a difference in the world. Yet 70 percent of employees report they are completely dissatisfied with their current work situation.¹ Seventy percent! That means millions of people face each day with zero desire or excitement about their jobs.

The question is: *Why?*

Why do millions of people go through the work week like zombies waiting for the weekend? Don't misunderstand. Those 70 percent aren't indifferent. Many

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are excellent employees. They just feel stuck in a job they are not passionate about. So why do so many people avoid taking that first step to a job they love? The problem is fear, pride, or plain old confusion about how to get started on their journey to a dream job.

I can tell you story after story of people who used to be part of that miserable 70 percent. Like my friend

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Jim, who spent forty years running his family furniture store instead of pursuing his passion for law. Or Rachel, who spent ten years in a banking career, daydreaming of being an event planner. And

Noah, a sales executive in his thirties who always wanted to coach high school football. All three of them had a longing to chase their dreams and do more.

I understand that feeling because I have been there.

SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE

For years I'd dreamed of being a broadcaster, but I was also one of the 70 percent—stuck in a job I didn't love.

Then one morning it hit me.

I was sitting on my back patio, coffee in hand, staring into the woods behind my house. I was lost. Completely frustrated. All I could think about was the distance be-

tween where I was and where I wanted to be. My mind was racing. *Is it too late to start? And if it isn't too late, what if I try and fail? What will my wife, family, and friends say if I quit my job to try something new? Is a broadcasting career even possible for me?* To be perfectly honest, I was ashamed that I hadn't made any progress toward my goal. I knew something had to change.

My Dream and My Dream Alone

Then it came to me. My dream was real to me and only me. I was fully expecting someone to just drop a broadcasting job in my lap. When that didn't happen, instead of doing something about it, I decided to throw myself a pity party. The truth is, no one in the entire world was sitting on their back patio, thinking about how they could help Ken Coleman get his dream job.

It was my dream and my dream alone.

That realization was both frightening and freeing. It was frightening because I knew if I was ever going to be a broadcaster, I was the only one who could make it happen. And it was freeing because it gave me just the kick in the butt I needed to stop feeling sorry for myself and start doing whatever it took to chase my dream.

Man, I was fired up! But I was also a little scared. Okay, *a lot* scared. Over the next few days as I was processing what had happened, I remembered a passage I read once by William Hutchison Murray that gave me the courage I needed to press on:

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Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way. I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets: Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it!²

Murray was a Scottish mountain climber in the 1930s. He became famous for winter climbing in the Western Highlands.³ Can you imagine the determination and skill it takes to climb mountains? In the *winter*? As I thought about Murray's words, I realized that chasing after your dream job is a lot like climbing a mountain. Both require bravery. Both require that you have the right people around to help you. Both require that you learn as you go. And ultimately, both require that you take one bold step at a time.

One Bold Step at a Time

That first step toward a dream job is *always* the scariest. My friend Jim took that first step by enrolling in law classes at the age of fifty-two. Rachel used her evenings to work as an intern at a local event company. And Noah went back to school and began volunteering after work with a local high school football team.

Me? I got off the patio and began pursuing my own dream job. It wasn't always easy. There were days—weeks even—when I felt scared, crazy, and hopeless. Other days I'd go from feeling excited and full of momentum to wondering if I should just give up. But I pressed on, and each step I took up the mountain got me in closer proximity to where I wanted to be. And now, seven years later, I've reached the summit! I'm the host of my very own daily radio show, *The Ken Coleman Show*, where I get to help other people make their dream job a reality.

Are you one of the 70 percent? Do you dread going to work each day because you're not passionate about your job? Are you looking up at your personal "Mount Everest," unsure of how to take the first step? The plan outlined in this book can help you reach the summit. And here's the exciting truth: finding opportunities to do what you love is as simple as getting around the right

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people and being in the right *places*. This is what I call The Proximity Principle.

So if you're ready to take that first bold step, let's begin it now.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE PROXIMITY PRINCIPLE?



The first step toward success is taken when you refuse to be a captive of the environment in which you first find yourself.

—MARK CAINE

Let's talk about proximity for a minute. The word *proximity* simply means to be near or close to something. When you are closer to something, it is often easier to access that thing, isn't it? That's not a hard concept. It isn't rocket science. It's actually common sense. It's just that common sense isn't so common.

And when you're far away from where you want to be, it makes things more difficult and challenging, right? I

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experienced this that morning on my patio. I was looking at a mountain without a plan for how to get to the top. I felt stuck in a job I didn't love, and the distance between my reality and my dream of becoming a broadcaster seemed insurmountable. But as soon as I realized no one was going to just hand me a radio show, I knew the first step was up to me. So I started brainstorming ways to get closer to my dream.

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In the introduction, I said that finding opportunities to do what you love is as simple as getting around the right *people* and being in the right *places*. That's The Proximity Principle. In order to do what you want to do, you have to find the *people* who are doing it and spend time in the *places* where it's happening. My first step, then, was to think about the personal connections I already had in the industry. I'd recently heard about a new cutting-edge thing called podcasting, and I was eager to try it out. This was back when the first iPods had just hit the market. Very few companies had even heard the term *podcasting*, and they certainly weren't putting money into it. I knew I was pretty good on a mic, and starting a podcast was the perfect entry point into a radio show. So I went to a leadership training company in my hometown in Georgia called Catalyst. Why? Because I already knew some of the people

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who worked there. I was using some of the relationships I had already developed to try to get my foot in the door. I told these folks about this new thing called *podcasting*—and even cut out an article from a technology magazine to show them that it was a real thing!

Because the guys at Catalyst knew and trusted me, they realized there was very little risk involved for them and possibly some potential upside, so they allowed me to launch a podcast. Now this is where it gets good: the *place*. The only space they had available for me to record in was a five foot by five foot sound booth in a warehouse.

And I'm being generous when I say "sound booth." You would almost have to see it to believe it. It didn't even have air conditioning. Have you ever experienced a summer in Georgia? Let me tell you, the humidity and heat take your breath away the second you walk outside. But that didn't matter to me because being in that sound booth—no matter how small and stuffy—meant I was on the right path.

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Practicing The Proximity Principle

When I moved into that cramped sound booth, I was nervous and excited. I was also short on equipment,

expertise, and experience. But I had created my own broadcasting opportunity, and I believed it would work. It did, but it wasn't as glamorous as I had envisioned. I sat down in front of the mic to record my first leadership podcast, and with each word I spoke, my breath pumped that tiny room with heat. I wish I was joking. Within five minutes I was drenched in sweat! It certainly didn't feel like I had landed my dream job, but I knew it was a start.

I wince when I think back on those podcasts today. It's embarrassing! I had no idea what I was doing, yet somehow—I guess because it was one of the first leadership podcasts out there—I actually had a few listeners. But here's what's more important: that sound booth gave me a chance to do something I was passionate about and gain some real experience in the field I was pursuing. That's what proximity will do for you.

My start-up podcast may not have been at the top of the charts, but as my talent and passion began to intersect, the guys at Catalyst took notice and gave me the chance to emcee their live leadership events. I was so grateful for this opportunity, but, man, I felt like a hot dog in a steak house! I got to interview the famous football coach Tony Dungy and the creator of *Survivor* and *The Voice*, Mark Burnett. I even got to interview a guy who hosted one of the biggest radio shows in America, *The Dave Ramsey Show*.

Without even knowing it, The Proximity Principle was beginning to work in my own journey. Step by step,

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I began putting myself in proximity to the right people in the right places. And each step of the way, I was getting in closer proximity to my dream job.

THE BEAUTIFUL
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Yes, that tiny sound booth was a humble start. I couldn't always see the significance of what I was doing, and I definitely wasn't doing it well. But it was exactly where I needed to be. I was learning from people who knew what I needed to know. I was working toward my goal and taking another step up the mountain.

I was practicing The Proximity Principle.

The Power of The Proximity Principle

The beautiful thing about The Proximity Principle is that it works. And it keeps on working for as long as you work it. If you want a new job, it works. If you want to change careers, it works. Even if you're already working in the right field and you just want to get to the next level, The Proximity Principle works. To put it into practice, you can start by asking yourself two questions:

1. *Who do I need to know?*
2. *Where do I need to be?*

When I asked myself those questions daily on my journey toward a career in broadcasting, I began to see quick results.

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This same principle will work for you too.

Answering those two questions determines your next step. It will help you gain the education, experience, and relationships you need to climb your Mount Everest. You'll never stop growing and improving with this principle in play.

Ready? Let's start climbing!

PART 1

THE PEOPLE



*I feel really grateful to the people who
encouraged me and helped me develop.
Nobody can succeed on their own.*

—SHERYL SANDBERG

The Proximity Principle works. Every. Single. Time.
It's not magic. It's a discipline that yields results.

**The right people + The right places =
Opportunities.**

If you focus on putting this principle to work, you will get closer to your dream job. You can count on it. So where do we start? Let's start with the first part of the equation: people. Because the truth is, it's not always *what* you know; it's *who* you know.

PROXIMITY TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE

People who can help you land your dream job are working hard at this very moment. But they're working for themselves, not for you. In fact, they aren't even thinking about you. They're living their own lives, focusing on their own jobs.

Your job, then, is to get strategic and *find them*.

Finding people who can make opportunities happen for you is the easy part. The hard part is getting some of their time and convincing them to help you on your journey. It's not impossible, but it will take some perseverance and patience. Be prepared for this reality. There will be times when you don't get a response, when you're overlooked, and when you get rejected. Stay with it. Turn

that rejection into redirection. Don't let the no's stop you. Instead let them lead you to the next yes.

Getting a Yes

Here's the deal: to get a yes, don't be an opportunistic jerk. If you approach people with your hand held out for favors like a kid at trick or treat, people will see you coming a mile away and slam the door in your face. If you want people to help you, you need to be the kind of person people want to help. People are more willing to take time out of their day to teach you when you are enthusiastic about learning. My friend Joy talked to me about this.

Joy works in the book publishing world and said, "I love my job, but at times it feels like everyone wants something from me: literary agents, authors, team members. When I'm approached by someone hungry to learn more about the publishing business, it usually stops me in my tracks. It reminds me of how much I love my job, and it gives me a chance to give back." Don't underestimate how your passion to learn and grow can inspire and give life to those around you!

Remember when I contacted the folks at Catalyst about doing a podcast? I didn't just ask them to help me get started in broadcasting. If I had, they would have had nothing to gain, and I would have looked self-serving. Instead, I had to find a way to help them while getting some experience in the process. I approached them with a podcast idea that I believed would benefit them, while

giving me some much-needed studio time. It was a win-win for both of us. As you look to others for help, you must approach them with an attitude of gratitude and humility rather than just focusing on gaining something for your-

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self. You want to develop real relationships with real people who you can both *give help to* and *get help from*.

Getting help from others is essential to your journey.

Climbing a mountain is no easy task, and knowing you're not climbing it alone will help you conquer the mental challenges you're sure to face. I like to call these mental challenges "limiting beliefs."

LIMITING BELIEFS

The first step in overcoming the limiting beliefs that are holding you back is to identify them. On the path to your dream job, there are two major limiting beliefs that stand in your way: *pride* and *fear*. Let's take a closer look at these and talk about how to recognize these lies.

Pride

Pride shows up in the lie that we are self-sufficient. That we don't need others. That it's weak to rely on others for help and guidance. It also shows up in worrying

about how others perceive us. Ironically, pride keeps us from being ambitious. It'd be ridiculous if it wasn't so powerful.

Take Steve Jobs, for instance. Imagine Jobs without ambition. It's impossible, right? I mean, you can't create the iPhone and build a multibillion dollar company without just a little ambition. Arguably, Jobs was one of the most innovative and successful people on the planet. But he didn't get there by being self-sufficient. No, he took a much different approach. At an early age, Jobs learned the value of asking for help. When he was just twelve years old, Jobs called up Bill Hewlett—yep, the Hewlett-Packard co-founder—to ask for spare parts for a project he was working on. And Bill said yes. To a twelve-year-old kid!

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It seems that pride never stopped Jobs from reaching out to others. In a 1994 interview, he talked about the power of asking for help: "I've never found anyone who's said no or hung up the phone when I called—I just asked. And when people ask me, I try to be as responsive, to pay that debt of gratitude back. Most people never pick up the phone and call. Most people never ask. And that's what separates, sometimes, the people that do things from the people that just dream about them."⁴

Setting aside our pride and admitting we need help from others is so critical on the journey to our dream job.

And if someone like Steve Jobs can do it, I'm pretty sure we can too.

Fear

Now let's take a look at the second limiting belief—fear. Fear is normal. There are two kinds of fear that limit us: the *fear of rejection* and the *fear of failure*. Both are liars.

The Fear of Rejection

If you've ever had an idea shot down, you've experienced the sting of rejection. Being told no to a project idea after pouring your heart into the proposal can suck the life right out of you. But the word *no* is not the enemy. Not asking is the enemy. Don't let the fear of rejection keep you from asking. And if you get a no the first time, don't give up. Sometimes you have to get through some hard no's to get to a yes.

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Take Patrick. Patrick was an accountant. He had two big passions and accounting was not one of them. Patrick enjoyed brewing his own beer, and he loved mission work in Africa.

Patrick also had a big imagination. He dreamed of turning beer into water. Okay, technically he wanted to open his own craft brewery as a way to raise money to build fresh water wells in impoverished villages in Africa. And to do

this, he needed to learn the craft brewery business from the ground up.

He began by building relationships with local professionals who knew the brewery business. Then he offered a win-win—he would work for free at their brewery if they would teach him the tricks of the trade. Free labor sounds like a no-brainer, right? Apparently not. The first sixteen breweries he approached told him no! But after sixteen no's, the seventeenth said yes, and Patrick spent over a year working for free, even on Saturdays and Sundays. As a result of his efforts, he was able to learn the business—everything from the actual brewing and marketing to packaging and shipping the product. If Patrick had let his fear of rejection keep him from continuing to ask for help, he would have missed out on an unbelievable learning experience. He also wouldn't be where he is today, brewing beer full time. He is doing quite well, and his charity efforts have changed some villages in Africa for generations.

The Fear of Failure

The second kind of fear that limits us is a fear of failure. This often starts with the question: “What if?” *What if someone gives me a shot and I fail?* Sure, failure is a risk. It's part of the deal. But when you know what your top talents, strengths, and skills are, it's absurd to let a limiting belief override the truth that you have what it takes. Remember this: whatever you focus on, you will feel. So, don't focus on the possibility of failure. Focus on

the truth that you can make this happen. You absolutely have to believe that!

“What if” usually leads to another question: *What will people think?* It would be easy for me just to say, “Who cares what people think!” But the fear of failure can be so acute and personal that we can’t help but care. When I was auditioning for TV hosting roles, I got rejection after rejection. I’d go to each audition, hopeful this would be the one where they’d say yes. I’d ask my friends and family to pray for me. Then, the sting of rejection would come. I finally stopped asking for prayer because I was embarrassed to report back that I hadn’t gotten the gig. It was humiliating and defeating. But deep down I knew that these small failures were not catastrophic. Every audition was a little more practice for the next—all preparing me for the job I really wanted.

The trick is to reframe the way we think about failure. Often, success happens not *despite* failure, but *because* of failure. Thomas Edison had failed inventions. Marie Curie’s failures in the lab led to two Nobel Prizes. Albert Einstein had failed equations before the theory of relativity. The list goes on and on. I’d go so far as to say that you can’t succeed *unless* and *until* you fail. Failure is what helps us learn and grow, so we shouldn’t let our fear of it keep us from trying.

Hockey Hall-of-Famer Wayne Gretzky said it best: “You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.” Gretzky knew that in order to score, you have to actually shoot. Did

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Gretzky miss some shots? Absolutely. But the fear of missing goals didn't keep him from shooting. Gretzky made 894 career goals, becoming one of the greatest hockey players of all time.⁵ He didn't give up when he missed or when they lost a game. He just kept taking shots.

And then there's Will Ferrell, one of the most successful comedic actors in the business. Looking at his career, you might think he is fearless. Not true. He shared his thoughts on the fear of failure in a 2017 commencement speech at the University of Southern California. Ferrell said, "You're never not afraid. . . . But my fear of failure never approached in magnitude my fear of 'what if.' What if I never tried at all?"⁶

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No matter how high you climb or how successful you get, the fear of failure will always threaten to stop your progress. Don't let it! The only way you'll reach your goals is by pushing through the fear, by taking the shot, and by always, *always* choosing to try.

DREAM BIG

Taking the shot isn't always easy. Pride and fear have no shame, and they will try to convince you that your goal is crazy. When I decided to give my dream a shot, I

discovered how quickly self-doubt can creep in. I found it difficult to tell my friends and family about my plan because I was worried about what they'd think of me. At the time, my job was in politics, and the industry I wanted to move into was such a dramatic change from what I'd been doing. It was a completely different career trajectory. I began to question myself. *Will they think I'm crazy?* I had to learn to call that for what it was: pride.

As I began to put my plan into action, I worried about being told no. I wanted everyone to believe in me and my dream. I wanted to impress everyone and show

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them I could do this. But that nagging question would pop up. *What if they say no?* I had to learn to call that for what it was: fear of rejection.

When I started my climb, I was also running my own business and had a wife and three young children counting on me. The possible financial consequences scared me to death. I worried that I'd mess up so bad that I'd destroy my family. *What if I don't have what it takes?* I had to learn to call that for what it was: fear of failure.

The truth is that all dreams are a little crazy. That's why they are called "dreams." But we are never crazy for dreaming. What's crazier than dreaming is never trying at all.

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My path began with a start-up podcast in a warehouse closet sound booth with only a handful of people listening. That put me in proximity to the people and the places that allowed me to learn and grow. As I mentioned earlier, one of those people was none other than Dave Ramsey. That podcast interview, although I didn't know it at the time, was the first step that got me where I am today.

The journey to climb your own personal Mount Everest will be wildly different than mine. You'll have your own battles with pride and fear. But don't let the size of the mountain paralyze you. Put one foot in front of the other, up the mountain. You'll reach the top before you know it. Your arrival at the summit will be unique. There is no perfect path. There's only *yours*. So, dream big, ask for help, embrace failure, take the shot, and continue to climb one step at a time.

The People to Look for

As you begin your climb, there are five specific types of people who can help you along the way:

1. **Professors** instruct in the field you want to work in.
2. **Professionals** are the best of the best in their field.
3. **Mentors** offer guidance and accountability.
4. **Peers** accompany you on your journey.

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5. **Producers** create jobs, hire and build teams, and generate opportunities.

Let's dig in to each of these groups so you'll know exactly *who* you're looking for, *where* to find them, and *why* you need them on your climb.