

## LESSON 1

# Know Thyself!

Young people often ask me, “What should I do?” Many of us have been there, just out of college or business school, searching for a job or trying to make a decision about a career. If you’re lucky, you have some options. You wonder, “Should I take this job or that one?” Or maybe you think, “I just got an offer for a high-paying job in a major corporation, but I also have a great idea for a business. What should I do?”

These questions are posed as if one alternative might be better than the other on some objective scale. But nothing could be more subjective. It depends entirely on who’s asking the question. What’s your personality? How strong is your drive? How much grit and determination do you have? Do you crave individuality? Success? The only possible answer is: *Know thyself.*

Has there ever been advice so ancient, so well known, and so *ignored*? “Know thyself” was already a common maxim in the fourth century B.C., when it was emblazoned on the entrance to the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, home of the Delphic Oracle. In several of Plato’s dialogues, Socrates notes the importance of this wisdom to living a virtuous life. And it’s just as relevant today as it was back then.

I realized the importance of self-awareness as I grew older and was transitioning from one career to another. By my midtwenties, I had ruled out working for the government or a large corporation. I had nothing against either type of institution; my problem was more personal.

I am about as proud of my father as any son I know. Richard Sonnenfeldt lived an extraordinary life by any measure. Born in Germany, his parents sent him and his younger brother to a boarding school in England when he

was 16. It was 1938, and the decision was part of a plan to move the family from Nazi Germany. One year later, World War II was under way. England declared him, as it did all German refugees 16 and older, an “enemy alien.” He was deported to an Australian internment camp. But it didn’t take him long to convince his English captors that he was a Jewish refugee who wanted to fight Nazis—not be imprisoned with them.

On the trip back to England, his ship was torpedoed off the coast of India. As a 17-year-old refugee, he spent the next six months working as a manager of a radio factory in Bombay. In May 1941, he arrived in the United States, his fourth continent in three years. There, he was reunited with his parents, who had escaped from Germany and settled in Baltimore. Two years later, he enlisted in the army (receiving automatic citizenship for doing so), getting his chance to fight Nazis at the Battle of the Bulge and helping to liberate the Dachau concentration camp. In mid-1945, General Bill Donovan, the head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and eventual founder of the CIA, selected him as an interpreter for the Nuremberg war crimes trials. He quickly rose, at the age of 23, to become the chief interpreter for the American prosecution. My father and a British major went from cell to cell to personally deliver the indictments to the 21 principal defendants at the first and most famous Nuremberg trial. He became the personal interpreter for Hermann Göring, the second in command of the German Third Reich.

Despite his extensive wartime experience, my father had yet to graduate from high school. Returning to Baltimore, he was directly admitted to the Johns Hopkins School of Engineering, from which he graduated in record time. Years later, he became the Distinguished Alumnus of the class of 1949. He held the final patents on color TV, which he designed while a young engineer at RCA, invented a circuit used in all radar detectors in the free world since 1951, and led the team that sent the first NASA satellite into space. And later in his career, he was dean of a business school too.

I can’t imagine a better set of genes to have inherited. Guided by his amazing intuition, he trained me from an early age to have the confidence that I could achieve almost anything if I put my mind to it. Unfortunately, my father’s capacious mind and amazing talent came with an emotional inflexibility and intolerance that took a toll on me as a child. It was only after years of analysis that I realized how much our relationship affected my becoming an entrepreneur. Being told what to do, when, and how would always remind me of some of my father’s worst qualities, and I would instinctively resist. I guess I should be grateful for his less-than-ideal traits because they led me to entrepreneurship. I could not have achieved a fraction of the success I have if I were someone else’s employee.

While I was writing this book, Marvin Israelow, my brother-in-law and an expert organizational consultant, reminded me of the work of Edgar Schein. Schein is a legendary MIT professor with whom Marvin worked in the late 1970s. One of the founders of the field of organizational psychology, Schein, now 88, is also famous for developing “a pattern of self-perceived talents, motives, and values” that organizes a person’s work life and career ambitions, which he labeled “career anchors.”<sup>1</sup>

Schein’s original five career anchors, derived from a study of business school graduates 10 to 12 years into their various careers, were:

1. Technical/functional competence
2. Managerial competence
3. Security/stability
4. Autonomy/independence
5. Entrepreneurial creativity

He later added three more anchors:

6. Service or dedication to a cause
7. Pure challenge
8. Lifestyle

Marvin pointed out the two values that anchored my career and also appear as common denominators in the success stories of many of the entrepreneurs featured in this book: autonomy, which was significantly a reaction to my father’s inflexibility, and creativity, which among Schein’s entrepreneurs was expressed as “an overarching need to build or create something that was entirely their own product.”

The real question for aspiring entrepreneurs isn’t about what job you should take. It’s about which job you are cut out for. It’s about *you*—your capabilities, your weaknesses, your strengths, and, critically, your emotional sensitivities. If, like me, you can’t stomach the idea of submitting yourself to the whims of an inflexible boss or a rigid institution—if the only way you can get satisfaction from a career is to create your own company—then entrepreneurship might make sense for you. But if you need a regular paycheck or your tolerance for risk is low, your career anchor is likely to be security/stability, number 3 on Schein’s list. In that case, I would advise you to forget about starting your own business.

Determining if the entrepreneur’s life is right for you takes self-reflection. It might surprise some people, but true self-reflection is the opposite of

narcissism or self-absorption. And it's no easy task. It's undeniable that self-deception is part of what it is to be human. Psychotherapy was invented to get behind the mask we present not only to the world but also to ourselves. But it isn't the only path to genuine self-reflection.

Schein devised a "career anchor self-assessment" to help people manage their career choices. It involves a series of questions that can reveal the kind of work that is likely to satisfy you and your ambitions. Popular among managers and human resources professionals for evaluating prospective employees, Schein's self-assessment tool has been refined over the years and is now available both in book form and online.

As painful as self-knowledge is, it has a huge upside: Once you recognize your weaknesses, you will also better understand your strengths.

What is your definition of success? To answer that question, you have to step back—at every stage of your career—and make an effort to know thyself. I believe that the following lessons will help you in that never-ending quest.

## Note

1. Edgar Schein, *Career Anchors* (San Diego: University Associates, 1985).