

# INTRODUCTION

## From Built to Last to Success Built to Last

### The Mandela Effect

It was close to midnight at the World Economic Forum when we sat down to wait for the last meeting of the day. The freezing rain had turned to a blizzard, but inside it felt like noon in the Sahara as the heating system gushed to overcompensate. Mark Thompson was nodding off in his chair when Nelson Mandela suddenly appeared around the corner, extending a sweaty hand and a tired smile. Thompson shivered as Mandela leaned on his shoulder and eased onto the leather couch.

In the years before Mandela, an activist lawyer, had been sent to a death camp, he was rarely without zealous overconfidence about his mission to end apartheid. South Africa had suffered violence and unrest that seemed irreconcilable. Although Mandela initially advocated a peaceful solution, he eventually took up arms when the path of peace appeared to be a dead end. In 1964, he was convicted of conspiracy and sabotage and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Most of his years as an inmate were on Robben Island, off Cape Town, where the South African government sent the opposition to break its morale. During his many years of hard labor, the government pressed him repeatedly to compromise his beliefs in exchange for early freedom. He refused.

After 27 years in captivity, in 1990, at the age of 71, Mandela was released. He had every reason to have become the most dangerous man on his continent, but instead he accelerated the peaceful reinvention of his nation.

How could he have overcome his hatred to lead a non-violent revolution, seeking reconciliation instead of revenge? There he sat, exhausted, but radiant; continuing his quest to heal his homeland. The adulation of Mandela's fans has grown or evaporated, depending on whom you ask. Nevertheless, he took his own unique path—a journey that matters so much to him that he has stayed the course year after year, often despite the social and political consequences, not because of them. When he could be lounging in retirement, the Nobel Laureate and ex-President was instead recruiting people to his cause—as he had been doing not just for a month or a year, but for a lifetime, with an intensity that had not faded despite his decades of suffering in a South African jail.

Your three co-authors, separately and now together, have always been passionately curious about what makes enduringly successful people and extraordinary organizations tick. We have long shared a common question: What inspires long-term achievers to make the kind of choice Mandela did—to struggle and grow despite all odds—to find new

meaning and hang onto it not just for the moment or for himself, but to create success that lasts? Although history supports Mandela's noble intentions, the fact that he didn't start out as a saint, with neither perfect grace, nor humility, before his long walk to freedom, makes his journey even more useful and inspiring to the rest of us. That's the Mandela Effect—when you can create enduring success not because you are perfect or lucky but because you have the courage to do what matters to you.

## From Built to Last to Success Built to Last

Mandela's transformation is a courageous example of creating a life built to last. He achieved not just any success, but enduring success that lasts because it matters. In the introduction for the paperback edition of the business classic, *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras reported “a significant number of people had found key concepts useful in their personal and family lives as they approached the fundamental human issues of self-identity and self-renewal. Who am I? What do I stand for? What is my purpose? How do I maintain my sense of self in this chaotic, unpredictable world? How do I infuse meaning into my life and work? How do I remain renewed, engaged, and stimulated?”<sup>1</sup>

Healthy, sustainable societies require the creation of healthy, sustainable organizations, and great organizations and societies can only be built by human beings who can grow and create meaningful success. If you believe that—and we do—then talking to people who had remarkable lives and lasting impact seemed a natural thing to do. As inner-city educator Marva Collins (no relation to Jim) told us, when you create a life that matters—a life you feel worthy of living—then “the world would be a darker place without you.”

And so began the journey of our collaboration on *Success Built to Last*.

## Conversations with Enduringly Successful People

This book is based on interviews with over 200 people all over the world who have made a difference—large or small—in their field, profession, or community, but who have lived a life that they believe mattered. In these conversations, we rediscovered a principle that is starting to emerge in books about organizational performance and leadership, but rarely seems fully developed: Success in the long run has less to do with finding the best idea, organizational structure, or business model for an enterprise, than with discovering what matters to us as individuals. It is here, at a very personal level, where thought and feeling inform each other, that creativity begins, and where the potential for enduring organizations emerges. We found ourselves on a quest to find insights—probing to uncover the principles and practices of individuals whose impact on the world endures.

These people are not confined to the categories of entrepreneur, revolutionary, or positive deviant. Many are reluctant to think of themselves as leaders or role models even today. Most did not start out by pursuing success as conventionally defined by their culture. Some will probably never have much money; others are rich, even very rich, but very few started out wealthy. They come from many backgrounds, some horrific and others privileged.

In terms of personality, they're all over the map—some are naturally loud and assertive, while others are barely audible until you ask them about what matters to them. A few have so-called charisma, but most do not; and many remain introverts in the midst of success. At some point in their lives, all of them found themselves on a collision course with a kind of

need that generated a relentless, passionate conviction to change the way things are for the long run, often despite how society might judge them.

We struggled with how to refer to these enduring high achievers. Labels such as “visionary leader,” in this context, seemed unnecessarily lofty; creating a separation that would provide the rest of us with reasons not to reach inside ourselves to retrieve our greater possibilities. Let’s be clear, however, that all of these people are providing leadership in one way or another. Ultimately, we chose the terms “Enduringly Successful People” and “Builders,” the latter a description based in part on the “clock-builder” concept from the original *Built to Last* book. By way of metaphor, Collins and Porras made a distinction between the ability to tell the time in the moment and the ability to build a clock that could tell the time beyond the lifetime of the builder. They observed that leaders who created a vision and culture that endured were “clock-builders” whose organizations stood the test of time, outlasted them as individuals, and ultimately outperformed those organizations run by men and women who functioned merely as “time tellers” who lead in the traditional manner hoping to succeed with a hot idea.

Builders are people whose beginnings may be inauspicious but who eventually become defined by their creativity. At some point in their lives, Builders feel compelled to create something new or better that will endure throughout their lifetime and flourish well beyond. Builders often see themselves simply as people trying to make a difference doing something that they believe deserves to be done with or without them, and they recruit the team—build the organization—needed to get it done. Great organizations can be a dividend of this process, but enduring institutions seem to be more of an outcome of the Builder’s mindset than a goal in and of itself.

We learned that, for the most part, extraordinary people, teams, and organizations are simply ordinary people doing extraordinary things that matter to them. The message here is that you have it within you to live an extraordinary life. You have the choice to embrace a personally meaningful journey, integrating your personal and professional lives in ways that make a lasting difference. And when you do that, you have the potential to create an organization and a legacy that can serve the world long after you’re gone.

## How We Found the People

We interviewed relatively unknown business managers, entrepreneurs, teachers, Olympians, and Nobel Laureates, as well as Pulitzer, Grammy, Peabody, and Academy Award winners and the CEOs of large and small organizations. We met many of these people during consulting assignments around the world. To identify additional people to interview, we reviewed an eclectic variety of well-established lists—from Time Magazine’s Most Influential People to Oprah Winfrey’s Use Your Life Award winners, as well as those on the annual honor rolls of the biggest, fastest growing, or most admired in major business publications, notably Forbes and Fortune. We also looked at lists of noteworthy individuals honored by nonprofit organizations.

From this universe of people, we overlaid an unusual time limitation to our review—a 20-year minimum—eliminating those who had significant success in their careers, with a few exceptions, for less than two decades. As a result, we dropped celebrities-of-the-moment and multiple generations of charismatic leaders who come and go—culling our list to fewer than a thousand people who described themselves as having found lasting success.

From that group, we screened for diversity of interests, industries, and gender. We invited several hundred people to participate and, ultimately, completed more than 200

personal interviews from 1996 to 2006.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, the group was largely over age 40, and the oldest individual interviewed was 95.

## Avoiding the Apprentice Trap

In the age of reality TV, it has become commonplace for individuals to rise from complete obscurity to super-stardom in a matter of weeks or months, only to soon disappear into the “where are they now?” files—or worse. We looked at people with a long tenure of performance—people who mattered year after year—rather than anyone who happened to show up on the cover of this week’s magazine as a celebrity-of-the-moment from *The Apprentice* or *Survivor*.

This long-term approach allowed us to include people who have had significant impact, both those who are popular as well as those who are wildly out of fashion, but nonetheless well worth interviewing for this project because they have (or had) been highly accomplished in their field for a long time. Jimmy Carter was stunned by a humiliating defeat—a landslide against him in the 1980 elections—but found a more rewarding role and won the Nobel Peace Prize after 20 more years of following an entirely new dream largely unrelated to his presidency. Although he’s under fire again for his strongly held views and his latest book on values and anti-fundamentalism, he continues his mission around the world.

There are bound to be people who you may think are inappropriate choices for this discussion about enduring success. Whether you love them or hate them, very few of the people we interviewed will escape harsh criticism from one quarter or another because they are, by definition, having impact doing what matters to them! Indeed, as soon as you place someone on a pedestal as a role model, there seems to be a perverse law of the universe that increases the chances that person or that organization will stumble foolishly or become the target of heated controversy. Let’s make it clear that the people interviewed are not presented here as role models for you to follow. That’s a very personal choice only you can make. We offer them only to provoke a discussion that you may need to have with yourself, and the people who matter to you, about the definition of success. If there is anything that became abundantly clear after so many interviews, it was that there are many different, even contradictory and dangerous, ways to go about evaluating success that lasts—as you will see in Chapter 1, “From Great to Lasting—Redefining Success.”

Many high achievers who have enduring success cherish a dogma with which we disagree, and some that were even offensive to us. We hope you can’t tell who they are. We excluded violent criminals and terrorists who have had impact for the long haul because we hope that none of us can or should count on insanity or other criminal pathologies to build a legacy of lasting impact.

## Successful People Have a History of Mistakes and They Harvest Their Failures

What often surprises most people is that Builders have very significant failures, losses, and bitter disappointments. Some are experiencing difficulty as we publish this book. In hundreds of interviews, we never met a soul who didn’t have embarrassments or failures in their portfolio of experience, including the authors themselves. Extraordinary individuals take one step back and two steps forward with most every challenge—and sometimes two steps back to one step forward. They harvest useful lessons and knowledge from what

doesn't work, and they display a remarkable resiliency; an ability to bounce back from adversity.

They don't just think positively, but rather practice the ability to respond and move ahead, often despite how they might feel in the moment, whether the setback was their own foolish fault or just an unlucky break. Builders generally did not blame others for their circumstances, but instead focused their attention on actions within their control that they could take to solve or manage the problem.

This sense of perspective was particularly necessary during our first set of interviews. As you might expect, a few of these high achievers seemed superhuman. They were not remotely like the vast majority of the rest of us on Earth. Some people are way too smart, talented, or lucky to be helpful as a reference. An unnerving number of Nobel Laureates and virtuosos came into this world with their special genius seemingly in full bloom. If you yearn for the heights of Yo Yo Ma, you had better be a cello prodigy by age seven. "No novelist in the world would have dared invent him. The combination of virtues—musical, intellectual, and personal is simply too implausible," said *Smithsonian Magazine*.<sup>3</sup> He is a generous humanitarian who lives his values and is an incredibly disarming and warm person when you meet him. These are gifts, but the rest of his talents are simply out of the reach for almost all of us, and, therefore, not as useful a source as others might be.

We certainly didn't want to take this journey just to find more people who give further reason to doubt our own abilities and reason to remain anonymous. Fortunately, and to our great relief, in the process of meeting and inter-viewing hundreds of remarkably successful people, we uncovered good news. We found powerful principles that transcend luck or simply great genes. In Chapter 1, we share a simple, three-part theoretical framework that explores useful attributes that all these successful people have in common.

Tracking these people down wasn't easy. Some work in remote regions of the world and surface only occasionally; others are celebrities or leaders whose schedules are in high demand. We intercepted some during their visits to universities around the world. Many we met initially during business conferences and consulting assignments. We interviewed people in the field, at conferences, public radio stations, or in their homes, offices, limos, and studios in the United States, Asia, and Europe.

Throughout this book, you will see descriptions of the places and circumstances in which we interviewed people. We have provided that additional color because we believe that, whenever possible, it's important to observe the ways these individuals actually behave—not just what they say. We wanted to catch them in the act of doing (or not doing) what they said they do—for example, Mandela's willingness to entertain a bunch of caffeinated business suits and other leaders at the World Economic Forum to continue to fuel the global dialog about peace and freedom.

For many years, we have participated in the Forum, which is a four-day marathon in the January snow three hours from Zurich, where attendees run from early morning espresso to well past midnight, often standing in lines oddly packed with CEOs, social workers, billionaires, and Nobel Laureates—awaiting access to venues—all anxious to squeeze in quality time with rock stars, heads of state, and each other. This sounds like a spectacle, and sometimes it is, but it's one of the more effective places to connect with people who are having lasting impact. What keeps you going despite the high security and long hours is the intellectual feast—dining all day and night on the insights and eccentricities of some of the world's most enduringly successful people.

## Our Approach to the Interviews

After we found Builders to interview, we needed a fresh way to think about this topic. We did not want to rely entirely on third-party biographies or send out yet another survey with a request to tick boxes on a mass mailing. We're not sure those surveys get the full attention of the leaders they're sent to anymore and, as Peter Drucker warned us, "That's all been done before." Drucker (and many others) encouraged us to think differently about this—to pursue free-ranging conversations with a diverse group of people about what success means rather than focus on business leaders or leadership per se. Until you "figure out what success means" to you personally and to your organization, leadership is an almost "pointless conversation," Drucker admonished. And we definitely did not want to confirm our own set of beliefs about some theory we were trying to prove. We wanted to learn!

The fact that we actually interviewed the vast majority of our sources, rather than rely on surveys or third-party data, sets this work apart from other offerings in this field. We explored the issues personally with individuals as human beings, asking them one kick-off question about their definition of success and lasting leadership. This open-ended inquiry enabled each enduringly successful person, or Builder, rather than the authors, to drive the conversation and provide insights in ways that would have never occurred otherwise. We followed their lead by asking clarifying questions to reveal the depth and creativity of their answers, rather than sticking to our own preset agenda of questions. All too often in academic research, dialog is curtailed when a respondent moves beyond the preordained questions or topic. We wanted to mine the richness of that spontaneous dialog.

The unique power of this project was that it did not start out as a science experiment, but was the culmination of many leadership interviews collected in the course of our intensive, face-to-face consulting work in a wide variety of organizations, at universities, at professional conferences, for public broadcasting programs, and at other eclectic settings over a ten-year period. We saw the resulting data set as a gold mine of information that, when systematically analyzed, yielded some incredible insights. This opportunistic approach provided a very different and, we believe, richer dialog than if we had started with a narrower, highly structured process. The conversations exposed us to viewpoints that we never would have thought of as theories to test. In a real sense, this journalistic approach gave us a better set of hypotheses and a fresh perspective on the issues of leadership and lasting success.

By approaching people with this kind of exploratory dialog, we learned more than we could have hoped for or imagined. In fact, we found it sometimes unsettling, and occasionally threatening, to hear highly accomplished people describe things we had believed to be universal and concrete—like core values and the definition of success—in many different and even contradictory ways. The values these people cling to are their own intuitive and artful interpretation of what matters to them. The beliefs that they defended so dearly were not facts of life, but daring choices—judgments about what was right for them, not what everyone else should do. As we listened to their stories, we felt the bondage of our own beliefs dissolve.

After completing the interviews, we analyzed the content in a structured way to find the most frequent patterns of behavior and thinking, identifying 21 broad topic categories<sup>4</sup> that emerged from the conversations. The strongest of these made it into this book.

In *Success Built to Last*, we could not follow in the footsteps of many business books in which companies are paired for comparison and measured in terms of relative performance based on their business model, growth rates, founding data, key competitors, operating

efficiency, or stock market or other relative financial data. In our interviews, we reached out to individuals who work not just for public companies listed on stock exchanges, but also private for-profit and nonprofit organizations, scientific and educational institutions, government agencies, and communities. As a practical matter, we didn't think it was reasonable to have a control group to compare human beings in those same ways—as winners, losers, or runners-up.

Instead, with our manuscript already drafted, we tested our assumptions by creating a unique independent survey to challenge our conclusions. To take this ambitious step, our Stanford-based team partnered with Prentice Hall/Pearson Education, Wharton School Publishing (WSP), Lauder Professor Yoram (Jerry) Wind, editor of WSP and director of the SEI Center for Advanced Studies in Management at the Wharton School, and survey expert Dr. Howard Moskowitz and a team of researchers at the Moskowitz Jacobs design lab. Moskowitz's groundbreaking research at Harvard led him to author 14 books and 300 papers based in part on a sophisticated survey technique called conjoint analysis and rule developing experimentation (RDE). It's been around since the 1970s, but Moskowitz has been using this technique to reduce the tendency for people who answer surveys to give politically correct responses—digging instead into the soft underbelly of beliefs rather than what people think is appropriate or polite to say. His design lab uses it on everything from consumer products to presidential elections and views about terrorism.

Our World Success Survey was made available online on April 18, 2006, to executives and educators at senior and junior levels who are Knowledge@Wharton subscribers. More than 365 people from around the globe responded within the first week. This independent sample of data provided a comparison set and validation for our interview findings, and showed significant differences in perceptions and mindsets between respondents categorized as “successful” or “unsuccessful” in their professional or personal lives.

Among the top line results were confirmation that successful people don't rely on the approval of others to pursue their cause or calling. They have the audacity to take the initiative despite social pressures rather than because of them. They are more emotionally committed to doing what they love than being loved by others. They don't wallow or obsess on a single defeat or rely on finding scapegoats or blame when things go wrong, but instead relentlessly place highest priority on being effective in getting the outcomes they are seeking. (As we discuss in Chapter 7, “The Tripping Point—Always Make New Mistakes,” and Chapter 8, “Wounds to Wisdom—Trusting Your Weaknesses and Using Your Core Incompetencies,” Builders “harvest” their failures and successes as data they can use to improve their effectiveness.) Successful people also said that “loving what you do” is a necessary condition for success. (Indeed, in Chapter 2, “Love It or Lose—Passions and the Quest for Meaning,” we review the dangers of not doing what you love because people who have that passion can outlast and eventually outrun you in the task.)

Regardless of whether the survey participants rated themselves as “successful” or “unsuccessful,” all groups said that the traditional dictionary definition of success—notably wealth, fame, and power—no longer describes what success means to them. Although popularity and affluence, for example, are nice outcomes, people prefer to define success as the ability to “make a difference,” “create lasting impact,” and being “engaged in a life of personal fulfillment,” according to the study. What is special about Builders is that they won't settle for less than that! (See “The Pleasure of Finding Things Out—A Look at the Research Behind Success Built to Last.”)

Perhaps most important, it is our hope that this book and the World Success Survey launch an international dialog—providing a forum for this important subject that empowers

people to be heard with their own voices for the first time, together, on every continent. This extra step—to reach out to engage with the rest of the world in a conversation about redefining success—continues to keep us mindful, particularly when we find ourselves leaping to conclusions in a vacuum. Science in the social sciences can never escape influence from the personal realities of the people doing the work. Authors on leadership would love to convince you that they've been able to create the ultimate recipe for the secret sauce of success, but no one can give you that.

## Why Take This Journey?

We made a conscious decision to find and share insights without being prescriptive for a change. This is like a dinner conversation. Our intent here is to provoke a deeper dialog about success and what matters in our lives, rather than yet another lecture about leadership pretending to offer all the answers.

What we can tell you is we have been deeply touched and forever changed by the spirit, principles, and practices of the people we've met. We invite you to enter into the world of what follows unburdened by the need to believe or disbelieve. Rather, allow yourself to be inspired to find your own way. We hope you can challenge conventional wisdom and unearth new possibilities for success that lasts in your life, relationships, and work.

When you opened this book, you may have not intended to discover or be reminded that you are—or have an even bigger opportunity to be—a Builder, just like the enduringly successful people you will read about here. We hope the stories herein will make this clear—leaving you no place to hide—moving you to stretch toward your highest aspirations.