

Two Easy Steps to Ignite Your Potential

“Composer Gian Carlo Menotti forcefully stated, ‘Hell begins on that day when God grants us a clear vision of all that we might have achieved, of all the gifts we wasted, of all that we might have done that we did not do. Unrealized potential is a tragic waste.’” [1]

Reaching your potential is a choice. You choose to pursue fulfilling your potential by engaging in personal and professional development, or you can choose not to – what a waste. I decided to develop my potential early on and not throw it away. My road moving from potential to potency began when I made a huge career change from banking to sales. Here’s my story.

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With his piercing blue eyes, Chris stared at me for a moment and then said with an exasperated tone, “I’m not interested. You’re wasting your time and mine. As a matter of fact, you don’t need to come back, ever again.” His words penetrated my soul and wounded my pride. He was right; I was wasting his time. I’d frequently visited his store to make a case on why he needed to carry the new product line I represented. I thought enthusiasm and persistence would eventually pay off, and Chris would become a new customer. But I couldn’t close the deal. As a matter of fact, I wasn’t closing any deals.

You see, I was hired by *Ralston Purina* to launch a new premium pet food named *Pro Plan* – a competition for market leaders *Science Diet* and *Iams*. A friend referred me to the hiring manager, Tom, who oversaw forming the Southeast sales team. After our interview and lack of candidates in the Alabama / Mississippi market, Tom decided to give me a chance

even though I had absolutely no selling experience. When Tom called to offer the job to me, he made it clear that he was “hiring potential” and that we’d see how it would go. Not a resounding vote of confidence, but I decided to accept the role anyway. Why? I wanted to make a career change, and the offer was too good to turn down. It included a 30% pay raise, massive bonus, substantial benefits, and a company car – a sweet deal for someone without the needed experience.

Before I started the role, Tom called and said he was sending some brochures to learn about the *Pro Plan* product line and a list of pet and feed store accounts in my new territory. Since Tom was standing up a new sales team and couldn’t spend much time with me, he suggested that I read a few books on selling, pick my favorite principles, and apply them. He also told me that enthusiasm and persistence would win over any customer. Lastly, he said it was time to hit the road and begin selling *Pro Plan*. . . Call him if I have any questions.

I mapped out my route using the account list and hit the road. I started with the larger cities like Birmingham and Jackson, calling on local pet and feed store owners. Then, I visited rural markets. If you’ve never driven in the rural Southeast, there are long stretches of two-lane roads with only farmland and cows in sight. This was when I gained my affection for country music because it was typically the only music my radio would pick up.

I went from town to town, from pet store to pet store, feed store to feed store. I discovered that a few accounts had already picked up *Pro Plan*, but the vast majority hadn’t. Why? Because of Purina’s dominant grocery channel market share, many store owners considered Purina the competition, even the enemy. Purina’s flagship brand was *Dog Chow*. The company invested a lot of money in marketing and advertising the brand, driving customers into grocery stores, and converting customers into buyers. When customers purchased their pet food in a grocery store, they were less likely to visit and buy

from a pet or feed store. To many pet and feed store owners, the idea of carrying a Ralston product just wasn't palatable.

After my initial two-month swing across Alabama and Mississippi, I attended a Pro Plan sales meeting at Purina's St. Louis headquarters. The marketing team introduced a Pro Plan line extension called "Turkey and Barley." Part of the product knowledge was a kibble tasting; yes, a kibble tasting. I'll never forget the moment. Teams gathered at designated tables to review the packaging, ingredients, and product differentiation. Then the moment of truth. My manager, Tom, asked his new team, "You wouldn't feed something to your dog that you couldn't feed yourself, would you?" We all looked at each other with a sense of disbelief. I shrugged my shoulders and thought, "when in Rome". . . I began chewing, and the kibble sucked the moisture out of my mouth, bone dry. Immediately, I chased the kibble with a tall drink of water. "I can't believe I'm doing this," I thought. Thankfully, I managed to hide my angst, not embarrass myself, and comply with the culture.

I soon returned to my market and began calling on store owners again. Most of my focus was on new business development. Cold calling, opening new accounts, developing relationships. But I soon discovered that my efforts weren't paying off. I had great conversations with store owners, but I hadn't closed any deals. Reports from the company showed that I was in last place – opened accounts, volume % change. I was hired for my potential, but as Bear Bryant used to say, "potential just means you aren't worth a sh** yet." To reach my potential and to not let down the hiring manager who took a risk on me, I decided I needed some type of sales training. But I didn't know where to start.

The last straw happened at The Pet Stop in Vestavia, AL. The owner's name was Chris. His store was in a neighborhood near my house, making it easy to visit regularly. Chris was a big *Science Diet* and *Iams* supporter. As I got to know Chris

over time, I discovered that he was fervently resentful toward Purina because its marketing drew traffic and potential sales away from his store. I showed him the informative brochures during every visit and explained Pro Plan's latest marketing campaign. But I couldn't gain his commitment. He shared his gripes – no space, no money, happiness with competitors, not wanting to support “the competition.” One day Chris told me, “I'm not interested. You're wasting your time and mine. As a matter of fact, you don't need to come back, ever again.”

After a series of similar events, I approached my hiring manager, told him I didn't think I was cut out for the role, and he probably made a mistake in hiring me. He probed with a few questions and seemed empathetic. He asked me to walk him through my “selling” approach. He immediately concluded that I didn't follow a process – for example, no opening statements, probing for needs, handling objections, or closing techniques. He wasn't sure what to do because Purina didn't offer a formal sales training program because they typically hired experienced sales representatives. But he had an idea. . . What if I took an external sales training course? He charged me with finding some options, and once we picked the best one, he'd find the funds to pay for it.

I researched and found a course from a well-known company named Dale Carnegie Training. Maybe you've heard of it? Dale Carnegie is best known for writing “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” and his namesake training organization offered a human relations-oriented sales training course. But the fee and time commitment seemed outrageous . . . \$1,000 for a 12-week course that met one night a week for 3 hours, loads of homework, and on the job application. It would take a significant commitment to complete the course, but I was willing to do anything to improve my selling skills and shake my ranking as the worst sales rep on Tom's team.

Faced with the options of success or failure, winning or losing, continuing or quitting, I knew I needed to change. I

wanted to close the gap between where I was and where I wanted to be. I decided that the only way to succeed, win, and continue was to develop. If you're going to ignite your potential but don't know where to start, I recommend the following two steps:

Define Your Gap – When I began engaging potential customers about *Pro Plan*, I quickly realized that I couldn't sell. How? I didn't produce results. My natural abilities, enthusiasm, and persistence, while necessary, weren't enough. I knew I needed to learn a new skill. If I did, I was confident that I'd succeed. If not, I was sure that I'd be looking for a new role. Failure wasn't an option. I had a young family, depending on me, friends who referred me, and a manager who took a chance on me. I'd let them all down—the desire to succeed burned within me. I had a sense of urgency to close my gap.

Do you feel a burning to become better than you are right now? Where you are in now terms of character, skill, and habits typically won't get you where you want to go. You need to grow, change, enlarge. But how do you define your gap? Here's a simple exercise:

- Pick up to 8 skills that you need to develop in your current role to be successful.
- For each skill, rate yourself from 1 to 10, with 1 being no skill at all and 10 being skill mastery.
- Out of the 8 self-rated skills, choose the top 3 skills you need to improve. I recommend picking a combination of skill deficits and proficiencies. Why? People typically focus on the negative or what they lack. They forget they have unique talents, skills, and abilities. I encourage you to identify what you do well and build upon it. If you invest time to shore up your weaknesses and amplify your strengths, you will add more value to those around you.
- Out of the three skills you chose, what's your number

one gap? How do you move from where you are now to where you want to be? In terms of my selling skills, I rated myself as a 1, essentially deficient. I set a goal to become a 7 within the following year. Realistically, I knew I wouldn't immediately become a master salesperson, and it would take time to close the gap. But I was confident that if I grew my selling skill, I'd be on the path to success. I'd do more than just survive; I'd thrive. How about you. Ask yourself what your role, career, or life would look like if you closed your number one gap. What will be the benefit to you and those around you? On the flip side, what if you don't close the gap? What will happen then? What is it worth to you? Once you discover what it will mean if you improve or don't improve, the "why?" you'll find the motivation to change.

- Lastly, ask someone you trust to rate your skills. It's beneficial to have an outside perspective on where you can improve. Their feedback will be a gift.

Be Deliberate – What's the difference between growth and stagnation? You. You need to be intentional, take the initiative, own it. You can't be casual about your personal and professional development. Growth doesn't happen by itself. You won't develop accidentally. You must carefully think about what you want to do and how you will close your gaps. Set goals and put a plan in place. Avoid excuses like, "I'm too busy" or "I not willing to commit." Charles Schwab said, "When a man or woman puts a limit on what they will do, they limit what they can do." Make the time and be willing to pay the price. Do everything in your power to secure the support, funding, and time you need to develop the skill. Let nothing get in the way. I took the initiative after identifying my selling gap. I approached Tom, my manager, with my need and gained his support. He secured the Dale Carnegie Sales Course \$1,000 fee and allowed me to adjust my schedule to attend the training. Once enrolled, I wholeheartedly committed to

attending the classes, doing the homework, applying the principles, and sharing my learnings every week for three months.

If you define your development gap, deliberately commit, and act, you will grow. You'll be on the road to transforming the capacity, raw talents, and abilities you have into power, influence, and positive effect. What are you waiting for?

Do you want to discover more about reaching your potential? Visit my website, prestonpoore.com, today!

Cheers,

Preston

^[1] Excerpt From: John C. Maxwell & Jim Dornan. "Becoming a Person of Influence." Apple Books. <https://books.apple.com/us/book/becoming-a-person-of-influence/id607555354>