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When 'Reality' Becomes a Wall

It's easy to convince ourselves we can't move forward, but Curt Rosengren offers a four-step plan to pursuing our career dreams.

Everybody wants their dream job. So why aren't more people actually pursuing it?

For most of the folks I talk to, it's a nasty little beast they like to call "reality." From an early age, so many of us are trained to look at our world with a hyper-critical eye. Our minds delight in finding the flaws in the plan and obstacles in the path. Again and again, I see people look at their dreams, slather them with a thick coat of reasons they won't work and call it "being realistic."

Oddly enough, we always seem to see *other* people's reality as more conducive to dream fulfillment than our own. I've noticed that people often look at others who have successfully found passion and say something like, "Well, sure, it's easy for them. They're _____" (fill in the blank with something you're not).

Over the years, I've heard them all: *They* have lots of money to make a change. *They* don't have all these financial obligations I have. *They* don't have family obligations. *They* have someone else in their life to support them.

The truth is, *everybody* has obstacles. Everybody has a "reality" to deal with. Often the difference between achieving your dreams and staying stuck has to do

with whether you view that reality as fluid and moldable or rigid and static.

For mystery novelist J.A. Jance, that reality could very well have been an insurmountable obstacle. In the early 1980s, as a single mother with two small children, no child support and a time-consuming job selling life insurance, she dreamed of being a writer. In her situation that might have seemed more like a pipe dream than a possibility. But by writing her first two published books early in the morning before work, she made it happen. Today, Jance is a prolific best-selling author with 32 books to her credit.

Drawing from Jance and many others, here's my simple four-step plan for embracing reality and still achieving your dreams.

1. Look for a way

Many people look at obstacles and conclude that there is no way for them to make their dreams reality. It's like looking down a path and, if it's not a straight, flat line all the way to the horizon, deciding that the path isn't traversable. Usually, that's nonsense. It might not be as easy to walk as the straight path, but there is often a way.

To counter that tendency to balk at obstacles, instead of saying, "I can't," ask, "What if I *had* to?" The path to your destination might not be straight, and it might not be without bumps, but more often than not there is a way there. Be creative, innovative.

When Cindy Combs left her position as marketing director for AT&T Wireless Services in Seattle, she dreamed of combining her marketing knowledge and love of gardening as a consultant in the horticulture industry. She quickly found that she didn't have enough industry experience.

Rather than give up, Combs took another tack: She founded a business called Gardening Getaways that gave hands-on garden design workshops at bed and breakfasts throughout the Pacific Northwest, developing a reputation in the industry as an expert in the process. After several years, just as Combs decided that Gardening Getaways had run its course, a horticulture company offered her some marketing consulting work. That snowballed into a thriving practice focused on the horticulture industry. In the end – though she took a somewhat circuitous route – she ended up exactly where she wanted to be.

2. Be persistent

It may seem obvious, but you've got to hang in there long enough to be around when success comes your way. My own transformation from disenchanted marketing guy to Passion Catalyst was anything but smooth. In the early days, some might have thought I should take a clue from all that pain and stop banging my head against the wall. But once I had a taste of it, I was too pigheaded to stop.

Sports commentators sometimes talk about how you can't make anything happen if you don't keep your feet moving. As I was building my Passion Catalyst work, "keep your feet moving" became my mantra. Keep trying new things. Some will work, some won't.

Sometimes that persistence means openness to reinvention. When husband and wife team Ashton Palmer and Kristy Royce founded Seattle-based Expedition Trips to indulge their passion

for travel, the business idea looked much different from today's version. "The original business we opened was actually going to try to help indigenous people and take tourists to stay with them in different parts of the world," Royce recalls. "It was a very idealistic business that was very important to us."

Unfortunately, the market wasn't interested. They had invested their life savings into the business, but it just wasn't happening. Then they noticed that one part of the business was doing well – booking vacations on small cruise ships.

So, they wrote a new business plan, changed their focus and the business took off. Looking back, Royce notes, "What we've learned is that your goals and your dreams aren't static. They're constantly changing. And our business keeps changing."

3. Examine your assumptions

Watching clients explore new paths over the years, I've seen first-hand how the assumptions and beliefs we see as "the way things are" are actually quite susceptible to change.

Those assumptions and beliefs are often about what is and isn't possible. "I'm too old." "That's not practical." "That will never work." I counter those with one simple question. "Do you *know* that?" Challenged to back up their assumptions with fact, people often see that they can't. It's a self-created reality.

Another belief that commonly stands in the way is what success looks like. Success, in our classic American definition, can be summed up in one simple word...MORE. As in more money, more status, more things.

More money is easy to quantify. More happiness, on the other hand, is not. Guess which one gets used more often to measure success? Unfortunately, decisions made solely in pursuit of that monetary "success" often compromise our happiness. Sometimes shifting beliefs about success – even slightly – can open doors of possibility.

4. Shift your time perspective

In our instant gratification culture, anything that's not immediately possible is often seen as impossible. We see the obstacles and say, "I can't do it." And that may very well be true...*right now*. But what is impossible today just might be possible next year. Or five years from now. When we take that current reality and paint our entire future with it, we cheat ourselves of what could be.

But the time to start is now. There is never a perfect time – and there probably never will be. There will always be something getting in your way, and some way you could get better prepared before starting out.

"Don't just talk about it, do it – and don't make excuses," says Jance, the mystery writer. "I wrote my first three books between 4 and 7 a.m. before getting my children up to go to school and getting me dressed to go sell life insurance."

The time to start – regardless of your reality – is now.

Curt Rosengren is a self-described "Passion Catalyst" who helps clients find passion in their careers. He lives, works and writes from Seattle and blogs at blog.occupationaladventure.com.

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