

THE BIG IDEAS

Achievement

What is it?

Design Thinking

Applied to our lives.

Flip the Switch

Let there be light!

Predicting Your Life

Failure + odds = part of the game.

The Final Countdown

What would you do?

Being the Cause

In the matter and in your life.



The Achievement Habit

Stop Wishing, Start Doing, and Take Command of Your Life

BY BERNARD ROTH · HARPERBUSINESS © 2015 · 288 PAGES

“By the end of the book, as a reader you will understand:

- Why *trying* is not good enough and how it is very different from *doing*.
- Why excuses, even legitimate ones, are self-defeating.
- How to change your self-image into one of a doer and achiever, and why this is important.
- How subtle language changes can resolve existential dilemmas and also barriers to action.
- How to build resiliency by reinforcing what you do (your action) rather than what you accomplish, so you can easily recover from temporary setbacks.
- How to train yourself to ignore distractions that prevent you from achieving your goals.
- How to be open to learning from your own experience and that of others...

This book will open your eyes to the power you have to change your life for the better. It will give you confidence to finally do things you have always wanted to do while ridding yourself of issues that stand in the way of your full potential. And the experience of taking control of your life will change your reality, making it possible to achieve almost anything you seriously want to do.”

~ Bernard Roth from *The Achievement Habit*

*“ Achievement *can* be learned. It is a muscle, and once you learn to flex it, there's no end to what you can accomplish in life.”*

~ Bernard Roth

[Bernard Roth](#) has been a Professor of Engineering at Stanford for over FIFTY (!!) years.

A pioneer in the field of robotics, Bernie is one of the founders of the famed d.school at Stanford where he and his colleagues came up with the whole “design thinking” framework.

In this great book, he brings the concepts of design thinking to life in the context of our most important design project: designing our optimal lives.

Reading this book feels like hanging out with a wonderfully wise, playful and humble mentor who's excited to share some of his favorite lessons learned along the way of creating an extraordinary life so we can do the same.

I really enjoyed it and think you will as well. It's packed with Big Ideas and stories from his decades of living and teaching. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

I'm excited to share some of my favorite so let's jump straight in!

"The only thing to fear is fear itself," said Franklin D. Roosevelt, and I say the only thing to fear is not learning from your mistakes."

~ Bernard Roth

WHAT IS ACHIEVEMENT?

"In my mind and for the purposes of this book, I define *achievement* as having a good life; getting the job of living done in a satisfying way that nurtures the life force within us and within those we associate with. It entails developing some self-mastery to handle the difficult aspects of our lives and relationships. It involves finding something to do with our lives that engages us and gives us positive feedback. If we're doing it right, life shouldn't be a debilitating struggle, even if at times it takes considerable effort."

Achievement.

What a great word and great definition.

As I reflected on Bernie's definition and consulted my Apple dictionary for its version and explored some synonyms, the word that came to mind was: actualization.

To achieve is to flourish. To design a life we're proud of. To actualize our potential in service to the world and, very importantly, to enjoy the process.

[Abraham Maslow](#) comes to mind (see Notes on [Motivation and Personality](#)): "Musicians must make music, artists must paint, poets must write if they are to be ultimately at peace with themselves. What human beings can be, they must be. They must be true to their own nature. This need we may call self-actualization... It refers to man's desire for self-fulfillment, namely to the tendency for him to become actually in what he is potentially: to become everything one is capable of becoming."

What's achievement mean to you? Ready to make a habit out of it?

Here are some Ideas on how to go about doing that!

DESIGN THINKING

"Design thinking is an amorphous concept that was given its name by David Kelley, another Stanford professor and co-founder of IDEO, when he was trying to explain that successful designers have a different mind-set and approach from most people. We all adopted and adapted it at the d.school, and the idea took off like a shot. Suddenly everyone was talking about this new concept, design thinking, something I'd been practicing for half a century without having a proper name for it.

It's difficult to give an exact definition for design thinking, however, but because I'm one of its 'inventors' I can certainly give you an idea of the principles which we'll get into throughout the book:

1. **Empathize.** This is where it starts. When you design, you're not primarily doing it for yourself, you're doing it with other people's needs and desires in mind. Whether you're designing a better roller coaster or a better hospital waiting room experience, the idea is to care about the users' experiences and figure out how to help. In this step you're learning what the issues are.
2. **Define the problem.** Narrow down which problem you're going to solve or which question you're going to answer.
3. **Ideate.** Generate possible solutions using any means you like—brainstorming, mind mapping, sketching on napkins . . . however you work best.
4. **Prototype.** Without going crazy to make anything perfect (or even close to it), build your project in physical form, or develop the plans for what you're going to enact.
5. **Test and get feedback."**

"A system that punishes failure rather than accepting that they occur on the road to success squelches creativity."

~ Bernard Roth

Design thinking.

It's an incredibly effective mind-set and methodology to create innovative solutions.

Bernie tells us that usually design thinking is applied *outward*—to solving a creative challenge out in the world. In this book, he helps us apply it toward our own lives—improving our relationships and designing the best version of ourselves.

Let's take a quick look at what that looks like:

1. **Empathize.** In the case of designing our lives, empathy means self-awareness. We must know ourselves—our biases, our interests. In short, what we want.
2. **Define the problem.** What do you REALLY want? Bernie walks us through some great exercises to help us get clear on what we're after. Stepping back so we can solve the right problem.
3. **Ideate.** How might you go about solving the problem of getting what you want? Bernie gives us 22 ways to get unstuck (from hard work and relaxing to idea logs and mind mapping—my favorites!) and encourages us to lean into the ones we really like.
4. **Prototype.** Don't worry about being perfect. Just get in the game. Remember to focus on action—"doing" rather than overthinking."
5. **Test and get feedback.** Have a learning mindset. Be an experimenter in your own life. Gather data, adjust. Optimize!

Bernie tells us this rarely follows such a neat progression in the real world and that embracing mistakes is essential.

In fact, he tells us: "One of the important concepts of design thinking is that failure can be a valuable part of the process. 'The only thing to fear is fear itself,' said Franklin D. Roosevelt, and I say the only thing to fear is not learning from your mistakes. You can fail lots of times as long as you learn from these failures and figure a solution out in the end."

Here's to experimenting and designing our optimal lives!

And here are some Ideas on how to go about doing that:

FLIP THE SWITCH

"We also focus on action-doing rather than overthinking."

~ Bernard Roth

"Whenever anyone makes an important change, it's because a switch has flipped. Someone who has struggled her whole life with her weight finally decides to get fit. Someone who has put up with an abusive boss for years finally has enough and quits. Someone who has harbored a secret crush finally takes the plunge and asks her beloved out for coffee. A shift has happened that has made action favorable to inaction.

You can sit around in the dark waiting for the light to come on, or you can get up, walk across the room, and flip the switch yourself."

Have you ever flipped the switch in your life?

Simply DECIDED you were going to change something in your life and took the action to bring in the light?

Bernie is ALL about focusing on taking action rather than overthinking things to death.

He kicks the book off with a story about how he'd invite a student up to "try to take" a water bottle from him. They'd struggle and he'd win. Then he'd ask him to "take" the bottle from him and the results would be far different.

We don't want to TRY to do something. We want to simply DO it.

When we “try” to do something, after the inevitable obstacle or three arises, we often give up.

When we COMMIT to DOING something, on the other hand, we’re all-in and the little obstacles simply inform us en route to completion. Giving up isn’t an option.

As that wise, green Jedi tells us: “Do or do not. There is no try.”

Flip the switch. Don’t try to flip it. Just flip it.

Back to you: What flip do you need to switch?

I hereby commit to flipping THIS switch in my life: _____

Awesome.

Let there be light!

ODDS, FAILURES AND PREDICTING YOUR LIFE

“Statistics show you trends, they can’t predict your life.

Likewise, consider that the odds have *always* been against greatness. If one were to decide on a career path just by the odds of financial success, we would have no movie stars, authors, poets, or musicians. The odds of any one person becoming a professional, self-supporting musician are very low—and yet turn on the radio and you hear hundreds of them. The odds were against the Beatles, Elvis, and the Grateful Dead, too. They could have been ‘scientific’ about the whole thing and chosen more reasonable career paths, and what a loss for the world that would have been!

If you succeed, the odds are then meaningless. Any path may have a 2 percent success rate, yet if you’re in that 2 percent, there’s a 100 percent chance of success for you. The long shots are often the most rewarding.”

That’s a passage from the chapter “Doing Is Everything.”

It precedes a section called “The Gift of Failure” where Bernie tells us about the fact that Oprah was FIRED from her first job as a television anchor (hah!), Dr. Seuss’s first book was rejected dozens of times (it only got published because a friend decided to publish it himself!), and, of course, Edison failed countless times in pursuit of a commercially viable light bulb.

As Bernie tells us: “Almost without exception, people who have done great things have also experienced great failures.”

But you. (<— I’m talking to you and the guy in my mirror. :)

You think you need to achieve success without even the slightest failure.

Laughing.

Not gonna happen.

We come back to this idea again and again. Let’s get it. When we have a bias to action and DO things, we’re going to fall short of our goals. And, we need to know that’s awesome.

Speaking of awesome, here’s how [Tony Horton](#) puts it in [The Big Picture](#) (see Notes): “There’s nothing wrong with failing. In fact, failure needs a new name. ‘Failure’ should be renamed ‘awesome.’ Everyone loves awesome... Most folks think of failure as the opposite of success, but I beg to differ.

It’s like what Winston Churchill said: ‘Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.’ Failure and success are Siamese twins; they don’t exist without each other. There’s no way around it. The problem with the word ‘failure’ is that it connotes that you’re a

“At the d.school, one of the basic principles is a bias toward action: that is, it is better to start to do something and fail than it is to do nothing and wait for the correct path of action to appear. Failure is part of the result to expect if you have a bias toward action.”

~ Bernard Roth

"Nobody wants to fail, and yet we all do. Don't be afraid of failure. It is part of the price you pay for action; there's no need to sweep it under the rug and pretend it does not exist. The most liberating way to acknowledge failure is to celebrate it."

~ Bernard Roth

loser—and losers don't succeed or win or get the girl (or guy or pie or pot of gold or whatever it is you want to get). As a result, many people would rather play it safe, not take chances, not explore, and never, ever stick their neck out to actually try."

Any failures you need to reframe as awesomes?

Now a good time to do that?

P.S. I love the way Bernie frames the odds of success. If you're in that 2% who wind up succeeding, your chance of success is 100 percent. Hah. That's fantastic.

Reminds me of my Grandfather's wisdom to me 20 years ago when I was disheartened by the fact that only one out of hundreds of people would achieve a certain goal I found appealing at the time. "Sounds like great odds," he said. "How many of you are there?"

Here's to having a clear sense of what we *really* want, believing in our ability to make it happen and taking the smart, massive action in pursuit of that cherished goal.

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

Imagine you only have ten minutes to live. What would you do?

Imagine you only have ten days to live. What would you do?

Imagine you only have ten months to live. What would you do?

Imagine you only have ten years to live. What would you do?

Imagine you only have the rest of your life to live. What would you do?

Looking at your answers to these questions, you have a lot of information about yourself. In this exercise we are talking about your endgame. Can you think of any changes you would like to design into your self-image? Start designing and changing! None of the friends I just told you about knew when they would enter the final countdown. I don't know when mine will come, and you don't know yours either. One thing for sure—it is closer today than it was yesterday, and it will be closer still tomorrow. So now is the time to develop into the person you want to be."

Let's slow down to take a moment to reflect on this, shall we?

Imagine you only have ten minutes to live. What would you do?

I would _____

Imagine you only have ten days to live. What would you do?

I would _____

Imagine you only have ten months to live. What would you do?

I would _____

Imagine you only have ten years to live. What would you do?

I would _____

Imagine you only have the rest of your life to live. What would you do?

I would _____

Let's stop pretending we're going to live forever.

Now is the time to become the person we want to be!

"When you hold yourself in high esteem and keep a positive outlook on your future, others usually follow suit. By choosing the meaning we give to the people and things in our environment, ultimately we control our own experiences, no matter what work we are doing."

~ Bernard Roth

BEING THE CAUSE IN THE MATTER

"Being the 'cause in the matter' means taking full responsibility for whatever you're dealing with and whatever happens in your life, even when it seems that things are not totally in your control. It's a declaration of choice: instead of playing the role of passive protagonist in your life, choose to take charge of your future. Resolve to get things done, whatever it takes, and no matter how many valid 'reasons' pop up."

Being the cause in the matter.

At the end of the day, THIS is the keystone to creating a habit of achievement.

"Being the cause in the matter" is a phrase coined by Werner Erhard (creator of est and Landmark). This wisdom is echoed by all the great teachers.

[Stephen Covey](#) deemed it "Being Proactive" (vs. reactive) and made it the first of his [7 Habits](#) (see Notes). [Viktor Frankl](#) (see Notes on [Man's Search for Meaning](#)) told us there was a gap between stimulus and response and it is IN THAT GAP where we can choose our response that our freedom and growth lies. Psychologists tell us we can either have an internal locus of control (being the cause) or an external locus of control (being a passive effect).

We can be a creator or a victim. The choice is ours.

Here's to taking absolute responsibility for ourselves as we develop the habit of achievement and design our lives into the most wonderful creation imaginable!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of "The Achievement Habit"

BERNARD ROTH



Bernard Roth is one of the founders of the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford (the d.school) and is active in its development: currently, he serves as Academic Director. His design interests include organizing and presenting workshops on creativity, group interactions, and the problem solving process. Get the book [here](#).

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](#).