Running the Gauntlet

Essential Business Lessons to Lead, Drive Change, and Grow Profits

by Jeffrey Hayzlett

Grow or Die

Change is essential to your business’s success.

QUICK OVERVIEW

It’s hard enough to change yourself... but changing your organization or the way your business operates? That can seem almost impossible. With all the obstacles and naysayers that threaten to block innovation and change, Jeffrey Hayzlett explains in his new book that change can feel like running the gauntlet—with enemies lined up on either side of your path ready to beat and chastise you as you attempt to make it through alive and whole. Why go through all that hassle and abuse? Because change, as challenging and scary as it can be, is necessary for survival.

Sticking with the status quo may feel safe, but the reality is that if you are not relevant and adaptable, your company cannot grow in today’s marketplace. Running the Gauntlet examines how to make necessary, meaningful changes. In bite-sized chapters packed with real-life examples that relate to businesses of any size, Running the Gauntlet gives you the know-how and the courage to survive the trials of transformation so your company can thrive.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

What’s stopping you from making necessary changes in your business? Really think about it. If you need an assistant but have been putting off hiring one, ask yourself why. If you’ve been getting complaints about your customer service policy, why haven’t you already changed it?

The reason many of us don’t change—or wait longer than we should to change—isn’t because we don’t know what to do or how to do it. It’s often fear that stops us. We’re comforted by the known—even if the known isn’t that comfortable. How do you get past that fear? One recommendation Hayzlett makes is to be willing to be a beginner. Ask for help. Accept that you don’t know everything about a new process, company, teams or situation and be willing to learn. In all likeliness, someone you know—or at least know of—has
traveled a similar path before you. So ask for advice. Watch what they do. Study their habits and systems. And then adapt their knowledge to your situation.

Stop thinking you have to know it all before you begin. Be willing to be a beginner.

We were meeting in that conference room again—the conference room, the one with the clock on the wall that had been wrong for months and that annoyed everyone in the room, including me. But I wasn’t about to change it myself.

Okay, I’m sure it seems strange to start a book about change with a story about refusing to change something, but bear with me.

You see, I could have changed the time. I’m 6’3”. I could have just reached up, opened the face, and moved the hands. But I wasn’t just annoyed at the clock anymore. I had decided to wait and see how long it would take for someone else in the room to act once everyone became aware of the problem. After all, a crucial first step in implementing change is being aware there is a problem. And sure enough, the team became aware. Every single time my team had a meeting in that conference room, someone said, “That clock is off. I wish someone would change it.” But then I listened in amazement as the team just talked how to do it to death.

This time, after one too many discussions about why the clock was off, how to approach it, and how to go about requisitioning a change from Building Services, I had had enough. I challenged them. “Who has the guts to change it? Why doesn’t one of you just get up there and change the clock and get it done rather than talking and waiting for someone else in the company to fix it?”

That’s how change in business gets started: someone sees a need, takes the challenge personally, and acts. And that clock story sums up the problem with change, too: it takes too long for people to see the need and even longer for them to act—or for leaders to determine who should take action and motivate them to do it. Too often, we all need a push.

I believe most leaders and employees know when their old ways of doing business must change or their businesses will die, yet they don’t act. They have the ability to enact big changes, but too often they just don’t. Maybe they can’t see what needs to be done. Maybe they are scared of mistakes or failure. Maybe they refuse to hold themselves accountable and take responsibility. Maybe change seems too hard, and they’re too tired. But change won’t ever come passively through attrition, delegation, or waiting around for someone else to take responsibility.

So, how do you learn to act like an agent of change? How do you get your employees to buy into the changes you need? How do you change your business in a charismatic, effective way that instills enthusiasm and results in profits? The same way I do: you get up in business. If something sucks, get rid of it. If it isn’t working, change it, and own those things. Refuse to tolerate problems and passivity. Period.

For business leaders, being on the frontier of change every day feels like you’re running the gauntlet. A threatening and hostile environment surrounds you on all sides. Your business life depends on your stamina and survival skills. Naysayers, opportunists, obstructionists, and even partners and employees will balk, bicker, and fight. They will let you down; others will try to destroy you, both covertly and overtly. All this on top of the challenge of getting yourself motivated to see your changes all the way through to success.

Are you ready? Go!

I’m ready. As you’ll hear me say throughout this book: at least when you’re running the gauntlet in business, no one is going to die. So, as I like to say, “Cowboy up or go sit in the truck!” Let’s run the gauntlet and develop a “takeover mentality” for your business together.

Fear stops most people

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Finally, one of them said, “You’re right.” She pulled a chair over, climbed up, and moved the hands. Done.

FEAR STOPS MOST PEOPLE

Change agents welcome it. Get past your fear. Act with confidence and be willing to be a beginner.

You stand in the way of a winning attitude when you refuse to stretch yourself to be a beginner. You’ll go into everything
Thinking you know the answers. All that does is prevent leaders from being surprised by what the answers will be. And I want to be surprised. I like being surprised. Being a beginner simply means, “I have experience. I have confidence. But I admit I don’t know everything, and this [company, project, or team] is new to me,” be a blank slate and listen, look, and learn. Ask stupid questions and know that it is okay. No one is going to die.

Being willing to be a beginner is how you get past your “three seconds of fear.” Three seconds: that’s the difference between doing something and not doing it.

After all, leaders learn quickly that many of the changes they seek won’t be right the first time (beginner’s luck notwithstanding). That’s the first test of this attitude: adjust and try to be better, or stop and say that we tried and it did not work. When I started playing rugby, my team didn’t know anything. We lost our first game 80-0. The other team made fun of us. It was awful. But none of us walked away. We realized that we were still learning and we needed to adjust. For example, I learned just how slow I was that first game: they measured my speed with a calendar. So I took a different approach: I played up my size and gave dastardly and aggressive looks. I growled and beat my head on the ground. I pretended I was a buffalo and gnawed at the grass. I did everything to convince them I was crazy. And the first guy still crushed me. But I stuck with it and resolved along with the team to get it right or be mediocre at best. We won that game.

That’s what a winning attitude and a willingness to be a beginner is all about.
CHANGE THE MOOD, CHANGE THE CULTURE

I was riding the subway in New York City one afternoon when a sixty-something gentleman sat down across from me. At first glance, he looked successful—nice tie, jacket, and slacks; a distinguished head of white hair. But then I began to process the details. Everything about this guy read success... ten or twenty years ago. Today his look read “better days behind me.” His shirt and tie may have been expensive when he bought them, but now they were frayed and spotted. His pants and jacket were worn, if not threadbare, in places. He needed a haircut and a more careful shave.

Did I know this man? It doesn’t matter. I made the same assessment of him that your employees, customers, and vendors make of you, your employees and your business every day. Sure, there could be any number of reasons for this guy’s state. None of those reasons matter to me. This is not personal, just as it is not personal to your people or your customers if your business looks and feels like this guy.

And don’t start talking to me about “character.” I love character. Not everywhere of course. Pub: good. Character is part of a pub’s brand promise. Hospital: no thank you—I want everything about it to scream clean and healthy. Don’t start talking to me about “being comfortable,” either. There is a big difference between dressing to be comfortable and looking like the human equivalent of peeling paint—a memory of something that had once been fresh and neat. I like being comfortable, but it’s easy to get so comfortable that you ignore the problems. It happens to all of us, but when you start to change, and then again when things are growing and going well, so you don’t get too comfortable. Don’t let the phrase “that’s the way it is” resign you to mediocrity and your business coffin.

Too many businesses just don’t care or can’t or won’t see presentation as important and take action to change it. Yet I can tell most of what’s wrong with a business by walking around the place and sizing up the energy of its people.

Put simply, bad mood can ruin a company faster than bad business. I hear leaders talk about changing the culture of a business, and I say fine, but the most important thing you can do is start by changing the mood. When you change the mood, you change the attitude and take the right steps toward changing the culture. Mood makes your place and your people feel that the business’s best days are in front of it, and your conditions of satisfaction demand that.

Accept and Encourage Mistakes!

Don’t let perfect get in the way of the good—you’re not perfect, so don’t believe that anyone else can or has to be. In fact, in this imperfect world, no mistake will cost you unless it’s unacknowledged and uncorrected, or un-encouraged. Yes, I said un-encouraged. I believe that if you have the right people in the right positions, mistakes will mostly be of two types:

Inescapable errors. Acknowledge and correct these to create awareness and team play. They are useful early in the chance process in finding out whether you have a team that is responsible and accountable and capable of driving the change you need. Can you get ahead with the team you have? What are its weaknesses?

Missteps that come from thinking big and trying to grow bigger. Acknowledge and encourage them; they indicate a willingness to go for opportunities and not play it safe, refusing to resign oneself to mediocrity. Who wants bland? Go for it! Do you need more people or skilled technicians to help you do this?

Look at the mistakes your team members make and how they handle them to answer questions and to help you assess what your team can do and where you need new blood.
Using Social Media—Well

Just because social media makes everyone a tweet away, do not assume you are connected and using social media well. I imagine almost anyone reading this has a website, Facebook page, Twitter and LinkedIn accounts, and a blog. Can you tell me the difference between the conversations and interactions you have there?

- LinkedIn is like your storefront on Main Street, where people like to browse.
- Blogs are like a public diary on any topic you want posted on bulletin boards all over town.
- Facebook is like a living room where you can have longer and deeper kinds of conversations and interactions, but to do so, you need to sit down and stay for a while.
- Twitter is like your front porch-cum-cocktail party, where quick and easy conversations happen and people tell people what other people said.

Each of these social media sites has generally accepted practices, and you and your company can say and post anything you want as long as you stay within the scope of those practices and are transparent about why you are there. There’s nothing wrong with selling something if your followers expected that. But if they follow you for friendship and you send them solicitations? That’s bad form. You can do it, but you will not be invited back. And once you’re out there, don’t forget to listen, too.

work in jeans or business casual, or wear suits as long as the look is neat and it fits the brand promise, and makes them feel good. This includes you—set the example.

The same thing is true in your business; if it looks disorganized and disheveled, it probably is. Remember: it can’t be cool and look like Elmer Fudd! At the very least, addressing presentation companywide ensures that your people know you are paying attention.

Be relentless in driving the change you want in your people and all parts of your business. Be the change you want to see in the world.

Changing the mood in your business can lead to success. And if it doesn’t, you will at least have fun as you go down! But you are sure to go down if you don’t constantly and consistently drive the changes you want to see throughout your business and empower your people to live and execute them in everything they do. Of course, changes are hardest to implement when you’re dealing with deeply ingrained ways of doing business.

The higher the quality of your service, the more impact you will have, so make it exceptional.

MAKE CUSTOMER SERVICE A PRIORITY

In its 2011 national survey on customer service, Consumer Reports found that people still wanted to talk to a human to deal with service issues.

- The survey found that 71 percent of respondents were “tremendously annoyed” when they couldn’t reach a human on the phone, and 56 percent felt that way about having to take multiple phone steps to reach the right place.

- Not surprising, right? These days, instant service on the phone seems to happen only when you call a local or small business, which is a real competitive advantage for those businesses—if you are one, don’t screw it up!

- Customers care about how you respond and treat them before, during and after the sale. Sure, customers who eat at a buffet can’t expect to get great service, too. We all love getting a great deal at a big-box store, but we often pay for it again when there is a problem. Customers need to understand that, just like diners at a restaurant, if they want service on a real plate at a table, they have to pay for it. They are paying for that ongoing attention. And if they have paid for it, you’d better give it to them. Again, smaller businesses have an advantage here—don’t screw it up!

- Ultimately it comes down to this: if you care about what you sell and service, customers will care about you. The higher the quality of your service, the more impact you will have, so make it exceptional. Leaders must do what they need to do in order to understand what their customers are experiencing and stay on top of all their customer service “fronts” by going undercover. Make inquiries, order your products online, test the systems. Keep an eye on what works and what needs to change. Address the problems. Repeat. There is always room to grow.
ACTION STEPS

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned to your life. Here are a few thoughts, questions and activities to get you started.

1. List three obvious changes you need to make in the way you approach your business. What’s stopping you from making them?
2. Who are the people that threaten to keep you from making necessary changes? How can you either convince them to change or remove yourself from their regular influence?
3. Take an honest evaluation of your personal presentation. How do you show up your customers and team members?
4. What can you do to improve your team or company’s image?
5. What aspects, other than physical presentation, may be affecting the mood of your team or company? What can you do to address those issues?
6. Do you have a customer service policy?
7. Ask five customers for their honest feedback on the service they receive from you and your company. Fix what isn’t working.

About the Author

Jeffrey Hayzlett leads The Hayzlett Group, an international strategic business consulting company catering to high-growth businesses. He is a popular keynote speaker and business leader who focuses on helping companies thrive through change.

Hayzlett has appeared on Fox Business News, MSNBC’s Your Business and NBC’s Celebrity Apprentice with Donald Trump. He is the author of the best-selling The Mirror Test. Despite a passion and marked proficiency for business and consulting, Hayzlett is a cowboy at heart and is known to wear his cowboy boots even when he travels beyond the borders of his home state of South Dakota.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed this summary of Running the Gauntlet, you may also enjoy:

- Poke the Box by Seth Godin
- EntreLeadership by Dave Ramsey
- Great by Choice by Jim Collins and Morten T. Hansen