

Lessons in Aligned Performance

CHASING SUCCESS



Dr. Alok Trivedi

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Author Dr. Alok Trivedi

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Website: Draloktrivedi.com

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Sincerely,
Dr. Alok Trivedi

Introduction

To the reader,

My obsession for understanding life began at the age of five. Growing up in an East Indian home I found my identity through Eastern ways of thought. Living in Toronto, Canada, I saw myself through the lens of the traditions and values that were driven from a country so far away.

As I grew older I saw that life didn't have to be that way and there was a different way of thinking. I began to see the world from a different vantage point, almost to the point that I began to negate my previous self as many people do in today's society.

It wasn't until I began to see the world from both philosophical positions that I began to really understand who I was—a merger of worlds and life without barriers, and more importantly a life without labels.

The idea of Chasing Success came as I saw people in the East constantly searching for this everlasting nirvana and spirituality. It seemed that the greater their dedication to spirituality, the further they perceived themselves to be successful; until it became an obsession to find greater levels of so called peace. For many, this equaled a successful life.

Where in the West, the idea of materialism and a fast-paced world created success. Materialism, more money, more power, and more success equaled a successful life. Yet for many, including celebrities, this leads to chaos and destruction of their lives.

Where is the success in either of these vantage points? It wasn't until I saw the world through both lenses when things began to make sense. This book can be classified as a personal leadership book—a performance book. I tend to consider it a book to help you achieve alignment, which to me is about finding yourself and living and performing from that state.

I hope that you find this book enjoyable and that it allows you to think about things a little differently than you did before reading it. It is my humble request that you honor yourself, because only then will you impact the world.

Chapter One

“Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.”

– Norman Cousins

“If you were to die tomorrow, how would you spend today?” He had asked, not too long ago. The question rolled over in my mind as I gazed down at the coffin. I didn't have an answer for him then, and I still didn't, standing at his funeral and far too late to give my answer. The acrid smell of incense settled in the temple, burning my throat.

“I'm so sorry, Shah,” I whispered, unable to stop the tear tracking its way slowly down my cheek. The crush of people waiting for their moment behind me made me feel foolish; I thought he would be alone in the end, when I received notice of his funeral a few days before. I felt sure that I would be the lone representative, holding a prayer over him as he was laid to rest. His life as a park vendor did not, after all, lead to greatness. With tentative fingers I touched the edge of his coffin, overcome by how little I knew about him.

Sighing, I whispered, “I thought being here would somehow be enough.”

Arriving at the temple moments ago, I found myself faced with an unexpected throng of people. My black suit jacket made me feel much more out of place than I realized alongside the other mourners wearing the traditional white clothing befitting this kind of funeral. I considered turning back, vanishing without a backward glance. But Shah had

meant more to me than to justify that behavior. I had to push my way into the building, garnering more than a few angry glares. But I made my way through, and there I was, insistent upon paying my last respects. The words of our final conversation played over again in my mind.

“Because if you live your days in any way other than how you would choose to spend your last, then you do not live for yourself.” He had laughed, as he poured the tea.

“I don’t understand that,” I said reaching for the tea. “Not even a little bit, Shah.”

Since moving to Chicago, I have not been a part of the community as much as my parents would have wanted me to be. The view, as I walked up the sidewalk, of so many people—none of which knew me—gave me a crashing awareness of how little I actually knew about Shah. To me, he had been nothing more than a park vendor, an extremely wise and self-aware park vendor, but nothing more, nonetheless.

At last, I stepped away from the coffin and allowed the next person to step forward. I joined the outer edges of the crowd, finding myself searching for faces I may recognize. Every eye in the room seemed to bore into me, standing out from the crowd. Not one face appeared of those I had seen with him at the park. No one struck a familiarity, at least not right away. The heady scent of ceremonial incense wafted in a thin, white veil over the crowd.

I recalled the first time I spoke with him. I had seen him in passing countless times, without a glance. He always smiled and handed out treats, a crowd of eager, happy children surrounding him like the Pied Piper. His booth was as much a part of the park as the large trees surrounding the path. I cannot recall exactly when we developed the

habit of a friendly wave each time I passed; his wide grin accompanying a toss of his hand my way. I returned this gesture, of course, with a perfunctory nod. Every now and then, I had seen one of the other joggers purchasing an energy drink from him, something he sold alongside the standard offering of kebobs.

Settling in against the wall, hidden by the crowd, I felt hollow inside, empty, a deeper part of me grasping and searching again for that which evaded me. The pang pierces me as my glance landed once more on the deceased. I wondered, should I die, would my expression would be quite as serene as his? There were equal parts of humility, gratitude, and grief wrestling for a place in the hollow cavern inside my chest.

A few of the inhabitants turned towards me with some curiosity. My choice of dress was so unlike theirs. I am a black clad American in a sea of tradition. Leaning against the side wall to watch the remainder of the ceremony, I could see the Pujari over the heads of the reverent gathered, placing the ornaments alongside the body and wafting the incense over the upturned, silent faces. I felt more alone than I ever had in a long while.

“They are not doing a cremation,” I heard spoken close by from one woman to another. “The family wishes to have him interred at the cemetery.”

“That is rare,” the other woman replied.^[1]

The crowd began to move around and low voices broke the silence, marking the end of the ceremony. I felt puzzled at the presence of those around me, once more experiencing a bit of ownership over the man. *It makes no sense*, I thought, *that he would be surrounded by these people, none of which I had heard him mention during*

our many discussions. I pushed my way towards the two women.

“Excuse me,” I interrupted. “Where will they bury him?”

They both turned and faced me with raised eyebrows, taken aback most likely, by my brusque approach. It was not intended, but my desire for knowledge outweighed my ability to maintain a politeness appropriate to the occasion.

“Where?” I asked again. “Where will they take his body?”

A young man I had never seen before, made his way towards me through the crowd. I remained facing him, keeping our eyes locked and acknowledging that it is me he is seeking. The broad shoulders and firm step created a sense of ownership and dominance. I matched his position, with the slight adjustment of tilting back my shoulders.

“You were asking questions about Mr. Naahn?” he said, after arriving within earshot. His speech was relaxed but his gaze remained steady.

“Yes, I was,” I replied placing my hand over my heart and flicking my gaze towards the woman standing behind him. “I did not mean to upset anyone. Perhaps the emotion of the day affected my intention. I merely wanted to know where I could go to pay my respects in the future.”

“Who are you,” he demanded. “Why are you here?”

“I’m a friend of Shah’s,” I insisted. Surely I had been mentioned to this man, whoever he might be.

“How do you know him?” His brow furrowed and his eyes blazed.

“He’s the park vendor. I used to meet with him!” The intensity in my voice attracted a few more glances in the still reverent crowd milling around us. I ignored them,

focusing on the upstart before me. “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m his son!”

The young man drew up his posture. Once more I was overcome with the realization of how little I knew about my old mentor. What an insignificant part of his life I must have been, after all. All this time I thought I had known Shah, I had thought of myself as the greater of the two of us, that I was reaching from my position in life to one of the lower caste. This uniquely American idea—that we could all be aligned equally—had me thinking that I had somehow elevated him with my presence in his humble life. With a slow and painful dawning, I realized how much of this had been arrogance on my part.

Earlier in the week, the day I found out about his death, the hollow feeling in my chest did nothing for my frame of mind.

My wife, Nikki, came to mind. Ex-wife now, I guess. For a brief moment, I considered calling her, already knowing this would not be a good idea. There was really no point in going there. I turned on my computer before heading to the kitchen for a protein shake.

There was no one to call.

Flipping through the names in my phone, I realized that every name there was someone from work, older numbers, including the people we used to spend time with before the divorce; our “couple-friends”, as my wife called them. Most of them had veered out of my life over the last year. Nothing intentional, of course. It always starts with the wide-eyed “Let’s get together sometime soon.”

And then, maybe even if the offer is taken. Showing up to the dinner party, only after careful deliberation on

whether or not *she* might be there (“Not this time. She sends her regrets,” they say). You sit there, watching all the couples around you, realizing that without that common glue to hold down the awkward conversation, your wife’s friends are just that—your wife’s friends.

And then a couple more weeks go by and maybe you run into them in the grocery store. They smile, forcing the expression into their eyes. You smile back. Idle chit chat, and then “Let’s get together sometime soon.” This time, both knowing you are just reciting lines and playing the part. And just like that, we walk out of each other’s lives as easily as stepping across the sensors to the automatic doors into the oppressive heat of the grocery store parking lot.

I had no one to call.

I wondered if I only went to the funeral to sooth my own wounded ego, instead of doing it for him. I fully expected no one to be there. Maybe a few stragglers from the park. I could not have been more wrong.

Chapter Two

Three Years Prior

“There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires.”

– Nelson Mandela

“You’ve got to come with us,” boomed Frank Benjamin, company President, as he clapped me on the shoulder with his broad hand. Everyone else filtered out of the board room, chatting and smiling as the meeting came to an end.

In my pocket, my cell phone buzzed and I knew it was my wife calling.

“Tonight might not be good for me,” I replied.

“What’s going on?” Dave popped up next to us with his typical smiling, eager expression. I had just received a nod of consideration for the VP slot, which usually included an outing with higher ups, lots of kissing up, and a late-night home to an angry spouse.

“Our boy here is dragging his feet about celebrating his big step up in life,” Benjamin bellowed with a hefty chortle. Dave rolled his eyes, matching our boss’s demeanor and mood.

“Oh, come on, Kumar! You’re the man of the hour. You have to come out with us.” And just like that, Dave managed to get himself invited, almost without anyone else noticing him doing so. He had been sniffing at my boot heels for years. I found it par for the course.

“So what’s it going to be, then? Sushi or lobster?” Benjamin asked with an affable grin.

“Gentlemen,” I replied, holding the still-buzzing phone between us. “If you will excuse me. I need to take this.”

I stepped into the hallway and answered.

“What time will you be home?” The still voice of my wife asked on the other end.

“I don’t know if I’ll make it by dinner. Benjamin wants me to go out to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?” The slight tremor, only detectable by someone who knew it well, indicated her unhappiness.

“That’s the good news at least. I’m on the short list for the VP slot.”

“I thought you said you would take your name out of consideration for that.”

“I know, I know, Nikki. I did say that.”

“So what changed?”

Good question. The truth was, I still wanted it. Having joined Green Point as a salesman fresh out of college, I considered it my obligation to work my way up, schmoozing and rubbing elbows at company picnics. Frank Benjamin had noticed my numbers, taken me in under his wing early in the game, and readied the path for me. I didn’t just get lucky. I had earned this. She had to understand. I earned it. I deserved it.

“You didn’t tell them. Did you?” she demanded.

“Nikki, you know this would look good for me. This would change a lot for us if I got chosen for it. I’m doing this for you and the kids. You know that.”

“The kids need you here. They don’t care one bit how much money you are making. They just want their dad home for dinner, Kumar. They need you. I need you too.”

“I can’t say no to this Nikki. It would look good for me to do a little bit of schmoozing.”

“Fine. You’re right. This would be good for us, I guess. I’ll figure out something to tell the kids. They’ll be disappointed, but I am sure they’ll understand. I’ll see you when you get home. I love you.”

“I love you too, Nikki.”

A faint click and she was gone. I turned towards the men exiting the meeting room and tried to add some sincerity to the smile on my face. I had the privilege of joining the merry men on one of their promotion outings before, and I wondered how much Benjamin was motivated by his desire to eat expensive meals and drinks on the company dime. Every time someone made partner or got a promotion within the higher levels it was the same old song and dance.

Within the hour, I found myself sitting in front of an expansive table of sushi, ranging from Maki rolls to expertly sliced sashimi, scrolling by on the lazy conveyer belt. The phone call with Nikki had left a bad taste in my mouth, but Benjamin pushed the Sake towards me with a knowing grin and slowly, any lingering misgivings were erased.

“I’m liking you, Kumar,” he told me, as he gave me a strong pat on the back. “It’s pretty remarkable what you have managed to pull off during your time at the company.”

“Do you think so?” I said with a grin.

“Are you kidding?” His boisterous laugh gathered glances from nearby tables. “Going from the sales floor to sitting at the edge of VP in three short years? I’d say that’s pretty remarkable.”

The night stretched out before me. Plates came and went, serving up to us the formidable delicacies created

by the white-clad sushi chef standing before us. I found myself pushing the idea of Nikki out of my mind, justifying the path that appeared before me. I could've called her to come get me. I could've called a taxi. I could've grabbed Dave and talked him into ducking out with me, but none of those felt like the right thing to do. I was, after all, indebted to Benjamin—the President of the company. If I wanted my life to change, I had to stay on his good side.

“What do you do?” an attractive woman nearby asked, as she stroked her painted fingertips up and down the plastic stir straw.

“Vice President at Green Point,” I replied. It was almost true, at least.

Dave, Benjamin and I had moved to a bar—a dimly lit, low key room filled with modern sculptures and smiling movie posters. The perfumed lady, with glossy lips and smoky eyes, had made her way over, perched next to me and leaned in, close enough that the curve of her shoulder pressed against my arm. Her rapt attention felt pretty good, if I were to admit the truth to myself. I couldn't help it. Her heavily mascaraed eyes looked at me in a way which Nikki had not in a long time and it sparked something in me.

“Ooh,” she purred. Her eyes narrowed and she stroked the smooth surface of the bar with her lacquered nails. “That sounds fascinating.”

Dave returned to the table, slid in next to the girl by me, casted a wicked grin my way, and patted me on the shoulder.

The phone buzzed again, but I ignored it. The call could go to voice mail.

Chapter Three

“True greatness consists in being great in little things.”
– Charles Simmons

The morning came and went without much more discussion. I walked through my day in a fog, only partially brought on by the previous night out. Nikki had managed to avoid me for the duration of the morning, her ambivalence masked by the hustle and bustle of getting the kids fed, ready for school and out the door. She gave me a frosty glare but snapped towards me the perfunctory “Love you!” before vanishing out the door.

Work crept by, minute by minute.

“Here man,” Dave said, appearing at my door with a Gatorade.

“Thanks.”

He sat down in the chair across from my desk, and I swung away from the computer screen, rubbing my thumbs against my temples.

“Anything important?” he asked.

“Finance reports. So, no.” I cracked the seal of the drink and tilted it back, the cool bitter liquid doing much too little to pacify my headache.

“Man, that was some serious celebrating last night,” Dave exclaimed. “You must be a shoe in for that VP slot.”

“I guess so.” In retrospect, the whole scene struck me as ridiculous. The falseness of the exchange between the dull eyed bar patrons. Maybe it had been the expression on Dave's face, the maniacal grin and leering side glances,

making whatever assumptions he was capable of. I downed my drink and tossed the empty bottle into the can behind my desk.

“You know what, Dave,” I said, standing and picking up my jacket off the back of my chair. “I think I’m going to knock out early.”

“Hey, yeah. Okay.” He stood and slowly stepped out of my office. He looked a bit disappointed that I had not picked up the bait about whatever it was he had wanted to talk about. All I wanted to do was to get out and get some fresh air. On most days, I could handle Dave and his annoyances, but not today.

“Oh, hey!” Dave called out to me as I brushed past him into the hallway. “I almost forgot to tell you. Benjamin wants you to come by his office.”

“Alright, thanks,” I replied out loud, while I thought to myself, *great*.

I hung a right towards the boss’s corner office and walked through the large, glass double doors leading into the entryway where his secretary sat, a plump lady with a modest low bun and an easy smile.

“Oh, Hello Kumar,” she said as I entered.

“How are you, Cynthia?” I asked as I offered her a small smile.

“I’ll let Mr. Benjamin know you are here.” She pressed a few buttons, and moments later, he appeared, holding open one of the oak double doors to his private office, waving me in.

“Come in, my boy, come in!” He looked no worse for the wear. His face held the usual ruddiness and his demeanor appeared large and dominating, as usual. Here was a man who liked to indulge, and may have been already; I caught

a faint whiff of gin as I walked passed him. He sat down at his desk and methodically began to unbutton his sleeves with his large fingers. I didn’t feel particularly worried, but I nodded and settled in for one of his speeches.

“My boy, I don’t want you to worry about this whole VP thing,” he said taking his jacket off. “Truth is, you’re the best candidate for the position.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“There is one bit of business that I want you to go through before we make it official. Nothing to worry about. Not even a little bit. But the Board of Directors insists this is just part of the vetting process. Red tape, really. Nothing more.”

“What is it, sir?” I asked, growing uneasy as he spoke.

“Take a look at this.” He reached across his desk and handed me a business card. “Some of the board members think it might be a good idea if you give this guy a visit.”

I examined the stiff paper between my fingers. It contained a name, address and phone number. Nothing more. “Mr. Benjamin. I’m not sure I understand what this is about.”

“I suppose,” he replied leaning back and lacing his fingers together behind his head. “You could say this guy is kind of a business adviser.”

“Do you think that is something I need, sir?” If I were to be honest with myself, it bruised my ego to have this given to me right before this promotion. Why couldn’t he just push it through?

“It’s not up to me, Kumar. The board needs it done. I don’t know what it’s about, but the guy’s supposed to give you some kind of sign off. It sounds like a bunch of nonsense to me, but apparently this guy has helped a couple