



## Do Leaders Need Luck to Succeed?

*By Steve Tobak*

If you've been around long enough, you're probably aware that most important things in life come about seemingly by accident, chance, or coincidence. Discovering what you were meant to do, meeting your spouse, finding an incredibly unique opportunity or a great job, that sort of thing.

Well, those events are not as random as you might think. Certain behavioral attributes increase the probability of these "happy accidents" occurring. And not only are these characteristics of successful people, they are, I believe, learnable or teachable.

First, here are some examples of what I'm talking about - how important things happen seemingly by accident - followed by five enabling characteristics of successful people:

**Steve Jobs** returned to **Apple** as part of its acquisition of **NeXT**. A year later, Jobs was once again running the company he co-founded and cleaning house. Eventually, the stars aligned for the greatest turnaround in business history. But Jobs returning to Apple was nobody's grand design. It just *sort of happened that way*.

The way **Bill Gates** and **Microsoft** came to develop and own the rights to **IBM's** PC operating system is so far-fetched you couldn't make it up. Gates had been working on a programming language for IBM. When IBM mentioned needing an operating system, Gates referred them to **Digital Research**, but CEO **Gary Kindall** left negotiations to his wife, who wouldn't sign IBM's non-disclosure agreement. So IBM went back to Gates, who bought QDOS from a Seattle company and sold it to IBM while retaining exclusive licensing rights. You know the rest.

Yesterday I watched an interview with **Rivers Cuomo**, founder of alternative rock band **Weezer**. Cuomo described an 18-month stint working as a clerk





for **Tower Records** as the transformative event that completely changed the way he thought about music. After that, he formed Weezer and the rest is history.

In [Unusual Origins of 15 Innovative Companies](#), we saw that lots of great companies started out making products that had nothing to do with what they eventually became known for. **American Express** was an express mail company, **3M** mined a mineral, **Nokia** was a paper mill, and **Toyota** made looms. Somehow, leaders of these companies *found a way* to achieve greatness.

As for me, everything that's ever mattered in my life happened pretty much by accident. Meeting my wife, discovering the high-tech industry, a whole bunch of great job opportunities, even blogging for CNET and then BNET, were all chance events that essentially fell in my lap. Or did they?

Of course, none of this stuff happened purely by chance. Everyone involved in the above events had certain characteristics that ultimately weighed heavily on their actions and ultimate success. To me, it boils down to five attributes:

## 5 Characteristics That Enable *Accidental* Success

1. **Being opportunistic.** That means taking advantage of opportunities as they arise, including a willingness to act boldly and decisively and to take risks without overanalyzing possible outcomes. Successful invention requires a lot of trial and error. That's the mindset of an entrepreneur.
2. **Ability to network, schmooze, persuade.** Not social networking, but old school networking. In fact, the actual definition of *schmooze* is "*to converse informally, to chat, or to chat in a friendly and persuasive manner especially so as to gain favor, business, or connections.*" That's what opens doors.
3. **Having a can-do attitude.** You can be presented with all the opportunities in the world, but if you're a negatron - always seeing the glass half empty, the fly in the ointment, why it can't or shouldn't be done - you'll never capitalize on any of it. You'll be the guy who's always saying, "I almost [fill in the blank]; I don't know what went wrong."
4. **Being genuine and open.** Some people think BSers and those who sugarcoat the truth or tell people what they want to hear get ahead. Now *that's* BS.





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Smart, successful people are attracted to those who are genuine and open. Being genuine entices others to open up and share their thoughts and feelings.

**5. Being inquisitive or searching for answers, how things work, a place in the world.** This characteristic is difficult to explain or quantify, but I think it comes down to a genuine need to figure things out, understand how things work, or do something important. It drives certain people and, one thing's for sure: we don't stop until we find what we're looking for.

