

breakthrough

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Creating a **Break**
through

**“One grows or dies.
There is no third possibility.”**

OSWALD SPENGLER

By Patrick O’Neill

Story continued inside...

CREATING A BREAKTHROUGH

Story continued from front cover

“Most people are not really free. They are confined by the niche in the world that they carve out for themselves. They limit themselves to fewer possibilities by the narrowness of their vision.”

V.S. NAIPAUL, NOBEL LAUREATE

Creating Breakthrough

Steve Podborski, the first North American downhill skier to win the World Cup, provided me a valuable education during a period when we worked together on behalf of a client. It was my job to prepare him for his duties as a corporate spokesperson. Even though he was far more experienced than I was, he was an open and enthusiastic student. “Please feel free to coach and correct me,” he explained. “That’s how I improve.”



PATRICK O’NEILL

Podborski was the most successful Canadian man in Alpine history! He was a charter member of the Crazy Canucks, won an Olympic Bronze medal, eight downhill, was an Officer of the Order of Canada, and had been inducted into the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame, and Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame.

His request for coaching made a lasting impression on me. Despite his fame and success, he wanted to grow and improve, to create a breakthrough. I don’t know if anything I said to him at the time was particularly useful to a seasoned veteran, but I came away from that encounter committed to continuous learning and growth.

Since that fateful conversation, I have encountered many other Olympic athletes, executives, professionals, homemakers, teachers, and clergy who were also lifelong learners. Despite the differences in their ages, personalities and occupations, they all share a common desire for personal growth. And they all have a healthy relationship with two key concepts: *breakthrough* and *breakdown*.

A *breakthrough* is a major advance in thinking, action or relationship. We know we have experienced a breakthrough when we have gone beyond what we believe to be possible. A breakthrough is not incremental gain. It is the experience of removing or surpassing an obstruction or barrier that restricts performance. In common parlance, people often say that they have “gone to another level” when reporting a breakthrough.

Breakdown is the collapse of a set of assumptions or beliefs that give rise to our action strategies. When breakdown occurs, we are forced to reevaluate how we approach tasks and relationships because something in our philosophy, reasoning or execution is faulty. Breakdown is not disaster. It is a necessary part of experimentation, a foundation for learning.

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR BREAKTHROUGH

Achieving a breakthrough requires tenacity, hard work, and the capacity to remain open and committed in the face of “failed experiments.” We must master three competencies to generate a breakthrough: *vision*, *planning* and *discipline*.

VISION

Every breakthrough begins with a vision. Vision is the ability to imagine the result that you want to create for yourself at home or work in advance of it occurring. This requires the ability to examine possibilities from a realistic perspective. It is an act of self-sabotage to set expectations for ourselves that are either too low or that we could never possibly attain. For example, even though I might want to be a rock star, there are some realities that might prevent me from succeeding. Lack of musical training is certainly one barrier. Starting late is another: while I am a little younger than the Rolling Stones, woefully, it’s not by much. But all of that does not preclude me from learning to play an instrument well. That would be a breakthrough.

Vision is a catalyst for growth and positive change. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, of the Harvard Business School, suggests, “A vision is not just a picture of what could be; it is an appeal to our better selves, a call to become something more.” One means of appealing to our better self is through inquiry.

Vision is stimulated by asking questions like:

- **What would be a major advance for me in my work at this time?**
- **In relationships?**
- **In my family?**
- **In community service?**
- **In personal development?**
- **In health and well-being?**

For a vision to be clear, one must devote time to imagining it. This is easy work if we have a lot of passion for it. We dream about the vision for a breakthrough day and night. Without passion, clarity is difficult work. Many people resist clarity because once we have it we are obliged to act. For some, it is far easier to be complacent than to actively pursue a dream.

It is not necessary to have your whole vision premeditated. As a matter of fact, it might be counterproductive. Sometimes, we can waste valuable time thinking about our dreams and aspirations ad nauseam rather than taking action. Conversely, we might be arrested by terror should we see the full magnitude of our vision! It may be an act of mercy for us to see just enough of it to get started and not so much of it that we feel incapable, insufficient or overwhelmed in living up to its promise.

“It is not enough to take steps which may some day lead to a goal; each step must be a goal and a step likewise.”

GOETHE

PLANNING

Once we have some clarity, careful planning is required to generate a breakthrough. Most athletes use creative visualization as a discipline for planning and peak performance. I have witnessed elite freestyle skiers visualize the aerial jump they are about to make over and over in their mind's eye, even simulating some of the body positions they must perform in advance of the jump. Once they are satisfied that they have preconditioned success by picturing it in detail, they move into action. We can learn something about high performance from this approach. Taking the time necessary to look at each step in advance, picturing it in detail, supports effective action that leads to a breakthrough.

One such approach to planning that has proven very effective is the 90-Day Action Plan. The basic premise is simple. Looking at the first 90 days of your vision, what are the most important steps you will need to take for success? Whose help will you need

to accomplish each step? What resources will you require (time, budget, people, skills, learning)? How will you measure success? Now, what do the next 90 days look like? You would continue planning this way until you have reached the completion of the breakthrough or have completed one full year of action plans.

DISCIPLINE

The third component, and equal in importance to vision and planning is discipline. The Latin word *discipulus* means, “to be a learner.” Discipline is the marriage of sound methodology and will power. It provides the means to translate vision to action. As a young person, I was suspicious of discipline, equating it with the loss of personal freedom and spontaneity. Later, and probably to the immense relief of my parents, I began to see that my relationship with discipline was immature and counterproductive. Discipline provides a framework for effective and efficient action. It is a true pathway to breakthrough results. Rather than limit freedom and heartfelt action, it supports it.

The elements of discipline include *concentration, tenacity, experimentation, consistency* and *fortitude*.

Author Piero Ferucci writes:

“The goal is not for the weak. It is not for those who remain on the surface or for those who give up easily. Nor is it for those who are content with little, or those who already think they have the solution.

The goal is discovery... In order to reach the goal one must use all of one's resources. One must struggle with passion and challenge the impossible. And all this means discipline.

Lack of discipline invites disorder to undermine vision, planning and execution of actions that lead to a breakthrough. Procrastination, laziness and self-indulgence, the conditions that sabotage discipline, are impediments to progress.

Discipline is also required to ensure that breakdowns are met with *equanimity*, which I define as the ability to meet a disturbance without disturbance. Samuel Beckett provides a clear and concise recipe for seeing breakdown from a continuous learning perspective: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.”

That's the attitude that leads to a breakthrough... that, and a healthy disrespect for the impossible.

THANK YOU!

This is our 20th year of service. I was a nervous wreck for those first couple of years, trying to learn the skills of running my own business, creating value for our clients and keeping the lights on at work and at home. Twenty years later, while I am still learning how to bring Extraordinary Conversations into the world, I am so grateful to all of those that have supported our remarkable journey thus far.

To our clients, past and present, thank you for trusting us to support your goals, growth and development. It has been an honour to work with you. A special thank you to Grant McDiarmid, our very first client, who supported us right out of the gate.

Extraordinary Conversations has worked with a wide variety of organizations in our 20 year history – airplane manufacturers, pension funds, banks, pharmaceutical companies, entertainment and cultural organizations, food companies, federal regulators, schools, sales and marketing agencies. Our clients have been people of vision and courage, committed to continuous learning, growth and development for themselves and their organizations. Thank you for trusting us to support your journey.

Thank you as well to our remarkable staff. Over the years, our people have risen to the challenge of learning the art and craft of leading transformational change, building meaningful dialogue in the workplace, mentoring and coaching leaders at all levels, building high performance organizations and helping bridge conflict. I cannot begin to express my thanks for the sacrifice and extra effort that our staff has made to provide service excellence. A special thank you to Elinor Trainor, who has led our Transformational Communications practice for 20 years with great dedication and irreverent humour. The Extraordinary Conversations team includes: Sandra Harris, Susan Flynn, Darren Alexander, Roger Pepler, Catherine Boothby, Linda Eggerer, and Tola Oyekanmi.

Thank you as well to our suppliers who have been so much a part of the team, supporting our creativity and productivity.

Dr. Angeles Arrien has been my generous mentor, friend and a deep resource of cross-cultural teachings and practices that support leadership and collaboration. She has also helped me expand my vision of this work and deepen my ability to be of service.

Finally, thank you to my wife Lynne, our Executive Coaching practice leader, and to our daughters: Alannah, April and Ariana. You have been a constant source of inspiration, love and support.

CORPORATE PROFILE

Extraordinary Conversations helps leaders generate breakthroughs in organizational, team and individual performance.

Since 1988, we have supported large, medium and small organizations to build environments where people can do their best work. Clear vision, commitment and responsibility, open communication, courage and the passion to accomplish meaningful goals lead to extraordinary results.

Extraordinary Conversations works with diverse industries including manufacturing, retail, financial institutions, entertainment and service companies. Our clients include Fortune 500 leaders, medium-sized national companies and small entrepreneurial enterprises. Our work has taken us to global corporations in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia, to the townships of South Africa and the peace process in the Middle East.



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