



MASTERING THE BASICS

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It was January 2015

and I had more than three decades as a successful and happy sales professional in the publishing industry. However, I was eager to embark on something new. Like many industries, publishing was and continues to undergo a major transition. People's reading habits are changing, the internet is providing advice faster and less expensive than buying a "how-to" book, and the retail landscape for many categories has shifted to an online focus.

As a sales director and eventually a Senior Vice President, the job function I loved was working with customers, but even more so the sales teams that reported to me. Through the years and with various companies, I've worked with thousands of sales people. I've probably hired personally or directly approved the hire of hundreds of them. The coaching, the one-on-one meetings, and the sales conferences gave me the opportunity to spend extended periods of time with everyone and hopefully guide them to be better—as business professionals and individuals.

Through the years I got better as a manager and eventually as a leader. I would preach about planning and preparation, the importance of believing in yourself, and how we must always be learning new concepts and enhancing our skills. Years ago, I started using the phrase "mastering the basics" with those who reported to me. I was watching staffers feel the pressure to learn the latest new strategy, or feel intimidated by colleagues with fancy titles or advanced degrees. So, my guidance for people was to instruct them to focus on their own skills, do the best they can to enhance their abilities, and that would enable them to be successful. It was a strategy that had worked for me through the years and I was now using it as a training tool for those who worked in my departments.

However, because of the changes in the marketplace, instead of motivating and leading, I was now restructuring, redeploying, and reorganizing the teams that reported to me. That's the corporate-speak way of saying I was letting people go. It's a part of the job and all managers

know there are times when we must eliminate positions—or, in corporate-speak, “reduce headcount.” With the business changing so rapidly, it was a necessity to reduce the size of our sales teams in a significant way. I accepted that responsibility, but sitting across the desk from someone I had hired or worked with for years and telling them now that his or her job was impacted was painful. Obviously, it was far more painful for the colleague losing a job, but it took a toll on me, too.

So my goal became to begin a new career, coaching business people, and I assumed my days of using the phrase “mastering the basics” were now over. I went back to school to take additional courses in coaching. Sure, I had decades working with sales people, but I felt I needed some additional foundational skills in order to pursue this as a profession. This experience reinvigorated me. I was in classes at New York University with students so smart and full of enthusiasm. I learned so much and was ready to embark on this next chapter in my life.

The coaching clients I’ve worked with over the past four years have each been exceptional individuals—from all types of professions, job titles, and levels of experience. Ironically, very few have been from the publishing industry. As I’ve worked with each person, I began to realize that, although my job may now be new, the conversations were strikingly similar to what I heard as a sales director. In every industry, we all face hurdles and obstacles as well as opportunities and potential for success. I found myself referring back to what I had learned through the years and stating again, this time to a new audience, the importance of mastering the basics.

About two years ago I began to write down subjects I was hearing about frequently from clients or skills that I was seeing in people that needed to be enhanced. Before long I had a list that reached almost 200. I began to write my thoughts, about 200 to 300 words for each, and also provide my opinion on how to master these basic skills. I saw it as way to formalize my thinking on topics I’ve talked about my entire career. I viewed them as my lessons for achieving success in business.

Here are a few of the subjects that are discussed in the my new book, *Mastering the Basics*, along with a quick summary sentence or two for each to give you an idea of my thinking and approach.

Be Open to Constructive Criticism | This is always interesting. We ask for feedback from people and when we receive it, if it's not positive, we'll be offended. You're nodding your head yes, right? Take a deep breath and listen to the constructive criticism.

Don't be Afraid to Say "No" | Very often in business settings we'll agree to do something for fear that if we don't, we'll be seen as not a team player or supporter. If you are unable to do something, say "I'm sorry, but no I can't." It's better to say "no" now, than not being able to deliver on your commitment.

Enthusiasm is Contagious | When people are energized, that feeling spreads throughout an organization. When you're feeling upbeat, let people see your enthusiasm.

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Get Away from Your Desk | Whether you work in a corporate office or in your home, you need to step away from your desk or work station at regular intervals to give your eyes a rest and your body a chance to reinvigorate. I used to take a quick walk in the building and often a stroll a few blocks from the office to clear my mind. It's amazing the impact a short break can have.

Keep Yourself Honest | Haven't we all had a moment or two when maybe we bent the rules a bit or weren't totally forthcoming? Of course, we're all human. But we know there are lines that shouldn't be crossed. I often say that if you can't look at yourself in the mirror, you know you've erred.

Negative Attitude | Negative people can really sap the energy out of a team or of a meeting. Their sour style can't drag down you, too, unless you're careful. If you're finding yourself regularly with a down attitude you need to take steps to fix it.

Networking is So Important | The word networking may make you recall fake smiles, and those who forget your name within minutes. You should approach networking as communicating with one person at a time and with the objective of getting to know the person and vice versa.

Think Twice Before Sending that Email | It has happened to all of us. We get an email that irks us or we have a customer service issue with a company and we lean into our computer keyboard and fire off a venomous response that starts an email war. Write your email but let it sit in the draft folder for a while before deciding whether it needs to be sent.

Working for a Micromanager | Every situation is different, but I believe that lousy managers are not only tough to work for, they don't often get better. If you report to one of these types, you probably should keep your eyes open for the next opportunity.

You've Started a New Job—Day One

I talk a lot about setting realistic goals and objectives, but it takes a while to get used to a new job, learn the culture, and figure out what those are. Keep things in perspective and set out a plan for the first 90 days.

You may not agree with all of the lessons or recommendations I give for the 200 topics in my new book, but my hope is that will get you to think more and focus on setting a foundation of business success. All of them align in some way to my core beliefs and personal philosophy which consists of 10 principles and values that I believe are essential.

1. **Be Good to People** | This seems like it should be so easy, yet we all know people who don't treat people with respect or who are just not nice. Reach out to friends and coworkers, and to put it as simply as possible, be a good person.
2. **Smile and Say Hello** | I can't tell you how many people through the years have said to me, "Dean, you always smile and say hello." There are a whole lot worse things that people can remember you by.
3. **Have a Good Work Ethic** | Old school? Well maybe, but I never had a manager tell me that I didn't work hard or showed up late.
4. **Send Thank You Notes** | This is so simple to do, yet most people forgot or send them late. Believe me, people remember you for doing it.
5. **Be A Lifelong Learner** | This is a great phrase that elicits nods from everyone, but then people just don't do it. Pick a course, read a book, watch a LinkedIn Learning video.

6. **Believe in Yourself** | This is easier said than done, and we've all experienced the ups and downs in life. Keep at it. Give yourself more credit.
7. **Integrity and Character** | This trait is the core of us as individuals. If people don't trust you, feel you're not honest, or your character is damaged, it may be impossible to repair the relationship.
8. **Be Authentic, Be Genuine** | Quit trying to be someone you're not. People will figure you out quickly if you're a phony. Just be yourself and continue to improve.
9. **Planning and Preparation** | Not everyone follows this philosophy, but for me, being well prepared has always paid dividends and also reduced my stress.
10. **Know Your Priorities, and Focus on What Really Matters** | Family comes first. This is another obvious goal, but one that is too often forgotten.

Edit my list or, better yet, develop your own. It can be an effective way to keep you focused on your goals. Which ones would you change and with what would you replace them? It's a good exercise, so try it now.

Keep things in perspective and set out a plan for the first 90 days.

Over the course of my career, I learned many lessons from great leaders with whom I worked or watched from the sidelines. Learning through observing can be quite effective. Candidly, I also learned what *not* to do from some managers and peers who were not as effective.

I have always been an avid reader of business books, especially ones with quick tips and techniques for ways of doing things better and smarter. I benefited from motivational tomes as well, going back to Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* and Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Books are a terrific investment and can have a significant impact on your career and life.

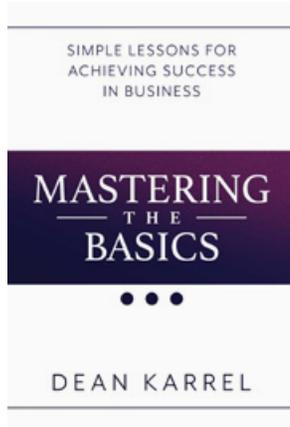
The concepts I learned from reading business books and lessons I absorbed from leaders I respected and worked with through the years formed who I am today. And, I believe I'm a work in progress, as lifelong learning and continuous improvement is something that I feel is essential.

My new book, *Mastering the Basics*, is not a post-graduate document on business strategy or organizational psychology. You won't find all of the answers, but my goal is to inspire you to look at your job, your colleagues, and your employer in a fresh way so you can be a better businessperson and individual. It's meant to be a straightforward, honest, and common-sense guide to business skills development.

We all can't be the top performer in school or the senior executive of the company, so you need to figure out what steps you can take to be more successful. **You can focus on learning essential business skills, developing your confidence, being a good person, and recognizing the priorities in your life, and that will take you a lot farther than you might imagine.** 📖



Info



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About the author

Dean Karrel is an Executive and Professional Career Coach. He is the instructor of over ten courses available on LinkedIn Learning and has also been in senior leadership positions for more than three decades with global publishing companies.

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