Choose
change
and stability
to meet
the new
expectations.

By Marvin Wilson

Being in the Successful Minority involves making the choice to enter and remain in a zone of comfort and high, valued performance, or even a position of influence. That's how many of us define success—by how comfortable, how influential we are. But the choice to gain comfort and keep it might not be the choice you think it is or expect it to be. The choice and path initially are typically uncomfortable. The question is, Are you willing to risk discomfort to join the exclusive club of enduring success?

The Successful
Minority

So, what is your preference? Change or stability?

Your answer just may determine how successful you are. Accepting even the premise of choosing a preference places you in peril. If your preference is for change, then all you will know is unrest. Other people will see you as a pariah because you'll never let them, or yourself, rest to enjoy gains. If your preference is stability then, at best, you'll be liked but you won't be respected. Opportunities will pass you by; you may even be exploited.

Pretty strong words. But don't they reflect the marketplace? Extreme times are on the increase in all aspects of life, including business and learning. Examples are everywhere and easy to find when one looks. In business, look to the economy and stock market for recent instances of those who have accepted the premise of preference—Enron and WorldCom, for example. Other businesses, small and large, are making similar choices. In the learning arena, compare the statistical performance of public schools to private schools and you'll know which has accepted the flawed premise of making a choice—change or stability; likewise the performance of sports teams. In the wake of 9/11, the world community is confronted with this choice.

Obviously, we must make choices and act wisely. But to do so means to avoid making a choice between change and stability. Either way you choose, you'll lose. By chance should you pull off a win, your success is unlikely to be lasting or enduring. Again, think of Enron and WorldCom. What's sad in such examples is that the acceptance of choice was an attempt to avoid risk—only to find the risk manifested.

The aim and alternative

There is good news. There is a minority that has made different choices, with consistently favorable outcomes. This minority is made up of individuals and groups. I refer to them as the Successful Minority because they're at the top of the marketplace and top of their game. They're easily recognized for the value they produce, but more important, how they produce it. They understand and accept the requirements for getting to the top as well as staying there. They make a different choice based on a different premise. They never accept the premise of choosing a preference for change or stability. They make the more multivariable choice of both-and. That choice has a more inclusive premise. The issue for the Successful Minority isn't change *or* stability; it's change *and* stability. I call that a winner's choice because it treats risk differently. That type of choice creates margin for gain in order to preserve some degree of stability. What's noted is that risk is taken. The Successful Minority will risk changing things and people to usher in something worth stabilizing. That something can be as different and as unique as there are variations of people. Under the current rules of the marketplace and community, there's only room for a few at the top of a given mountain—markets, niches, and opportunities. But the winner's choice stipulates getting to the top of a particular mountain, moving on, and finding and creating new mountains. It's never either-or for these individuals and groups. Historically, the Successful Minority has found the risk worth it in the choices that confront them.

Business owners with enduring success in the marketplace live the winner's choice, as do communities and nations. The evidence is seen in the benefits the Successful Minority reaps. Their zone of comfort is long, wide, and enduring. Their zone of danger or discomfort was acceptable, brief, and well managed. Examples are America Online, 3M, Abbott, Circuit City, Dell Computers, Fannie Mae, General Electric, Gillette, Hewlett-Packard, Johnson & Johnson, Pitney Bowes, WalMart, and Walt Disney Company. Some of those companies are relatively new; some have dominated their respective markets for 75 years.

Individuals with successful careers also live the winner's choice. There's a short list of people who are critical to the success of an organization. They're typically described as "exemplars" or "star performers." We know who those people are in our own organizations. They, like the companies mentioned, have endured and continue to thrive under change within their organizations' structures, operations, and cultures. Their individual track records illus-

trate their success and dominance through job advancement, technical or managerial. In fact, they are the few who are largely responsible for their company's or community's continued success.

Theory into practice

For the Successful Minority, it's about defining focus and expectations and then achieving them. Usually the focus is theoretical or visionary, in that no one has accomplished it before or accomplished it in the way the Successful Minority has. As new information and requirements arise, the Successful Minority stays focused, refines expectations, and actualizes them. Theory is turned to practice. Their track records over time speak to their results and to their focus and resolve for turning vision into demonstrated improved performance.

There's nothing mysterious about the Successful Minority's approach to success. But as common as their approach is, it's customized to the specific requirements of where they are in the marketplace and community relative to where they prefer or need to be. Their approach reflects the acceptable risks and necessary investment to make the goals an actuality. Customization and execution are their hallmarks. Due to the complexity and ambiguity of their real-world circumstances, there's no ready-made boilerplate, map, or recipe. Challenges are embraced. The Successful Minority creates clarity and simplicity out of ambiguity and complexity. That is real work, requiring change across the board. And that's uncomfortable. The choice to accept temporary discomfort as a price for ultimate comfort is what allows the Successful Minority to begin transforming theory into practice and to realize their vision of sustained, relatively stable growth and performance as requirements change.

Five things done well

The rest of us can learn from the example of the Successful Minority—a leadership bench for future business. Generally, the Successful Minority does five things well to attain and retain success and enduring dominance. The first two enable theory or vision to be clearly defined. The other three enable practice and refinement of the practice for real and valued performance.

Action 1: First, the benefits and risks are clearly articulated.

Action 2: Next, the decision (whether direction, product, service or process) is sold, advocated, or marketed to the people affected and who must execute it or deliver it.

During those first two actions, it's made explicit to everyone what stakes are involved—what the organization and its individuals must accomplish and why. The outstanding question at this point is how to get there from here given current real-world circumstances, requirements, and capabilities.

Action 3: The third action addresses that question. It's here that the winner's choice is made consummate. Actions taken here begin to distinguish and separate individuals and groups from the rest of the pack. As people undertake efforts to make the vision a reality, it's imperative that they become tactical, creative, and improvisational to deal with current realities. The current realities typically prove to be challenges or barriers to the vision becoming real. It's here that the Successful Minority leaves behind the vanilla templates or best practices. Bleached-out practices no longer apply to their unique circumstances and requirements. Here, a road must be paved where there is none. Here, a journey is begun that's traveled by few or none. By default, learning is largely experiential or accomplished by doing. In group settings, the learning is extremely interactive. If learning, creating, interacting, and learning some more from the activities and requirements isn't occurring, the risk is in not moving forward. The effort stalls and dies. When it's all new ground, the corner is either turned or it's not.

Action 4: The Successful Minority sets the level. They

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Attributes of the Successful Minority

All of these attributes are required, though resolve and improvisation in the face of the unknown is a particularly leveraging characteristic. All of these attributes can be taught and are being taught:

- sound and balanced decision making
- candor and openness
- resolve and improvisation
- level setting
- proactivity.

check integration to ensure that the support chain—focus, message, incentives, training, and recognition—is congruent and consistent with the vision and required activities. If there's a weak or broken link, derailment is certain and likely to cause unrest. That will cause talent to defect.

Action 5: The final action is building early warning systems or lead indicators to monitor progress and changes. Such indicators allow constant adaptation, improvement, and learning in real-time fashion. The Successful Minority understands that methods and systems that facilitate proactivity provide a real advantage in the marketplace and community. Alternatively, a lag can be catastrophically costly. People must be willing to devise their own approaches and be disciplined enough to execute them. You must be willing to brave purgatory to be constantly learning.

Leaders, not managers

Over the years, I've witnessed, participated in, and been affected by decisions in major corporations to stabilize in the face of new requirements in the marketplace, workplace, and community. The theme of those stabilization efforts was always efficiency, though under many different labels. But it was efficiency to the point of sacrificing actual effectiveness for appearance sake. That's a short-term strategy—similar to going on a crash diet only to gain back even more weight. The businesses that didn't die from starvation would continue on, or so it was believed. But many business succumbed by either obesity or anemia. They weren't nimble enough or had insufficient resources to keep up with the new requirements. The crash diet only delayed the inevitable. Downsizings are testimony to the many companies that couldn't recover, given the premise

they accepted and the choices they made. As a consequence, the landscape of the marketplace has changed radically, with the addition of new performers. But as far as I can tell, the new world of business isn't much different fundamentally than in the 1980s. The only real difference is that downsizings, layoffs, and separations are done in stealth to keep the media at bay. In the current economic, political, and cultural unrest, stability is the gut response. That has implications for business continuity and people's careers. It's a mini 1980s, yet things will never be the same.

On the optimistic front, some old businesses have met the new requirements. They'll continue to survive—at least, for the foreseeable future. New businesses can and will meet the new requirements, replacing the businesses that couldn't or wouldn't meet those requirements. These new businesses are thriving. They have leaders, not managers. They recognize that real leadership is required in a world marketplace consisting of managers who remain true to the title of manager—pursuing stability and avoiding risk.

The contract between employers and employees has changed profoundly. Employees are no longer trusting and loyal and now behave as investors. If employees' time, energy, and talent aren't used appropriately by the business, they reinvest in a different business that *will* use their time, energy, and talent. In the learning arena, the public schools face being replaced by new and clear requirements that private schools and sometimes home schooling are meeting more effectively.

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ed a different premise and made a different choice. Slow, incremental change used to be enough. But now, and increasingly, significant and transformational change is required. That kind of change and the requirements have nothing to do stability alone and everything to do with change *and* stability. Though things will never be the same, the benefits of meeting new requirements are worth the risks and will endure.

When we make choices between danger and comfort based on preference to the exclusion of requirements and risk, the outcomes can be fatal. The preference for comfort is understandable; the aversion to danger is just as natural. But the outcome of choosing stability exclusively is the illusion of stability. Stability is an illusion because *someone else* will have made a choice based on preference *and* requirements—the winner's choice. Those individuals and groups will usher in instability for those who chose either-or.

Why predict instability?

As individuals and groups seek to guide and drive change, the world will never be the same. Stability is gone. The Successful Minority found the risks acceptable for attaining the comforts or benefits that their actions ultimately bring. They realized that in

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order to have stable benefits, they would have to change. They stepped up to the requirements, while others stepped away. They stepped decisively and with lasting resolve. For them, requirements and risks weren't obscure, so their actions weren't vulnerable to unpredictable, random factors. They became responsible and accountable for their success and recruited probability to their causes.

Recognize that all of us—individuals, small and large businesses, profit and nonprofit organizations, governments, and communities—will be presented with the choice of stability or change at least once. Don't fall for it. Instead, reframe that choice as one that requires you to understand, embrace, and master the challenges of ambiguity and complexity in a rapidly and constantly evolving marketplace. You must address the unique, real-world circumstances of the environment in which you do business. If you don't, someone else will. It's highly likely that tomorrow someone else will introduce something new in pursuit of opportunity. Will you be ready? **T**D

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