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MAKE BETTER DECISIONS
UNDER PRESSURE

TOTAL FOCUS



BRANDON WEBB

Former Navy SEAL sniper turned CEO

AND JOHN DAVID MANN

New York Times bestselling authors of *The Red Circle*

TOTAL FOCUS



ALSO BY BRANDON WEBB AND JOHN DAVID MANN

The Red Circle

The Making of a Navy SEAL

Among Heroes

The Killing School

ALSO BY BRANDON WEBB

The Power of Thought

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MAKING BETTER DECISIONS
UNDER PRESSURE

Brandon Webb
with **John David Mann**

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*Knowing the path and walking the path
are two very different things.
This book is dedicated to the
ultimate path walker:
the entrepreneur.*

Concentration is the secret of strength in politics, in war,
in trade, in short, in all management of human affairs.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Conduct of Life*

Man's basic vice . . . is the act of unfocusing his mind, the
suspension of his consciousness, which is not blindness, but the
refusal to see, not ignorance, but the refusal to know.

—Ayn Rand, *The Objectivist Ethics*

Chase two rabbits, both will escape.

—Russian proverb

CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter 1 FRONT SIGHT FOCUS	9
PROFILE: JOE APFELBAUM (AJAX UNION)	42
Chapter 2 TOTAL SITUATIONAL AWARENESS	51
PROFILE: BETSY MORGAN (<i>THE HUFFINGTON POST</i>, <i>THEBLAZE</i>)	76
Chapter 3 VIOLENCE OF ACTION	83
PROFILE: AMIT VERMA (THE VERMA GROUP)	109
Chapter 4 EXCELLENCE MATTERS	115
PROFILE: SOLOMON CHOI (16 HANDLES)	151
Chapter 5 EMBRACE THE SUCK	159
PROFILE: KAMAL RAVIKANT	
(<i>LOVE YOURSELF LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT</i>)	177

CONTENTS

Chapter 6	ONE TEAM, ONE FIGHT	183
	PROFILE: RYAN ZAGATA (BROOKLYN BICYCLE COMPANY)	209
Chapter 7	LEAD FROM THE FRONT	215
	PROFILE: MATT MEEKER (BARKBOX)	244
	CONCLUSION	253
	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	259
	APPENDIX: THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES	261
	INDEX	265

TOTAL FOCUS

INTRODUCTION



Staring through my scope at the man in my crosshairs, I take a slow breath. An Afghan farmer. An Afghan farmer with a rifle slung casually over his shoulder. A farmer who looks a lot like someone trying *not* to look like someone who's up to something he shouldn't be. I feel the pressure of my finger against the metal trigger.

Feel that pressure slowly increase.

January 2002. I'm standing sniper overwatch for my SEAL platoon as they approach a group of villagers in this mountain community in northeast Afghanistan for an exploratory chat. Everything seems cool. Everything looks innocent. Except for that farmer.

Something is off.

The thing is, these are Pashtun people, exactly the kind of people who, a few years from now and in this same region, will shield Marcus (*Lone Survivor*) Luttrell from the men trying to kill him. Our goodwill with these folks is a precious commodity, especially because we're out here in Taliban country. If I shoot this guy and it turns out

TOTAL FOCUS

he *is* as innocent as he's trying to appear, we can kiss that goodwill good-bye, and I will have to live with his blood on my hands for the rest of my life. But if I don't shoot him and it turns out he was up to no good after all, some of our guys could get hurt as a result. Hurt, or dead.

I can't call this in. There's no more intel to gather. It is what it is, and it's up to me.

I have a decision to make.

Do I pull the trigger?

I took a deep breath and looked down at my laptop. It was now twelve years later, and I was no longer in the service; I was sitting at the bar of the Jane Hotel in New York City, staring at an e-mail that held an offer to buy my business for \$15 million.

Amazing, I thought. Considering that only a few years earlier, I'd been broke. No, worse than broke: with a negative net worth, because I'd owed nearly a hundred grand after my first business venture collapsed around me, taking all my life savings with it. And now here I sat, my new business barely two years old, and this big media company was trying to buy it from me. For \$15 million. Amazing, all right. Still . . .

Something was off.

If I said yes, I would be \$15 million richer, arguably set for life. It would mean I'd won. Right? But it would also mean the business I'd built with my own hands, for a community I cared about deeply, would no longer be in my control. And the people who'd built it with me: What would happen to them?

I couldn't call this one in, either. I had all the information I was going to have. There was no more advice to ask for or guidance to seek. It was what it was—and it was my call. I had a decision to make.

INTRODUCTION

Do I pull the trigger?

Do I shoot the farmer?

Do I take the offer?

Both of these are decisions that, once made, can't be undone. There's a lot of blood involved in one, a lot of money in the other. Both could affect the lives of a lot of other people, to say nothing of my own, for years to come. The two situations are different in a thousand ways, similar in a handful of ways, but identical in one.

They both require *total focus*.

Before I tell you the outcome of those two scenarios, I should probably give you my résumé. Here's the two-minute version:

- Tossed out of the house at the age of sixteen.
- Spent the first thirteen years of my adult life in the U.S. Navy, where I served in a SEAL platoon in Afghanistan immediately following 9/11.
- Back in the States, rose through the ranks of SEAL snipers to the top position as course master and helped redesign the entire SEAL sniper training program, the schoolhouse that produced a generation of legendary snipers including Marcus Luttrell, Chris Kyle (*American Sniper*), and a ton of others you've never heard of but who were just as effective on the battlefield.
- After leaving the service, traded my sniper rifle for a MacBook Air, signed up for a new career as an entrepreneur, spent the next few years going through business training in the school of hard knocks—years that were nearly as brutal as my time going through BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training) and the rest of SEAL training. Maybe more so. Raised millions of dollars and lost it all, my brainchild beaten to death by nuisance lawsuits in the California

TOTAL FOCUS

courts. Sat in my car on the La Jolla coast, staring out at the Pacific Ocean, and made the phone call to my lawyer that killed the business for good.

– Soon after which my wife filed for divorce. Full stop.

End of first minute

– After getting my teeth kicked in, forced to regroup and reinvent myself. Took a corporate job as an executive with a defense/aerospace company, where I was put in charge of \$40 million in business related to a classified communications program. A cherry post, but with the blood of entrepreneurship coursing through my veins, I felt like a caged rat.

– To feed my creative side, accepted a writing job for a military Web site where I ended up running and hosting one of its most successful blogs, with millions of monthly viewers. Noticed that when it came to Special Operations content, there was a gaping hole on the Internet. You could read a book or watch a movie about Spec Ops, but there was no solid, legitimate source of information online. At least not until February 2012, when I left that post and founded SOFREP.com, a veteran-run Special Operations news site.

– Leveraging SOFREP's rapidly growing following, acquired and/or created additional sites and built these digital properties into Hurricane Group, Inc., which today is the fastest-growing military and outdoor content network on the Internet, reaching tens of millions of men monthly in over 220 countries through its Web sites, online TV, Internet radio, earned media partners that syndicate our content and link back to us, and our e-commerce clubs business.

– In the spring of 2014, received an unsolicited acquisition offer

INTRODUCTION

from Scout Media, backed by MTV founder Bob Pittman's private equity company, the Pilot Group, to purchase Hurricane for \$15 million in stock and cash.

End of résumé

In the course of these two careers, I've realized something: the core principles it takes to achieve excellence in Special Operations are the same fundamental principles it takes to accomplish great things in business. Or for that matter in life.

It might surprise you to see a former Navy SEAL sniper writing a book on business. But it makes sense. The training, mind-set, and experience that go into building a Special Operations warrior are perfectly attuned to the sensibilities it takes to be an accomplished business owner and entrepreneur. In the SEAL teams, we're not taught simply to obey orders, as in other more conventional units. We're put into "ingeniously brutal training environments that force us to fail, learn, adapt, and overcome, and in the process teach us to accomplish the mission, whatever it takes. We focus not on obstacles but on blowing through them with creative solutions. We are groomed to think fast, think for ourselves, and think unconventionally.

To make impossible decisions under insane pressure.

If soldiers and sailors are the military's version of a solid corporate workforce, we in Spec Ops are its entrepreneurs, innovators, and misfits. And the training we receive is powerfully effective in business, once translated and adapted for the business world rather than for armed conflict.

There's something about SEALs and other Spec Ops operators that leads a substantial number of us to start highly successful

TOTAL FOCUS

businesses. It's almost as if it were in our DNA. In *Total Focus*, I'm going to deconstruct that DNA and show you how you can develop it, too. In these pages, I'll describe a blueprint for success built on seven hard-won lessons learned from the crucible of war and re-learned on the battlefields of business. You might think of them as "The 7 Deadly Habits of Highly Successful People."

Each chapter illustrates one of these insights with experiences from my time with the SEALs, side by side with examples of how I've seen and experienced that same principle play out in the world of business. I'll also illustrate each with a profile of one exceptional entrepreneur from the circle of business professionals I've gotten to know in the last few years—people I've come to think of as "the Spec Ops warriors of the business world."

You're probably wondering, how did those two high-pressure decisions turn out?

I did not shoot the farmer. I reasoned that the risks of damage in taking the shot were higher than those in holding fire. The man likely never knew how close he was to death that day. Moments after I eased my finger off the trigger, I caught a glimpse of some character in Arab dress, out behind the village, hoofing it out of there and up a little goat trail, making his way for the Pakistan border as fast as his jihadist legs could take him. Damn. I'd been right. That farmer wasn't just an innocent dude, standing around; he was standing sentry, hiding the guy who escaped into the hills.

Had I made the right decision? Impossible to know, but I knew this for sure: all my guys were still alive.

And the \$15 million offer? I turned it down. Sitting at the bar at the Jane in Manhattan, I typed out an e-mail that said, in essence,

INTRODUCTION

Thanks . . . but no thanks. Two years later, I heard that a group of Russian investors had executed a hostile takeover of that same media group. A ton of the company's Web site producers resigned in protest, and a dozen tech people walked. It was a bloodbath.

I still have my company.

Chapter 1

FRONT SIGHT FOCUS



Hi, Todd Dakarmen here—is this Brandon Webb, the SEAL sniper instructor dude? Look, I want to hire you to teach me how to shoot. How soon can you get up to L.A.?”

This guy didn’t waste any time getting down to business. Before I’d even had a chance to say hello, or “Yeah, Webb, that’s me,” he’d laid out his agenda. The man wasn’t shy about saying what he wanted, and he expected to get it.

I never did find out exactly how he got my name, let alone my phone number. Not that I was hard to find. This was mid-2011; two years earlier, when the Captain Phillips rescue mission happened and suddenly everyone was talking about Navy SEAL snipers, I’d been invited onto CNN to talk about the Naval Special Warfare (NSW) sniper training program my friend Eric Davis and I had helped develop and run for a few years. Ever since, I’d been in the public eye as an expert in sniper instruction. It would have been no challenge at all for a resourceful guy like Todd to track me down.

TOTAL FOCUS

I hated to disappoint him, but I was already working out how to say no.

Those years teaching the sniper course were incredibly satisfying, and I still loved going out shooting with friends now and then. But private instruction was just not something I did. Besides, I was too busy.

Insanely busy.

Crazy busy.

"I've been working on my long-gun form," Todd was saying. "I'm not terrible, but I could be a lot better. I'd just as soon learn from the best."

It didn't feel right to just say no outright, but I figured that if I threw out a ridiculously high number, he would go away.

"I charge five hundred dollars an hour," I said. "Also, I charge half that rate, two fifty an hour, for my travel time to and from." From San Diego to L.A., that would've meant at least another fifteen hundred tacked onto my fee. Add that to the three or four hours I'd probably spend with him, at five hundred a whack, and his private shooting lesson was looking like close to five grand. I figured he'd tell me to go screw myself.

"No problem," he said.

Oh, shit, I thought.

What could I say? The man called my bluff. That weekend I threw some guns in the car and made the drive up to L.A. to take Todd Dakarmen shooting.

We spent the whole day at the range. He could shoot, but he hadn't been trained in how to set up his scope properly. I see this all the time, guys who get into shooting but don't realize how important the initial setup of the rifle is. It's like fitting a good business suit to the individual. You don't buy an expensive suit off the rack, throw it on, and go walk into

your meeting. Everyone's unique: different inseam, different chest size, and so forth. If you want to look the part, the thing needs to be tailored; that's the only way it becomes *your* suit. The same thing applies to a good rifle. You could just throw on a scope and go shoot, but you're not going to get the best results. Ideally, you need to get down there, put your shoulder into the buttstock, gauge your reach forward, see exactly where your cheek comes to rest, adjust the distance from your eye to the scope, and so on. Everything matters. To do it right, to fine-tune a rifle so it fits you like a fine Hugo Boss, typically takes about an hour.

Todd had brought five rifles with him. We took the time to dial in two of them. Then we started shooting, working on his fundamentals. We took a break for lunch and then went back to shoot some more. I ended up staying the weekend.

While I was there, Todd took me out to his plant, a huge facility in a big industrial park in East L.A. There were smashed-up vehicles on the floor and racks and racks of auto parts stacked up everywhere, all carefully inventoried—all taken from wrecked Porsches. Todd and his wife run a business called Los Angeles Dismantler. They'll find a wrecked Porsche Turbo, worth maybe a few hundred thousand brand new, pay ten grand or so to the insurance company that's written it off, then dismantle it and resell the parts to specialty stores and individuals for ten or fifteen times what they paid for the wreck. Talk about a business model.

The following weekend, I went up to L.A. to give Todd some more private classes. This time, as we were having lunch, he asked me what I was up to these days, and I told him about all the different things I had going.

I'd been out of the SEALs for five years at this point. My first year out, I'd done some contract security work over in a country I won't

TOTAL FOCUS

name (it rhymes with “Barack”) for a government agency, but other than that I’d been a strictly private-sector entrepreneur. For most of those five years, I’d been working on a multimillion-dollar land development deal, a massive training facility and race car track out in the Southern California desert, called Wind Zero. I was also an active investor in Neptunic, the company that created the Sharksuit (metal mesh protective diving gear). I was doing a bunch of consulting. I was writing for a few military Web sites. I was also working on my memoir, *The Red Circle*.

I had a lot going on.

Todd didn’t say a word as I ran down my list, just ate and listened. Finally, when I’d gotten to the end of a paragraph and paused to take a bite, he sat back and looked at me.

“You know, when I look at you, I see a lot of myself in you.” I took that as a hell of a nice compliment and was about to say so, but he kept going. “You’re kind of a mess, you think?”

Not what I was expecting him to say.

“I was doing like you’re doing, not too long ago,” he went on, “going in every direction at once. One day, a mentor sat me down and said, ‘Todd, you need to collect yourself and focus on one thing. You’re all over the map. As soon as you focus, things will start coming together. And you’ll be successful.’ I took his advice. He was dead right. Once I focused on this one opportunity, on Porsche parts, big things started happening.”

He pushed back from the table.

“Anyway,” he said as we got up to go shoot some more, “think about it.”

I did. He was right; I was all over the place. I had twenty different irons in the fire. I wasn’t focused. It was a recipe for disaster.

FRONT SIGHT FOCUS

And disaster was exactly what I'd cooked up.

That land development project had blown up in my face. The county had approved it, and it had a lot of local support, but at the eleventh hour the thing had been nailed shut and screwed to the floor by a nuisance lawsuit by the Sierra Club. We'd spent millions our investors had put up to get this far. Fighting the suit would have cost millions more. I was trying everything I could think of to salvage it, in talks with another developer to take it over, but it was crushing me. My marriage was in trouble, too.

Todd was dead on target. I wasn't focused. And because I wasn't focused, nothing was really coming to fruition.

The thing was, *I already knew this*. Learning how to focus was a critical part of my training as a SEAL sniper, and SEAL training isn't like a weekend seminar. The things they teach you in the SEAL teams, they go bone deep, and they never leave you.

In the teams, we called it "front sight focus," and it was as critical to survival as breathing.

"*Brandon!*" Cassidy hisses in my ear. "You're gonna have to Kentucky windage this thing!"

Lieutenant Cassidy and I and two other teammates are pinned like bugs to the scrubby Afghan mountainside; a knot of armed Taliban fighters are walking in our direction. They haven't found us yet, but they will any moment. If we leap to our feet and try to shoot it out, we're dead. Our only option is to call in an air strike and take these guys out with a bomb. Preferably without taking ourselves out at the same time. To call a strike with that degree of accuracy, someone needs to give the guys in the B-52 somewhere a mile or so above our heads the precise drop coordinates. That someone is me.

TOTAL FOCUS

But because we weren't supposed to be out here in the first place, in this mission that was supposed to take eighteen hours but is lasting for days, I don't have my usual equipment with me: laser range finder, GPS, sniper scope, and the rest. All I have is my eyes, ears, brain, and gut.

As a sniper, I've been taught to estimate distances on the fly, but normally we're talking about shooting a bullet roughly the size of my forefinger from the muzzle of a rifle. Here I have to shoot a thousand-pound "bullet" out of a 125-ton aircraft, flying unseen somewhere over our heads at near the speed of sound, at a target less than five hundred yards away from where we are crouched. Without any range-finding equipment to help me aim the shot. In other words, I have to wing it, which is exactly what Cassidy means by "Kentucky windage." I have to get this right, and I have only seconds to do it. Sighting upward on an irregular rocky incline. In the deceptively vague light of daybreak.

Talk about an impossible decision under insane pressure.

Oh, great. Now the shooting starts. They've seen us. We're returning fire.

All right, class, let's review.

There are a bunch of guys shooting at us with intent to kill. We're in weird, crappy light, sighting uphill, with no sighting or range-finding equipment. I need to figure out exactly how far away these guys are so a plane somewhere up in the sky can drop a bomb on them and not hit us. And the guy in that B-52 is waiting for my numbers, *now*.

This is a situation that requires *focus*.

Focus. Yeah, I knew what Todd Dakarmen was talking about. Not only did I already know this; I had *taught* this. As a sniper, I had *lived* it. I just hadn't been applying it to my life in business.

I would never make that mistake again.

The Single Most Important Principle

Front sight focus is that state of intense concentration in which all your resources and abilities are brought to bear on a singular intention, when you're so locked on to the crosshair reticle inside your scope (or, in an iron sights system, the sighting device at the front of your weapon, hence *front sight focus*) that everything else blurs and disappears. There may be helicopters overhead, gunfire in the streets, someone inches away screaming at you, but to you none of that exists. It may be raining or snowing, boiling or freezing. Hell, there may be snakes or scorpions slithering over your leg. Inconsequential. Irrelevant. Everything about your surroundings slips far away into the background, and you are completely calm and relaxed, focused on that solitary objective.

What makes this even harder is that you still have to *know* all that chaos going on around you. Some part of your brain has to stay acutely aware of it all. (That's the subject of chapter 2, "Total Situational Awareness.") You never fully let go of it, not for a millisecond. You've just trained yourself to tune it out and stay in total focus.

I call that central area of total focus my "red circle"—hence the title of my first book—and it's as critical to business as it is to Spec Ops warfare.

I talked recently with a friend who runs a graphic design business. "I have this great business idea," she told me. "We'd create this virtual concierge service for people visiting New York City who need anything—a good restaurant reservation, dry cleaning, a manicure, whatever. Start here and take it to other cities. I think the idea's killer," she added, "but I can't do it on my own. I need a partner."

TOTAL FOCUS

Here we go again, I thought. Probably just what Todd Dakarmen thought that first day we talked. The truth is, hers wasn't a bad concept. It may even be a good one. I think there's something there. But is it something she should pursue? And if she does, what happens to the design business?

If you can't pour yourself 100 percent into an idea when you start it, then you're starting it half-assed, and you'll never have more than a half-baked plan. When you have a half-baked plan, you can't expect any more than a half-baked outcome.

By nature, most entrepreneurs have some form of attention deficit disorder. It can be an asset, that spark-and-shoot creativity, but unchecked, it can also be a serious liability. I run into younger entrepreneurs all the time who tell me, "Yeah, I've got three start-ups going," and I don't need to hear any more, because I already know how that story ends. You may think you're going to do three or four things at once and keep that up until one of them shows itself to be the winner—but you're kidding yourself. All you're doing is shortchanging all three or four projects. You need to choose one. Not two. One.

Which one? Of all the great projects you could be working on, which one most merits your undivided attention? There's no definitive, one-size-fits-all approach here, because every person and situation is unique. It may be the one that makes the most sense for your circumstances; the most marketable; the one that taps into your greatest skills; the one that most touches your imagination, quickens your pulse, stirs your soul; the one you've been talking about for the last ten years but never let yourself dive into; or even the one you're most afraid to try. Whatever it is, the best I can tell you is this: once you start asking the question, honestly and earnestly, you'll know the answer. It's *that* one.

If I had to pick a single core principle for success in business, it would be this: choose one thing, focus on that one thing, and execute it to the absolute limit of your abilities. Focus on your career, invest in yourself, and learn how to say no to everything else.

Once you reach the point where you have the financial capacity to hire out or partner with the talent and team power to manage a range of different areas, you can start adding additional projects to your portfolio . . . *maybe*. If you're Richard Branson, or Elon Musk. And I've seen business owners who *aren't* billionaires do it, too. But it's a high-wire act and definitely not something you want to even think about until your own business is performing at the level you want it to, and doing so solidly and reliably. It's so easy to lose your focus.

This is job 1: Stay on task. Stay on target.

Stay focused.

Live Every Day with a Single Bullet

You've probably heard about BUD/S, the brutally difficult seven-month SEAL selection course. Maybe you've even seen footage of it, with men running along the sand carrying a gigantic log on their shoulders, or being sprayed with high-powered hoses, or doing calisthenics for hours in the freezing surf. My BUD/S class started out with 220 students; seven months later, there were fewer than two dozen left. So, yeah: it's as bad as it looks.

Sniper school was worse.

It's hard to fully explain just how torturous, how difficult, how stressful SEAL sniper school is. What makes it even harder to explain is that the stress is 90 percent mental. Hour after hour, day

TOTAL FOCUS

after day, you're placed under the most demanding conditions and expected to deliver on the most complex tasks, to the most exacting specifications. It's mentally and psychologically grueling. And for me, the single most grueling, difficult, torturous aspect of the class was an exercise we executed first thing every morning.

They called it "cold bore."

The concept of cold bore was simple: you wake up at dawn, go straight out onto the range, and fire a single shot, hitting whatever target they tell you to hit. The idea was to simulate conditions on the battlefield, when you won't necessarily be warmed up and ready, won't be prepared, won't know what's going on until the split second it's in motion.

Miss your cold bore target three days in a row, and you were out of the course.

How do you set yourself up to successfully make that shot every morning? Do you run out to the range as fast as you can, so you'll have more time to line up the shot, but then be out of breath? Or go at a more measured pace, keeping your breath under control so it won't screw up your shot, but as a result get there with no prep time? Nobody's at his best right when he wakes up, not even SEALs; so do you set your alarm and get up earlier, but then make yourself even more sleep deprived than you already are?

There's no way to win here.

And a cold rifle behaves differently than a warmed-up rifle. Shoot even three or four rounds through that bore and the metal heats up, which means the ballistics of your round changes. But not here, not with a cold bore shot. Great: sleep-soaked body and nervous system, cold and unpredictable rifle. For that matter, even a cold bullet will behave differently than a warmer round.

FRONT SIGHT FOCUS

So I would sleep with my bullet. It was the one thing I could control. Every night, I took that single round to bed with me and slept with it like a long-lost lover.

The first day, I missed my shot. The second day, I missed my shot. I never missed again.

Today, more than a decade and a half later, I still wake up every morning with the sense that I've got that single live .300 Win Mag round under my pillow. And you might see me in a coffee shop in SoHo, or boarding an early flight at JFK, or heading into some Manhattan TV studio to do a morning interview on the latest foreign-policy development, but in my mind I'm out on that range getting ready to put my single round into the center of that target.

My parents used to say, if you're going to do something, make the effort to do it right the first time. Cold bore taught me that the first time may be the only chance you get. You don't always get to warm up. You don't always get to take practice shots. You can't always recover from a first-shot miss.

This is why you need to operate your business with front sight focus: every day you may be called upon to make a decision that will make or break your business, even make or break your career. Every day, you may be presented with conditions you're not prepared for, situations you haven't predicted, choices you don't have time to think through. Situations where you have one round to fire, and only one round, and cannot afford to miss.

Even on those days when those high-stakes challenges *don't* present themselves, if you operate in a way that anticipates them, if you go through your day with that single bullet in your pocket, you'll be operating at a level that sets you apart and primes you for success.

Embrace a State of Healthy Obsession

Putting a copper-jacketed high-speed sniper round into a target at one thousand yards—ten football fields away, far enough that you can barely see it with the naked eye—is an extremely complex task. Between point of release and point of contact, there are an enormous number of physical and environmental factors that mess with your round's flight path: wind currents pulling it right or left, air friction slowing it down, gravity dragging it downward. The time of day, how hot or cool it is outside, will have an impact on the round's velocity as it spits out the end of the barrel, which will have an impact on the shape of its arc as it travels. A spinning object's natural tendency to precess after a while—the way a spinning top will start to wobble as it slows, then spin out and fall—applies to a spiraling rifle bullet, too. In some cases, even the earth's spin can have an impact on exactly where that round hits when it reaches the thousand-yard mark.

In other words, there are a thousand things that can go wrong. Yet in our SEAL sniper course, we trained our students to place that round on the target, with dead-on accuracy, in shot after shot after shot, never missing.

If you think that takes a “steady hand,” you're kidding yourself. Painting the trim in your living room takes a “steady hand.” What being a Spec Ops sniper takes is a highly unusual state of mind—the ability to hold on to dozens of variables at the same time and bring them all together with a precision attainable only through something like a state of self-hypnosis.

Succeeding in business takes the same thing. Sit down with

twenty different successful entrepreneurs and have twenty different conversations. You'll hear twenty different stories, twenty different sets of circumstances, twenty variations on a theme. But there is one thing I guarantee you will hear in common: every single one of those twenty individuals will exhibit a level of engagement with his or her business that borders on the obsessive.

In fact, let's call it what it is. Because it *is* obsession. Not an unhealthy obsession, one you can't control, but an obsession born of passion and total dedication. Focus taken to a level that can seem uncanny, almost pathological. But it's not pathological. What you're seeing is the same thing you observe when you watch Lang Lang play the piano or Michael Phelps race to an Olympic gold medal. It's the inspired and inspiring capacity of human beings to transcend their limitations and do something great.

Not to make it all sound too grandiose. I'm not saying you have to be the Michael Phelps of the business world to be successful. Just that it's that same level of passion, transformed into focus, that creates something new, that works. That hits the target you're shooting for.

Win First in Your Mind

After I got back from Afghanistan in 2002, my BUD/S mate Eric and I were tapped to rework the SEAL sniper course from top to bottom, to bring it up to speed for the new century and new face of asymmetrical warfare. In completely revamping the course, we brought in all sorts of innovations, including new technologies, new curricula and teaching content, new teaching methodologies, and a new

TOTAL FOCUS

mentoring system. But of all the innovations we brought to the program, the one that I believe made the biggest difference in the caliber of our graduates was also the one that has the most direct relevance to achieving outstanding performance in business: our program of mental management.

Based on the performance practices of Olympic athletes and world-class shooters, the program focused on developing the two traits common to every one of these top performers: complete and total confidence (“I will win no matter what”), combined with rigorous, consistent, meticulous mental rehearsal (“and this is exactly what it will look like and feel like”). The first session we ran with this program in place, we had one shooter-spotter team shoot perfect 100s on the first part of a shooting test. Guess how often that had happened before. Never. The second part of the test, they shot a 95. Taken together, it was the highest score in U.S. Navy SEAL sniper course history.

Jack Nicklaus used to say that 90 percent of a tough shot is the mental picture you create and how you set it up and 10 percent is the physical swing itself. In that respect, sniping is a lot like golf. So is business.

Sun Tzu was right: the outcome of the battle is typically determined before the first shot is fired. I’ve seen businesspeople with all the advantages and opportunities in the world blow it because of what was going on behind their eyebrows. And I’ve seen guys with nothing, nothing at all but a mental picture of their own success, surprise everyone and transform industries.

Some people call this process “visualization,” but I prefer the term we used in our sniper course: “superior mental rehearsal.” Yes, part of that is to visualize your desired outcome, to fix your goal

FRONT SIGHT FOCUS

clearly in your mind. But it's more active than that. Just seeing the outcome is static. We taught our students to play out the scenario fully in their heads. You want your service to have a million unique visitors per month by the end of the year? You want your product in the hands of 100,000 satisfied customers? See it. Rehearse it.

Close your eyes and shoot a movie in your head, a moving picture of satisfied customers using your product. Picture your operations team handing you the year-end report with the million uniques or seeing your company listed on the *Inc.* 500 fastest-growing companies list. In your head, give your year-end talk to a gathering of your employees, thanking them all for working together to reach this phenomenal benchmark. You don't get to the top of Mount Everest unless you've already visualized yourself being there.

Today I live an extremely busy life, but I put aside the time to meditate every day. For me, meditation is something like a long hot shower, a quiet time and space that creates clarity of mind and fosters new thinking. Some of my best ideas come to me during meditation. It also exercises the muscles of the creative mind and helps create the blank canvas upon which I practice my mental rehearsal. I know my business plan, and I use visualization and mental rehearsal as reinforcement tools for elements within that plan. I'm winning in my mind.

If I need to overcome some self-limiting pattern or bad habit I've noticed, or if I'm looking to cement a new goal into my mind, I'll write it down—either the goal or a positive habit that is opposite of the bad habit—then place it in key places so I bump into it throughout the day, triggering my mental rehearsal again. When you do this, you're imprinting that positive idea or goal by forcing yourself to think about it.

At one point, I really wanted to get better at remembering

TOTAL FOCUS

people's names. Each name I wanted to remember, I repeated it aloud three times and came up with a funny story I associated with that person, to lock it into my memory. Then I wrote down, "You are excellent at remembering people's names." I put a few slips of paper with that written on it around my home. After a week, I removed the slips; a week is all it takes. Now I'm good at remembering names.

I even block out specific time in my calendar that is devoted entirely to examining my current thoughts: time to put the cell phone away and read, think, focus on my personal and business goals, and build the thoughts I want to build. I've been doing this for a few years now and found it to be a very powerful thing.

My SEAL Team Three friend John Zinn started a company with a friend after getting out of the service, building armored vehicles that could withstand the rigors of the urban battlefield. At one point, they needed to bring out a second generation of vehicles but didn't have the capital to build a functioning prototype. They needed investors but couldn't get them without showing the prototype that they couldn't build. A no-win situation, right? Only in the physical world. To a SEAL, there is no such thing as a no-win situation, because you can always win in your mind.

John set up a large black box in the center of his company's showroom floor. When people asked what was in it, he said, "Oh, we can't show you that yet. That's Gen 2—very hush-hush."

Potential investors went nuts with curiosity. They had to know what was in there. John wouldn't say. Before long, John and his partner had gotten all the investment money they needed. They developed and distributed the new generation of vehicles, to great success.

Of course, there had been nothing in the box—no prototype, no nothing.

Only that's not really true, because there *was* something in there: *what John saw* was in there. He saw it so strongly that his potential buyers saw it, too, and laid down hard cash for it. Of course, hucksters do this, too; they're so good at painting the picture that they make you believe it, and you give them your money, and you get nothing. The difference was, John could deliver, and he did.

Pay Attention to Your Self-Talk

Next time the Olympics are on, pay attention to the interviews with the top-performing athletes, the ones who bring home the gold. You'll hear how they talk about their events and their training, the phrases they use, the words they feed themselves—how they literally talk themselves into success. Physically, these men and women train and train and train, just as SEALs do, but what sets the gold medalists apart is superior state of mind.

This is *not* something you're born with. It's something you develop, which means that no matter who you are, it's something *you* can develop. It just takes commitment, will, and practice.

As I said, when we studied Olympian gold medalists in the course of redesigning our sniper training program, we found two traits that set these superachievers apart. The first of these was *complete and total confidence*, and self-talk was how they created that total confidence.

If you think this sounds like some airy-fairy “personal growth” workshop talk, think again. Adopting this as one of our core training planks allowed us to turn out a generation of lethal snipers on the battlefield. We trained our instructors to teach and reinforce with

TOTAL FOCUS

positive language rather than negative, reminding students what *to* do and how to do it right rather than cautioning what *not* to do and castigating them for what they did wrong. And we trained our students in how to talk to themselves.

The truth is, whether out loud or silently, consciously or not, we all talk to ourselves constantly. Every one of us has this running commentary going on in our head. Most of us just aren't aware of it. The first step in training your self-talk is to become aware of that running commentary. Once you do, you will be amazed. I've trained myself to hear it, and I am constantly stunned by the crap people tell themselves.

I saw this happen in BUD/S. It was the middle of Hell Week, that legendary five-day ordeal designed to extrude all but the toughest from the program. During a rare lull in the punishment when we were allowed to eat something, I overheard two guys in the class talking.

"You know," said one, "I really wanted to be a pilot anyway."

"Yeah," said the other. "Did I tell you my girlfriend was hoping we would get married this month? It's tough, all this time away. I'm thinking this really isn't fair to her."

I could not believe what I was hearing. These guys were literally talking themselves out of making it through BUD/S! Right then and there I knew: when graduation came I would be standing there, and those guys would not. Months later, that's exactly what happened.

I saw and heard it happen again and again.

"Man, my leg hurts. I don't think I can do this."

"Someone's going to get killed, and I sure as hell don't want it to be me." At least this one was honest.

"All the cursing—it's just too much or me." Wait—was he *serious*? He was. I actually heard an officer in my BUD/S class say this,

and sure enough he quit. So did all the others. Of the nearly two hundred men who quit my class before it was over, not one was *physically* incapable of making it through the course. They quit because they *decided* to.

Outstanding success starts in your mind, and so does failure.

I'm sure you've seen this, too. You have friends who talk to themselves this way, who say, "Oh, I'm just an average golfer," or "I'm not that good a swimmer," or "I'm not a people person," "I don't really dance," "I'm not good at math," "I'm not much of a businessperson," "I don't really know how to cook," and on and on. Maybe you talk to *yourself* that way. (Most people do.) If you're having that conversation with yourself, you're setting the bar too low. You're limiting yourself from ever becoming anything above average. You're talking yourself out of the success you want.

I mentioned that I meditate every day. I also rigorously monitor my self-talk. I remind myself continually that I'm going to achieve the outcome I'm shooting for, that I'm totally capable of achieving it, and that it's already in process. That it's inevitable. If that sounds like self-hypnosis, well, in a way it is.

We're all doing it anyway, every day. Every human being does. Why not do it intentionally and aimed in the direction you want? Building your victory up, instead of tearing it down?

Master Distractions

When Eric and I ran the sniper course, we had guys shooting targets at a thousand yards with loud music blaring at them, trash can lids banging together, the targets moving when they weren't supposed

TOTAL FOCUS

to. We did anything we could do to screw with their concentration. Not because we were trying to flunk them, but because we were trying to save their lives when they were in situations just like the one I faced on the Afghanistan hillside.

We had one particularly difficult drill we called the edge shot. We'd place all the students at eight hundred yards and inform them that their targets would appear in the vicinity sometime within the next three hours. This meant those SEALs might spend as much as three hours on the scope, concentrating and waiting. There was one student who diverted his eyes from his line of view for just a moment, just long enough to wipe the sweat from his brow—and when he looked back up, he saw his target disappearing from view. I still remember his anguished cry: “Noooooooo!” He received a failing grade. A little sweat and discomfort is no reason to lose your focus.

High-pressure situations occur just as often in business as they do in combat, and while bullets and bombs are not involved and lives are not literally on the line, the stakes can be high. As a CEO, I consider it an invaluable gift that I've been trained to remain calm under fire. It has also helped me model behavior for the rest of my team; they know I expect cool heads during stressful times.

Distractions come in a thousand forms, and every one of them wants to tear apart the fabric of your focus.

I was going to make this heading “*Ignore Distractions*,” but that's not realistic. Some distractions are nothing but noise, and you can completely ignore them, but there are plenty that you can't ignore, because there's something meaningful behind the noise. You can ignore hecklers and dream stealers; you can't ignore the threat of a lawsuit. You can ignore the critics who are just taking cheap shots, but you can't dismiss criticism altogether, because some of

FRONT SIGHT FOCUS

your most valuable learning is going to come from criticism. It's crucial to have an open mind and cast a wide net when it comes to what you're learning, hearing about, noticing. But some things are plain distractions, and you can't afford to give them an inch or a minute. I can't tell you which is which. You'll have to discern. What I can tell you is to make it a constant practice to ask yourself the question and exercise the judgment: Is this worth my time? Is this important? Is it important *to me*? Is it going to move my business forward or make me a better businessperson?

A hundred things will crop up in a day that you have to put some attention on. The trick is not to let them get in the pilot's seat. You're the one flying this plane, not them. You can't ignore them; you *can* master them. If you don't, they'll take your plane down.

The most tempting distractions, and therefore the most dangerous to your business, are those opportunities that you could easily see yourself getting engaged in. Things you *know* you could do a job of. Don't chase down rabbit holes. I get these coming at me constantly: projects I could be part of, ventures I could invest in, boards I could sit on. I'm not saying never. But my default mode is no.

Communicate Effectively and Efficiently

You've heard people say "time is money." What utter horseshit. Money is just money. You can always get more of it. But time? Time is the *opposite* of money. You can't put it in a savings account or invest it in a high-yield hedge fund. You have exactly the same amount of it as the poorest person on the planet, and you're never going to get more.

If you want to experience the mental equivalent of a naked dive

TOTAL FOCUS

into a freezing mountain lake, print out a list of all the calendar days from today until your hundredth birthday: you'll find it fits on the back of your office door. It's a sobering exercise; it sends shivers up my spine just to type the words. Your entire life, and you can flip through it in the blink of an eye. Wasting money is foolish, but it's something you can learn from and recover from. Wasting time? That's like cutting off a limb.

Time is the master of everything. Time will eventually put an end to all things—birds, trees, flowers, mountains, and, yes, your business. It grinds stones to sand and years to memories. Yet as terrible as it is, it's also the most beautiful thing we have. And while it is the master of everything, here's something truly amazing: *you* can master *it*.

I pack a lot into every twenty-four hours, and the way I do it is by staying clear on my focus, mastering distractions, and paying attention to the quality of my communications.

People who communicate regularly with me soon learn how I e-mail. It's rarely more than one line. Often, just a word or two. "Sounds good." "Doubtful." "Great—you nailed it!" "Rework first paragraph, all else stays." "Too much." Ninety percent of the time, that's all it needs. Any more would be wasted time. And if you're e-mailing me, keep it to one topic; if you address more than one thing, you'll probably get a reply to only the first thing you asked.

I have a virtual assistant, Angie, who books all my phone calls and appointments and helps me stay on purpose. "Purpose" is a powerful word; it comes from an Old French word, *purpos*, meaning aim or intention. To be "on purpose" is "to aim accurately." That sounds like a Spec Ops sniper to me. It also sounds like a successful businessperson. With every meeting, every e-mail, every phone call, I have a question going in the back of my mind: "Is there purpose to

this conversation? Do I want to build a relationship with this person or this company? Is there purpose behind this meeting that aligns with my life and business strategy?”

If the answer is no, then I pass, every time.

Since I started putting this discipline into practice, my business revenue has quintupled. I’ve also started making new and more powerful relationships, both in my business and in my life. To the uninitiated, some of this may sound brash or mean-spirited. The initiated know better. Successful executives and business owners hold both their time and their relationships in an iron vault, precious and inviolable.

Know Your Number

When I started my business, I wanted to do three things.

Number one, I wanted to change the world.

If you say that sounds grandiose, I would ask, don’t you want the same thing? Why would you even dream of going through the grief and hardship, struggle and stress, of being in business if you *weren’t* intending to change the world? I know my business isn’t going to feed the world’s hungry, or raise global literacy rates, or vaccinate kids in Africa. But do I want to make my mark on the world? Of course I do. I want to leave behind tangible proof that the world is a better place because I was here. Don’t you? Doesn’t every entrepreneur and hard-charging executive?

At the very least, all ambitious businesspeople *start out* with that impulse. Maybe it gets lost in a long series of setbacks and compromises. People give up on their real dreams and settle for superficial

TOTAL FOCUS

goals. But I believe that, deep down, every person who goes into business wants to change the world for the better, at least in some way.

So that's number one.

Number two, I wanted to serve my community. By "my community," I meant the Special Operations world, both active duty and vets. Although before long (as we'll see in chapter 4), that definition got a good deal broader. But even then, the mission has always remained the same: serve our community with information and perspective, straight and honest, that they aren't getting anywhere else.

Change the world and serve the larger community: call those the big reasons.

And then there was a personal reason. I wanted to hit a number.

Years ago, not long after I left the service, I went through a two-year business program, in the course of which we did an exercise where we had to write down a number that answered the question "What do you need to live your ideal lifestyle?"

We weren't talking here about living on a yacht or buying an island. But I wanted a decent place, and a second home somewhere nice, to be able to eat out *X* number of times per week, a housekeeper so my place wouldn't be a mess. The ability to handle emergencies without freaking out. My life handled. When I did the math, that came in at right about \$400,000 a year.

There were about a hundred of us in this class, all doing the same exercise. Yet even with all the differences in our individual histories and circumstances, we all arrived at right around that same figure.

The next question was, "What does it take to have \$400,000 coming in every year, in passive income, so you don't have to keep your nose to the grindstone every week for the rest of your life just to keep things glued together?" The answer, with a give-or-take factor

depending on current interest rates, was about \$10 million, banked (or, better, invested).

That was my number. That *is* my number. Ten million. (You can see why the Scout Media offer was tempting.)

Maybe you're saying, "Well, I could get by just fine on half of that." Fair enough. Say you need \$200,000 a year, so about \$16K a month. That's \$5 million, banked and/or invested, to produce that much in annual passive income. Which means if you say it would take about \$200K to live on, not outrageously but comfortably, with not only day-to-day costs but also vacations and travels and emergencies and other unexpecteds all handled just fine, then what you're saying is, your number is \$5 million.

Are you worth \$5 million, right now, today? I sure as hell wasn't.

When I did that exercise, it scared the crap out of me. Because I didn't have anywhere near that much. I didn't have any immediate prospects of having anywhere near that much. That fact was, I'd never even identified what that number was, let alone worked out a strategy for how to get there. I'd never sat down and quantified exactly what it was I was shooting for.

Imagine you're in a sniper course and your instructor tells you, "Okay, get ready to shoot, you need to hit this target." *Okay*, you go. *What target? Where is it?* "Oh, we don't know," he says. "We just know there's a target somewhere out there. Go ahead. Start shooting. Maybe you'll find it by hitting it."

It doesn't work that way.

As snipers, we learned a huge amount of the intricate math and physics involved in ballistics. But here's something we learned that isn't intricate at all: if you're not looking at the target, if you don't even know where the target is, then your chances of hitting it are pretty slim.

TOTAL FOCUS

You have to know your number. If you don't, then there's no point in pulling the trigger, because you have no idea where you're aiming. And once you know your number, you have to develop a business strategy that will produce that kind of asset and therefore that kind of income.

I'm not saying your number should be the same as mine. It might be half that. It might be twice that. It might be something else altogether. It's whatever it is. But you need to *know* what it is, or there's no point being in business.

So what's your number? If you don't know it, you'll never hit it.

Get Clear About Money

Since the subject has come up, let's talk about money.

When you pour all your concentration into that red circle, that central focal point at the front of your scope, is money what you see there? It better be—but it also better *not* be. Because there are three things you need to know about money to succeed in business, and here are the first two:

1. It's about the money.
2. It's not about the money.

I know. Two completely contradictory statements, and they're both true, and you need to be able to hold on to both of them with clarity.

A friend of mine, Kamal Ravikant, has spent years working in the venture capital world and has seen a lot of billion-dollar business

ideas. He says, “If you start a business selling spoons because you think spoons are hot right now, everyone’s buying spoons, and you can make a killing in spoons, I’m not interested in investing, because I’m pretty sure you’ll fail. If you want to start a business in spoons because all your life you’ve loved spoons, you can’t stop thinking about them, you’ve come up with a hundred ways of designing new and different and cool spoons . . . let’s talk.”

His point: money, on its own, is not a compelling goal. It’s not enough to keep you in the game when the tough challenges come. Money is critical, and you have to know your number. But it’s not the oxygen your business burns to stay alive. What is? Your passion. The thing you care about. (We’ll hear more from Kamal in chapter 5, “Embrace the Suck.”)

So get clear about this: Money is critical. But it can never be the deciding factor. Never make an important business decision based purely on comparative numbers. There are always deeper and more important factors involved.

Which brings us to the third thing you need to know about money to succeed in business:

3. Whatever attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and opinions you have about money, you need to drop them. Lose them. Right here, right now.

People who have issues around money are the first to say, “Money isn’t everything.” What they really mean is, “I have a problem with money, so I’m going to pretend it’s not really very important.” Which is complete bullshit.

The other day, I had a conversation with a friend who’s working

like crazy in his business, having his struggles. “Yeah,” he said, “I just want to do this so I can grow the business and take care of my family.”

I asked him, “So how much *is* that, to take care of your family?”

He couldn’t answer that. He didn’t know his number. Didn’t have a clue. So what did he say? “Well, money isn’t everything.”

I shook my head and said, “Hang on a second. What you just said makes absolutely no sense. There is an actual number that takes care of your mom, your dad, your sisters, your brothers, everyone. But you’re afraid to dig it out. No, money isn’t everything, but money takes care of the people you want to take care of. It feeds them, it buys health care, it creates experiences.

“Dude,” I said, “the reason I know my number is that I have exactly the same concerns you do. I want to take care of my kids and make sure they go to college and they don’t have to graduate with a bunch of debt. I want to make sure that if, God forbid, they get hurt, they’re taken good care of. I want to be able to spend time with them—a *lot* of time—doing amazing things that they’ll remember for the rest of their lives.”

He could relate to that. But I’m still not sure he’s sat down and nailed his number.

Part of what informs my own perspective has to do with my dad’s views on money. I wanted to make sure I didn’t have the attitude about it that he did.

My father was very entrepreneurial. Working a construction job, he taught himself everything there was to know about building houses, from framing and roofing to plumbing and electrical wiring. Before long, he ran his own construction business. But he also had some major setbacks and lost his company, and I think

that burned him to the point that he didn't trust the world, which made him fearful and stingy with money. One year I really wanted a skateboard, and my mom bought me one at Target. My dad was so pissed at her that he drove off, left her standing there in the parking lot.

I have to admit there was some good modeling there, in that we learned to be careful with our money and not to spend it on frivolous things. But a fearful, overcautious attitude about money can lead you to make bad decisions in business. It can also cripple your ability to live life to the fullest.

My attitude with my kids is, if it's important, if it's valuable, if it enriches their lives, I do it. And if it costs money, so what. I can always make more money. I can't make more time.

Over the past decade, I've seen my dad loosen up a little about money, but the old attitudes die hard. Recently, I wanted to take him to the Stanley Cup finals in Pittsburgh for his birthday. He's a massive hockey fan and a great player himself, but he'd never been to a Stanley Cup play-off game. I bought the tickets; they were trading on Ticketmaster for as much as \$2,500, but a pro player friend got them for me at face value, \$600 or \$700 apiece. I told my dad I'd scored the tickets, and he should book his flight out east.

He said, "Well, I don't know . . . the flight's going to cost a lot. It's too much."

I knew he had the money. I knew he could afford it. But I wasn't about to challenge him. I called Angie and said, "You know what, let's just book his flight and hotel room."

When he found out I'd bought his plane ticket, I could tell he was happy about it—but a part of him was going, *Whoa, why would you do that? That's crazy!*

TOTAL FOCUS

But it's not crazy, not at all. Being able to have that time with my dad, to share that experience together? That's priceless. He won't be here forever. Hell, none of us will. If I don't use the money for something like this, then what's the point of making it?

My son Hunter recently broke his arm. I took him to the best ortho guy in Tahoe. It cost me three grand. Was it worth it? Are you serious?

People who don't have money suffer for it. They eat cheap processed food and get heart disease and cancer at higher rates. They don't take care of themselves, because they can't afford to. They have more stress in their lives because they're so freaking stretched. They can't afford the best, and it hurts. It's just the facticity of life.

The extremely successful people I know aren't greedy, or selfish, or materialistic. They don't have distorted values. If anything, the opposite. They are the most generous, kind, devoted, caring, clearheaded people I know. All that crap about rich people being egocentric, or corrupt, or uncaring, is complete and total nonsense, concocted to help people who *don't* have money feel more virtuous and better about their lives. Are there unhappy rich people? Sure; I've met some. But I know a lot more people who have built their wealth *and* their happiness, because they found their purpose in life and are passionately focused on what they do, from their businesses to their hobbies, whether it's flying, sailing, or collecting art.

Is business all about the money? Of course not. It's about innovation and ingenuity, about coming up with new and better ways of doing things. It's about making people's lives better. Exercising the incredible creativity of the human spirit. *And* it's about hitting your number: giving you what you need so you can design the life you want and take care of the people you care about.

Making the world a better place, and making *your* world a better place. Two equally noble pursuits. It's not either/or. It's *and*.

So whatever hang-ups you have about money, you need to wipe them away. Get really clear on money.

Keep Your Balance

Earlier I talked about embracing a “healthy state of obsession.” Before closing this chapter, I want to put that in perspective. Because total focus is not the same thing as tunnel vision, where you are literally unaware of everything outside your field of attention. That's not focus; that's being an ostrich with your head in the sand. Otherwise known as blissful denial.

In business, also known as suicide.

You have to stay aware of it all *and* at the same time be totally focused. Like most truths that really matter, it's a paradox.

Front sight focus is also not the same thing as being a workaholic. As a sniper, you can't keep performing with consistent accuracy on the gun if you neglect your physical fitness or let your health go to seed. Yes, for those minutes or hours when you're lying prone and drilling your eyesight on a target a thousand yards off, your body becomes a nonexistent irrelevancy—but the only reason you can perform like that is that you've been taking care of it day in and day out. (We'll talk more about your health and fitness in chapter 4.)

The same holds true for your business and the rest of your life outside your business.

The only way you can successfully and consistently focus on your business is if you maintain your health, your family, your relationships,

TOTAL FOCUS

and all the rest of what makes you a human being in a healthy state of balance. There's a point where work takes precedence, and whenever that point comes, you know you simply have to lock the doors and rivet yourself on getting the job done. And there's a time when you have to shift your attention to your family, your kids, your girlfriend or boyfriend, your circle of friends.

If you see those things as taking away from your business, then you're not looking at it right. Those things aren't detracting *from* your business. They are what allows you to be successful *in* your business.

A few years ago, *Men's Journal* wrote a profile on me that included this day-in-the-life excerpt from my Facebook page:

My last 30 hours: 0400 Uber to JFK, 0600 nonstop to LAX, CBS studios, lunch with Mark Harmon (great guy), kids call, CNN call, dinner with friends and agent Valarie, friend Sally drops me at LAX, miss flight, standby for 1130 to JFK, coach seat secured, flt crew upgrades me to 1st class sleeper, 0730 land, 0830 NYAC [New York Athletic Club] swim 2,000 meters. Start my Saturday.

This is pretty typical for me. Am I busy? I am.

At the same time, as I write these words, I just finished a week unplugged and off the map with my three kids, somewhere in the Northwest, having a blast with them. Total dad time. It's one of those things that gives my life depth and meaning. Without it, I'd be a pale copy of myself. I made a pledge to myself years ago, when my first business fell apart and my wife and I divorced, that I would never let business get in the way of spending time with my kids. As I wrote in

FRONT SIGHT FOCUS

The Red Circle, “The marriage may not have made it, but the family is forever. That, too, is part of my red circle.”

You have those things, too, that make you who you are. You know what they are. You have to keep them in your red circle, too.

It’s a matter of balance, and balance is a matter of doing one thing at a time—and being very, very clear on exactly what that one thing is.

PROFILE: JOE APFELBAUM (AJAX UNION)

As I said in the introduction, I have a circle of friends I look to for insight and inspiration—and, in those times when I need it, for guidance. They are all super-successful. I call them my “Spec Ops friends of the business world.” No one better exemplifies the principle of front sight focus than Joe Apfelbaum, CEO of the Brooklyn-based digital marketing company Ajax Union.

As successful as Joe is, it took some bitter failure and heartbreak to get him there.

Joe grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community where, when you get married, it’s very important to have kids right away. In 2003, all of Joe’s married friends were having kids, but not Joe and his new bride. People who knew them started talking: Why weren’t the Apfelbaums having kids? After a year of this, Joe and his wife started seeing doctors, going through tests, and doing all kinds of research. It became a huge source of stress in Joe’s life.

Finally, they got pregnant. They were so excited they had a celebration at his mother’s house and another at his wife’s mother’s house. Everybody they knew was happy for them. They told the whole world.

A few weeks before their due date, Joe was at his office when he got a call from his wife, who was crying so hard he could barely understand her. She was at the hospital for a routine test. The doctors said they couldn’t find a heartbeat.

“They don’t know what they’re talking about,” said Joe. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

One of Joe’s strengths is that he has an amazing ability to become an expert at pretty much anything he turns his mind to. (His mother used to call him Touchy-Touch when he was little, because he would go around touching and messing with everything until he became an expert at it.) By this time, he was running a few different businesses and had already acquired a reputation as a master troubleshooter. As far as he was concerned, there wasn’t a problem that couldn’t be fixed.

He would just go over to that hospital and fix this one.

He walked in, full of confidence, and when the attendant said, “Mr. Apfelbaum, I’m so sorry for your loss,” Joe replied, “What loss? There’s no loss here. Let me speak to the doctor. Bring me the head cardiologist.”

For two days, Joe battled to make it not true. Finally, he had to accept that he and his wife had lost their baby.

A deep sadness settled over Joe, like a black cloud. “This was my purpose for being here,” he says. “This was the reason I came to this world. And now I’d failed. It felt like my life was over.” He sent his employees home and closed his businesses—maybe permanently. He wasn’t really sure. He wasn’t sure of anything.

After a few weeks, someone called to offer him a job. Joe didn’t want to take it—like most entrepreneurs, he considered himself unemployable—but the guy pressed. He’d just sold a \$100,000 piece of software to somebody in Minnesota who was having trouble with it, and Joe was the only person he knew who could figure things like this out on the fly. He needed Joe to get out to Minnesota and figure the damn thing out.

TOTAL FOCUS

Joe asked his wife what she thought.

“Look,” she said. “For the past two weeks you’ve been sitting around the house, moping and crying, driving me crazy. I can’t take it. You need to go do this, or we’re getting divorced.”

Joe agreed to take the job if his new employer would let him run his other businesses on the side, and the guy said yes. He spent a little phone time with the software company’s staff, read a few books on the subject, flew out to Minnesota, and within three or four hours of messing with it, he had the problem solved.

Okay. So he hadn’t fathered a child. But he could do *this*.

Joe poured himself into his work again. At his new job, he became an expert at IT. Every time Google changed its algorithm, Joe would reverse-engineer it and figure out what he needed to do to get his clients to the top. It was like a game for Joe—a game that paid *very* well. He started an IT consulting business on the side. He became an expert at selling things on the Internet. He became an expert at Web site construction, graphic design, marketing. He read entire shelves of books, about everything and anything. He worked until three in the morning every day.

During the next few years, he went through a series of four full-time jobs, all while running seven businesses on the side, in an office with eight full-time employees. He had a construction company building sukkahs (ceremonial huts used for Sukkot) with three crews building units each year for four hundred customers. He ran a real estate Web site. An SEO (search engine optimization) company. A graphic design business. An eBay business. He was doing a million things and executing flawlessly. But deep down, he knew it was crazy.

“I said yes to everything,” says Joe. “But I knew I was doing some-

thing wrong. It's just not humanly possible for someone to do all that and be successful at all of it."

Joe had grown up working after school and on weekends in his mother's clothing shop on Manhattan's Lower East Side. He had seen her go from selling sweaters to flying all over the world to buy the best fabrics and selling high-end couture under her own label at half the department stores' prices. She was successful, to a point—but she could never break the million-dollar mark. Joe had watched her business struggle for more than a decade before finally going under.

Now something weirdly similar was happening to him. He wasn't *failing* . . . but something was keeping him from being as successful as he should be. The truth was, he was a mile wide and an inch deep.

In 2008, a business partner, Zevi Friedman, approached Joe about starting an online marketing company. Joe said yes (of course), and the two started a digital marketing company they named Ajax Union. Joe now had yet one more part-time horse to ride in his jam-packed stable.

At the time, Joe had a full-time position as chief marketing officer for TheWatchery.com, a luxury watch business, where he managed about a hundred people in its sales and marketing division. Even as the Great Recession was killing a lot of other luxury businesses, Joe helped it grow from \$3 million to \$40 million in a very short time.

In April 2009, after Ajax Union had been going for a while and was showing some serious growth, Joe walked into the office of Watchery's CEO, Joseph Levy, and said, "Joseph, you know I have seven side gigs that I do, right?"

"Yeah, of course," said Levy. "How's that going?"

"It's going well," said Joe. "Actually, this one business in particular is really taking off. We have thirty clients, we're growing, and my partner wants me to come work full-time. But I love you, I love this company, and I love working here. What should I do?"

"Listen," said Levy. "First of all, I want to thank you. Because of you, I've grown my company from \$3 million to \$40 million, and we'll be selling it soon. You should go build that business. What's more, I want to be your biggest customer."

Joe went back to Zevi and said he was ready to work full-time in their business—and much to his astonishment Zevi said, "No. That's not going to work for me."

"*What?* What are you talking about?" said Joe.

Zevi said, "Joe, you need to focus."

"What do you mean, I need to focus? I'm *incredibly* focused!"

Zevi shook his head. "No, you need to get rid of everything you're doing on the side. Everything. Let go of all of it. You need this to be the *only* thing you're doing."

Joe was shocked. "I can't do that! I'm making so much money from my sukkah business, and my eBay business, and my advertising platform, and . . ."

Zevi looked at him and said, "Joe. We can build a multimillion-dollar company here. But we're not going to do that if you're doing all this other stuff. I need you to *focus*."

Joe was stunned.

He went and talked to his wife. She said, "Do it. If it means we take a financial hit, that's okay, you'll make up for it with Ajax Union. You'll figure it out."

Joe took a deep breath and made the plunge. He sold the sukkah business; closed down his eBay business; shuttered his IT company,

handing its client list off to a few other IT companies he knew; pulled the plug on a bunch of Web sites; and folded the resources of his Web design and online marketing businesses into Ajax Union. He got rid of *everything*. It was like reaching into his pockets, turning them inside out, and giving everything away—like jumping off the highest high dive without knowing for sure how much water was in the pool.

In the process, Joe says, Zevi helped him realize something. He'd never really been excited about all those different businesses; what he'd been excited about was *promoting* them. Joe had a passion for promoting things—ideas, concepts, values, businesses. Focusing all his energies into a single digital marketing business allowed him to tap into that passion.

Ajax Union took off. Eighteen months after Joe went full-time, the company hit No. 178 on the *Inc.* 500, an annual list of the fastest-growing private companies in America. In 2010, it doubled its revenue, from \$500,000 to \$1 million, and then doubled it again the following year to over \$2 million. By 2015, the revenue was \$4 million, and as of this writing the company's on track for \$6 million in 2016.

Joe has also become an expert in a whole new topic: focus.

"Most people don't really know what they want," he says. "If you don't know where you want to go, you might end up getting somewhere else. Where? I don't know. But it's probably not somewhere you'll be happy with."

Like me, Joe is big on the word "purpose."

"If you know what you want to do and focus intensely on that purpose, you'll move forward—but you have to put all your chips into one basket and go all in. If you don't do that, you'll die."

Joe says focus is a skill, and as with any skill, to become good at

TOTAL FOCUS

it you need to practice it. Not just the kind of hyper-focusing you do when it's suddenly crunch time, but focusing each and every day on whatever is the most important thing, on that particular day, toward reaching your goal.

He has also brought that dedication to focus to how he works with his clients. He doesn't just help them market their business; he also coaches them to help them get clear on exactly what that business is at its core.

"Most businesses fail in the first year," he tells them, "and most of those still standing fail within the first three. Very few get past five. Almost none get past ten. And you know what most of those failures have to do with? Lack of focus."

Today Joe is one of the most focused guys I know. He's also one of the happiest.

And by the way, he and his wife now have five beautiful children.

You're probably wondering what happened after that lunch with Todd Dakarmen, when he called me on my lack of focus.

A week later I got another phone call. "Hi, Brandon? Todd Dakarmen. Look, I want to set up our next shooting date." He was a man who knew what he wanted, all right.

But now so was I. "Sorry, man," I told him. "I can't do it. I've taken your advice. I'm focusing."

He laughed. "Son of a bitch!" he said. "Good for you."

I made that call staring off the La Jolla coast and let go of Wind Zero. Unlike Todd's crashed Porsches, the thing was not salvageable, not even for parts. Four million dollars' worth of investor money and my life savings, gone. Chalk that up to one expensive postgraduate course in business. I took a position with a large defense firm in

San Diego, just to have something to pay the bills and consolidate my finances while I figured out what the hell to do next. Over the rest of that year, I let go of a bunch of other projects I was working on and gave a pass to a lot of strong opportunities I'd been considering. I got laser focused. I needed to find that single target.

Within a few months, I did.

I scraped together about \$10,000 and in February 2012 launched a Web site, SOFREP.com, which stood for "Special Operations Forces Report" (like the military term "SITREP," for "situation report"). That became my front sight focus.

By the end of the year, we had more than a million people hitting the site each month. Our weekly SOFREP Radio broadcast became the No. 1 broadcast in its category on iTunes. We had a publishing division going that would generate several *New York Times* best-sellers. Over the next few years, we launched or acquired more than half a dozen related Web sites, including SpecialOperations.com and the gear site Loadout Room, and I formed an umbrella entity, Hurricane Group, Inc., to bring all these properties together into one unified digital media empire. In 2014, a media company offered to buy it all from me for \$15 million, and you already know where that went. A year later, Hurricane was worth triple that, and today it's worth a good deal more. There have been other offers. I'm still not selling.

It's amazing what can happen in a few short years. All the success that had failed to materialize with Wind Zero happened with SOFREP and Hurricane. And I trace it all back to that conversation with Todd.

Over these last few years, I've said no to a lot of strong opportunities, some of them truly amazing situations. It still happens today. On average, I say no to a solid business offer about once a week.

TOTAL FOCUS

“Will you consult for my company? Will you join this board of directors? Are you interested in being my partner investor?” Sorry—no can do. I’m focused on my target.

You’re also probably wondering how that B-52 bomb drop worked out.

I called the numbers, and seconds later the bomb fell—about a hundred yards behind the fighters who were shooting at us. I made a quick recalculation and called up new numbers. The second drop was right on target. We’re still here. The other guys aren’t.

Sometimes that’s the only outcome that counts.