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Commentary

How To Be The Next Bill Gates

Hayes Davenport 06.23.08, 6:00 PM ET

Profit-seeking entrepreneurs could take a few tips from billionaire software engineer-turned-philanthropist Bill Gates.

In honor of Gates' June departure from his day job at Microsoft, career consultants and psychologists scrutinized the peaks and valleys of Gates' 35-year career to pinpoint what factors determined his success.

In Pictures: How To Be The Next Bill Gates

They found that one of Gates' most instructive traits--his clarity of vision--has been evident since adolescence. After writing his first computer program at age 13, Gates hasn't wavered in his mission to develop cutting-edge software with the potential to change the world.

Gates' single-mindedness has led him down some risky paths. For example, when he was 20, he dropped out of Harvard to found Microsoft. And in 1998, he dared to take the stand himself in an antitrust suit brought about by the government. His pattern of accomplishment following these choices--Microsoft's meteoric rise and an eventual settlement that didn't much restrict the company's monopoly on its browser and operating system--reflects Gates' understanding of how and when it's actually a good idea to break the rules.

But experts say it's important for aspiring business leaders considering dicey ventures to fully understand their potential ramifications. Gambling isn't for everybody, they add, and it can sink a career if backup plans aren't in place.

"Gates demonstrated that the old-school model of an Ivy-league degree, or a pedigreed family, isn't a requirement for career success," says Katy Piotrowski, author of *The Career Coward's Guide to Changing Careers*. "Yet it's important to remember that in the absence of a career-driving vision, it doesn't hurt."

Critics have lambasted Gates for a management style they label overbearing and bossy, but his harsh workplace demeanor belies another secret to his success: his unwillingness to compromise his goals. But there's a softer side to the technology magnate. Gates earned the appreciation of his employees by leading an office as casual as a college campus and encouraging free thinking, which allowed him some leeway to exercise tough love when necessary.

"Microsoft employees are some of the best and brightest, but they're not known for being conformists," says Stephen Hopson, a career consultant and professional speaker, in an e-mail. "Can you imagine them working in an environment that required adherence to a strict dress code? Bill Gates understood his employees and provided the ideal conditions for them to thrive."

Gates' emotional intelligence and business savvy could only get him so far. Luck certainly was kind to him. And while that lesson is impossible to emulate, he also pounced on opportunities as they came to him. For example, when IBM first asked Gates to write an operating system for its first PC, Gates possessed neither the experience nor the resources to put one together. He said yes anyway, and in a few weeks MS-DOS was born.

"Successful people like Gates take advantage of opportunities because they're ready for them," says Carol Vecchio, founder of the Seattle-based Centerpoint Institute for Life and Career Renewal. "If your vision isn't clear enough, these opportunities don't happen to you, because you can't see them."

The quality most essential to Gates' success, though, is what the experts call self-knowledge. Whether it was programming BASIC or managing a charitable foundation, Gates never hesitated to act in accordance with his passions. He constantly champions innovation, refusing to stop and revel in his past accomplishments. That way, he keeps himself stimulated by work that is all-consuming.

"People should look at Gates as someone who has been successful as a total human being, not just as a businessman," says Alexandra Levit, a career consultant and author of *How'd You Score That Gig?* "This is, admittedly, a new definition for success, but one that's becoming increasingly important as the boundaries between the personal and the professional continue to blur."

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