

Do one more push up

“Whenever you start-give it your best. The opportunities are there to be anything you want to be. But wanting to be someone isn’t enough; dreaming about it isn’t enough; thinking about it isn’t enough. You’ve got to study for it, work for it, fight for it with all your heart and soul because nobody is going to hand it to you.” – Colin Powell

I remember being invited to Washington, D.C., for a national sales kickoff meeting our company was hosting. This was one of those very inspirational sessions where all of our top sales leaders from across the country would meet for two days to help kick off the new fiscal year with demonstrations of new products, new contests, new awards, and a ton of excitement and recognition. During that event, one of the keynote speakers was retired four-star general and former national security advisor, Colin Powell. As you can imagine, General Colin Powell told some very powerful stories, but the story that stuck with me the most was about how he became a four-star general. He summed it up by saying, "I did one more push-up than everyone else."

Of course, we know that's not exactly what happened - but it was the honest truth to how he began his military career. General Powell started in the military as most do, at the very bottom. He went on to talk about how during their routine physical training exercises, he would often try to squeeze out one more push up than the rest of the platoon. If the squad were doing fifty push-ups, he would do fifty-one. Of course, for his superiors who were overlooking this field of new recruits, this made Mr. Powell stand out - and often, it was not in a good way. The military likes uniformity, compliance, and predictability. They like to see everyone obeying orders. Yet, Mr. Powell stood out from his peer group by doing "one more push-up."

As the years passed, he was never the strongest or the fastest person enlisted in the military. Still, he knew from this early lesson that if he could differentiate himself, even just a

little bit, from his peer group, the senior officers would take notice. Of course, this didn't literally mean doing an extra push-up. Sometimes it meant saying yes when others said no, or perhaps staying late when nobody else wanted to, or offering assistance to that jerk nobody else wants to be associated with. Each of these small acts was his way of doing one extra push-up and creating a way for him to stand out in a crowd of sameness that so many of us are so familiar with.

I've used this mantra of "Doing one extra push-up" in countless conversations with others I've led or mentored over the years. You see, this story applies to me perfectly. I was never very athletic. I was never the smartest kid in school or the best looking. I wasn't very popular, and I grew up in a very lower-middle-class family. In a nutshell, I was normal. I was average. I simply didn't stand out to most people in any particular way. The one thing I had going for me was that I was brought up to have an outstanding work ethic. Whenever I was working, I always put in 110%. I would go above and beyond to help teach others how to do things more effectively or efficiently.

I remember in one particular situation when I was a front-line associate back in the 1990s (long before automation or AI existed), I was tasked with a huge account that had more than 2,800 locations. I searched and searched to see if there were any digital tools I could use to help me with the ongoing servicing of this massive account. One afternoon while reading some random PC publication, I stumbled upon an article that spoke about this new freeware macro software that could automate simple computer tasks. Imagine, if this client calls and wants to update their phone number, someone would have to manually key the new phone number on 2,800 different screens. But after playing around for a few hours on my own time with this new free software I read about in a magazine, I was able to write a simple macro that would pull the data from a text file and "paste" it into the appropriate screens 2,800 times without any human intervention. The application worked so well that our firm bought me ten new IBM laptops so I could run ten macros simultaneously that were doing the work of a hundred people, except these "people" never got sick, never got stuck in traffic, and never took a break!

That was my very first introduction to automation, which has since gone mainstream across all walks of business. Shortly after deploying this macro solution in our region, my firm then flew me to Pittsburgh and other major regions across the country to teach others how to use this technology in their own parts of our business. Without realizing it, I did an extra push-

up. When I look back, I could have just accepted that this would be a difficult client to service and will require many hours of manual keying every time a simple change needs to be processed. But instead, I kept thinking about solving the problem differently until finally, I stumbled upon that article that educated me on a possible solution that could do the work for free! All I needed to do was play with it for a few hours and work out the bugs. That solution and the act of flying me across different parts of the country to teach others how to use this free application did wonders for my career.

All sorts of people at all sorts of levels within our organization heard stories about my famous macros - helping to pave the way to build my personal brand for future promotions. In a simpler example, when I first became an executive, my role was to support our sales teams across the Northeastern part of the United States. Those teams had exceptionally high quotas and very challenging jobs. Of course, like most sales organizations, they're also rewarded well for their success. However, I quickly observed that all of the recognition was "the same" as everyone else's. If you hit a certain target, you won a trip - the same trip that several hundred other people also won. If you sold a certain amount this month, you received a bonus - the same bonus countless other people would also earn. Despite our failed attempts at creating meaningful compensation and recognition programs, we had created an expensive sea of sameness for our top sales associates. I wanted to try to do something about it.

That year, I asked for a list of every sales associate who achieved our President's Club - the top honor one could achieve each year of their sales career; the opportunity to bring a guest on an all-expense-paid trip to some exotic destination. I also asked for a home address to accommodate the list of winners. Unfortunately, due to privacy concerns, all they would give me was their work addresses. I didn't let that stop me. I decided to send a hand-written congratulatory note to every President's Club qualifier within my region. I don't remember exactly, but there were probably sixty or seventy of them. I wanted each of them to know I was personally proud of their accomplishments and was thrilled to have played a small part in their success. I thought, "it's easy to send an email or nothing at all, but what if I send a hand-written note? What if I do it just a little bit differently than my predecessor did?" I'm here to tell you that people noticed! Some of the recipients had been with the firm for 20+ years and had never received a hand-written note from their direct manager, never mind someone on the fringes who simply indirectly supports our sales teams.

I carried on that tradition each year I was in that role, doing something just a little bit differently than my counterparts across the country were doing. I may not be a four-star general, but I'm proof that an extra push-up can go a long way towards helping one's career.