

Questioning Authority

Joe Montana says that even the real pros need to get back to basics.



Post-retirement, sports superstars used to aim their advice and inspiring life stories at Little Leaguers and weekend-warrior fans. These days, they offer counsel to companies and their workers. Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana has kept busy the last decade as a motivational speaker, a partner in a private equity fund, a real-estate investor, and co-founder of MVP Performance Institute, a coaching and training firm. And now he's written a book, *The Winning Spirit: 16 Timeless Principles That Drive Performance Excellence* (Random House), with co-author and business partner Tom Mitchell. Montana, 49, spoke by phone from his Silicon Valley office.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN

A lot of what's in your book—about, say, thinking positive, working as a team, and leading by example—borders on rudimentary. Are you aiming to reach people who've never really thought about their own performance at work?

We're after everyone. In business, when you reach a certain level, you forget about the fundamentals. People lose track of the little things as they have success. When I joined the 49ers after college, I was shocked that coach Bill Walsh went back to fundamentals with me from day one—working with footwork, with body position—and I was going, “God, this is crazy—I've already done all this.” I didn't realize that I still needed to work on fundamentals.

Yes, these principles are all pretty basic and pretty simple. Everybody thinks there's a secret other than hard work, and the really hard thing to get across is the principles and basics of your business. Fundamentals can get you back on track. When we were in trouble on the field, we didn't go running plays that had been put in just that week. We went right back to plays that everybody knew, that we didn't have to think about. We built a foundation again. That's how you come back from deficits and start having success again. And that foundation comes from practice and repetition and drills.

How do you convince people that practice and repetition and drills are as important as you say they are? Working on your business skills day after day isn't as exhilarating as sports practice can be.

Even in sports, practice is still practice, and nobody likes to go to practice. You have to find a way to make something out of the practice. I would play games with myself—every day, I tried to complete 100 percent of my passes—and try different things to keep it new, keep it fresh, and challenge myself. Those are the things that keep your job interesting. Otherwise, you just fall into the doldrums of going to work every day: OK, I'm going to answer the phone when it rings.

Throughout *The Winning Spirit*—even in the title—you speak of winning and triumphs and champions. But in the corporate world, most people do just go to work every day and answer the phone when it rings.

Well, there are probably big days in everybody's business week or month that you aim toward, and you have to have little challenges every day; there has to be something you want to accomplish. And sometimes it may be rather miniscule or seem stupid. On the 49ers, we had portable goalposts with hollow tops, and before practice, the quarterbacks would take half-used rolls of tape and see who

could throw the most rolls in the goalposts. It was a challenge that wasn't meaningful, but it allowed us to go into the practice saying, “OK, now how else can I challenge myself?” Sometimes it's the simplest exercises that give you a fresh outlook on what you're doing for the rest of the day.

You note that playing sports is “pure pleasure” and that people play “for the love of the game.” Should one expect to get the same feeling from daily work?

Well, there's still nothing as exciting as Sunday was for me. When you're closing a deal, you don't have 300-pounders chasing you. I haven't tried that yet—it might make business a little more exhilarating!

That'd be some motivation.

Yeah, that'd put the fear in you; that'd get your heart rate going. No, I don't think you can have the same pleasure you get from a game. But the most successful people in the business world find it exhilarating to go through their sales pitches and their meetings. It's fun. That's what Tom and I are trying to get people to realize—that you've got to find something that you enjoy doing. You can't just go to work. That's what happened to me my last year in football—all of a sudden, I felt like I was going to work instead of going to play a silly game

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that I'd enjoyed for thirty-some years. That's why I retired.

The tough part is the practice. Golfers analyze every shot they hit; while they're watching the flight, they're thinking about how it felt and what they did wrong. When I meet with a potential client, I go out and sell what I'm doing, and the whole time, I'm going through the pitch and trying to hone it: *God, I didn't say that, did I?*

Your book actually demands quite a bit from the reader: meditation, making lists, picking up new avocations, hiring a performance coach. And then you insist on practice and repetition. Is that expecting too much from someone who's just hoping for a few pointers?

I don't really expect anyone who's not at a higher level in an organization to hire a performance coach. What I try to do is give 'em a lot and hope that they'll catch a couple of things in the beginning. Maybe if they have success with those, then they'll start picking up the things that seem a little bit more difficult.

What if they fail?

You can learn from your failures as well as your successes.

Actually, the acceptance of failure is an interesting theme in your book. You even take the space

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to criticize those who congratulate others "for simply showing up."

You have to build self-esteem in the proper way. I'll be in the grocery store, and kids come up to me in their uniforms, and I ask, "Did you have a game? Did you win?" And the parents speak up right away: "*Everybody* won." What they forget is that the kids *know* whether they won or lost; they know whether they played well or not. Parents aren't helping kids by telling them that failure is OK: "Oh, wow, you walked up to the plate like a champ"—even though they struck out five times. When they get into the real world, those strikeouts aren't any good.

You also talk about the importance of being confident, though. How is that different than self-esteem?

Look: I don't care how good you are—you're gonna lose some-

times. No one has 100 percent success. In my football career, some games I played the best I ever played, and we still lost. I had to learn from that experience and try not to make the same mistakes the next time out. You can have failure but still be confident in your ability to do things. In real estate, you may go in and bid on a job, and somebody may think he can do it for less. You may lose the job. But there'll be another one down the road; there's no reason for you not to be confident.

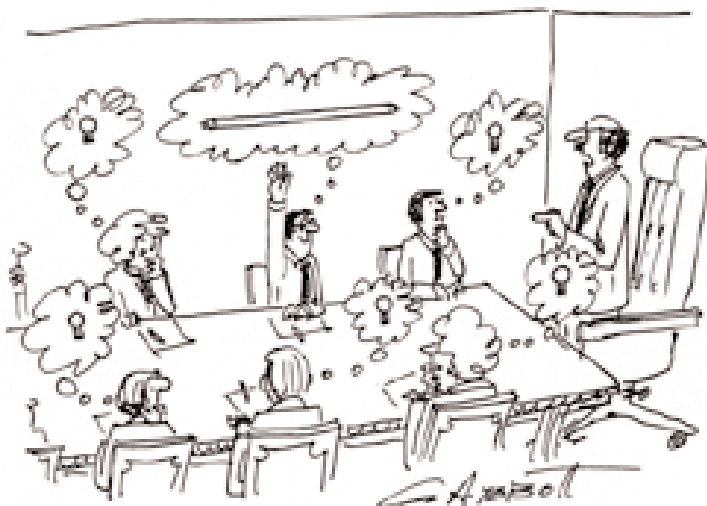
Personally, I'm motivated more by the fear of failure than I am by the promise of success. Success is what *should* happen, so there's not that big elation when I reach that goal—other than the pinnacle for me, which was the Super Bowl. But I've always worried more about what I might do wrong.

I'd bet that a lot of people have trouble envisioning a two-time MVP having any fear of failure.

What I'm really after is getting people to see where success comes from, and that it's just a matter of how much time they're willing to put in and how much they're willing to sacrifice. Look at any major sport: The guys who are performing well are the guys who are practicing and trying to hone their skills more than the other guy. Yeah, occasionally, there's going to be that lottery winner, that one person who just happens to be a tremendous athlete, and there's the same thing in the business world—you're going to run into someone who's just *got it*. But the rest of us, even me, have to work pretty dang hard to get there. So I hope that people see that.

Do you ever wish that people would set aside your celebrity for a moment and listen more carefully to what you have to say?

Yeah, a lot of times. It overshadows things. But that's OK—it gets me in the door. ♦



"Do you have a better idea, Hawkins?"