All the World's a Disney Stage T.R Feather

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Introduction

When first writing this, my goal was to create something instructional that would provide support and insight into the life of someone who has performed for the Walt Disney Company. So, it was to be informative, full of lessons, and taught with the authority and know-how of a Dr. Phil book. But it turns out that people don't really want to be taught on a subject that is interesting enough just to hear stories about, and don't want to be taught by someone even less qualified to teach within their field than Dr. Phil. So, needless to say, the text needed to be revised.

I now present a book of my experiences, of stories and my journey, and hope that it interests and fascinates you in a way that gives the feeling of being at Disney World, and a little less like you are having coffee with a TV Psychologist.

For whatever the reason was that caused you to pick this out of the virtual world and read, whether it be a look at the inside of Disney, or because you've already read all the other 'I Worked at Disney' books, I hope that you get out what you are looking for.

I'd like you to first take a moment, if you will, to remember April 2011. Do you recall what you were doing? Easter is just over and...I don't know how you answered the question, and perhaps I never will. But for me it was sitting in my parent's living room in Australia, enduring the heat and trying to avoid permanently sticking to the couch. I had been "let go" from my job and university was growing more skull crushingly boring by the day. Adding to that was an encompassing feeling of age, and failure was growing on me like any other reasonable twenty two year old who hasn't yet made the big time. I was practically retired in my mind, at the time.

There was something about performing on a stage, as crazy fun as it is, for 150 people didn't feel as fulfilling as it once did. Whether by some misplaced sense of entitlement or gross overconfidence in my performance skill, I wasn't sure. But, regardless, I wanted something else.

My entire family was sitting in the lounge watching something loud on TV, and I was on my laptop searching local jobs when a Disney audition was one of the advertisements off to the side. You know, those silly ads that tracking cookies "custom tailor" to you and then try to sell you stuff? Yeah, those ads. But I clicked on it anyway.

The audition was for a week's time and I happened to have that day off from both work and school. And to add fuel to the fires of fate, the day I was able to go was the very last day for registration. So. I registered, and about a week later I suddenly didn't feel like going anymore. It was going to cost too much in fuel and I would have to leave for the audition at the crack of dawn. But I obviously set my excuses aside and went, since I'm telling you this story right now. Yes, this story of awesome experiences and a one of a kind journey that you're going to rave about to all of your friends.

So I went, carting half a ton of paperwork that I had been asked to bring with me, like resumes and such, then gave it all to a nice Brazilian receptionist that Disney had brought with them. I watched her staple them together and comment surprisingly that everything was there.

Essentially, the tough life starts now. It's not easy getting all of that paperwork together. The website Disney had available at the time was buggy and it wasn't easy sending through fourteen pages of forms that would stop loading randomly and then crash the browser. To be honest, I devoted an entire day to getting this form finished. It's because of this, and the amount of other forms needed, that I believe is the reason several people turned up without everything. It wasn't the worst thing in the world for these people, they were sent away to find a computer and finish the job, but I believe it payed off for me to have the forms to create not only a good first impression but to secure early interview times while the interviewers were still fresh and excited.

So score 'one' for me so far, sitting patiently in a little plastic chair wearing my scratchy formal clothes and praying that I don't sweat them into becoming my informal car washing rags when Mr. Smiles arrived.

My interviewer, Mr. Smiles (not his real name) was a very happy thirty something year old man who loved life and loved Disney almost as much as his teeth whitener and hair polish. He seemed like someone you'd love to sell something too, but not as much work or room with. His smile tried to reach for the roof and he beamed without bias in all directions, he just couldn't seem to be any happier to represent Disney or he might burst. It was then that I knew I had some serious impressing to do. I answered lots of questions. I tried to sell that I, too, had Disney stapled to my heart and soul, then I performed and was subjected to measuring and weighing. He then informed me that that was all, and if I passed the first round then my next audition would be in Orlando. But failing wouldn't mean deporting, just merely meant that I would be shuffled into something as awful as a janitor. Or worse, until I was begging for deportation. Not his words exactly, but needless to say it was terrifying and nauseating, made worse by the fact that I wouldn't know my acceptance or rejection for three more weeks.

Three weeks could have been three months, every day was harder to get up for and I felt sick constantly. My mum braced for my depression, anticipating the news that I had been rejected. Then, one night, June 1st 2011 to be exact, I received an email from a lady named Karina from Disney Recruiting:

Congratulations!! You have been offered the position of Entertainment Performer with Walt Disney World to begin in January 2012! Please reply to either accept or decline

Hmm a tough choice? Trust me, I replied immediately and half a second later happily danced my guts out before calling my brother and then mum.

After that came six months of preparation, my life leading up to that point in time was literally closing shop and I had six months to finish the chapter before an entire new life in a foreign country could begin. I lived at my friend's place and worked for him, selling his baked goods for rent, and sold paintings I'd acquired from overseas on eBay to keep myself alive until I could begin my real job.

The airport was traumatic, I left my all my friends in a teary mess and had already left my family at their house in much the same manner. I then began my journey to Nadi Airport in Fiji (No, the airport is not a tropical paradise). Then to Los Angeles which was kind of less impressive that I had hoped. I don't know what I had expected but the air you breathed there, being 50fifty percent glitter, was sort-of part of it. Then finally to Orlando, Florida, which I decided on the bus ride to my resort, was not somewhere I would ever live under different circumstances. It's not really a city that makes a lot of sense; it's more of a small town but on a massive scale. It almost feels beach side city without a beach, if you can imagine it. Anyway, a strange place that happened to harbor 100 kilometers worth of Disney plus every other theme park ever dreamed up since the time of Jesus Christ. Are you aware of the existence of the "Holy Land" theme park? Oh yeah, that's a real thing.

Chapter 1 - The Nature of Performance

Skipping through the boring stuff-I have moved in, settled and about to attend my first day of performance training. I should tell you now, the book from this point on is going to be a lot less about my home life and a lot more about the job because I assume it's the job that intrigued you into buying this book and the opportunity to learn from one who has gone before you. This book is what I wished the other "I Worked at Disney" books talked more about when I was reading them. This one's also not going to complain about Disney, unlike almost all of the others, because, in my opinion, Disney is awesome. And the opposite is also true; there are no unicorns and rainbows.

We do not play all day and not every day is filled with smiles. We work hard and long hours and I am stiff and sore right now reclining while writing this paragraph after a long day working. However, the work is awesome and I love it, and anything you love to do that is constructive and gives your life value is worth the price you pay to keep it.

A Disney Audition

Audition time! Each performer is worth different amounts depending on how good they are, and your value can be reassessed as regularly as you like at an audition, or I guess a re-audition. Typical Disney auditions have been detailed meticulously in several related blogs, which I know a lot of you will have memorized by the time you found this, but I'm going to explain it a little for those of us just hearing about it now.

Lots of people will be there warming up and silently freaking out together, people generally chat while waiting to be measured and are then given a number. You sit down; maybe do some paperwork if they want some information from you that they don't already have such as "if a role required it, would you be willing to shave your head and/or body?" But also some less extreme questions too, one that isn't typical, but more likely based around Star Wars Weekends, which we get to later.

We are then split into groups and put with people depending on our numbers, 50 - 65 etc. We learn a dance and are given time to practice it, and are asked to break into small groups of about five people and are given a scene that we're required to act out together. With a minute of preparation time, we then perform the dance. That's pretty much the long and short of a typical Disney audition but if you want more detail there is no shortage online, believe me.

So, I'm in the clear and don't need to worry about auditioning again for a while (woohoo! High fives all around!). Throughout the year I auditioned many times, in several locations, all for different roles within the same job. Most, nearly all, in-fact, were soul crushingly disappointing. But I think I speak for most when I say we are all on the stage because every now and then, when the planets align, and the casting director happens to be an angel sent by God, we are picked. And so here we are doing what we love to do best.

Picked and Ready to Rehearse

Skip forward to when Day One of training begins. It starts by simply throwing everything away we ever thought we knew about life and starting over again. Everything, even the tiniest most natural habitual movement is re-thought out, adapted and made better for the 'new us'. Walking, waving, gesturing, nodding, nothing can be taken for granted. Our minds are being reprogrammed as if we have begun again as babies and are re-growing within a professional children's performer mold.

Days pass, and exhaustion takes hold. Overworking and terrible American food combine and I become very ill for the next couple of weeks, but I hide it from the trainers as each day was as valuable as it was daunting, and also physically exhausting.

Disney performance training is highly sought after and has a lot of sensitive information that I won't/can't go into. But after a few weeks of January sliding by, it is time to hit the streets for the very first time and embrace the next twelve months of my new life.

Training along with me were a bunch of other fledgling performers ready to make their mark on our new behemoth of a stage called Home, and would come to be great friends of mine in the months to come as we each performed in our respective spots across Disney World.

There are many places across Disney where one can perform, and most performers are never stuck in one spot for more than a day or two. So becoming bored with the job, in my opinion, is really difficult to do, particularly if you're like me and are hired to complete a mere twelve month contract only to be sent home afterwards with an expired visa, kicking and screaming all the way.

Walt Disney World spans four theme parks, two water parks, one shopping and entertainment mega, several full scale golf courses, spas, retreats and more than thirty resorts boasting a combined effort of more hotel rooms than New York City. And plenty of shows, parades, and streets to go around. When you begin, you are likely to start the same as I did, on the street.

Street Performing

There are a great many street performers throughout Disney parks and resorts, never allowing a second for you to entertain boredom. Even many of the restaurants, in both the parks and resorts, boast performers that entertain people at their tables. My first discovery: grumpy people and suits on business trips eat at Disney, too. So learn early on how to spot them, and move on! Nothing takes the shine off your shift like having your first show of the day spoiled by a business couple you cheesed off during their protein loaded pre-meeting hangover-cure breakfast at six a.m.

Most of our guests are happy, however. I mean, it's pretty difficult not to be when you're at The Happiest Place on Earth, but some people still manage to be grumpy and I had to realize that early on so I could make my peace with it.

I began the year being perfectly fine entertaining grumpy people close up and simply focusing on the happy ones and allowing the grumpy to move on. It was only later in the year that they started to bother me, causing me to focus more on them to try and change their mood only to have them leave early making me feel like I've wasted my effort and the time of the happy people. I feel like mimes and other such street performers are going to be able to visualize my struggle very easily while reading this.

Performing on the street is hard, hot and tiring work. Depending on what you're wearing, and the nature of your routine, some days can be brutal. I'm sure I'm preaching to the converted when I stress the importance of water and hydrating fluids like PowerAde. One fluid I can't demote enough is coffee (actually let me add poisonous energy drinks to that also).

In those early days, I went through a massive life overhaul, and began to really rethink what I consumed and, in particular, how much water. I've done mime and clowning before, but I have never struggled so intensely to maintain enough water in my body to keep going strong. It became a very purposeful focus.

But no-matter what level of effort I committed to becoming better for the job, many, most even beat me out in commitment. People put serious time and effort into maintaining their bodies that allowed them to put their best foot forward.

Besides hitting the gym, running and yoga are important tools for a performer. Building stamina and flexibility are paramount to success. It's an awful fact that we do get hurt, and eventually we get too old for the job which can come far too early if you don't prioritize your health.

When I first started performing, I couldn't imagine how my Captains and Supervisors were okay with having such performance knowledge and passion without ever getting out there and doing it themselves. To me, the benefits of promotion and a better title and position didn't outweigh the downside, which was stepping aside and letting others hit the stage.

It was only after talking to one of my Captains, Brock, which I discovered a lot of them actually did perform, and did so in some absolutely spectacular shows.

Brock toured with 'Disney on Ice' as well as 'Disney Live' which staged shows around the world. He's in his late thirties now and his body is just unable to cope under the physical pressure of such demanding work so he now looks after us while we have our time in the sun.

So next time you're at Disney World and you see the performer supervisors standing near the shows and entertainment areas, strike up a conversation with one of them, ponder a little about their life. You never ever know who you might be talking to and what kind of life you may be able to hear about and be inspired by.

One friend of mine struck up a conversation with one such cast member while he was enjoying lunch at the restaurant she worked at. A little while into the conversation she found out that he was a casting agent, around the same time he found out that she was wonderful. He subsequently took her name and now she's a friend and fellow performer of mine, happily cast a year and a half ago while serving someone lunch.

Disney is always on the lookout for new talent, shining existing talent that can keep the company looking good, and is always watching us to make sure the Disney machine is constantly putting its best foot forward.

Therefore, it stands to reason, that Disney will place its best and hardest working performers in the highest watched shows and give these performers a better job status and anything else they need because they are simply more valuable and harder to replace.

A long time ago, a colleague of mine was cast as part of the Hunchback of Notre Dame show when it used to play at Disney's Hollywood Studio's. He was the best at his role but unfortunately for him it was a small role and he really wanted something more substantial. Disney did not want to cast him in any other show while he performed his existing role so well. But over time this made him very disillusioned.

Unhappy that his precious time as a fit and young performer was being wasted, he decided to move to New York and try his luck there. It was then, however, that Disney truly realized his value in the show, the part he'd left behind was difficult to cast and required the level of experience and skill that he had to be given true justice. Of course, parts can always be re-trained to new performers, but it takes time and that experience comes slowly. So they called him and offered to fly him back and teach him Beauty and the Beast in exchange for him rejoining Hunchback.

Needless to say, I want to be THAT guy.

Stage Performing

The highest volume park we have is the Magic Kingdom. It's the most magical place on Earth and the biggest draw card for guests; therefore, it needs to showcase the highest quality entertainment we can produce.

We can't, however, say that the Magic Kingdom really has the best shows; entertainment is always based on opinion. A great friend of mine likes the shows in Disney's Animal Kingdom a lot more than Magic Kingdom, and another vastly prefers Disney's Hollywood Studio's. It's all really down to taste and what you enjoy.

However, the first show that I saw when I began my training was the quick paced, rapid changing, colorful and musical show that takes place in front of Cinderella's Castle, Dream Along with Mickey. Magic Kingdom shows are big, very big. Particularly, the seasonal holiday themed ones. And the bigger the show, sometimes the lesser your role in it. Confusing? Let me explain.

Conventional shows in a theatre are typically about the actor, there are two or three on stage, sets are kept simple and minimal and nothing distracts too far from the actor, they are king of the stage.

Shows here are a little different. The stage is literally a humongous castle. Fireworks and grand pyrotechnic displays are the norm. Scenes change rapidly and often have no reason to repeat themselves (bringing you back) unless to resolve the story. And there are many, many more actors in one scene than would be normal.

Here's a rundown of Dream Along with Mickey:

There is a big party planned to celebrate dreams with Mickey and the whole gang stars in it. However, Donald Duck's not thrilled about the party theme because he doesn't believe in dreams.

Despite Donald, Minnie dreams of princesses and Goofy dreams of pirates.

The scene changes, the princesses have arrived to share their dreams through song and dance.

Scene change! Peter Pan has arrived with Wendy to share pirate dreams. Oh no! Captain Hook and Smee have turned up, and are threatening to ruin things.

Peter fights the Captain who ends up being distracted by a ticking clock and fails, once again, to slay Peter. Mickey and the gang laugh at the captain but are interrupted by the laughter of Maleficent, the witch. She has turned up to share her dream, to see the Magic Kingdom become the place where nightmares come true. She's defeated by a mass effort between Mickey and the crowd, who offset her power with the constant and loud confession that 'dreams come true', an idea thought of by Donald, originally a skeptic but moved by the display of dreams over the course of the show and the crowd's faith in them.

She's defeated and vows to return when the kingdom no longer believes in dreams. All the good guys, including the princesses, return to perform the finale.

Then they wait an hour before doing the how all over again, then four more times after that throughout the day.

As you can see, the show has been built to be the most entertaining as possible for any age, a truly difficult task to achieve. It changes constantly; actors have minutes in the spot light and are sharing it with music, constant plot twists, fireworks and backup dancers. The show itself is a giant, twisting turning, wonderment which in itself is incredible. The guests love it and this keeps Disney far, far on top. The show is so big that roles can be as small as simple choreography that adds very little contribution to the whole picture, as the whole is just so massive. Basically, this style of performance is a bit of a tester for those who perform for the vanity of it, the ego trip of being adored.

It's hard not to want adoration, though, it's not like we're in this not to be the center of attention. I think that being a part of anything here gives you a different happiness, rather than being massive. The sensation of being a true part of something is actually, in itself, truly massive. I'm simply trying to articulate a feeling that I haven't felt before, I've never had so many eyes watching me. I'm not part of anything as close as the grandeur of Dream Along with Mickey, but in my humble role I contribute to the whole that is the Magic Kingdom.

I love the NBC show 30 Rock, created by Tina Fey, and the characters of the show that accentuate the nature of performer types. They vocalize and sing out those tiny narcissistic thoughts that drive out desire for the spotlight. But I finding I'm coping well with the transition from solo spotlight, to humongous shared spotlight with hundreds of others. Ego is not a luxury as easily gotten away with over here as every show is more of a combined effort than ever, so it's pretty easily, and thankfully, forgotten.

Chapter 2 - Getting Better

January ended relatively quickly as training had a tendency to fly because you're so focused on everything you need to absorb, and re-learning your craft so intimately, a month can flitter away without a thought of warning and you scarcely look up from your studies for even a moment to check where it has gone.

However, all difficult and tedious things do come to an end and one early morning in late January I burst through the gates of Epcot and performed my first street show.

It's a curious horror waiting for your first show to begin. You're wearing something surprisingly hot and slightly ill-fitting, the air outside is cold and you can feel it chill your windpipe and burn your eyes slightly. You overreact a little and decide you're going blind and will be useless to Disney in a matter of days (never thinking once of the other disadvantages of being suddenly blind). Anything, really, to take your mind off of the fact that you're standing behind a huge gate that will open in a moment to guests who are silly enough to pay so much money and be rewarded by being subjected to you perform. Okay, it's not that bad, but the first time is pretty nerve wracking.

So January became February and it had scarcely begun before all the energy at Disney began pulling in the direction of romance and Valentine's Day. When Disney does something, it does it well, and all its power and resources pull together to achieve a single great cause.

Valentine's Day swept the land, and no place more than the Magic Kingdom.

The park began to prepare for the arrival of the Princes, who never generally make a lot of public appearances but would sheathe their swords and leave the dragons to fight another day until the romance had passed. I noticed for the first time that, despite the fact that Disney's merchandise fills enough shops to rival several full scale malls, it can be thrown away into storage in a single night and replaced by love, romance, marriage and eternal happiness themed merchandise of all varieties.

Okay, I'm being over the top, but the Magic Kingdom becomes suddenly beautiful and it's quite the sight to behold, and the shows adapt. If you are lucky enough to be chosen for a show as it changes, then good for you. More on my failed auditions will come later. The hardest thing I'm finding is that I'm not going to climb any ladders auditioning for roles that require extra skills or killer looks, it's going to come, if at all, by putting in the crazy hard yards. I'm at home in bed writing this, having just returned from an understudying shift where everybody turned up. So where does that leave me? Standing outside of Tinkerbelle's Nook directing people inside, for literally hours. But do you hear me complaining? Okay, maybe a little. But I want to be the promotable guy that will do whatever they need. I had no accountability tonight, I could have thrown on a jumper and gone on some rides and no-one need know. God knows others in similar postings did, I know this because one came to meet Tinkerbelle.

The ones you talk to with the amazing shows and killer casting's nine times out of ten spent five years carrying a flag in parade once a day, but did it with conviction. Never late, never fussy, they turned up on time, dressed and ready to go with no dramas and did it long enough to show they weren't a short burning bright flame, but were long lasting greatness. A performer who can quality act a great scene has nothing on the flag guy, that's the guy Disney knows they can trust to continue its tradition of greatness every day for the new guests gaining first impressions of what we have to offer. At least, this is what I'm hoping, and seems to be the theme among the captains and veteran performers.

So now, Valentine's Day has passed and so far I've reflected mainly on the earlier parts of my year. Back then, I mostly worked the streets and restaurants, through the cold of February I shivered my way down the streets and the love sick crowds of the Magic Kingdom. Valentine's Day came and went, and the magic of romance slowed down and the Kingdom returned to normal. Never to be caught celebrating nothing, close on its tail was Easter and all the festivities it brings with its chocolaty goodness. Bunnies, hot cross buns and six little words - "Star Wars Weekends Auditioning Begins Now!" "Star Wars Weekends" is an annual event at Disney's Hollywood Studio's and is among the biggest Star Wars celebration events in the world. Imagine an entire Disney Park overrun with Jedi, Sith, Ewoks running around poking people and Jawa's scurrying around stealing people's handbags and small children. It is a consuming and electrifying event and highly anticipated all around the country. Many people camp outside the entrance to the park several hours before opening through the cold of the night. Therefore, it should go without saying, that it's just about every sane Disney performers dream to be a part of this event.

The trouble with "Star Wars weekends" is that absolutely anyone can turn up to auditions, no-matter how built, beautiful or amazing. Not just the friends that I've made and the other fellow performers I've come to understand and know, and are happy to compete with, but also a few hundred Broadway, Hollywood and Las Vegas stars that have flown over for the day to take their piece of the opportunity pie.

Now I know that sounds selfish, but it is a hard thing to keep your confidence and your cool when the acting elite of America turn up to compete with you because the opportunity is just too amazing to miss. Curse modern day speedy travel. Now I've been to a lot of Disney auditions since arriving here, and this was the most difficult and the competition was the fiercest.

The biggest thing" Star Wars Weekends" boasts besides Star Wars celebrity visits and fight scene demonstrations, is the best dance show this side of the intergalactic federation. It's controversial for Star Wars purists but the 'Hyperspace Hoopla' is an incredible show. The Light Side and the Dark Side battle it out in a crazy dance contest that tests the limits to the extreme of how skilled and sexy dance can get. Picture a gold bikini Princess Leia and skin tight white battle latex Padme Amidala dance off to "Sexy and I Know It"...yeah that happened, I kid you not. But, assuming you're human, it pays to learn to be okay with rejection every now and then and to be happy for those that do make the show. One day after finishing a shift at Hollywood Studio's during "Star Wars Weekends" I was walking through the park stalking Jawa's and their thieving and trading activities with the guests. This particular day I found a good cafe with a view of the festivities and bought a Darth Vader cupcake and watched a father trade his child with a Jawa for a Darth Vader action figure, a good trade until he left and the child began to cry. The father ran back and managed to keep both the child and the toy. Anything goes on the Dark Side of the park, being pushed aside by Darth Vader, threatened at the business end of two EE-3 carbine rifles (Boba Fett) and being seduced and nearly murdered by a certain saucy female Tatooine bounty hunter were a few of my misadventures in the evil half of the park.

Oh yeah, and there's a good side too where people are less scarred and deformed, but still somehow have the edge over the light side in sex appeal. On the Light Side you can find a monotone queen with some incredible hair pieces, some Jedi masters and two very famous droids, but not the ones you're looking for.

Hard times

The people you get to know here over the course of your contract will become your friends, and it pays to be happy for them when they land something you don't. Also, when you go and actually watch the show they are a part of, you're going to want to enjoy it. These shows are so unique and 'once in a life time' you need to enjoy your experience. Trust me; keeping bitterness about your rejection for a part in the show is the quickest way to souring the entire performance for you and ruining the whole experience.

That last part is something I want to copy and paste into the mind of myself, from the past. But I can't.

Anyway, audition time came and I made it through the warm-ups without too much difficulty, my body is flexible enough that I could at least imitate the strenuous legitimate warm-ups that the seasoned pros were doing easily enough. The strength exercises...not so much. But, once again, 'personal variations for more specific strength needs' is a nice rubbish excuse for lazy pushups. Basically, I faked my way through warm-ups which was a clear indication of how the whole audition would go.

Now don't let my dramatic and pessimistic experience turn you off of a potentially life-changing audition like a Star Wars or, if you want seriously challenging; a Tokyo Disneyland audition. Be confident and know your strengths, remember to be well prepared. Learn real stretches and, unlike me, be capable of doing basic pushups. Put in legitimate work and preparation and you will see the rewards. In other words; the stretch alone killed me, and the first part of the audition was dance. I'm not talking about movement, or soft choreography. I'm talking hard core stuff.

By this point I'm making friends, one would hope that would happen when one is spending enough time with people.

But it was only on the bus to the audition, looking around at all the familiar faces that I speculated about friendship and how it exists in a place like this. Below is the advice I would give my overly sensitive friend, if I only had the courage.

Keep the friends that will support you, and when it's time to compete then do so. Once it's over forget about it, most likely neither of you got it but if one of you did then be supportive, even a great show that is celebrated alone gets dull after a while.

You will win some and you will lose a lot more, keep the friends that are the golden ones or, like me, make friends with those that are not performers or have no similarity in skill-set or possible castings and eliminate the problems before they start.

If you find times when friends are lacking and you don't have support, and then be strong enough in yourself to live without them. If you need someone holding your hand to make you feel like you can succeed then you have a ceiling on your success that you are never going to bust through.

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