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# Fighting for Success: Lessons from the Cage Applied to Life

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# Fighting for Success:

## Lessons from the Cage Applied to Life

By Dr. Randy Borum/Photos by: Alfonso Moreno

**Today's mixed martial artist has become an icon of the modern gladiator. For centuries, combatant athletes and their sports have captivated the public's interest. The events are exciting, of course, but the fighters themselves symbolize the virtue of an indomitable spirit. The mindset and character traits possessed by successful fighters can cultivate achievement in other areas of life as well.**

**Think about that project you have to manage, the deadline or quota you have to meet, or the critical presentation you have to deliver at work. Each of these tasks requires preparation, planning and personal readiness. You will probably encounter glitches and obstacles that you will have to overcome. Success is your ultimate goal. This is all true for fighters as well.**

**In this article, we will look through the eyes of a fighter to find out what it takes to succeed in whatever you do.**

### Make a Game Plan:

Chinese general and military strategist Sun-Tzu said: "Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win." Planning and preparation are the cornerstones of success in nearly any endeavor. Great fighters set goals for themselves to guide their training. Each goal is embedded in a larger overall training plan. Goals give a competitor something specific to strive for. Research shows that having a specific aim enhances performance beyond what you get with an unfocused, but still "go hard" attitude.

Effective goals are driven by your motivation Proper motivation provides your will to win… or to succeed. Whether you are a fighter or a businessperson, you have to understand what drives you if you are going to excel. It's not enough just to want it, you have to be able to tap into a source of inner strength that will propel you in the direction you want to go.

Human motivation can be complex. We are drawn – simultaneously - to strive to achieve and attain our desired outcomes, while avoiding undesirable outcomes. Our driving motivations may come from within - like feelings of accomplishment or fun – or come from outside- like money or praise. Psychologists often refer to the internal motivators as intrinsic and the outside motivators as extrinsic. The top achievers in nearly every endeavor – even if they desire and receive fame and fortune – also possess a high degree of intrinsic motivation. They have the "fire in the belly."

Ask yourself when it is that you feel most successful in what you do. What gives you the greatest feeling of joy, pride or satisfaction? What kinds of experiences make you say to yourself: "I love this stuff"?
When you understand your motivation, think about your short and long-term objectives. Think about where you want to be in your chosen field one year from now. Then

chart a course – marked by a set of short-term goals – to make it happen. You may, for example, want to increase your sales volume by 10% each month for four months before asking for a raise.

A popular formula used for effective goal-setting in business and in sports in the **SMART** model. This suggests that your goals should be:

• **Specific –** because studies show that specific goals exert a greater effect on motivation and are more likely to be achieved. A specific goal might consider a time frame, units of change or other particular elements of task-related behavior.

• **Measurable –** because you should have a way to judge whether or not you goal has been achieved. Think about what it will look like when you meet your goal, then write it down and use that written description as your measure of success. You should also state your goal positively, stating what you WILL do, not what you WON'T do. Telling yourself what not to do almost never works.

• **Attainable –** because although people who set more challenging goals do tend to accomplish more than those with easy goals, the goals still much be realistic. Set yourself up to succeed.

• **Relevant –** because you are more likely to persist in working toward a goal that is meaningful to you. You should choose goals that are consistent with your values and priorities, so that you will be motivated to press toward them.

• **Timely –** because it helps to set timeframes or deadlines for specific goals, rather than just thinking it will happen "whenever." Putting a timeframe on your goal will help to keep you focused. You can modify it if necessary, but don't abandon your deadline without first setting a new one.

OK. Let's say you set a goal, but you miss the mark. What do you do? Re-group, Re-formulate, and Renew your commitment. Plans are valuable. Goals are great. Their primary purpose, however, is to guide and motivate you. Let them work for you even if you do not reach them. "A goal is not always meant to be reached," Bruce Lee said. "it often serves simply as something to aim at"

The process of planning helps you to create a blueprint for success. It focuses your mindset on victory even before you enter the ring or the boss' office. Goal setting promotes success in a variety of ways. General (and later President) Dwight D. Eisenhower once commented that: "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." Do not get overly wrapped up in the outcome.

## Get Tough

One of the most inspiring qualities of champion fighters is their mental toughness – the ability to persist through adversity; to never quit. In a study of the psychological characteristics of ten Olympic champions (who had accumulated a total of 32 medals), mental toughness was the most frequently mentioned trait (along with focus) by the athletes and their coaches. Many sport psychology studies highlight its importance in sport performance, particularly among elite-level athletes.

What is mental toughness? Well, it carries different meaning to different athletes. Researchers have even conducted surveys just to better understand how to define it. One of these studies conducted by Jones and colleagues and published in the Journal of Applied Sport Psychology came up with the following proposal:

"Mental toughness is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to:
*1) Generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer; and,*

*2) Specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure."*

For more than a hundred years psychological researchers have recognized the importance of qualities related to mental toughness. Through the years, in-depth interviews have been conducted with those considered to possess "genius" in the fields of art, music, finance, business, science, law, medicine and others. Consistently, the "stand out" performers are the ones whose passion and commitment allow them consistently to persist through adversity.

More recently, researchers in the field of "positive psychology" have explored a similar idea that they call "Grit." University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Angela Duckworth has pioneered this line of research on "grit" without even drawing on sport psychology studies of mental toughness. But many features are remarkably similar. Duckworth defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress."

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One of the most remarkable findings from the research on grit is that it appears to be just as important as – or perhaps more important than – IQ (natural ability) in predicting grades among Ivy league college students, retention among West Point cadets, and achievement in the National Spelling Bee. If grit and mental toughness are that important in determining who will achieve in such "intellectual" tasks, and it also consistently distinguishes top-level athletes, it probably deserves attention from anyone who wants to perform at their peak.

When a fighter has been dominated for two rounds of a three-round bout, what makes
him want to continue? If an MMA fighter loses his first three professional bouts in a row, what would drive him to keep training? When you have worked tirelessly on a business proposal or project only to have it "shot down" by your supervisor, what makes you want to continue working on an idea you believe in and press on to make it better?

Recall that the research definition marks mental toughness as a natural or developed psychological edge. Mental toughness is, indeed, a skill. One that can be developed and trained. How do you develop that kind of resilience? Through preparation and practice.

A first step is learning how to pull yourself through the rough spots. As Winston Churchill said: "If you are going through hell. . .keep going." This ability to transcend adversity is a key element of what psychologists call resilience. It is as important to success in business as it is in fighting.

Learning to modify and control how you think about a bad situation can really help to take the edge off of its negative effects. The best fighters don't ruminate endlessly over a loss or repeatedly beat themselves up over it. They develop an explanation that makes sense to them about "what happened" – then they figure out what they need to work on to keep that from happening again.

They console themselves with the realization that an occasional loss is virtually inevitable when you are competing at the highest levels of your sport. They do not define themselves as a "loser" simply because the lost a particular match.

When bouncing back from a loss, those with well-honed mental toughness will typically find a way to accept the loss, keep their confidence up, and develop specific, measurable goals they want to achieve in moving forward. They then get swiftly to the task of working to achieve them. Looking forward works better than continuing to look back.

## Rely on Work, not Talent

Have you ever watched a co-worker deliver a pitch or conjure up an amazing report on short notice and envied their natural talent? And have you ever watched a talented fighter who doesn't seem to work hard enough to get better? Raw talent or natural ability is not the best predictor of long-term success. And if you think it is – talented or not - you will probably limit how far you will go.

What does it take to be a champion? What separates the good from the truly great? Why do some succeed and move ahead while others are left behind? How you answer those questions probably reflects your mindset about human performance. And your mindset will drive your confidence, effort, persistence, and – ultimately your achievement.

In the book, Mindset: The New Psychology of Success Stanford professor Carol Dweck contrasts two basic mindsets that people bring to learning or mastering a task. She calls them the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. The basic difference is whether you think a person's ability to do something is determined more by talent or by hard work. Those who give priority to talent tend to have a fixed mindset. They believe their success comes from a fixed trait that they either do or do not possess. Those with a growth mindset view natural talent just as a starting point – not an end point. They believe ability can be improved through commitment and hard work.

Have you ever wanted to do something but thought that you were just not "cut out for it"? You could be falling prey to a fixed mindset. If you let it take hold, it will cause you to avoid challenges, to sulk over obstacles, to moderate your effort, and to eschew criticism or feedback from others. It will actually prevent you from growing, from learning, and from getting better.

If you don't already have a growth mindset, can you develop one? Absolutely. But you have to take responsibility for the choices you make and for how you think and act in challenging situations. Dweck says there are four steps to creating a growth mindset. First, you have to recognize the self talk or inner voice of the fixed mindset. When you hear it tell you something like: "Don't even try that move" or "Don't even share that idea", "You don't have what it takes to make it work," label that in your mind as the fixed mindset talking. Second, recognize when faced with a challenge you have a choice. You must acknowledge that you will choose whether to listen to the fixed mindset or challenge it. Third, talk back to the fixed mindset with a growth mindset response – like "It takes courage to try. By trying, I'll make myself better." The fourth step is to act on the growth mindset voice. You have muster faith and follow-through. By consistently making choices to listen to the growth mindset voice, it will become your more natural voice. Your mindset will encourage, rather than limit you.

There are other things you can do too to facilitate a growth mindset and to bolster your inner climate of success:

**Keep a positive focus:** The best fighters never let their doubts take over. They maintain a faith in their ability and steadfast confidence. They constantly look for positive cues in their environment and say positive messages to themselves. As a result they are less often bothered by negative thoughts, they are happier, and they perform better.

**Control your intensity:** Champions have learned to play or fight "in the zone." They know how to keep their mind calm and their body energized without amping up to the point of feeling "jittery". It takes fine tuning, and a strong awareness of your own body, but you can lower your heart rate with deep breathing, release tension from your muscles, and quiet a worried mind – all with a little practice.

**Manage distractions:** As you cultivate a growth mindset, you are learning to filter through negative messages from the inner "fixed" voice and buffering external distractions that do not facilitate your best performance. You might develop positive "cue words" to help yourself quickly get back on a positive track. Or you may just drown out the distractions with your own growth-oriented messages of confidence. Either way, you will be increasingly focused on what is important and indifferent to what is not.

**Prepare to perform:** Prepare to confront expected challenges. Sometimes challenges catch us by surprise. At those times we need to work quickly to recognize and act on our choices. But often we know in advance about an important meeting, presentation, sales pitch….or match. This gives us an opportunity both to practice and to create an inner climate for peak performance. Run through the task several times in your head, watching it go well every single time. Listen to the positive voice speaking to you. Feel the sensation of confidence and the inner calmness. Delight in the flow of being "in the moment." And when "you're on" in a real situation, your brain and body can respond as if you have been there and done this before.

The greatest athletes, the greatest performers, and those who excel in business – or nearly any task – use some common strategies. They set goals for themselves so they have a game plan and a roadmap for success. They learn to be tough and resilient – persisting through adversity and disappointment and pressing ever forward. And they constantly seek to improve their skills, while always working to get better. They surround themselves with the best people and listen to what they have to say. Whether in or out of the cage, these strategies – combined with your passion to achieve – can take you to the top.

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