

Mavericks at Work

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*Why the Most Original Minds
in Business Win*
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WILLIAM MORROW

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Introduction

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The Maverick Promise

We've always believed that the first step in any successful venture—starting a company, launching a product, even writing a book—is to establish a clear definition of what it means to succeed. Our definition of success for this book begins and ends with its impact on you. We will consider *Mavericks at Work* a success if it opens your eyes, engages your imagination, and encourages you to think bigger and aim higher. Most of all, we will consider it a success if it equips you to act more boldly as a leader and win more decisively as a competitor. We will measure our success by how much we contribute to yours.

That said, this is more than a how-to book. It is also a what-if book. Business needs a breath of fresh air. We are, at last, coming out of a dark and trying period in our economy and society—an era of slow growth and dashed expectations, of criminal wrongdoing and ethical misconduct at some of the world's best-known companies. But NASDAQ nuttiness already feels like time-capsule fodder, the white-collar perp

walk has become as routine as an annual meeting, and the triumphant return of me-first moguls like Donald Trump feels like a bad nostalgia trip, the corporate equivalent of a hair-band reunion. We've seen the face of business at its worst, and it hasn't been a pretty sight. This book is intended to persuade you of the power of business at its best.

Which speaks to our second goal for *Mavericks at Work*—to restore the promise of business as a force for innovation, satisfaction, and progress, and to get beyond its recent history as a source of revulsion, remorse, and recrimination. Indeed, despite all the bleak headlines and blood-boiling scandals over the last five years, the economy has experienced a period of realignment, a power shift so profound that we're just beginning to appreciate what it means for the future of business, for how all of us go about the business of building companies that work, and for doing work that matters.

In industry after industry, executives and organizations that were once dismissed as upstarts, as outliers, as wild cards, have achieved positions of financial prosperity and market leadership. There's a reason the young billionaires behind the most celebrated entrepreneurial success in recent memory began their initial public offering (IPO) of shares with a declaration of independence from business as usual. "Google is not a conventional company," read their Letter from the Founders. "We do not intend to become one."

Nor does the unconventional cast of characters you will encounter in this book. From a culture-shaping television network with offices in sun-splashed Santa Monica, California, to a little-known office furniture manufacturer rooted in the frozen tundra of Green Bay, Wisconsin, from glamorous fields such as advertising, fashion, and the Internet to old-line industries such as construction, mining, and household products, they are winning big at business—attracting millions of customers, creating thousands of jobs, generating tens of billions of dollars of wealth—by rethinking the logic of how business gets done.

Alan Kay, the celebrated computer scientist, put it memorably some

35 years ago: “The best way to predict the future is to invent it.” The companies, executives, and entrepreneurs you’ll meet in the pages that follow are inventing a more exciting, more compelling, more rewarding future for business. They have devised provocative and instructive answers to four of the timeless challenges that face organizations of every size and leaders in every field: setting strategy, unleashing new ideas, connecting with customers, and helping their best people achieve great results.¹

There’s nothing quite so exhilarating as being an eyewitness to the future. We felt that sense of exhilaration throughout our travels as we immersed ourselves in organizations that have shaped the course of their industries by reshaping the sense of what’s possible among employees, customers, and investors. We spent countless hours with leaders at every level of these organizations, from CEOs to research scientists, who understand that companies with a disruptive presence in the marketplace also need a distinctive approach to the workplace.

We went deep inside these organizations, looking to understand the ideas they stand for and the ways they work. We participated in a film-making class at one of the world’s most successful movie studios. We attended a closed-to-the-public awards ceremony at Radio City Music Hall, where employees of what has to be the world’s most entertaining bank sang, danced, and strutted their stuff. We sat in on a crucial monthly meeting (the 384th such consecutive meeting over the last 32 years) in which top executives and frontline managers of a \$600 million employee-owned company shared their most sensitive financial information and most valuable market secrets. We walked the corridors of a 120-year-old research facility where a team of R&D executives is changing how one of the world’s biggest companies develops new ideas for consumer products. We walked the streets of Manhattan with employees from a hard-charging hedge fund who were sizing up ideas about marketplace trends and stock market picks.

This book is our report from the front lines of the future—an account of what we saw, what it means for business, and why it matters to

your company, your colleagues, and your career. It is not a book of best practices. It is a book of *next* practices—a set of insights and case studies that amount to a business plan for the 21st century, a new way to lead, compete, and succeed.

Our basic argument is as straightforward as it is urgent: when it comes to thriving in a hypercompetitive marketplace, “playing it safe” is no longer playing it smart. In an economy defined by overcapacity, oversupply, and utter sensory overload—an economy in which everyone already has more than enough of whatever it is you’re selling—the only way to stand out from the crowd is to stand for a truly distinctive set of ideas about where your industry should be going. You can’t do big things as a competitor if you’re content with doing things only a little better than the competition.

Another well-known bit of philosophy, made famous by Hall of Fame basketball coach Pete Carril, captures the competitive spirit at the heart of this book. During his 29-year tenure, Carril’s Princeton Tigers regularly squared off against (and often beat) teams whose players were bigger, faster, and more physically gifted than his team. “The strong take from the weak,” his coaching mantra went, “but the smart take from the strong.”²

This book is devoted to the proposition that in business, as in basketball, the smart can take from the strong—that the best way to outperform the competition is to outthink the competition. Maverick companies aren’t always the largest in their field; maverick entrepreneurs don’t always make the cover of the business magazines. But mavericks do the work that matters most—the work of originality, creativity, and experimentation. They demonstrate that you can build companies around high ideals and fierce competitive ambitions, that the most powerful way to create economic value is to embrace a set of values that go beyond just amassing power, and that business, at its best, is too exciting, too important, and too much fun to be left to the dead hand of business as usual.³

Who are these mavericks? The core ideas in this book are rooted in the strategies, practices, and leadership styles of 32 organizations with

vastly different histories, cultures, and business models. Half of them are publicly traded companies or business units inside public companies. The other half are privately held companies, venture-backed start-ups, or even not-for-profits. Some of them are giants, with thousands of employees and billions of dollars in sales. Some of them are pip-squeaks, with a few hundred employees and sales in the tens of millions of dollars. But the distinctiveness of their ideas and the power of their practices make all of them true business originals. They are rethinking competition, reinventing innovation, reconnecting with customers, and redesigning work. Together, they are creating a maverick agenda for business—an agenda from which every business can learn.

No one can promise that every company you meet in these pages will thrive, without setbacks or reversals, for years to come. The realities of competition are too treacherous for that. We can't promise that every technique or business practice we highlight will work just as well in your organization. There's a difference between learning from someone else's ideas and applying them effectively somewhere else.

What we can promise is a book that is as eye-opening, as energetic, as flat-out useful as we know how to make it, a book that aims to be true to the maverick spirit of the agenda it champions and the leaders it chronicles. To that end, we've added four sections we call "Maverick Messages"—which distill the ideas we explore and the stories we tell into a set of action-oriented takeaways. We end the book with a valuable collection of resources (called "Maverick Material") that will help you keep learning long after you've finished reading.

We hope we've delivered on the maverick promise. Please visit us on the Web, learn more about the ideas, themes, and case studies in this book, and share your own stories and lessons about what it takes to be a maverick at work.

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www.mavericksatwork.com