

Six Rules for Success

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One of my favorite verses in the Book of Mormon is from 1 Nephi. Responding to an angel who had inquired, “Knowest thou the condescension of God?” Nephi said, “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:16–17). And while I can testify wholeheartedly that our heavenly parents love their children, I am equally sure that I do not know the meaning of all things. I want to speak today as one who views the world through the eyes of a statistician and coach. I hope to convince you that there are certain rules on this earth that are critically important not only to our temporal journey but to our eternal journey as well.

Six Rules for Temporal Success

Rule 1: Focus matters. When I completed my PhD and was privileged to return to BYU in a faculty position, I was fortunate to continue to work with the men’s volleyball program under the tutelage of Dr. Carl McGown. Carl had been asked to serve as an assistant coach to the men’s national volleyball

team. He was concerned that the national team only had a short time to prepare for the Olympics, because the players were coming from various professional programs around the world, so he arranged for us to receive a truckload of data from the world cup and world championships in the hope that we could discover what the team should focus on during their limited practice time.

After reviewing the data, we determined that the national team performed every skill at a high level—except for serving. The first line of my report to Carl stated, “Serve, serve, and serve some more.” Ranked fourteenth in the world in 2003 at the time of the report, the United States men’s volleyball team finished fourth in the Olympics in 2004 and then won the gold in 2008. Now while it is clear that our analysis didn’t determine any outcome, it did drive home the notion that with limited time and resources, focus is critical.

And it’s easy to be fooled about what is important to focus on. At one point we were contacted

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by Andy Reid, then the coach of the Philadelphia Eagles. Carl McGown knew Andy and recommended that we might be able to give him some insight. I say “we” because I worked with now academic vice president Shane Reese on the volleyball project. I have found that it is very helpful to have at least one member of the data analysis team who is bright and capable, and Vice President Reese certainly fit that requirement.

One of the things that Coach Reid was interested in was rating his offensive linemen. Although the Eagles had not kept very good data, we set about building a model. We concluded that his center was his most valuable lineman.

When he received our report, Coach Reid told us that our result just couldn’t be correct. He assured us that his left tackle was clearly his best offensive lineman.

But then we continued the conversation and asked Coach Reid who called the blocking schemes. He said his center called all the blocking schemes. Our reply was, “Isn’t it possible that when the center has a good game, all the linemen have good games because he is making the line calls?”

Coach Reid acknowledged that such a situation was possible. So while it may be that Coach Reid was correct when he was focused on blocking ability, the point is that he overlooked the importance of making the line calls. We need to be careful to look deeply when we decide what our focus should be.

Rule 2: There is no substitute for hard work. And a corollary: just showing up is vitally important. When I first graduated from college, I got a job as a math teacher and a coach in a local high school. Since my college sports were water polo and swimming, I became the coach of those two programs in a high school that had a history of excellence in both sports. The youngest and smallest of the athletes worked out before school. One of the smallest was a boy named Chris. When these athletes first entered the pool, I was pretty sure I was going to have to go in after Chris. In fact, I slipped into the office, took off my shoes, and put my wallet on the desk before going back on the deck.

Somehow Chris got through that first practice, although it certainly seemed to me that he spent

the majority of the time underwater. When we finally finished that workout, I was sure Chris would never be back, but his words to me as he left the pool deck were “See you tomorrow, Coach.” And sure enough, he came back the next day, spent most of it underwater, and then left with the same words: “See you tomorrow, Coach.” He came back the next day and the next day and the next day. He just kept coming back.

I learned so much from this very small young man who had so little talent. Chris taught me that hard work and consistency are powerfully important values. He became an important member of our program because he was a constant reminder of the benefit of hard work. I have heard people say, “Work smarter, not harder,” and I admit I don’t believe it. If you want to be successful at something, show up and work hard.

Rule 3: Develop your talents. After completing some graduate work at BYU, I returned to high school teaching at a small school in rural western Washington. I was hired to coach volleyball and teach math. I felt pretty comfortable coaching volleyball, having played with and helped coach the BYU club team, but after one semester there, my principal asked if I would like to coach track and field. I waffled, since I had never competed in track and field, but in a small school, just as the athletes play all the sports, the coaches sometimes coach outside their disciplines.

A couple of years into my tenure there, a young freshman named Erica Wheeler came out for volleyball. Although Erica had little experience, she clearly had a nice arm, and I could see she would develop into a good volleyball player. When the second semester came along, Erica came out for track. Well, as you know if you have ever been around track and field, there are a lot of disciplines, and we struggled to find the right place for her. We tried running and jumping, and she did fine but did not excel. Then one day we went out to the field to try some throwing. She tried the shot and the discus, again without much distinction, and then picked up the javelin. After minimal instruction, she threw better than anyone on the team. There was no question Erica had talent.

Well, like Chris, Erica knew how to show up and work hard. She never missed a workout. By her senior year she was consistently throwing farther than the state record, but an athlete could only set a state record in a state meet. When the day of the state meet came, the wind was perfect. The individual who was to mark the throws was standing on the field at the state record line, which was 167 feet. When Erica's turn came, her throw sailed well over the marker's head. That day she not only set a state record of 189 feet 7 inches, which still stands today, but Erica set a national high school record as well. She later threw 206 feet to make the 1996 Olympic team.

What was the difference between Chris and Erica? We call them gifts, or talents. Erica clearly had a gift. Did that somehow make Erica better than Chris? Certainly not in my book. I loved and valued both of them. Both were humble and dedicated. They both inspired me. We are going to come back to this rule in a few minutes when we talk about what makes a gift have value.

Rule 4: Little improvements can have big benefits. In the early 1990s, the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball was interested in changing the scoring system so that volleyball matches would have more uniform times. They wanted to make the sport more attractive to a television audience. I collaborated with Carl McGown and Bruce Collings, a member of the Statistics Department, to write a paper outlining the effects of changing the scoring system from side-out scoring (in which you only score a point when serving) to quick scoring (in which a point is scored on every serve) and various combinations of those two basic methods.

In the course of examining the issues, we looked at the effect of small changes in a team's point-scoring ability. If we were to take two evenly matched men's volleyball teams with the reasonable probability of scoring a point on the opponent's serve of 0.7 (we call this siding out at 70 percent) and the probability of scoring a point on their own serve of 0.3 (we call this point scoring at 30 percent), and if the coin flip is truly random, then the probability of winning the set is 0.5 (50 percent). At the end of the season, that team's

record would include equal numbers of wins and losses—middle of the pack. We discovered that if we could improve two out of every one hundred serves when siding out and two out of every one hundred serves when serving, we would win the league and compete for a national championship. Little improvements can have big benefits.

Rule 5: Always be willing to grow. A corollary: mistakes are mandatory. Thus performance may go down before it improves whenever you make changes. Here is what I mean: Suppose you are a fairly efficient left pin hitter in volleyball (that's the hitter who is attacking the ball on the left side of the court). Your favorite swing is what we call a high seam—the ball is either hit over the block to the back of the court or it is hit high enough that even though it is touched by the block it sails out of bounds—and you are quite efficient using this swing. The coach would like you to expand your hitting range and learn to hit the line. Well, the first few times you try, you either hit the ball out of bounds or you are blocked, so you decide it is not worth it.

You continue to be quite successful over the season, but when you get to the NCAA tournament, you are facing a team whose block is two inches higher than you are used to. All those high seam swings that used to be kills are now being touched enough by the block that your opponent can return them. Now you can see the advantage of hitting the line, but you are not proficient at that swing. Suppose you had been willing to make those necessary mistakes, knowing that in the long run you would be better.

If we really want to be successful, we must be willing to make mistakes. Virtually every successful athlete will tell you that they learn more from their mistakes than they do from their successes. Growth is always slow, sometimes painful, but always worth it.

Let's talk about school for just a minute. Let's say you are majoring in a technical skill, one that you are fairly certain will lead to a good job. You have excellent focus. Is it possible that to be really successful you will need to be able to speak and write well so that your ideas can be communicated with effectiveness to others in your

company? The writing class that is difficult for you, that is not getting much effort right now, and in which your grade is not the best may be something that needs more focus. Remember what I said: Growth is always slow, sometimes painful, but always worth it.

Rule 6: Don't make excuses. Many of you have heard of Jared Ward. He represented the United States in the 2016 Olympic marathon in Rio de Janeiro, where he finished sixth. Jared is a superb athlete and a wonderful individual. I was privileged to become acquainted with Jared when he returned from his mission and took a class from me. I am pretty sure he was more interested in courting his soon-to-be wife than he was in statistics at that time, and he didn't do as well as he would have liked. But he was really interested in and wanted to learn the material. So Jared didn't make excuses; he just took that class again.

I learned quite a bit about Jared from that experience. I learned that he was not afraid of work and that he understood there are consequences for choices. It's not that Jared was ruining his life with his choices; his focus at that time was on courting his beautiful wife, and I don't want to fault him for that. But there were consequences from the many small choices he made at that time. As Jared finished his undergraduate work, he applied to our graduate program, and I now had a pretty good idea what that would mean. I knew Jared could work hard, and I knew he took responsibility for his actions. I was confident he would be a good graduate student.

Six Rules for Eternal Success

Now that I have talked about some rules that I believe will help you succeed in a temporal sense, I would like to change the perspective and focus on eternity. I believe that if you will follow these same rules in spiritual matters, you will be blessed throughout your life as you journey through mortality and beyond.

Rule 1: Focus matters. I hope we can all agree that our focus should be on the Savior. Our beloved prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, has said:

My dear brothers and sisters, the joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.¹

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf stated:

If our primary focus, thoughts, and efforts are centered on increasing our love for Almighty God and extending our hearts to others, we can know that we have found the right target and are . . . becoming true disciples of Jesus Christ.²

Keep your focus on the Savior, remembering that it's easy to be fooled about what is important. Does your focus sometimes wander? I know mine does. I feel that my focus is sharp on the Sabbath, but that focus sometimes wanders during the week as I encounter temporal problems and focus more on temporal things. Let's look at what the Savior said about focus in Matthew 6:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. . . .

. . . Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

[Matthew 6:19–21, 24]

Do we value someone by looking at the size of the house they live in or at the cars they drive or at how much money they seem to have?

Another issue we face today is the pervasiveness of social media. We can also lose focus as we interact often with our phones. Do we value someone by the number of followers they have or the number of likes a post got? Do we value ourselves less because of the posts that come to our Instagram feed? What is your treasure? You need to answer that question, for your heart is there.

Because so many people value things such as money or social media or current fashion, we can give those things attention they don't deserve. As the Savior said in Matthew 13 when He explained the parable of the sower to His disciples:

He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. [Matthew 13:22]

Don't let your focus wander so that your time and energy are focused on things that just don't matter much in the eternal scheme of things.

Rule 2: There is no substitute for hard work. Like Chris, don't we all sometimes feel as if we are floundering around underwater? It can be a pretty tough feeling. But hasn't Chris shown us a way to deal with tough times? Just keep showing up. In our vocabulary, it's called "endure to the end." My wife has a favorite scripture that also applies here: "And it came to pass." As we keep showing up, remember that there are any number of people who are waiting and willing to help. There are countless bishops, Relief Society presidents, elders quorum presidents, personal ministers, and just good friends who have figuratively taken off their shoes and left their wallets on the desk to keep us from drowning.

Also remember that we volunteered for this life. We knew that undergoing the challenges of mortality would give us growth opportunities we couldn't get any other way. As the Lord told Joseph, "Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7). Sometimes it is hard to see the good that comes from our tough experiences, but I testify that good is the result. Don't give up. Good things will happen if we keep our focus on the Savior and continue doing those things that we have been counseled to do. Recall Elder Dale G. Renlund's devotional in September and keep climbing the spiritual mountain he described in his address.³ There are no shortcuts, but there is a great vista at the top of the mountain.

Rule 3: Develop your talents. Sometimes our talents just don't seem very important. I am reasonably sure each of us has wished at one time or another that we had talents like Erica or Jared—talents the world recognized, talents that made us feel more important. But let's take a minute and

remember where our focus should be. The Lord said that

to every man [and woman] is given a gift by the Spirit of God.

*To some is given one, and to some is given another, that **all** may be profited thereby.* [Doctrine and Covenants 46:11–12; emphasis added]

Our gifts are not really about us as individuals at all. The really important gifts are those that benefit more than just ourselves. The list of gifts in section 46 clearly emphasizes those gifts that are focused outward, so we need to be careful about becoming self-centered about our gifts.

Since we all have gifts, what does the Lord expect from us relative to developing our talents? In the parable of the talents, the Lord said the exact same thing to the servant who was given five talents and turned them into five more (Erica and Jared) as he did to the servant who was given two talents and turned them into two more (Chris). The Lord said, "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matthew 25:23).

We need to spend our time developing our talents with an eye to how others might benefit. We shouldn't be focusing on how our gifts set us apart or in some way make us better. The Lord is no respecter of persons. Your reward is the same for developing your gifts, regardless of how the world views them and you. Develop your talents and keep your focus where it belongs.

Rule 4: Little improvements can have big benefits. I like to call Rule 4 the "line-upon-line rule." In Isaiah 28:10 we read, "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little." This counsel appears time and again in the scriptures. It is the Lord's way to teach us a little at a time. He knows that those little bits accumulate. But we must be willing to take in each little bit and, as the Lord said in 2 Nephi, "learn wisdom," because if we don't hearken, the Lord told us, "For unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be

taken away even that which they have” (2 Nephi 28:30).

To grow in the Lord’s way, we learn a little and we move on to a little more. Sometimes we get impatient with this method. We think we know enough, or perhaps we think we are smarter than we are. Using this line-upon-line method, we can’t get ahead of ourselves. We need to retain our humility and allow the Lord to teach us a little at a time. So learn line upon line throughout your lives and reap eternal blessings beyond measure.

Rule 5: Always be willing to grow. Rule 5 means that we have to be willing to stretch in our line-upon-line learning, and that means we will make mistakes. However, until we take on difficult tasks, we won’t grow as the Lord intends. Yes, growth can be uncomfortable, but growth is the reason we have come to this mortal experience. We are taught in Alma 34:33, “Behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.”

Since we are here to grow, we shouldn’t be surprised or disappointed when we are not perfect. There has been, after all, only one perfect life on this earth. Mistakes and short-term failure are part of the process. Don’t turn down opportunities to grow because you fear failure. The Lord will always be there. As we learned in Rule 3, we need to develop the gifts that we have all been given. We all may feel like we are underwater at times, but, like Chris, we can astound those around us with our accomplishments. Don’t be afraid to stretch.

Rule 6: Don’t make excuses. This one is all about personal responsibility. We have each been given the wonderful gift called agency. This means that we can make all the decisions that really matter for our own lives. We are told in Helaman 14:30, “And now remember, remember, . . . ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free.”

There are two things that I would like to say concerning this freedom to choose. One, don’t give it away. Those who flirt with addictive

behaviors are treading a dangerous path. Once you have voluntarily given up your agency, it is very difficult to recover. If you feel you have an addiction, I want to encourage you with all my being to seek help from both your ecclesiastical leaders and those with professional experience. Don’t wait. Commit today to recover your agency.

Two, agency means you have to take responsibility. I know that humanity has a long history of blaming others. Since the beginning of time it has been our way:

And the man said: The woman thou gavest me, and commandest that she should remain with me, she gave me of the fruit of the tree and I did eat.

. . . And the woman said: The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. [Moses 4:18–19]

Don’t look for excuses or blame others. Just as world-class athletes must take charge of their training, so must we take charge of our own lives. We are responsible for the choices we make. Don’t get in the habit of blaming others. Your life is yours. Be grateful for the opportunities you have been given and take charge.

I testify that the same rules that can help athletes or students perform at their best can help each of us overcome life’s challenges, and with the help of Jesus Christ and His love for each of us, we can reach the infinite potential our Heavenly Father has planned for us. May we each be blessed as we work with the Holy Spirit to take control of our lives and be our best selves. I know the Lord loves each of us and wants the best for us, and He has done His part to make that possible for each one of us. I am grateful for this knowledge and for the gospel that helps me navigate mortality. May the Lord’s richest blessings be with each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival,” *Ensign*, November 2016.
2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “First Presidency Message: Aiming at the Center,” *Ensign*, January 2017.
3. See Dale G. Renlund, “Lifelong Conversion,” BYU devotional address, 14 September 2021.