

Shift From Drift



We've all heard the expression "Life is too short!" I would counter that by saying, "Life is too long." What do I mean? Simply that life is too long *not* to be spending it doing something that you are genuinely passionate about.

This opening chapter creates the context and sets the stage for the essential six promises covered in this guide, all of which revolve around the promise to yourself to pursue your passion. Many of us are in a "crisis state"—wandering through the wilderness, often reactively, hoping that we find "success." This chapter compels us to make a paradigm shift, to view our life as a journey toward success on our own terms—the passion point.

At this very moment, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, there are 240 million people in the cycle of *It*. They are either:

- Getting ready for *It*.
- On the way to *It*.
- At *It*.
- Taking a break from *It*.
- On the way home from *It*.
- Decompressing from *It*.

What is the It? It is a job. In those jobs, few people take the initiative to innovate what they do and how they do it. People often say that you can't get to success by doing things your way. Few believe they can achieve success by creating custom-tailored life and business experiences based on their unique talents, interests, and dreams.

What will you do to achieve success your way?

Consider that you will spend decades in the workforce—and when I say decades, I am talking about roughly 7 million minutes of your life, when you calculate the average time spent working. It just doesn't make sense to invest all those years without connecting them to your dreams and talents. If you're going to spend that much time doing something, shouldn't it be something that stokes your inner fire, your passion, and allows you to innovate within your career and life?

Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome.

—Booker T. Washington

And yet, so few of us do! Recent survey results as reported in *Forbes* magazine indicate that only 20 percent of people are satisfied with their jobs. That means 80 percent are dissatisfied. That's a crippling statistic considering that every four out of five people are actively unhappy with what they are spending the days and years of their lives doing.

What gets in your way?

I appreciate that I have been extremely fortunate in my career, having made it to senior management roles as a member of an underrepresented group (black males), raised in urban Philadelphia, with a public school education, and without a college degree until my early 30s. Still, it wasn't at all a linear pathway. I too experienced "drift." On the surface, the circumstances of my life make my success look unlikely.

In my 20s, I realized that one of my passions was to show that there's another way out of the neighborhood besides drugs, music, sports, or in a coffin. As everyone comes up against obstacles, I will relate a few of mine and how I've marshaled the energies of passion, persistence, and a commitment to move through any impediment.

Passion sustains you

So why don't more people get jobs they enjoy? Is it because we are told from a young age what we *should* want, such as a great education or a high-paying job like a doctor, lawyer, or business executive? Does pursuing what we should want crowd out our passions?

One of the great things I enjoy watching in younger children is the pure view of life they bring to any activity. They still view, explore, imagine, believe, and act as if their dreams can come true. They don't think about boundaries, precedents, solvency, market opportunity, or the business case. They think about what they enjoy doing or believe they would enjoy doing, and then do it. Or they pretend to. Or, at least, they dream about doing it someday.

At some point, the realities of the world crowd in. Without meaning to, we, as a society, tend to steal those dreams away. These dreams often represent the passion that has already taken up residence in their hearts. You'll also find that these dreams are not just the common everyday desires, either. It isn't just the desire to be a rapper, actor, athlete, doctor, or lawyer. These uncommon dreams also include the inner city child who aspires to become an architect, the little girl who sees herself as a veterinarian, or the little boy who sees himself traveling on foreign mission trips.

One of the huge mistakes people make is that they try to force an interest on themselves.

You don't choose your passions; your passions choose you.

—Jeff Bezos

Money comes and money goes, but having a passion can sustain you. Passion is like having access to an endless supply of fuel. Passion is what makes you fall seven times and stand up eight; it's what makes Olympic athletes train for four hard years, go to the Olympics, not make the medal stand, and then go right back into training for four more years for the opportunity to do it again.

How do I know this to be true? The simple answer is because passion has sustained me for most of my life. Following the principles found in this book, over a 25-year career, I've become president of a division of a Fortune 100 company. At the same time, no matter how successful I became in corporate life, I have continued my passionate pursuit of Christian hip-hop that combines all of my passions: music, innovation, and helping others. Later, you'll hear more about my story as "Trig," a Christian hip-hop artist turned producer, radio host, and media company owner. Fuel like that allows you to work a full day and a full night, and be ready for more the very next morning.

Dreams feed your passion

For as long as I can remember, I have enjoyed helping people achieve their dreams. Though I didn't necessarily think of it that way when I was younger, it was always there. Early in my business career, at a celebratory event, I was talking to our company CEO, Skip, my boss's boss. He asked me, "Why do you push and work so hard to do all of the things you are doing?" It was then that my second passion became crystal clear to me. My response was, "I want to be able to show people from the 'hood that you don't have to be a rapper, play basketball, or sell drugs to make it."

That revelation took us into a deeper conversation. Ultimately, I revealed to him that one day I wanted to go back into the old neighborhood driving a Lexus, showing them that I achieved success in a different way. But, more importantly, I wanted to show people that it was achievable for them as well. I wanted to help people see their way out of what they probably considered the

destiny they were stuck with. And that is how I see this book as well.

Skip and I also discussed my first passion, music, and what I wanted to achieve in that particular realm. I told him about what I had been doing in the Christian hip-hop scene and how I wanted to bring together that community in an organized way.

In my 20s, I realized that my goal of becoming a CEO meant that I would be able to help even more people, which is not always the case in corporate America. In fact, when I finally get around to doing that PhD thesis, it's going to explore the myth that you have to be ruthless to be a CEO.

Athletic beginnings

I had a real desire to play football. It may have naturally grown out of the physical size that the Lord placed on me. Like many others, I worked to play Pop Warner football with the neighborhood team, the Nicetown Steelers. Dr. Hankerson, principal of Edward T. Steel Elementary School, which I attended, was the head coach.

In the summer of 1982, I was trying out for the 135-pound team. I wanted to make the team more than anything. I wanted to play fullback and had to compete against a good friend of mine for the spot. I wanted it so bad that, when I found I was over the weight limit, I went to great lengths to get my weight down. I would eat grapefruit three times a day and wear the infamous silver plastic suit several hours a day to sweat off some pounds. I made the team, albeit not starting at fullback, but playing tight end and defensive end.

In high school, I landed on the junior varsity team my first year and was working toward varsity for my sophomore year. During the Thanksgiving break, I was with a bunch of friends from the neighborhood, playing our regular Thanksgiving Day football game. The air was crisp. It was a little cold, of course, but we were having a great time. Although I didn't land a fullback spot on any

official teams I was playing for, I still loved to run with the football. So naturally, during a kick-off, if the ball came my way, I took it.

During one such kick-off return, I ran toward the sideline, focusing only on “touchdown” in my head. Out of nowhere, a little boy stepped out onto the field and right into my path. There wasn’t enough time to change course, so my only option was to try to hurdle over him. As I leapt, my back foot hit his head (he was okay, by the way). As a result, though, my left knee drove straight into the ground. I was in agonizing pain for a few minutes, but I thought that was it: just a few minutes of pain. Five minutes later, I was playing back in the game. But then, soon after, my knee gave out totally and I couldn’t walk.

My friends helped me get home and, after hobbling around for a few days, I went to Temple Sports Medicine. As luck would have it, I had a crazy experience my first day there. I was sitting on a table in the back room waiting for a doctor. From my side I heard a voice say, “Tough break, kid.” I looked up, and it was Andrew Tony, star point guard for the Philadelphia 76ers. Well, if anyone would know, he would. He’d had a bad string of injuries.

It turned out I had a torn ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) and, though I was able to have surgery, I received some interesting insights to go with it. The doctor told me that I was good to go from a normal, everyday mobility perspective, but to play football would be risky. If I took a significant hit, he cautioned, I could be re-injured and this time it could be worse, impairing my normal mobility off the field as well. That was it for my football career. I was crushed, to say the least. In hindsight, however, some years later, I came to a conclusion on this. As much as I loved it, football was neither my passion nor my purpose. I believe that if it truly had been, I would have taken the risk and played on.

Life, interrupted

My last year of high school was particularly difficult. I faced significant challenges with my father. After my parents split up, I

lived with Dad for a time. Then he disappeared early in my senior year of high school. I dropped out of school, working full-time in an attempt to pay the bills and keep the home running. After realizing I couldn't sabotage my own future, I was able to get things right in school and turn failing grades into passing ones. In fact, I was recognized by Philadelphia's Channel 10 as the most improved student in the city at graduation.

During that year, it became clear to me that I wanted to be a communications major. Up until that time, I had focused a lot on music in various forms, whether playing instruments, rapping, or acting as a DJ, which certainly influenced my longer-term interests. As an English assignment, we were challenged to interview someone who was currently in the field we believed we wanted to be in. For me, it was radio, and I went to interview the one and only Doug Henderson, son of the legendary Jocko Henderson, at WDAS 105.3 FM in Philadelphia.

The interview was magical. Upon my arrival, Doug welcomed me into the studio and began telling me about how he got into the business. What was so cool about the interview is that he was also on air. So every now and then, as we were talking, he would say, "Excuse me a moment," spin his chair around to the microphone and jump on the air effortlessly with that deep, smooth voice. "This is Doug Henderson, playing those smooth grooves to get you home this afternoon. Hold your baby tight, and let her know it will be alllllll right," he would say. He was a pro!

That confirmed it for me. I left the DJ booth that day thinking, "I am going to go into radio," and as soon as I could, I applied for college as a communications major. I was ultimately accepted to Temple University. It was hard to believe. Between winning an award for the most improved student in the city from CBS Channel 10 news (and the money that came with it), looking forward to a great summer ahead, and now acceptance to Temple, things were on a roll.

The first morning at Temple felt surreal. I arrived ready to get my books and my roster, and get going. I was ready to start my classes. Of course, there were all of the prerequisite courses, orientation, overviews of the fraternities you can join, the rules and regulations, how to support the school's sports teams, and what seemed like a never-ending list of things to do. I just wanted to get to the communications classes—please! “Fine,” I said to myself, “I’ll do what it takes to get there.” By the middle of the afternoon, I was called down to the administrative offices. On arrival, I was abruptly notified that my financial aid had fallen through. My initial reaction was, “Okay, so what do we do now?” I was informed that I had to fix that issue: no payment, no school.

Upon further investigation, it was clear. My mother didn’t make enough to qualify for the various loans, but made too much for us to get grants. As far as we knew, there were no alternatives. So there I was, crushed yet again. First I’d lost my hopes of playing pro football courtesy of a knee injury, and now, because of some paperwork and perceived financial problems, I couldn’t go to college.

I couldn’t believe that this was being taken from me, particularly after I had gotten over the football setback a few years before and had re-focused my energy.

I’ll admit it: I was mad at God for real.

Death comes calling

I believe that every young boy wants the attention, approval, and perhaps even the admiration of his father. It is hard for us to admit that as men. We often form the belief that we cannot show our emotional needs because it’s not “manly.” However, these emotional needs are very real. With more young men than ever growing up without a father in the home or in their lives, there is a significant gap relative to the emotional connection needed with a father to help a young man develop.

Absent filling that gap, I believe that many men walk the days of their lives seeking attention, approval, and admiration from others. As a result, men seek to consciously or subconsciously do the things they believe will secure that same attention. Though I was fortunate to have my father in my life during my early years, as a child I never felt like I measured up to his expectations. Unfortunately, he passed away before I was ever able to prove I did. Although he never said it out loud, I felt like what I did was never good enough. If I scored a 95 on a test, for example, I felt like I needed it to be 100 to get his approval. Though I can't point to examples of him saying he wasn't satisfied, I also can't find ones of him celebrating successes with me or, if he did, I don't remember them.

My father was an insurance agent by trade, as well as a pastor of a small church, Triumph the Church and the Kingdom of God in Christ. It had a long name, but it was a small church in West Philadelphia. Every Sunday had the same routine: up early, get ready, grits and fish for breakfast, then off to church—or at least trying to go to church, as Mom often ran a little late. Dad and I sat in the car waiting, as he grumbled, “Come on, Gail. I'm the pastor. I can't be late for church.”

That small church in West Philadelphia, with no more than 10 benches on each side, was like a second home. Mom often conducted service, and Dad waited in the pulpit, ready to preach. I usually stayed in the back of the church, having fun with my friends, Stacy and Freddie. Often, we got caught not paying attention, and then came the evil eye from Mom up front. After church, we often went to either one of two places for lunch: Ida's or the Divine Lorraine Hotel on Broad Street, both in the North Philadelphia area. We ate heartily, went home, somehow getting into a pillow fight and then, as I remember, it was time to take an afternoon nap. I hated the last part; I just wanted to go outside and play with my friends, but Dad always made us take an afternoon nap.

My mother and father also adopted several children along the way in my younger years. Ivan Bonner stayed with us for quite a while. We used to call ourselves “7-11” (mocking the name of the well-known chain stores in Philly), as I was “7” and Ivan was “11.” I learned a lot from him during the years we grew up together. Ivan treated me like a younger brother and showed me the ropes on many things, like how to attract young ladies, shaving, bathing more regularly, and dressing more attractively. We got in trouble together and, once, almost got thrown out of the house together by my mother. She gave us trash bags to pack our clothes and everything, but I knew she wasn’t going to throw us out. (Okay, I’ll admit it. I was really scared.)

In retrospect, what I’ve taken away from all of these experiences, observing my father in everything he did, was that I learned he had a clear passion for people. Pastoring is about helping people; working as an insurance professional is about helping people prepare for their needs and aiding them as they pick up the pieces after an unfortunate event. Adopting children is about helping a young person have a home with love and alternatives.

This was our family’s life for a while. Although I wasn’t directly getting some of the things I needed as a young man, I think the family structure and its consistency, along with our time at the church, helped fill the perceived gap. Unfortunately, my father and mother got divorced when I was in my early teens. The night my father left felt tragic. He and my mother argued as he was leaving the house. A man I then called “Uncle Tom” pulled him away, saying, “Come on, James. We should go.” Years later, I got a much better understanding about some of the events surrounding that night.

As time passed, missing my father, I decided to move in with him and my grandmother. Why did I do such a thing, when I felt like he didn’t celebrate me enough as a person? Well, because, like most young men, I was still in pursuit of his attention and approval. When I initially moved in, it felt great. I had a large bedroom all to myself. My father even let me use the basement for my passion

of music. I turned the basement into a nice studio of sorts with my DJ equipment and keyboard. And there was enough room for practice space with my group. However, between us, nothing had really changed. In fact, things got much worse.

I was 16 or 17, driving my own car, and working an after-school job, and I had a girlfriend. Times were good. One day, I got some great news at school. I picked up Tracy, my girlfriend at the time, and rushed home to tell my father. I couldn't wait. Whatever the news, I felt it was important enough to get to Dad right away. I ran up the steps, turned the corner, and barged into his room. To my devastation he was in bed with "Uncle Tom" and "Uncle Bob." Damn!

My heart sank as I turned and walked out, or *ran* out. I jumped into the car and drove for a while, finally stopping and sitting in a field of grass over by the eye hospital near Broad Street. I felt totally betrayed, asking myself over and over, "How could my father be gay? How could he be in that type of a relationship with Uncle Tom and Uncle Bob? Wait, how long has this been going on? Wait, is this why he and Mom are divorced?"

As the months marched on, things continued to deteriorate. Sure, we talked. He apologized for letting me find out that way. He told me he loved me, but there was more to it. Not long after, I found out that my father also had a drug problem, and suddenly it all started to make sense. I had been trying to figure out why things were changing. I mean, the divorce was one thing, but no more pastoring (or church for that matter); the insurance job went away; and he was now driving a cab. Once all the pieces came together, there it was.

One day, during the early part of my senior year in high school, Dad didn't come home. The next day came and went, and no Dad. Days passed until the end of the week, and still no Dad. I was distraught to say the least. There I was, just Grandma and me, and I didn't know what to do. Grandma was elderly and not working, and we still had bills to pay.

I went to the owner of the store where I worked after school and asked for more hours, and he was nice enough to give them to me. I left school early or just cut all day sometimes to get the hours in, hoping to pay the bills—a farfetched idea. I only realized too late that I could not earn nearly enough to keep up with the bills.

After a time, I raised the white flag and called my mother. She was all too happy to help. In fact, she was so eager for me to get my life back on track that my grandmother and I moved in with my mother.

Years passed and no word from Dad. Then one day I found out that he was staying at a halfway house in North Philly. I went to investigate. Sure enough, he was there. He looked rough, but I didn't care. I was glad to know he was alive. For all I knew, he could have been dead all those years.

I was full of mixed emotions: happy to find him alive, but angry, sad, and confused that he never reached out to establish contact after leaving home. He was clearly recovering from drug usage, but had come a long way. He had recovered enough so that the owner of the halfway house had made him a supervisor and, I believe, had provided him with a furnished apartment across the street.

Upon going to his apartment, I found that he was lacking a lot of things. As Temple University hadn't worked out and I didn't have funds for college, I decided to work and try to save up some money, so I took on several jobs. I worked at a parking lot from mid-afternoon to early evening. I had a day job serving yogurt and making salads at Everything Yogurt in Liberty Place on Chestnut Street. I also had an overnight valet and doorman position at the Four Seasons Hotel on Benjamin Franklin Parkway. I was making pretty good tips and had the luxury of coming across lost articles in the hotel, so I was able to help Dad with some men's clothing, a few dollars for groceries, and whatever he needed.

It felt so strange helping out my own father. Then again, that's what he had taught me growing up. His whole life had been about

helping others until he could no longer help himself. I was visiting Dad regularly. For me, it was like a wound finally starting to heal. It wasn't perfect, by any measure, but what relationship is? What was important was the time we were spending together, time to talk and, hopefully, reconcile with one another. And, who knows, perhaps get his attention, approval, and admiration after all.

One day, I came by to visit him but there was no answer at his door. I knocked several times, waited patiently, but still no answer. I then went over to the halfway house to ask a few people I had come to know during my visits. But no one had seen him. I returned again a few days later, same thing; a week later, same thing; two weeks later and still no luck. Once again, Dad had disappeared. Angry, sad, and confused, I didn't know what to do. The one upside was that I felt a bit more optimistic that he was alive now—having gone through what I would call this first cycle with him.

About a year passed from the time of my father's second disappearance. One day I received a letter notifying me that my dad was in Harlem, New York. "What the heck is he doing up in Harlem?" I thought. By this time, my son, James Jr., was born, so I took him on a trip to Harlem to meet his grandfather. When I arrived at the address, I found that it was a YMCA. Dad was living in a tiny room with just a bed and a hot plate. It was very sad, but again, this was Dad. I was happy to see him, but our reunion was short-lived. The next time I came to see him, he was gone again.

When I next found my father, I saw a rapid decline in his health. Then one day, I got word that he had passed away. I was at my mother's house, stopping by for a visit. My brother, Brenton, who was very young at the time, said, "Your dad died." I was at a loss. I knew that it was a long shot, but I had still hoped that my father and I would be able to spend time together, that he would have a chance to see me do well and get to

Take advantage of every opportunity; where there is none, make it for yourself.
—Marcus Garvey

know his grandson. The three of us were going to do things and, for lack of a better term, get some “Huxtable” time in. It was hard to move from “improbable” to “clearly not going to happen.”

My whole life became a whirlwind after that. My mother was great in helping put together the funeral and all of the other arrangements. We did everything in Philadelphia, and despite Dad’s long absence from his church, there was still a good turnout. I was pretty strong through it all, but I think I was just overwhelmed and performing on autopilot. There was a lot going on, and I was still in disbelief and tremendously saddened. I completely lost it when they tried to close the casket. I literally stopped them from closing it. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye at that point: goodbye to my father; goodbye to the possibility of securing his approval and admiration; goodbye to the possibility of learning from his example.

For years after that, I kept things bottled up. I certainly worked hard at everything I did, perhaps harder than before, but I believe I lost some balance along the way. After a lifetime without my father’s attention, where was I going to get it now? I didn’t have any other male role models at the time, nor did I seek them out. Instead, through the years, I let these scars evolve.

If I can do it, so can you

“How can I best share the things I have learned through the years?” I asked myself this question, as the possibility of a book percolated in my mind. Today’s conventional wisdom would say my background and life experiences are not the “usual suspects” for career or life success. However, that is exactly one of the reasons I wrote this book.

During the last few years, there has been a noticeable increase in the subject of how to advance your career. This question leaves many people searching for the proverbial secrets of success. As I continued to think about the topic and what I could share that might be meaningful, I ultimately decided that I wanted to focus on things that I believed were key life lessons along my journey.

After working for 25 years, and through trial and error, I finally realized something powerful. I understood and acknowledged that it wasn't a random set of acts or events that produced the success and joy I have felt in my career. Actually, the success I've created has grown out of a repeatable set of acts—a model—if you will. The model is simple to use and is made up of six tenets or promises. Within this book I will share that model through my personal journey and a select set of stories that are intended to empower you.

Knowing what I know now, I want to help others avoid what I consider a crisis state. The truth is, if you don't know what you're chasing, you *are* in a crisis state. What if, based on my stories and experiences, you could avoid the downward spiral? What if the continuum, starting with disappointment and disenchantment, leading ultimately to failure, could be completely reversed with success as the result?

How to shift from drift

What I learned in going through the challenges, in encountering roadblocks and obstacles, is that I have to be true to myself. These six promises are commitments that I've made to myself and mindfully put into practice in every situation that I've been in. My advice, from someone who has been there, is to make these six promises and keep them:

1. **Embrace your passion.** Don't discount your dreams. Return to that childlike fascination you once had and find a way to spend your work and life passionately!
2. **Perform to progress versus perfection.** Most of us have experienced the paralysis that often comes from perfection or the pursuit of it. Here is an alternative to the paralysis of perfection: what if you performed to progress toward your goals and dreams, celebrating each small step along the way? As I referenced before, passion is at the root of the promises. It is a key part of

the larger process of fueling your progress. However, the world doesn't reward dreamers for dreaming, but for doing. You must also perform at the highest possible level, seeking progress with each new skill set learned and action taken.

3. **Promote with purpose.** Let people know who you are in a way that is personal and purposeful. No one enjoys the slick self-promoter. People will, instead, recognize and reward those who stand confidently in their strengths authentically and purposefully.
4. **Parlay your platform.** Your "platform" is the station in life you've achieved thus far. It may not be where you want to be yet, but it is yours! It includes your network of friends, coworkers, your mentors, and even those bosses who partner with you to achieve your passions, just as you've helped them achieve theirs. Your platform is the sum total of all your efforts in honing your talents and skills. It's that sense of confidence and awareness you've grown into and developed by walking the path of your life, including insights gleaned from all your business experiences.
5. **Put it into action.** I don't believe that opportunity knocks only once. I believe it knocks often. But we have to keep our eyes and ears open to see and hear it when it does! Often, opportunity stares us in the face and we're too busy working to notice. Instead, be alert and aware. Take action on the four steps that lead up to this one as earnestly and as often as possible.
6. **Practice philanthropy.** Give. You can never go wrong giving, even when nobody hears about it. Giving helps not just those to whom you give but also helps you find the purpose to give and give again. So many of us have benefited from the gifts of others, and you'll never know what your small, or even not-so-small, gift might mean

to someone in need, be it a coworker, a friend, or even a boss. As you find success, make giving a habit commensurate with your earnings.

First and foremost, you are making these promises to yourself within the context of being the very best you possible. I am a strong believer in my Christian faith, and believe that we are all designed and called to fulfill a purpose. Not everyone is going to applaud you along the way as you fulfill that purpose. You have to create the expectation of success so that you have motivation to draw from as you move forward.

Find comfort in committing to and fulfilling the promises you make to yourself. Others can't run the race for you. You can only run it for yourself. If that means turning around at the "Finish" line and being the only one there to pat your back, then go on and pat it! I encourage you to begin reading this book, and committing to making and keeping these six promises to yourself. I firmly believe that these tenets are universally applicable, regardless of your vocation, interests, or background. These promises are practical and easy to remember, and will prevent you from going into a crisis state. These are six proven ways to innovate your career.

You have a monumental choice before you: how you will invest your time, energy, and, ultimately, your life. This is not about your education level or formal training. This is about your willingness to take ac-

The lack of expectation of success takes away a powerful incentive to succeed.

—George Subira

tion on these six promises and to make them a part of your daily routine. Remember, it is not always the large, Hollywood ending or the "Rocky" moments that determine our success. Instead, it's the small things we do daily, habitually, that make us successful. Based on my life experiences, I have created the game plan and road map I wish I had when I started out. I share it with you now. Let's get started!