

A portrait of Stedman Graham, a middle-aged man with grey hair and a mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie. He is resting his chin on his hand in a thoughtful pose. The background is a warm, textured wall with a yellow abstract pattern on the right side.

STEDMAN GRAHAM ON LEADING A RELEVANT LIFE

by Beth Douglass Silcox

Relevant living leads to success. Taking ownership of your life, expanding the good and ditching the bad, looking inside yourself for direction, focus and motivation while ignoring society's labels and expectations—these are some of the actions and attitudes to prepare you for opportunities to build a successful life.

But personal relevancy can be elusive. It takes introspection to determine what is important to you, where you want to go and how you're going to get there. Looking inward and really listening to our inner selves isn't always easy.

"We're not programmed to look inside," says Stedman Graham, motivational speaker, educator and best-selling author. "We're programmed to focus on the external world to define us. It defines us by our race, by our house, car, job, title, family, class, gender, religion, money—all the external things that give value to who we are."

"We just learn this way," Graham says. "So we go through the motions looking for the outside world to direct us and guide us. They tell us what to buy, what to eat, what to wear, where to go and what's new. They dictate to us who we are and where we should be going."

In essence, Graham says, we relinquish ownership of our lives by putting too much stock in what the world thinks. In the process, we squelch our future success.

9 Steps to Make It Happen

Identify Yourself

Only about 5 percent of people are privy to this “secret information,” Graham quips, not because of some innate ability, but instead because of intervention. A combination of environment, training, good parents and teachers, as well as exposure to diverse peoples and places, gradually changes personal perspective and allows these people to shed unnecessary societal directives and create individualized success.

“True leadership is about developing an identity for yourself, knowing who you are, where you’re going and how you’re going to get there, then developing a process for continuous improvement,” Graham says. But 95 percent of people never learn this, casually falling in line as followers with a deeply hidden desire to create relevance and take ownership of their lives.

That’s why people gravitate toward true leaders. A case in point is the grassroots organization built by Barack Obama in his bid for the presidency. Graham says, “The reason that Barack Obama is president of the United States is because he took ownership of his own life. Because he said, ‘You know what? I want to dedicate myself to public service.’ He could’ve made more money. He could’ve had more opportunities, but instead he became a community organizer.”

The power of community organizers is on-the-ground leadership, Graham says. They organize community resources, build relationships and navigate issues affecting people with varied backgrounds, all while developing a spirit of cooperation. “That’s leadership, and it’s the toughest work because many times you don’t come with the resources; you have to develop them.

“When [leadership] is real, when it’s truthful, when it’s relevant, when it’s exciting, when there’s energy, you understand that the leader knows how to organize and create resources and opportunity,” he says. “That’s clearly a person who takes charge of their life and a person who consistently thinks.”

Prep Work

A decade ago, Graham devised a nine-step plan to enlighten the 95 percent of people out there who weren’t directing their own lives. *You Can Make It*



Happen became a *New York Times* Best-Seller and Graham stood as a proponent for relevant living and

lifelong learning. In the years since, he has published multiple personal-development titles, including *Teens Can Make It Happen*, counseled thousands of individuals with backgrounds in education and business, and became a community activist.

As the old adage says, “Success is when preparation meets opportunity.” Graham firmly believes in being prepared, and his nine-step plan for success provides prep work for recognizing opportunities and making the most of them while remaining true to personal beliefs.

“First, you have to know who you are, and then you have to organize all the things that you want to achieve in your life, all the things that you are passionate about,” Graham says. This is by no means a stagnant list, but rather an ever-evolving one. By compartmentalizing your life vision, based on who you are, you have a road map of sorts to guide you.

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Lose Baggage, Gain Vision

How, then, to know who you are on the inside? Graham calls this checking your ID. Everyone comes with baggage, issues buried deep in the psyche that often work silently to defeat success. Look inside, understand what motivates your thoughts and actions, then take ownership and start resolving the issues.

Don’t settle for a poor self-image or negative attitude. Be confident in yourself, competent in your skills, and capable of defining, creating and controlling your own life. Above all, feel worthy of your personal vision, which requires an inventory of talents and interests and a dose of imagination, as well as meaningful, realistic and well-defined goals.

Uncertainty makes for a long, arduous life journey, making the same mistakes and getting the same results. Graham says, “You have no big-picture thinking, no vision of what’s possible. You can’t create your own life because you’re still in the same place, in your history, in your background.”

Practice Means Productivity

Personal vision accelerates one's pace toward a new reality and success, but the proof is in the execution. No one can simply dream it. There's work to be done, and only you can do it. Fortunately, equal time awaits everyone daily. So the question becomes: What do you do with your 24 hours?

"It's all practice, practice, practice," says Graham, who played professional basketball in the European League, where he and his teammates practiced, he says, "for the opportunity to play." When game time rolled around, "We would win or lose based on how good we were and how hard we practiced. It's the same in life. You practice, practice, practice, so when the opportunity comes, you're ready. You can do a good job and you can win!"

Understated Expert

Expertise is the prize. Others look to you for direction. You can choose whether you want to be a leader among people, or run a company or be a supervisor. Regardless, you earn the position because you are qualified. "That's how you make money, that's how you create opportunities, that's how you become revered at what you do," Graham says.



STEDMAN GRAHAM'S Nine Steps to Success

- Step 1: **Check Your ID**—Who are you?
- Step 2: **Create Your Vision**—What is important to you?
- Step 3: **Develop Your Travel Plan**—How will you get there?
- Step 4: **Master the Rules of the Road**—How will you meet obstacles?
- Step 5: **Step Into the Outer Limits**—When should you take risks?
- Step 6: **Pilot the Seasons of Change**—How will you grow?
- Step 7: **Build Your Dream Team**—Who will you take along?
- Step 8: **Win by a Decision**—How will you make choices?
- Step 9: **Commit to Your Vision**—Where will you go?

Talent and skill induce a kind of humbleness, Graham believes. "You don't have to brag about it because people know you're good. You're going to get accolades. People are going to respond to you because you're better than most and you understand how it's done. To you, it's no big thing... but it's something that you've been practicing for a long time," he says. "Once you earn it, it's a way of life for you."

Personal Identity, Authenticity

Graham's nine-step plan crosses socioeconomic, educational, racial and generational boundaries. "You see [the need] in major leadership positions in our country. You see it in corporate America. You see it in teachers who teach children. You see it in parents. It's the same for everybody," he says.

All the trinkets society has to offer cannot replace personal identity and authenticity. The external world's illusion of success fools many, ranging from the wave of entitled millennials hitting the job market to the flood of powerful, retiring baby boomers and every generation between.

"You can be very wealthy and still not know who you are," Graham says. "It has nothing to do with money, but everything to do with your ability to create your own and have ownership of your life. That allows you to have better relationships, and develop a sense of strength and confidence.

"The nine-step success process helps you see yourself differently, based on investing in yourself, so you're constantly evolving and changing for the better," Graham says. "You're not the same person you were last year... because you have a process for continuous improvement that allows you to create more opportunities for yourself based on thinking and developing and building."

A powerful sense of freedom and security results from knowing who you are and where you're going. For Graham, life must have relevancy. "That's what I love, taking complete ownership and accountability for my own life," he says. "I leave it up to no one else to determine my destiny." **S**