CHAPTER 2

Flexibility Is Key

FEW PRODUCTS HAVE SHAPED OUR LIVES AS MUCH AS the cell phone. The pace at which we can access information, accomplish tasks, and interact with one another has dramatically increased since the introduction of this mobile device and its even more sophisticated cousin, the smartphone.

Can you imagine what your life would be like without your cell phone? It has given us some of life’s ultimate gifts—freedom, time, and knowledge, as well as mobility. Do you realize that this single creation has given those of us alive today more opportunity than any generation that has gone before us?

It's become the great equalizer.

With the evolution of smartphones, even people who live
below the poverty line in the U.S. have greater access to knowledge at their fingertips than fills the Library of Congress. According to an International Telecommunication Union report in 2011, 6 billion people worldwide (87 percent of the world population) have cell-phone subscriptions, and more than 60 percent of all cell-phone users are in developing nations. It’s been estimated that a fourteen-year-old kid with a smartphone now has access to more information in his pocket than the president of the United States did a mere eighteen years ago.

Right now, all the information needed to accomplish anything we could ever imagine lies within our palm—literally—thanks to the brilliant mind of a man who saw an opportunity before anyone else: Martin Cooper.

Credited as the inventor of the modern-day cellular phone, Martin Cooper is a visionary, and an excellent example of stickability. He took advantage when the opportunity presented itself. He didn’t procrastinate, but took continued action against doubters and unparalleled obstacles.

Martin understood that great ideas originate from one of three things:

- A need
- An unsolved problem
- An easier way of doing things
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Solutions are created by a person or team with the ability to address one of these points, and with the persistence to see that vision through. This point is needed most when inventing new ideas, as there is no road map to follow. (Wait till you get to the chapter about Steve Wozniak and his role in the creation of Apple computers!)

Martin Cooper began by developing portable products, including the first handheld police radios, made for the Chicago police department, and citywide pagers, which led to the invention of the first 800 MHz cellular phone, often called the “Brick,” in 1973.

You remember those big devices on Miami Vice that weighed about 2.5 pounds each? Sure, there were car phones at the time, but nobody thought that having a portable phone would be of any value. Martin, however, saw things differently and envisioned a phone that would be so portable it could go anywhere.

After countless hours of trial and error, and in defiance of skeptics, Martin eventually became the first person in history to make a public call using what he referred to as a “personal telephone.”

Standing in the streets of New York City, he picked up the phone to dial. And yet, who could he call? No one else had a portable device!

After a moment of contemplation he decided to call the
only logical person at a land-line number: his chief competitor at Bell Labs. Motorola (the company Martin worked for) had just beaten Bell Labs to make the first apparatus work, and Martin wasn’t shy about letting them know it.

Just like the “shot heard ’round the world,” this insurgence caused a huge market shift toward the person and away from the place. Martin saw the demand for people to be able to communicate wherever they are, without the need for the traditional copper wire.

In 2006, Martin Cooper and his wife, Arlene Harris (an ingenious innovator in her own right), founded GreatCall, makers of the Jitterbug cell phone, in cooperation with the Verizon network. Here, Arlene tapped her own extensive background from her previous employment, and the two built a company that provided mobile telephone service on its own proprietary brand of handsets. They marketed it to the elderly and to others looking for simplicity—a true modern example of applying the “Keep It Simple, Stupid” (KISS) formula in a practical and successful manner.

What was the secret behind their success? He understood that:

Stickability has to be consistent with flexibility.
A balance is crucial. Martin said that sometimes you can take *stickability* too far. It’s important to know the difference between perseverance and stubbornness.

You have to be able to adjust if necessary. This means, of course, that you first have to be able to identify when adjustments need to be made. You must be fair and open with yourself. Sometimes this includes listening to others’ feedback, even when you don’t wish to hear it.

According to Martin, obstacles can do one of two things.
One: they can make you quit.
Two: they can reinforce your resolution.

Again, it’s the undeniable difference that sets apart those who succeed and those who fail. For many, the obstacle is the failure—and they stop. But for those who see the achievement, the obstacle is simply a means to a better solution. It is as simple as having perspective:

*In the past, the future depended on changes around us.*

*Today, the future depends on the changes within us.*

Martin continues: “Once we latch onto something that has potential, we must always adapt, always keep moving, and the
easiest way to do so is by not fearing failure. And of course . . .
become a great student of success. For myself, when I got frus-
trated I simply shadowed those I admired most, looked for
strengths I could incorporate myself, and then simply applied
and emulated those results.”

Thank goodness he didn’t quit. Can you imagine a life
without immediate access to information and to people? A life
without texting?

How many creations in our lives would we not have today
if the inventors had let obstacles stop them?

What would your life look like if you had quit after the first
failed attempt? You would never have learned how to walk, ride
a bike, or drive. Do you still have the same level of determina-
tion and persistence that you had in your youth to achieve your
goals?

When faced with challenges, Martin knew that if one pro-
cess fell short, another one would eventually succeed. He knew
this as a fact; it wasn’t something he hoped for. He knew that
for every obstacle there was a solution—and he had the disci-
pline to find the solution. The solution here is simply never to
quit before all options have been exhausted.

And here’s the thing: when times are tough and we’re ob-
structed en route to our goals, it may seem that there is no
other way to proceed. This is the point at which some quit.
While understandable, this is very narrow-minded. In these situations we need perspective. We need to broaden the scope of our thinking and exercise the creativity and discipline to know one thing: there is always another way.

Martin Cooper’s thoughts are summarized in this powerful message:

*The key is to listen to your inner voice, and outside counsel, while being willing to adjust along the journey.*

No story illustrates this better than one about spider monkeys. These creatures are among the quickest and most nimble in the jungle.

As legend has it, a young hunter named San Juan knew his father, grandfather, and many other hunters had tried for decades to catch spider monkeys with spears, nets, and arrows, but the primates were simply too small and agile to conquer. He and his father even made special nets and traps in order to capture their noble foe, but to no avail.

One day San Juan came up with a new idea. He designed a heavy container with a very narrow opening at the top and placed the primate’s favorite snack inside. He and the men scattered the containers on the ground and patiently waited to see what would happen.
With eager anticipation, they watched the curious monkeys climb down from the trees to investigate the containers. The monkeys walked around them, touched them, and then smelled the delicious nuts inside.

What would they do next?

Exactly what San Juan had planned!

The spider monkeys squeezed their little hands through the narrow top of the container to reach inside and grab the treat. Once they wrapped their hands around the nut lying at the bottom of the container, their fists became too large to remove through the tiny opening. Since the containers were too heavy for them to carry off, the monkeys found themselves stuck. San Juan and the men looked on in wonder.

What would the spider monkeys do? Would they let go of the nuts and free themselves, or hold onto the treasure and succumb to capture?

San Juan and the others approached the bewildered monkeys. They witnessed fear in the eyes of the creatures as they came closer, but surprisingly enough the spider monkeys didn’t let go of the nuts.

They were unable to adapt to this strange, unforeseen circumstance. They were unable to change course and elude their human predators. The hunters simply snatched them up and
locked them in a cage. San Juan was a hero. He had done something nobody had ever done before.

Can you imagine? The spider monkeys were unwilling to let go of a small nut in order to gain their freedom. They had neither the discipline nor the wherewithal to surmount an obstacle that, to us, seems an easy fix: let go of the nut! This is what we mean by perspective. What to one may seem like an insurmountable obstacle, to another may seem an easy fix.

Perspective is simpler to achieve when we have unequivocal faith that any obstacle can be either overcome or circumvented. The monkeys could not see a solution beyond their challenge. They simply sat there with their hands stuck in the containers until the hunters captured them. They ended up captive because they didn’t have the flexibility to adapt to the situation, and they paid for it with their lives.

Could it be that we are no different from the spider monkeys? It’s a matter of scale, of course, as most folks would simply let go of the nut in this case. But we’re uniquely able to transcend folklore, aren’t we?

This is the power of the stories we tell.

Could we be holding onto something that should be let go? Could it be that over time we, too, have confused stubbornness and stickability—and ended up just being stuck?
Consider this.

What in your life are you holding onto that might actually be contributing to your demise? It’s difficult to immediately determine for certain. Like the nut for the spider monkey, many of the things we hold onto—which a job, a relationship, a belief system, or what have you—are comfortable, appealing, and seemingly what we desire. This may very well be true, but it takes perspective and self-faith for you to determine without question that the nut in your grasp is worth holding onto.

It may be the case that the very thing you think you want is what’s holding you back from accomplishing what you seek.

Ultimately, that’s for you to decide.

So breathe.

And consider.

But remember: you’re not alone!

We sat down with another legendary inventor to shed further light on the importance of being flexible and finding perspective in the face of obstacles.

Ron Klein invented the magnetic strip on the back of your credit/debit card and hotel key, not to mention computerized systems for Multiple Listing Services for realtors, and other great projects that have impacted our lives in many ways.