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Your Start-Up Life: Fail to Succeed

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Your Start-Up Life is a business advice column by [Rana Florida](#), CEO of the [Creative Class Group](#). In addition to answering readers' questions, she features [conversations](#) with successful entrepreneurs, creative thinkers and innovative leaders. Send your questions about work, life and play to rana@creativeclass.com

Government leaders, Fortune 500 companies, and some of the world's leading cultural organizations are increasingly turning to [Sir Ken Robinson](#) for advice on creativity, education, and the economy. The author of such bestselling books as [The Element](#) and [Out of Our Minds](#), he is an emeritus professor of education at the [University of Warwick](#) in the UK and has been honored with a host of honorary degrees and such awards as the [Peabody Medal](#) and the [Benjamin Franklin Medal](#) of the Royal Society of Arts. In 2005, he was named as one of Time/Fortune/CNN's '[Principal Voices](#)' and in 2003 he received his knighthood for his services to the arts.

His innovative theories combined with his wit and sense of humor earned him an estimated 200 million viewers in more than 150 countries for his legendary [TED talks](#) on You Tube. When I met him in Barcelona, I was expecting a formal meeting -- given the "Sir" in front of his name. But as befits a thinker who believes that "if you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original," Robinson is as un-stodgy a world-renowned authority as you're likely to meet -- and certainly one of the most insightful experts I've ever had the pleasure of interviewing.



Q. What was your first job and what lessons did you take away?

A. As a student I spent two summers working night shifts in a glass factory. The money was great; my job was awful. I worked on a line that made pint-size beer mugs. It was physically hard and crushingly repetitive. I stood next to a furnace that dropped globs of molten glass into red hot metal moulds on a rotating turntable. As they turned through the cycle, each mould stopped in front of me for a few seconds and opened up. I had to pull out the glowing glasses with asbestos tongs and put them on a hot conveyor belt, which ran through a blazing gas oven where they were baked and hardened. Standing under that furnace was as close to Hades as I could imagine. The heat was so intense that we had to work half an hour on and half an hour off. The air was so heavy with burning sulphur, which the operator used to stop the hot glass from sticking to the moulds, that the taste of it clung in the throat long after the shift was over. The noise of the machinery was so deafening that we had to lip-read.

What did I get from this experience apart from the money and the road trips that it paid for? I learnt at first-hand about some of the realities for people who do heavy work in manufacturing. I say some because there's a difference between having to do this work and choosing to do it temporarily, as I did. Even so, for those of us who mainly do for a living what my uncle used to call "head work," it's a salutary experience.

I also saw that some of the people in the glass factory were doing jobs that they loved. So I learnt to not to make unwarranted assumptions about what other people get from their work and the lives they lead. This became a core theme of my book *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*.

Q. What traits do you look for in a leader?

A. Leaders lead. The role of a leader is to offer a compelling vision of the road ahead and to inspire people that they'll be able to travel it successfully. Management is about organization. Leadership is about vision. Both are important. Organization without leadership breeds bureaucracy. Vision without management breeds disillusion.

Q. What type of leader are you?

A. An accidental one. I have some heartfelt views on education and the conditions people need to flourish, which I've been developing for a long time. I express them publicly because they're important to me. Throughout my life and work I've found that countless people share them. If I encourage others to think and act differently, I'm delighted.

Q. How important is creativity to the world?

A. Creativity is the fruit of imagination and imagination is what makes us human. Imagination is the ability to bring to mind things that aren't present to our senses. Through imagination you can visit the past; you can empathize with other people's points of view and you can anticipate the future. Creativity is putting your imagination to work and it manifests in every field of human achievement. Creativity is the fountainhead of human culture and it couldn't be more important. It's all the more tragic that it's so often stifled in our schools, businesses and institutions. We pay a heavy price for that.

Q. What can schools and businesses do to encourage creativity?

A. Everything. Creativity is a practical process; we can learn how to be more creative. I said that creativity is putting your imagination to work. A more formal definition is that creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value. Creativity is a process. Often the ideas we start from are not the ones we end up with. They evolve as we work on them and the dynamics of this process can be learnt and practiced.

Creativity involves generating new ideas. They don't have to be new in the history of humanity, but they do have to be new to you. There are techniques to question old ideas and generate new ones. Creativity also involves judgment in deciding what works and what does not.

These techniques can be taught in schools and businesses. The first step is to recognize how important it is to do that and to treat them as seriously as we do literacy and numeracy. I go into all this in more detail my book, [*Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative.*](#)

Q. What are your thoughts on collaboration?

A. I'm all for it.

Q. What advice would you give to jobseekers trying to find their passion while still earning a paycheck?

A. Don't give up. Being in your element is where your talents meet your passions. The two are important. To be in your element it's not enough to do something you're good at. I know plenty of people who are good at things they don't care for. To be in your element you have to love it. 'It' can be anything; teaching, carpentry, law, nursing, graphic design, pathology, working with animals, snow-boarding. You name it. Human culture is as rich as it is because our talents and passions are so various. Some people can make a living from being in their element, others can't or don't want to. They just do it for the love of it. Whatever your circumstances, you need to find time to be in your element - to do what gives you energy rather than what takes it from you.

Q. What if you can't find your passion?

A. The good news is that I have just written the sequel to *The Element*, which answers this very question. It's called [*Finding Your Element: How to Find Your Talents and Passions and Transform Your Life*](#). It will be published on 21 May 2013 by Viking. You can't do better than that.

Q. How do you get others on board for radical change?

A. Benjamin Franklin once said that "there are three classes of people in the world: those who are immovable, those who are moveable, and those who move." Some people just don't get the need for change or don't want to. They're fixed in their position and no amount of argument or evidence is likely to shift them. My advice is to leave them alone and put your energy somewhere else. There are others who may not be convinced yet but they're willing to listen. Work with them. Then there are those who are already moving. Align with them and support each other. When enough people move, that's a movement: when a movement gathers enough momentum, that's a revolution.

Q. What are your views on failure?

A. I once asked a scientist who'd won the Nobel Prize for chemistry how many of his experiments failed. He said most of them. But failure, he said, isn't really the right word. Science is about finding out what doesn't work in the expectation of discovering what does. Trial and error is at the heart of all creative processes. If we want to promote creativity and innovation we have to honor and accept mistakes, false starts and dead ends. As Sir Winston Churchill once said, "Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm." Booker T. Washington put it this way: "I have learnt that success is to be measured in life not so much by the position one has reached as by the obstacles one has overcome while trying to succeed." So it should be.

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