

Make It Happen

Merlyn Vandervort

CreateSpace (Jan 18, 2014)

Softcover \$15.00 (190pp)

978-1-4937-1353-0

This self-made real estate entrepreneur offers tried-and-true advice bolstered by personal stories.

There is a fairly standard formula for business books written by entrepreneurs: in ten chapters or so, dole out somewhat obvious advice about how to start and run a business while peppering the text with occasional “war stories” that validate the advice. While Merlyn Vandervort follows this basic formula in *Make It Happen*, he writes with a distinct voice—positive, honest, and forthright—and his enthusiastic, motivational personality pervades each chapter.

Vandervort likens running a business and living life to being the captain of a ship. “Consider your life a ship on a journey to your ultimate destiny,” he writes. “You are the captain of your ship, the master of your destiny... It is up to you to stay the course and reach the destination of your choosing.” This is certainly not a new idea, but it does set the tone for the book. Much of what the author advises is to take control and operate from a position of leadership; however, the “captain of your ship” analogy is employed time and time again—so often that it loses some of its impact.

Still, Vandervort’s story is engaging. He is not afraid to share his business ups and downs with honesty. Clearly a self-made man, he describes “swinging a hammer as a carpenter” and starting his own construction company. Fast forward to the Great Recession, and Vandervort discusses in frank, painful detail what he went through: “For the next couple of months there wasn’t a week that passed that I wasn’t in my bank’s conference room or board room, reminding the bank executives that they were my partners in this venture.” He ends up losing a significant amount of money. This part of his story is quite compelling and something to which many readers will be able to relate.

While the author’s personal experiences harden him to the business world, they fail to extinguish his optimism, which shines through in each chapter. In “Do It Right,” for example, he writes about the value of paying it forward: “I truly believe that part of doing your business right, and even living your life right, means giving back in some meaningful way.” “The ten top reasons that businesses fail” is a helpful laundry list of not-to-dos demonstrating some of the key lessons Vandervort has learned over his twenty-five years in business.

The design of the book is pleasing to the eye. The text is easy to read, though some of the paragraphs could be shorter. The cover, a full-color photo of Vandervort set against a sunset, is appropriate. At the end of the text, the author includes several black-and-white photos: properties he has developed, his palatial home, and a number of shots of himself and his wife with celebrities. While the photos help put Vandervort’s success into perspective, they perhaps seem a bit boastful.

Make It Happen may be a little too self-serving to be considered in the same league as leading titles by other, better-known entrepreneurs, but would-be business owners should find Vandervort’s positive attitude and encouraging words to be infectious.

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (April 14, 2014)

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