



## Persevere or Pivot?

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N. Karl Haden, Ph.D.  
President, AAL

### Address

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3565 Piedmont Rd NE  
Building One, Suite 430  
Atlanta, GA 30305

### Telephone

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404-350-2098

### Website

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[AALgroup.org](http://AALgroup.org)

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# About the Author

**Dr. Karl Haden** is President and CEO of AAL. Since AAL's founding in 2005, Dr. Haden and AAL have worked with more than 150 U.S. and international higher education institutions, associations, and businesses through AAL's professional development programs and consulting services. Dr. Haden oversees ongoing leadership development initiatives for numerous organizations, including the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons, the American Dental Education Association, the Dental Trade Alliance, and the Interprofessional Education Collaborative. His areas of expertise include leadership, organizational change, team building, strategic planning, curriculum development, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Dr. Haden has authored or coauthored more than 80 articles and monographs. He is the author, along with AAL Senior Fellow Rob Jenkins, of *The 9 Virtues of Exceptional Leaders: Unlocking Your Leadership Potential* (Deeds, 2015) and *31 Days with the Virtues* (Deeds, 2020).

Dr. Haden is a Fellow (Hon.) of the American College of Dentists and a Fellow of the Center for the Study of the Great Ideas. In 2017, Dr. Haden was honored by the ADEAGies Foundation as recipient of the Gies Award for Achievement-Public or Private Partner.

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# Persevere or Pivot?

## Introduction

Rarely is anything great accomplished without perseverance. *USA Today* reports that only 20 percent of new businesses survive beyond their first year of operation, and approximately one-half of that number remain after five years. A variety of reasons contribute to the success of those that survive, but an underlying theme is the perseverance of

the entrepreneurs who start new businesses. Start-ups require determination, resilience, and a willingness to try, fail, and try again. World-class athletes are known for their perseverance. They practice assiduously; overcome fatigue, pain, and injury; and keep their eyes fixed on their goals. Andre Agassi describes athletic perseverance:

“You have to have the mentality of executing your game when you don’t feel like there’s a lot of hope. I think the best feeling is when somebody pushes you to the limit and you dig down a little bit extra.”

In *The 9 Virtues of Exceptional Leaders*, Rob Jenkins

and I describe the perseverance of presidents, civil rights leaders, authors, soldiers, and others. We argue that perseverance is an essential virtue for leadership.

Here, I reframe the virtue of perseverance. More specifically, I examine more deeply the question of when the virtue of perseverance becomes the vice of blind

ambition. Attempting to consider this virtue from the perspective of a leader who takes on a major initiative, I give examples of successful pivots, in which leaders persevered through redirection. I conclude by describing four strategies informed by forethought and real-time analysis to help leaders successfully persevere.

## Acting on Emotions

Virtues are dispositions to act, and they frequently relate to emotions, particularly those associated with pleasure and pain. Pleasure often causes us to act in ways that are not virtuous, just as pain sometimes

causes us to abstain from things we ought to do. Virtues are not ways of being unaffected by emotions; rather, they are the habits of taking the best action, even while anticipating or experiencing

pleasure or pain.

Taking our understanding of virtues a step further, we see that virtues are states of character concerned with a choice, an act, that is informed and determined by reason. This way of thinking about virtue connects nicely with modern discussions about emotional intelligence. I often describe emotional intelligence as emotions informed by reason and reason informed by emotions. Emotion comes from the Latin *emovere*, which means, among other things, “to move.” Emotions move us to behave in specific ways. From the same root, a motive explains why we act; motives are our reasons for doing something. Motives are pregnant with emotions. Our motives may

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*If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There's no use being a damn fool about it.*  
 – Attributed to W.C. Fields

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be good or bad for us, swayed by the pleasure or pain we are likely to feel. Virtually all great leaders are highly motivated: They have compelling reasons informed by emotions that keep them going through the tough times. They are emotionally intelligent. They exhibit the virtue of *perseverance*.

Like other virtues, perseverance is a means between two extremes. On the one hand, we observe people who do not try hard enough, those who lack motivation. When my sixth-grade teacher wrote on my report card, “Karl is not working up to his potential,” he was saying that I was not moved to learn. While I have not seen that teacher since the sixth grade, I have never forgotten the comment that became an admonition. The award of a doctorate two decades later provided evidence to the contrary: I had become motivated to learn and possessed the perseverance required to achieve an advanced degree.

If not working up to one’s potential, giving up, or having a lack of motivation is at one end of the perseverance continuum, that of *deficiency*, what is on the other, that of *excess*?

Before I answer, I want to state a basic premise for what follows: *Attributes we associate with perseverance, such as determination, tenacity, endurance, and goal achievement, are seldom problems for high achievers.* We do not need to encourage them to reach their potential, to work hard, and to stay the course. No, for these people, the challenge, the problem they face, is knowing when to stop persevering toward

a vision or goal, or when to redirect their efforts. Because of their intense motivation, high achievers risk taking perseverance to the other extreme. I use the phrase “blind ambition” to describe that extreme on the continuum. Those who are blinded by ambition cannot see what is happening around them, nor do these leaders see their own limitations. Blind ambition is a vice, harmful to the leader and those they lead.

### **Blind Ambition**

In his 1997 bestseller *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer tells a story of blind ambition on Mt. Everest. How, under the leadership of highly experienced climbing guides, could such catastrophic mistakes have been made that eight people died on May 10 and 11, 1996? At the time of his death, the New Zealander Rob Hall had summited Everest five times, more summits than any other non-Sherpa mountaineer. Yet Hall died on Everest, along with a fellow guide and two clients. Scott Fischer, an American guide leading another group of climbers, was known for ascending the world’s highest peaks without supplemental oxygen. He had reached the Everest summit two years before, in 1994. But during those ill-fated days in May of 1996, Fischer died, along with three others, in a blizzard as he descended Everest’s peak.

While the causes of the Everest disaster are disputed, several factors are relatively certain. The normal turnaround time from the summit was 2:00 pm. Team leaders decided to exceed the normal time. On May 10, only Krakauer and a few other climbers in the group had summited before 2:00 p.m. Some members of his group reached

the summit as late as 4:00 p.m. Bottlenecks (too many climbers on the Balcony and Hillary Step, narrow passages along the route) and securing fixed ropes caused delays. Two climbers became ill, and several ran out of oxygen at or near the summit and required attention. Krakauer speculated that assistance by professional guides elevated the risk, because it permitted otherwise unqualified climbers to attempt the climb. Bad decisions became tragic decisions when a severe blizzard caught the climbers by surprise.

No one can dispute that mountaineers like Hall and Fischer became world-class climbers through perseverance. No one can claim that they lacked knowledge or experience. Their clients paid top dollar to join their expeditions because they were proven leaders, which meant a greater chance of reaching Everest's summit safely. But perseverance became blind ambition. Why?

These experiences may be analogous to those of other high achievers in less dire circumstances. Consider some possible factors:

- **Hubris:** Their accomplishments showed self-confidence in spades, but they became blind to their own limitations. Out of self-confidence, highly motivated leaders often believe they can achieve anything, that they are invincible.
- **Sense of duty:** Clients had paid \$60,000 or more for the adventure, and some were close enough to see the summit from a distance at the 2:00 p.m. turnaround time. One client had tried to

reach the summit during another expedition and failed; this was his second attempt. Both Hall and Fischer found themselves rescuing and aiding other climbers. Leaders sometimes make crucial errors even when trying to do what is right for those they lead. Sometimes their decisions even create the need to rescue followers.

- **Competition:** The rivalry between Hall and Fischer's climbing companies may have led Hall to continue past the 2:00 p.m. turnaround. Competition can drive leaders to do things they would consider unwise in other circumstances.
- **Poor planning:** The climbers fell victim to an unexpected storm. The adage is sound: "Expect the unexpected." How many leaders have fallen because they failed to plan for contingencies?

All of these possible explanations are summarized in one: The climbers did not know when to persevere and when to change direction, or pivot. The virtue of perseverance became the vice of blind ambition.

### **Pivoting**

My premise, stated earlier, is that for most of my readers, perseverance is usually not a problem, and neither is idleness or lack of motivation. A *pivot* is a course correction, a redirecting because changes in the environment indicate that the original vision, initiative, or goal is unattainable. Pivots might indicate that the leader must settle for something different than what he or she envisioned, but pivots can result in even more desirable results. There are numerous examples: Starbucks began in

1971 as a seller of espresso makers and coffee beans but pivoted to focus on coffee making. Twitter started as Odeo, a network for finding and subscribing to podcasts; when iTunes began to take over podcasts, the company pivoted to its current model. YouTube started as a video dating site but pivoted to video hosting. Paypal launched as a business to exchange money through Palm Pilots and pivoted when Palm Pilots became obsolete.

“You gotta know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em”; so the song goes. “Quit” is a four-letter word. Exceptional leaders and high achievers do not like to quit. For the purposes of our discussion, I consider the act of quitting equivalent to an extreme pivot, one so extreme that it means abandoning a vision, goal, or initiative. Pivots, whether extreme or minor redirections, are valid alternatives to persevering. In 1940, nearly 340,000 British, French, and Belgian troops found themselves trapped on the French coast after the Allies failed to block Germany’s blitzkrieg invasion of France. They faced sure annihilation. The “Miracle of Dunkirk” began when Hitler halted the advance of his Panzer tanks, and the British Expeditionary Force held the port long enough to begin an urgent retreat. With support from the Royal Air Force, more than 900 navy ships, merchant vessels, paddle steamers, fishing boats, and other private vessels began evacuating soldiers to the English mainland. Under heavy fire, over nine days, these courageous heroes executed the largest sea evacuation in history. They quit the

field, but this extreme pivot allowed thousands to live to fight another day and defeat Nazi Germany.

*In extremis* situations like Dunkirk occur seldom in history, but the example shows two things: First, quitting on a plan, project, or vision is rarely the end of the story; secondly, in most situations—in business and education, for example—what may be perceived as quitting is an opportunity to pivot, regroup, strategize, and begin anew. Examples exist of not giving up that result in an undesirable finality—from deaths on mountaintop to bankruptcies, from the closure of institutions, to job termination. Most of these effects are caused by the virtue of perseverance becoming the vice of blind ambition.

### **Strategies for Perseverance**

To avoid blind ambition, we need a way of seeing. I suggest four strategies for leader to persevere. The first three strategies are best employed before beginning a new initiative, but the leader can utilize them any time by stepping back, planning, and analyzing what is happening.

#### Manage Emotions Through Data-Driven Milestones

If you are committed to a vision, initiative, or goal, emotions will energize your efforts. Emotions help us persevere; they motivate us. If you are aiming to accomplish something worthwhile, you will and should feel the excitement! That said, one of the reasons that perseverance can become blind ambition is that emotions hijack rational thinking. A leader does not need to

be in the thick of battle or on icy slopes for emotions to take control.

One of the best ways to maintain perspective, to persevere with emotional intelligence, is to plan ahead—before your emotions intensify. A plan developed objectively, rationally, will serve as a map as you move forward. Such plans should be informed by data, so determining what data to use, find, and collect is an important first step. Do your homework. Effective planning includes quantitative measures and target dates (milestones) that allow you to assess where you are in the pursuit of your goal. Those milestones must include human and financial resource allocations. Where finances are concerned, establish how much is budgeted and how you will monitor expenditures along the milestones. Plans should be ambitious, but realistic. Plans should also include contingencies and alternatives—predetermined pivots—if you hit targets ahead of time or if you miss them.

Having a plan will not help if you do not stick to it. Make the commitment early that you will adhere to the milestones and pivot when necessary. Engage others who will keep you accountable. Using such data as key performance indicators and other outcome measures, regularly assess your progress toward milestones. Depending on the project, milestones may range from daily to monthly to quarterly targets. They need to fit the purpose of the initiative and level of risk you, the team, and the organization are willing and able to tolerate. Decision points are associated with each

major milestone. The decisions may be simple or complex based on the data, but they all fit into two categories: (1) persevere or (2) pivot.

#### Know Your Limits and Plan Accordingly=

While this strategy is applicable to organizations, here I focus on the leader. Limitations are imposed by your own personal and professional resources. First, consider knowledge. Do you have the requisite knowledge to move on an initiative? In many cases, basic knowledge is not a problem. Entrepreneurs often begin businesses because of their extensive knowledge and ability in an area. The frequent result is called the “entrepreneur’s dilemma”: The founder cannot continue grow the business when it rests solely on his or her expertise. CEOs, university presidents, and other leaders are sometimes selected for their content expertise, but the scope of most organizations far outreaches one individual’s knowledge. When conceiving and implementing bold initiatives, the question becomes whom you, as leader, know with the knowledge and skill to help achieve the desired outcomes. Are these individuals inside your organization, or will you need to recruit or contract with others? As you consider a bold initiative, if you neither possess the requisite knowledge and skills nor have access to those who do, you risk blind ambition even before you start.

Secondly, consider time constraints. Time constraints are relevant to the first strategy. If you are not making the milestones on schedule, then a pivot is likely in order. In



this case, consider your personal time as the leader. Do you have the time necessary to devote to the initiative? And if the answer is yes, at what point would you need to pivot should the time commitment exceed your expectations? What does the pivot look like? For example, could you simply step away from the initiative? Can you delegate it? If so, to whom? Answering these questions is a part of your personal contingency plan. If you have substantial involvement, then time constraints are also related to your energy level. Given your other commitments, will you have the energy to persevere?

#### Define Your Tolerance for Risk

Defining risk tolerance is especially important for entrepreneurs and other visionary leaders who are willing to take a leap based on a hunch, intuition, or simply what they believe is a good idea. Disruptive innovations are sometimes the result of brilliant insights that anticipated a need. Commodore introduced the first widely available personal computer in 1977. Few saw the need for a PC. How many of us knew that we needed an Amazon virtual assistant named Alexa? WebMD, the online health information provider, sold earlier this year for \$2.8 billion. Founded in 1996 by James Clark and Pavan Nigam, WebMD bet on the ubiquity and power of the internet.

Most of us are captivated by those who persevere against all odds to realize their vision. These heroes captivate us *because* they are so rare. *Inc.* magazine recently reported research conducted by Steve Kaplan, a professor of entrepreneurship

and finance at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, about venture funding. Just getting an audience with venture capitalists is extremely difficult. Few succeed. If the entrepreneur gets to pitch the idea, the chance of receiving funding is slim. On average, of 119 start-ups considered by early-stage investors, only two are offered a term sheet.

Taking the human element out of decision making, including the emotions that drive decisions and motivate us to achieve something about which we are passionate, is impossible. Risk assessment is a science beyond the scope of this essay. For our purposes, it is enough to say that the leader needs objective measures to determine whether he or she will persevere, pivot, or completely abandon an initiative. How many personal and organizational resources can you invest and, in some cases, afford to lose, before you need to stop persevering and pivot? If you are going to put *everything* on the line—and leaders often do—act with awareness of the consequences, should your perseverance not yield the desired result.

#### Learn from Mistakes

A virtue is a mean between two extremes. Perseverance is a mean between idleness and blind ambition. Another interesting characteristic of a virtue is that it is relative to the individual. That is, what constitutes the mean for one person will differ from the mean for another. Why is this the case? I sometimes illustrate this point with the virtue of courage. What is courageous in combat for a Navy Seal and for the average person is significantly different, owing to



training and experience. The Navy Seal has learned to behave in specific ways in specific contexts. It is also likely that the Navy Seal has certain natural abilities that the average person lacks.

Perseverance is similar, in that one's ability to persevere is based on knowledge, experience, and natural ability. For a serial entrepreneur who has started numerous successful businesses, or for an academic leader who has saved schools or institutions from financial insolvency, what constitutes perseverance would be blind ambition for those without similar levels of knowledge and experience. What constitutes a virtue, including the virtue of perseverance, is determined by reason and practical wisdom. Such wisdom comes from doing, experiencing, practicing, winning and losing, and succeeding and failing. We must learn from what has worked, and we must learn from our mistakes.

If you have decided to pivot, then chances are you have made a mistake—maybe even failed outright. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be believed forwards.” Complete clarity even with hindsight may not be possible, but you can more easily read where you were mistaken. A mistake is a learning opportunity. One of the most important steps in the forensics of failure is to examine the assumptions and beliefs that led to the mistake. If a pivot is necessary, what have you learned about that is important to achieve success and reduce risk for the next venture? If you need to abandon the initiative or start over, how can

you test assumptions more effectively the next time, before launching into the initiative? Your competence to persevere is directly related to your knowledge and experience, and for leaders, experience may well be the best teacher.

Great leaders know the importance of perseverance. Their visions require focus, determination, tenacity, endurance, and steadfastness to achieve. The virtue of perseverance does not exist in isolation from other virtues. For example, the leader needs courage, because perseverance often involves overcoming fear; and justice, because the leader must consider the well-being of others. Standing in the center of all virtues, including perseverance, is wisdom. Perseverance is an emotionally charged way of approaching a vision, initiative, goal, or project, but wisdom is required to know when to persevere and when to pivot. In an upcoming white paper, we will examine the virtue of wisdom.

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