

THE EIGHT TRAITS

What is it about some people—the ones who create their own luck—that makes them successful? Are they born under a lucky star? Do they get all the breaks? *No!* To a one, they are people who perceive a possibility, see the opportunity, and parlay it into something positive, which has a measure of success. They don't just **see** opportunity, they **seize** it. They are observers who pay attention—to issues, to problems, to perplexing situations, and to people. Regardless of whether their moment of serendipity turns into a job or business or two tickets to the Olympics or the opera, they are *open* to it!

The stories of these people reveal that they fall into two categories:

• **The Usual Suspects:** When studying the stories that changed people's careers, jobs, or businesses, there is a track of traits I mentioned in the Introduction called the Usual Suspects. Discussed in most business books, these are the qualities and characteristics generally ascribed to those who are successful. These people don't just work smart, they work hard

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rather than hardly work! They cultivate a good attitude. Some days their outlook is realistic, other days it's simply positive, but whichever it is, their attitude is a healthy one that embraces possibility. In addition, they have a vision that is bolstered by great follow-through.

• The Unusual Suspects: What most business books and courses don't identify are the unique traits exhibited by people who have seized the serendipity, co-opted the coincidence, and captured the karma. These Unusual Suspect traits set such people apart from the crowd, incorporating **counterintuitive** behaviors, actions, and attitudes that go against the prescribed norm. Interestingly enough, these traits are also the outgrowth of solid, savvy networking skills.

People who successfully create their own luck exhibit different combinations of these eight traits:

Trait One: They talk to strangers.

- Trait Two: They make small talk.
- Trait Three: They drop names.
- Trait Four: They eavesdrop and listen.
- Trait Five: They ask for or offer help.
- Trait Six: They stray from their chosen paths.
- Trait Seven: They exit graciously without burning bridges.
- Trait Eight: They say yes when they want to say no.

These You Never Know It Alls don't conform to the "keep it to yourself and play your cards close to your vest" school of thought. They remain open, and that openness is the linchpin of their so-called luck.

First and foremost, the people featured in this book talk to people they don't know.

TRAIT ONE: TALK TO STRANGERS

Introduced in my book *How to Work a Room*[®] (1988) as an antidote to the warning "Don't talk to strangers," this counterintuitive trait opened up a world of possibilities for most of the people in this book. If you take a moment to think about it, you have had an experience that started with talking to someone you didn't know. Such incidental, serendipitous conversations can sometimes score huge successes and make a dramatic impact on the bottom line.

A Royal Crown Room

Although we now complain about the inconveniences of cross-country business travel, the reality is that there have always been travails of travel that try our patience: flight delays, canceled flights, long layovers. Although merely annoying for the pleasure traveler, such unforeseen circumstances can mean a disaster for the businessperson who misses a meeting, presentation, or client conference.

One of those flight delays was aggravating for Mark Mayberry, a professional speaker, consultant, and author. "I had planned my travel perfectly. But sometimes the weather gods don't cooperate, and I was facing a long delay. Fortunately, I am a Delta Crown Club member and just figured I would go to the club, have a beverage, do some work, and read my book. Some other passengers were quite agitated, but I figured there was nothing I could do . . . might as well relax.

"As I sat down, I struck up a conversation with another

fellow, who was also delayed. We had a few things in common: We were on our way somewhere, members of the Crown Club, and very frequent fliers. We were both agitated because a golf tournament that was on TV was not on a channel available in the Crown Club. That's what started our conversation. We shared a few golf stories and had a few laughs. It was very casual and a pleasant way to pass the time. When our flight was called we said goodbye and wished each other well. No big deal. Was I ever wrong!

"I got on the plane and knew I was wasting a good opportunity and decided that was not an option. In the course of our conversation I had learned he was just named president of Atlantic Southeast Airlines. So I walked up to him and made sure I had his contact information and sent him my book. Then I followed up a little later. The result of this coincidental meeting and incidental conversation was two contracts totaling more than a half million dollars to consult with his company. It was the most lucrative weather delay of my career."

Striking up a conversation with a stranger isn't always easy. Shared circumstances can make it easier for us to do that. Mark could have behaved in an irritated and unpleasant manner. He could have become so irate that he kept to himself. Or he could have made bitter, whining remarks to that stranger in the airport club, stopping the conversation cold. There was nothing at stake, so it was just a pleasant interchange between two strangers in the same place at the same time, who wished they could watch a golf tournament. It was serendipitous that they were seated close enough to chat. However, Mark's willingness to see and seize the opportunity to chat with someone who turned out to be the *perfect* stranger (as in a six-figure client) made all the difference. What's most important is that he made sure he could make contact again, send his book, and follow up with a phone call.

Mark scored a huge business success, but sometimes "lucky" breaks successfully score things of a different nature—such as tickets to opening night at the opera.

TRAIT TWO: MAKE SMALL TALK

In my travels across the country giving presentations, I have learned that many people hold small talk in low regard. While researching *What Do I Say Next?* (Warner Books, 1999), I discovered that the people who put down small talk are generally those who are bad at it. Those who are adept, **the ConverSENsations**[®] described in that book, see small talk as a way to get to know people, and thus they never denigrate it.

People who create their own luck don't wait for a great opening line, nor do they initiate conversation with big talk—about such daunting topics as famine in underdeveloped countries, quantum theory in physics, or the social cost of incarcerating first-time offenders. Although these are terrific big talk topics, the people who attract coincidental opportunities tend to talk about little things: weather, traffic, movies, and the like. They might start by saying, "Hello, how are you?" And then they **listen** to the answer.

Diane Parente, an in-demand image and wardrobe specialist and founder of the Association of Image Consultants International, was taking her morning swim before work at a club in San Francisco. She was running a little late when she spotted one of her clients getting into the pool.

"I was in a hurry, but I felt it would be rude to just say hello and turn around and walk away." Diane, a genuinely open person and a great conversationalist, chatted at length with Jill, her client. "As I was about to leave, Jill said she had to go out of town that weekend and asked me if we could use her two tickets to opening night at the San Francisco Opera. I was ecstatic. My husband, Lou, and I are great fans of the opera, but opening night tickets are almost as hard to get as tickets for the Super Bowl."

Small talk yielded a big payoff for the Parentes because *La Traviata* is one of their favorites. But people who create their own luck are not one-trick ponies.

"When we arrived at the opera, we were in orchestra seats next to a couple who were women's clothing designers in New York, and I was familiar with their work. We just started to chat with them. During intermission, the wife indicated she wasn't feeling well. Her husband turned to us and asked if we could use their tickets to the Gala Ball following the opera. We were speechless. Fortunately, we were able to say yes, and thank you."

If Diane and Lou Parente had not exchanged lighthearted conversation with these people, they never would have attended opening night at the San Francisco Opera and the Gala Ball. Some of Diane's clients were season opera subscribers, and she was able to connect with them on another level, apart from their business relationship.

A Plane Lesson on Snobbery

The importance of being open, talking to strangers, and making small talk hit home like a sledgehammer for Ed Peters, a sales trainer, who logs many frequent-flier miles. One doesn't have to be a baseball fan to share in the lesson Ed learned the hard way.

"Little did I know that the flight from San Francisco to Chicago in October of 1984 would change my life forever. It was a Friday, the end of a long, exhausting work week in San Francisco. I wasn't exactly excited about a fourhour flight home to Chicago, but at least I had been upgraded to a first-class seat . . . in which I planned to sleep all the way back home. Making small talk was not part of my plane plan.

"No sooner am I sitting down than I hear a booming voice, 'How you doing?' My thought was, 'With my luck, that guy will have the seat next to me.'

"'I asked, how you doing?' he yelled one more time as he crawled across me and landed in the seat right next to me. In between my thinking that I wasn't going to get any sleep and that this guy would want to talk all the way to Chicago, he shouted out, "Hi, I'm Ernie." I didn't even look at him.

"There is one other empty seat in first class and it's next to the guy across the aisle from me. I'm thinking how lucky he is to get an empty seat next to him when up walks a beautiful woman who sits in that empty seat. I was tired, exasperated, and a bit jealous.

"So this guy gets this beautiful woman, and I've got . . . Ernie. Meanwhile I hear the woman across the aisle tell her seatmate she was a *Playboy* Playmate of the Month and was on her way to Chicago for her centerfold photo shoot. This guy's got a Playboy Playmate, and I've got . . . Ernie. I did my best to ignore Ernie by putting on my headphones, but it didn't deter him.

"When we landed, I got off the plane very quickly, ducked into the nearest restroom, and bumped into the guy who sat across the aisle. He asked me, 'So, are you and Ernie good friends?' 'Yeah right,' I said sarcastically. Then he said, 'Man, I would have given anything to have been able to spend four hours sitting next to *Mr*. Cub, Ernie Banks!'

"My jaw dropped in disbelief, and I slinked out of the restroom thinking, 'I just sat next to Ernie Banks, one of my all-time favorite baseball heroes and I completely blew the best coincidence of a lifetime because I didn't give him the time of day, much less exchange small talk.' "If I'm such a huge baseball fan, how was it I didn't know I was sitting next to Ernie Banks? I didn't want to make eye contact so I never looked at him."

Ed believes that in 1984 he learned the ultimate lesson in networking. Now he talks to everybody! Ed learned that if you respond to strangers, open up and make small talk with them, and, better yet, *listen* to them, good things happen. This true story changed his outlook, his behavior, and his life—especially his business life.

"I've come to realize that all business starts with a relationship, and that relationships start with communication. Since that fateful plane ride with Ernie Banks, I've never underestimated that business is all around us if we are open to that possibility . . . and embrace the opportunities that present themselves.

"I learned not to let 'prime times' become 'slime times' and that to be open to the world of possibilities that exists can make your business profitable and your life pleasurable beyond your wildest dreams."

For someone who grew up in Chicago like I did, Ernie Banks is a hero: *Mr. Cub.* My brother and several of my friends would trade their first- and second-born children to spend even an hour in the presence of the Great One. Ed Peters will always remember how he blew this serendipitous situation. To his credit, he learned a lesson and was willing to let us learn from his mistake as well.

You can change and control your own luck by making time for the casual conversation we call small talk. Much like the ConverSENsations I observed in *What Do I Say Next?*, open people are not dismissive of small talk. As Michael Korda writes in *Power* (Random House, 1975), they see small talk as a way to get to know people—and that often leads to Big Talk.

Small talk might start with an exchange of information about kids, pets, food, parents, sports, books, or yes, even the weather (it happens to all of us). Small talk can take place at a party, at the opera, at the watercooler, at a fund-raiser, at a bookstore, on the golf course, or in line at the supermarket. The best listeners and eavesdroppers are empathic, a quality that allows them to form deeper connections.

TRAIT THREE: DROP NAMES

As I sat at the table at the historic Old Ebbett Grill on a very hot and humid summer day in D.C., I looked across at my young companion and thought how unlikely it was that we would have spent a day together at the Corcoran Gallery and having lunch. That this lovely 20-year-old college coed would even want to hang with me was amazing, as she had met me only once and I was older than her parents. But when her mother, Jody Pilka, received my e-mail about my pending visit, she realized that she would be on a business trip and that her husband had a meeting. She mentioned my invite for lunch and a museum tour, and daughter Courtney volunteered. How this came about is just one of the "small world" stories that have added spice to my life.

It started four years earlier, when I received the web site inquiry from a potential client who wanted to discuss a presentation, based on my books. The inquiry was very businesslike, although I took special notice of her last name. When Jody, a vice president of Ryan Homes, and I finally spoke, she mentioned that her office was in Gaithersburg, Maryland. "Oh, I have a sister-in-law there," I commented, connecting with Jody on a more personal level.

We discussed the usual: how she found me and read my books, the agenda and objectives for the two-day meeting for sales staff, when and where it would take place. The exchange was pleasant, and our conversational energies matched, but I knew she was interviewing other speakers as well.

At the end of the conversation, I decided to take a risk and ask a personal question. "Jody, are you from Chicago?"

"No, but my husband's family is."

"Really? Were they in the paper business?"

"I think his grandfather was."

It was time to drop the big name. There is a school of thought that says dropping names is a way of showing off. If I were to mention that I had just been at a party with some big muckety-muck, it would be offensive. But this was different. There was a connection between us, and I had to let her know.

"Please sit down," I warned Jody. "Is your husband's grandfather Ike?"

Her surprise was apparent in her voice. "How did you know?"

"Jody, my dad worked for your husband's grandfather for 26 years . . . then bought the company."

Jody responded with surprise, excitement, and disbelief. Out of nowhere, she has contacted an author to speak to her company and discovers a connection to the Pilka family. I was a link to their past, and she was a link to mine.

E-mails and phone calls followed, establishing the reconnection. My parents had been guests at her husband's parents' wedding, and his grandparents were at my parents' wedding. My mother even remembered the gift they gave to her and my dad.

Yes, I was chosen to speak at the programs for Jody's company. But there was an extra bonus. I spent the weekend in Baltimore and from there drove out to Virginia to visit with Jody, her husband, Eric, and their daughters in order to meet the family of the man I grew up hearing so much about. Eric's grandfather was part of the lore of the Randolph Paper Company.

Jody and I stay in touch and have seen each other on subsequent occasions. None of that would have happened had I not risked sounding foolish with a potential client by dropping the name we had in common. Jody's openness to my questions is what enabled us to connect. At any point in our conversation she could have shut things down by saying "No, I am not from Chicago" or "No, my husband's family is not in the paper business." She could have done a Dragnet—"Just the facts, ma'am"—and then hastily ended the conversation. But she didn't.

Jody's response was not monosyllabic or terse; she took the time to elaborate, which established what we had in common. This certainly impacted my business in a positive way, but it also brought a lot of joy and fond memories to Eric's stepmom, who knew my parents, and to my mother, who adored Ike Pilka.

Dropping the names of people, places, and events that you might have in common with a stranger creates connections that open the door to opportunity.

Life is like that.

TRAIT FOUR: EAVESDROP AND LISTEN

People who benefit from coincidence and serendipity not only listen and observe, but also have highly refined *overhearing* skills. An episode of the television show *Frasier* reinforces the traditional lesson that it is not nice to eavesdrop. Dr. Crane overhears a bit of news and is told by his very sensible father, a former policeman, that "overhearing is like wiretaps, inadmissible in court."

However, for the savvy communicator, keeping one's ears open is a way to court information, to learn, assess,

and get a feel for the market. Listening and overhearing are ways to do very low cost "market research," although you may end up getting more direction than you bargained for. There are benefits to being the eavesdropper, but also to being the one who is eavesdropped on.

Tapped Out: A Success for Body and Soul

Sharon, a small business owner, had started her aerobics studio more than two decades earlier, and had been one of the first in the area. However, now her business was in trouble. The rent at the shopping center in which it was located had skyrocketed, and Sharon now faced competition from major health clubs and studios that had not existed when she was the "first on her block"—and for miles around. Body and Soul began losing clients to fullservice health clubs.

As her clients aged and their needs changed, Sharon focused her efforts on senior prime-time classes. Although getting new clients was hard, she had a loyal base of customers who had been with her for many of her twenty years in business.

Sharon did have a subrenter, a dance company, that made it possible to keep the doors of her studio open. When this longtime subrenter moved to a new location, things began to look bleak. She was on the verge of having to close her studio after twenty years.

Bonnie Alexander had been teaching tap at the local recreation and park center. "I never thought that the current studio was very amenable. One day, after attending an exercise class, I **overheard** Sharon on the phone saying that she had lost her subtenant. I waited till she was alone so I would not risk embarrassing her or spill the beans in front of other students. I told Sharon what I had heard, and that I thought her studio was in a great location for our tap and ballet classes. It was well lit for night classes, it had unlimited parking, and it had a great sound system and even a piano. Plus, I had always enjoyed the aerobics classes at Body and Soul and wanted to continue having it available. Sharon was very interested.

"I mentioned the studio to my colleague, who taught the ballet and jazz dance classes in the students' program. It just seemed like the perfect option for both of our classes. It would solve Sharon's problem, and we would have a much better facility. Little did I know that a week after I had started the ball rolling, the studio that the Rec and Park Department was using would be condemned and closed! It was amazing serendipity that the solution was in progress before we knew that there was a real problem. The timing was more perfect than I could have planned.

"Because it involved city codes, board votes, and some politicizing, the final decision took longer than we would have preferred. But it did happen. Our ballet, tap, and hula dance classes now take place in a lovely studio. Our students have made the transition of location very easily. The parents prefer the location because it is in one of the shopping centers, and that makes it easy for them. They get to do their grocery shopping, errands, or have a cup of Peet's coffee until the class is over."

And Sharon's business is no longer in danger of losing its lease.

Getting a new market for a stand-alone aerobics studio is difficult when it is surrounded by newer full-service clubs. Without investors, it's almost impossible. But you never know when a customer, familiar with the situation the business is facing, might be able to step in and save the day. There are many stories in which a community saves a local small business when the big guys move into town. The business might be a bookstore, a coffeehouse, the local shoe repair shop, or the ice cream parlor—but a little nostalgia, some shared information, and loyal customers can make a big difference.

As a result of Bonnie Alexander's overhearing Sharon's phone call approaching her with a proposed solution, Sharon was able to face her problem and overcome it. Bonnie's actions helped save a longtime small business from closing its doors. In this case, a bit of eavesdropping, some matchmaking, the superb timing of serendipity, and, as Bonnie says, "my big mouth" were the tools that turned a potential disaster into a "small business saved" success story.

TRAIT FIVE: ASK FOR OR OFFER HELP

So many of us were raised with the old adage about making it on our own—not asking for help but instead "pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps." That may work for some, but people who create their own luck are willing to do what novelist E. Lynn Harris did.

Harris spent 13 years selling computers for a major blue-chip company. But his heart was set on writing a novel. In a *San Francisco Chronicle* article, by Adair Lara, Harris said, "I always knew words could change people's lives. I'd go to the library when I was younger. I knew there was a big world waiting for me."¹

He quit his job and moved to Atlanta to write his novel. Because he could not sell it to any publisher, he selfpublished it. But bookstores weren't willing to take on his book.

"I knew from selling computers, it takes sales to get people's attention," Harris said. So he **asked** friends to throw book parties featuring his novel, and he asked owners of small businesses with predominantly African-American clienteles whether he could leave copies of his books in their shops. "I'd leave a copy in beauty salons with a note reading 'Please don't remove.' " People who had begun reading his book while waiting their turn in the chair started to call him with orders.

"One day a woman called me from Doubleday publishing who happened to read one of these self-published copies. She said it was 'one of the most enjoyable reading experiences' and asked if I had an agent."

When Harris went to see literary agent John Hawkins, he took a copy of his book and also mentioned the woman from Doubleday. Although Harris had thought she might be a secretary, he learned from Hawkins that she was actually a powerful person in the publishing world named Martha Levin. Hawkins then asked Harris whether he could represent him.

E. Lynn Harris is now a *New York Times* best-selling author who has sold over 3 million books. He had a passion and a plan and was willing to ask for help. The combination of his knowledge of his community and the sales process yielded a series of coincidences and sweet serendipity that catapulted him to the pinnacle at which he finds himself today.

TRAIT SIX: STRAY FROM THE PATH

Some very successful individuals follow paths they chose deliberately and for which they trained or attended school, or in which they had experience. But others exemplify a counterintuitive trait, and these people did not stay on the expected course. When the "Aha" lightbulb lit up, they allowed themselves to detour from their paths in order to pursue the new ones that had been illuminated for them. Such a fork in the road beckons these people down a new path in life.

We all make choices based on a variety of factors:

research and advice, family and peer pressure, and sheer gut reactions. The unpredictable result can fall into the "You Never Know!" category. We travel roads that have led us, albeit circuitously, to the place where we are. What if we had (or had not) taken that proverbial fork in the road that, as Robert Frost famously said, "has made all the difference"?

When Jansen Chan was a little boy, his father taught him to bake. When he was in primary school, Jansen and his dad would bake cakes for birthdays, parties, anniversaries, and traditional Chinese celebrations. They considered the foundation, design, structure, and, of course, the ingredients and taste of their cakes. The presentation was part of the planning process. Jansen was ten years old when his father succumbed to cancer after a sevenyear battle, but Jansen's memories of baking with his dad remained strong as he grew older.

Jansen had a general interest in design, structure, and form as well as visual presentation, so after his high school graduation, he planned to explore those interests at the University of California, Berkeley, in the school of architecture. He was an excellent student, who completed the five-year course and found a job as an architect with a local firm.

As Jansen tells it, "For two years, I worked on design projects and structures and discovered that I didn't like working as an architect." The path Jansen had not chosen called to him from a place deep within his most cherished memories. He broke the news to his employers and to his mother and left the firm. "I had to see if the path I didn't originally pursue was the one I wanted," he said.

Jansen arranged to apprentice to the pastry chef at a downtown restaurant rather than attend culinary school. His love of art—designing, paying attention to detail, and creating eye-pleasing edible structures (desserts)—prevailed. He worked at a four-star restaurant as the assistant pastry chef and was part of the team that created the Pecan Marjolaine with Julia's Chocolate Mousse for Julia Child's ninetieth birthday celebration. He followed his dream by returning to his preferred path—and found it to be the right one.

What did his mother, a chief development officer in the public school system, say about his career change? "At first I was surprised and a little disappointed. Now I see how happy he is, how good he is at what he does, and that makes me happy."

Jansen is currently in training with Alain Ducasse to work at Mix in Las Vegas. "I now love what I do, although it requires a lot of hard work and standing on your feet for ten hours a day. It's not lucrative, but it's my passion."

Jansen set out to follow the prescribed path, studying architecture in a traditional academic setting. He gave it a fair chance and worked in the field while he learned the machinations of the market, the business, and the politics. But he also learned that he did *not* like it.

Jansen took a risk by leaving an established and wellrespected profession. He also risked disappointing his mother. However, he had the courage to pay attention to the "voice inside." To make this career switch, he had to network in a brand-new arena in search of a pastry chef willing to mentor him. He also had to learn a whole new set of aesthetic details, work procedures, business policies, and office politics in his new profession. But it made him happy, and continues to do so.

TRAIT SEVEN: TIMELY, GRACIOUS EXITS WITHOUT BURNING BRIDGES

Newspapers and magazines often carry stories about sports figures, entertainers, and executives who leave their careers at their peak. They know "when to hold 'em, and when to fold 'em." Perhaps Shakespeare said it best: "All's well that ends well."

Jerry Seinfeld wanted to leave at the top of his game because he felt that too many television series stay too long at the fair. In a recent interview, Ray Romano, of the sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*, echoed this desire to exit his series before it becomes stale. He wants to avoid the fate of "the Fonz" from the sitcom *Happy Days*, who was forced to "jump the shark"—a reference to the extreme plot gimmicks TV writers resort to in order to maintain ratings once a show is past its prime.

Tennis star Pete Sampras, winner of five U.S. Opens and seven Wimbledon championships, was honored at the U.S. Open in 2003. He was officially retiring at the age of 36 from the game he loved. Sampras was one of the greats both on the court and off the court—a gentleman who is admired by his fans, the press, and his colleagues. The tribute to him at the U.S. Open reflected his most gracious and timely exit.

After her Farewell Tour, Cher explained, "You have to stop when you're really good at it." It's the preconcert hustle and staging that wear her down, according to a *USA Today* article by Edna Gunderson. "Performing is the easy part. The hard part is going from hotel to hotel, venue to venue. It's strenuous and backbreaking." At 56, Cher wants to "exit gracefully before rust sets in."²

A gracious and timely exit can prevent you from burning your bridges. And why is this important? Because you just never know!

On Her Toes: Salvaging a Burnt Bridge

Marika Sakellariou's careers have combined her passion for ballet with her commitment to fitness and excellence in sports. But it was her gracious, carefully considered, and well-choreographed conversation with Maestro Kurt Herbert Adler—after he fired her—that was Marika's turning point.

"I was a little girl living in my native Greece when my best school friend invited me to come to a class with her," Marika says. "I was excited, as I thought I was going to her gymnastics class and would get to do cartwheels. My best friend was Finnish and she spoke no Greek; I spoke no Finnish. When I walked into the 'gymnastics class,' I found a very different class: ballet. But the minute I heard the music, I fell in love with the dance.

"I worked very hard in ballet. One day my ballet teacher, Miss Laine Metz, said she was getting too old to demonstrate the steps. She said I could earn my classes by learning all of the ballet terminology and ballet exercises and teaching them to the students. She ended up closing her studio and becoming my mentor and advocate in the ballet world."

Marika and her family moved to Canada, where she became involved in sports and was an Olympic gymnastics competitor. She attended Connecticut College for Women and Juilliard, and started her own ballet company in Marin County, California—the Marin Repertory Dance Theater.

Marika continues, "One day, Mr. Kurt Herbert Adler of the San Francisco Opera, known as a demanding and formidable maestro, saw a performance of my company. We later learned that the Opera Ballet was having an audition, and my partner thought that I should go with him to try out. Although I knew it would interfere with my dance company and wanted to refuse, I agreed and was hired as a soloist.

"On a day my dance company had a scheduled performance, I was supposed to dance a solo and, luckily, the choreographer of SFOB [San Francisco Opera Ballet] agreed that I would not appear and could be with my dance company. But when Mr. Adler noticed I wasn't on stage, he fired me! I was very upset because I had permission to be absent, which he did not know. I felt I had to speak to him and requested a meeting. I was quite nervous, but I calmly told him that my absence was authorized—and added that if he didn't know that, then there was no administrative leadership.

"I was twenty-three at the time and to say what I did to Maestro Adler could have been career suicide. It took more guts than I thought I had. He paused, and asked me who he should hire to provide that leadership. I thought about it, looked him in the eye, and said, 'Me.' He asked me to write a proposal describing the position I would fill. He accepted it. I stayed for 10 years, choreographed over 40 ballets, and designed a fitness regime for the dancers in the off-season.

"After a ballet injury, I became more involved in sports fitness and became a licensed fitness instructor. I designed EnduradanceTM as a training [method] for Olympic athletes."

Under the umbrella of her company, Marikasport, she also invented the Ski-slide to prepare U.S. gold medalist Jonny Mosley for the 1998 Winter Olympics. The Skislide exercise method won a Nike Innovation Award and was licensed to Reebok. "I continue to teach ballet, combining my first love with my passion for fitness," Marika comments.

Avoiding the burning of bridges is not about being meek or allowing yourself to become a victim. It's about being professional and reasonable. Marika was unfairly fired and had every right to be furious and resentful; instead, she chose to handle the situation with a combination of tact, grace, and chutzpah. Because she had the courage to speak to Maestro Adler with respect and graciousness, Marika salvaged a bridge that was almost burnt for her, and the rest is ballet history.

Not burning bridges is a common trait of people who

create their own luck, but being able to reconstruct one that has been burnt for you is an act of grace.

An untimely exit as the result of a layoff, a merger, or cost-cutting measures can be a disruptive and unexpected experience. While we can't control company decisions, we can control our response to them. A gracious exit can ensure that you will get a good letter of recommendation or some work as an independent contractor or even that you will be rehired in the future. But a bitter end guarantees that none of these are possibilities.

People whose opportunities have been transformed into successes have often benefited from their own good behavior. When the CEO of Clearbrook, Carl LaMell, interviewed two final candidates for a senior executive position, he asked both when they could start. One fellow said he could start the following Monday. The other said it would take a month, because he had projects to finish and couldn't leave his present employer in the lurch. The staff assumed Carl would choose the first candidate. "Not at all," Carl explained. "Why would I want someone who would leave a position with four days' notice? If he would do that to his current boss, he'd do that to us. I didn't want to hire someone who could leave a position so lightly and not care about burning bridges."

TRAIT EIGHT: SAY YES WHEN YOU WANT TO SAY NO

A current trend, recommended as a time management technique, is to just say *no* to anything that might be an imposition on our time. However, the corollary is that we are also saying no to any opportunities that might result if we had said yes.

Some people's lives constitute a series of serendipitous events. These people live large and embrace life. Today Anna Maria Bertacchi is executive administration manager of United Nations Federal Credit Union because many years earlier she said yes when she really had wanted to say no.

Anna Maria has an infectious smile that lights up a room. It caught the eye of an older woman in her church who seemed to be alone most of the time. When she began to smile back, Anna Maria would say hello and ask her how she was.

"After a few months of our growing conversations," says Anna Maria, "she asked me if I would drive her to Wednesday night Bible study. I was a bit surprised and speechless because I didn't often go to that class.

"But I felt honored that she would ask me out of everyone at the church. And I thought Elizabeth was alone. Even though it was not something I planned to attend regularly, instead of doing the sensible thing and saying no, I heard myself say, 'Sure, I'll take you.'

"Over the course of time, we became close. She knew I lived near my family home and helped to care for my dad, who had been an invalid since I was 10 years old. The year following my dad's death was a time of great change for me. I began to work at a struggling community hospital in the public relations and development office. I also wanted to go to school and get a bachelor's degree. During that year, Elizabeth decided to sell her home and move to Phoenix to be near her son. As I helped her pack, she made me promise two things: to visit her and to get my degree. I was determined to keep both those promises. I just couldn't figure out how to work and go to school.

"Then I remembered that years earlier, when I was working as a secretary at IBM in New York, I had won an award that was presented at a conference in the Los Angeles area. As I was sitting on the beach, staring at the Pacific Ocean, I knew that it was my destiny to move there. I went home, told my supervisor, and asked for a transfer to the California office."

After two years, Anna Maria sensed that her family needed her back in New York. She spent her last few months in California working as a temporary secretary for a supervisor who was pursuing a weekend college degree program at Loyola Marymount. She encouraged Anna Maria to do the same and mentioned Marymount College in Tarrytown, New York, which offered the same weekend degree program. Although she had never heard of the program, Anna Maria had grown up in Tarrytown.

"Years later, after I had promised Elizabeth I would go to college, I remembered this conversation and enrolled in the program. I still worked at a local hospital doing PR, volunteered at church, and continued my friendship with Elizabeth.

"Three years into the program, I began to feel so tired and discouraged. One evening, when Elizabeth called, I became very emotional and said that I wanted to give up. A couple of weeks later, Elizabeth's son contacted me and asked me how much it would cost for me to get my degree. He said that his mom had spoken with him and they decided that they wanted to pay my way through college. I was shocked.

"Shortly after that conversation, I received a check for \$10,000 to cover the cost of my courses and a new computer. And two years later, at the age of 36, I marched across the stage and received my bachelor's in psychology with honors.

"After I got my degree, I looked for a new job and saw an ad for a company in Manhattan that was looking for a PR specialist. The job involved international relations, and required a college degree, which I now had. I began working for the United Nations Federal Credit Union. I have organized a grand opening of our office in Geneva, Switzerland, and traveled to Germany and Rome, where we made presentations to the U.N. staff. As I stood on the balcony of my hotel overlooking the Coliseum, I thought, Wow! I had come a long way.

"If I had said no to Elizabeth, who wanted to attend Bible study, instead of yes, I would not have had this incredible series of opportunities or met the sweet woman who changed my entire life."

Volunteers in professional associations are frequently asked to donate their time and talents. Sometimes saying yes instead of no to such requests can make an impact on your life in a way you never imagined. Jennifer Klein was involved in her local Sacramento chapter of the Public Relations Society of America when she was asked to do yet another task for their annual holiday event.

"I had so much on my plate, between client work, holiday obligations, and my other responsibilities for the organization that one more thing seemed like the last straw. But I had been a member since I was a student at U.C. Davis, and everyone had been so helpful to me in my career that I just thought it wouldn't kill me to meet with the celebrity emcee. Sander Walker was a D.J. at our local radio station not too far from my office. So I arranged to meet with him to deliver the script.

"As we went over the event's agenda and script, we ended up having a great time, talking and laughing a lot."

And they still are having a great time. Jennifer and Sander turned their serendipitous meeting into a success by my (and every matchmaker's) standards. They married and are now the parents of Jayde Anne.

Consider the possibilities of saying yes to something when you really want to say no. Doing this in your business life can have a major impact on your personal life as well.

RoAne's Reminders

The eight counterintuitive traits that we've discussed are what set apart the "lucky" ones from the rest of us. Their behaviors and actions transformed those experiences we generally refer to as coincidence, kismet, karma, fate, destiny, or luck from serendipity into success. Once again, here are the eight characteristics that made all the difference for the people we met in this chapter:

- Talk to strangers.
- Make small talk.
- Drop names.
- Eavesdrop and listen.
- Ask for or offer help.
- Stray from chosen paths.
- Exit graciously without burning bridges.
- Say yes instead of no.

People who create their own luck live large, remain **open to possibility,** and **expect** that good things will happen—and they *do*. You will be able to identify at least one, and often more, of these eight traits in the "lucky people" whose stories are told in this book.

Think about the events, the opportunities, and the coincidences that are taking place in your life right now. Maybe a door is closing, but there is a window that can be pried open. For example, you might be feeling burned out on the job when a friend suggests that you talk to his former boss, who is starting a company. The first step is to recognize the opportunity, then evaluate it for its potential. What can you do now to transform these possibilities into opportunities with positive outcomes?

A Closer Look at the Current Opportunities in Your Life	
Opportunity	Action Plan
 You are invited to join the board of a highly regarded not-for-profit organization. 	 Interview current board members. Assess time commitment and responsibilities. Attend a meeting and/or event.
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
Once you are open, you will hear, see, and simply bump into more opportunities that you can add to the list.	