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## The Quest for Prowess

### Why Everyone Needs a Prowess Map

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The quest for prowess is likely the reason you've chosen to pick up this book.

In this chapter, you'll uncover the moment and event that drives the desire to seek and expand one's prowess—a pivotal experience that propels you to learn more and to continue learning. For some, this quest emerges from a singular incident; for others, it's a gradual realization.

For me, this journey was shaped by a sequence of events that transformed my life. Unlike mastery, prowess is a lifestyle—a commitment fueled by passion, drive, and purpose, grounded in a clear understanding of what's required to create meaningful outcomes and alternative realities.

This pivotal moment is illustrated in Figure 1.1. In the sections that follow, we'll explore the intricacies of the prowess map and explain why everyone needs one as a tool for intentional growth and leadership clarity.



**FIGURE 1.1** My prowess map.

## Unpacking the Map: A Life-Altering Moment

It was Sunday, September 18, 2016. I was overwhelmed with joy, lying in my hospital bed and gazing at my first child, who was peacefully asleep beside me. It was one of the happiest days of my life.

Only three hours had passed since I had given birth, and as my newborn son and I rested, my phone rang with an unexpected call. I answered, unconcerned about the timing, only to hear unexpected news that I was being laid off.

As the caller went on, I found myself tuning out. It's common to disconnect after hearing the words, “You’re being laid off.” I froze—numb and confused. The emotional high from my recent delivery had overpowered my ability to fully process the disappointment and fear that came with losing my job.

When the call ended abruptly, leaving me with a mix of emotions—joy for my newborn and the jarring shock of job loss. I wondered silently how I would manage without the stability of a full-time income.

## A New Perspective: From Loss to Purpose

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When my husband, Alexander, returned to the hospital with extra clothes for me, I waited to share the news. As he stared at his son in his crib, with pride and joy, I hesitated, not wanting to taint the moment with my layoff news.

But eventually, I shared it.

His response would forever solidify his role as my greatest coach and accountability partner: “Now you can focus on your passion for teaching,” he said.

Alexander—a natural leader and top executive—had an effortless way of inspiring and managing people. Though his response initially shocked me, his unwavering support and vision were qualities I had always admired in him.

## A Journey Rooted in Teaching and Impact

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By this point in my career, I have been teaching as an adjunct professor and guest lecturer at various higher education institutions both in the United States and abroad.

Teaching is my passion. I thrived in the classroom, energized by the opportunity to work closely with students, share insights, and make a meaningful impact in their careers.

As a practitioner, I brought a real-world perspective to my students, offering them insights into business challenges and workplace dynamics. Their curiosity fueled my passion, and I was deeply committed to helping them shape their career aspirations. My classes filled quickly, and many students reached out, hoping to move from the waitlist into the classroom.

## Investing in Prowess

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Despite my love for teaching, I recognized that if I wanted to fully commit to academia, there was more to learn. This quest for pedagogical prowess led me to further my education at the University of Pennsylvania—a decision that remains one of the best investments of my life.

The experience deepened my understanding of teaching, reinforcing that prowess is not a destination but a continuous journey. Being at Penn was transformative for me. It reshaped my approach to teaching and solidified my role as a scholar practitioner, committed to blending practical experience with academic rigor.

When I returned to the classroom, I knew I could offer my students a richer, more nuanced learning experience as a scholar practitioner. It's no surprise that my dissertation—focused on teaching prowess and pedagogical effectiveness—earned double distinctions and was accepted into the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

My mission was clear: to create new pathways that empower both faculty and students in advancing the role of pedagogy and student learning success.

Creating a prowess map gave me the opportunity to look inward—to reflect on who I wanted to become next and identify the actions I needed to take to turn those aspirations into reality.

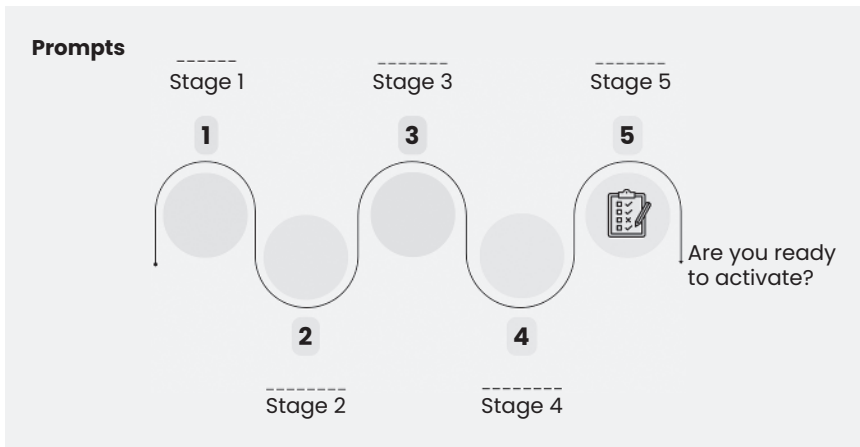
It's a process that my coauthor, Marshall, describes in his book *Triggers* as the key to creating lasting behavior change and becoming the person you want to be.

With that in mind, we now turn the lens back on you. It's time to ask an important question: where are you on your quest for prowess?

## Mapping Out Your Quest for Prowess

Use the personal prowess map shown in Figure 1.2 to reflect on your current situation. Consider the factors that led you to pick up this book, and channel those insights into the spaces provided. Let this exercise be a starting point for your journey toward growth and transformation.

The transformation you seek may be personal or professional—but it begins by crafting a narrative that bridges where you are today with whom you aspire to become. What we refer to as your *desired future self*, we mean the version of you that emerges after engaging deeply with this process—through the personal prowess map or any other path of intentional change.



**FIGURE 1.2** The personal prowess map.

## How to Complete Your Personal Prowess Map: A Step-by-Step Guide —

**Stage 1.** Take a moment to reflect on what's happening around you. What has occurred recently, or what changes are you anticipating? What has sparked your pursuit of growth or ignited your drive for self-improvement? Identify what triggered this journey—an event, experience, or realization—and write it as a label. Summarizing the experience in a word or short phrase can help encapsulate its essence.

Feel free to expand on your thoughts in notes either under the label or in a separate file. While creating a label might feel challenging, it's a meaningful way to distill the experience into something memorable and impactful.

For example, my label was *birth of a child*. What's yours?

**Stage 2.** Now, reflect on what unfolded afterward or shortly after that experience. Be prepared to lean into vulnerability, but also approach this stage gently, especially if reflecting uncovered sensitive or potentially traumatic memories.

For example, after the birth of my child, I felt immense joy. But then, I received a phone call that momentarily disrupted my sense of calm.

**Stage 3.** How did the experience make you feel? Reflect on the incident (if applicable) and the emotions it brought up. Summarize these feelings with a label that captures the essence of your emotional response. Below your label, add any related words or emotions that come to mind.

**Stage 4.** Did anyone say something to you during or after this experience? Whether it was positive or negative, include it in your reflection. Add it to your label and explore its significance.

The goal of this stage is to build your personal prowess map. By reflecting on the incident that triggered your reaction, you can channel the energy from the experience and reframe it in a way that empowers your actions and strengthens your resolve.

**Stage 5.** What are you willing to do to achieve your desired outcome? Reflect on the steps you must take to move forward. What actions are necessary, and how can you start today?

Several academic theories have closely examined human behavior and motivation, and the personal prowess map exercise is designed to tap into your emotional experiences as a driver for activating your “willingness.” This concept is central to the WIN mindset model—the foundation of this book—which emphasizes key actions that can sustain your momentum toward achieving better outcomes and becoming your desired self.

## The Prowess Map and Motivation Theories

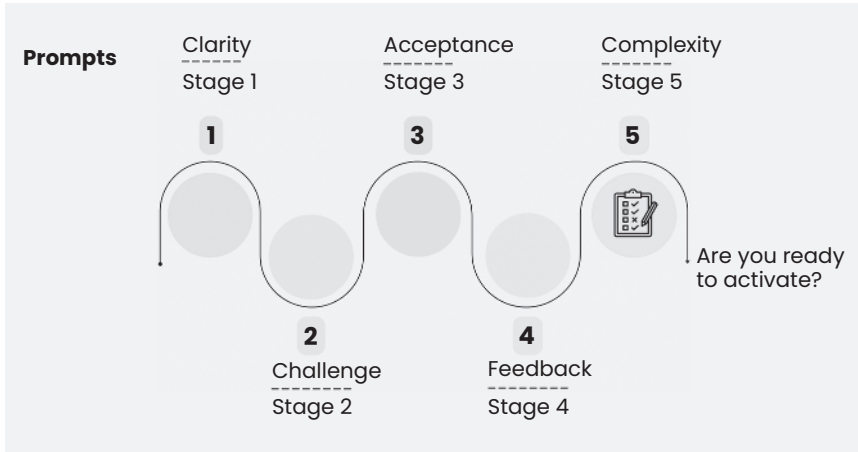
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To align the personal prowess map with well-established theories, we have selected three academic frameworks to better explain this phenomenon.

The first is self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in their book *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (Springer, 1985), which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as critical psychological needs that drive motivation. When we engage with aspects of SDT, we feel a greater sense of control, choice, autonomy, and capability in our actions.

Our personal prowess map closely aligns with SDT by promoting self-reflection and fostering intrinsic motivation. It mirrors the five core principles of SDT through its staged approach: *clarity* as Stage 1, *challenge* as Stage 2, *acceptance* as Stage 3, *feedback* as Stage 4, and *complexity* as Stage 5.

As shown in Figure 1.3, this progression empowers individuals to take ownership of their growth, enabling intentional and informed choices that lead to meaningful and lasting outcomes.



**FIGURE 1.3** The personal prowess map and SDT.

The second academic framework, the role of commitment and willingness in goal achievement, based on the work of Edwin Locke and Gary Latham in their book *A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance* (Prentice-Hall, 1990), this theory explores the interplay between personal commitment and the willingness to take specific actions necessary to achieve our goals or to set goals. It highlights that willingness acts as a powerful catalyst, transforming abstract intentions into actionable steps that create meaningful outcomes.

This process often unfolds when we experience a range of emotions—joy, hope, or even confusion—while envisioning the possibilities we seek. As we gain clarity on how to move forward, this clarity fuels our motivation and commitment.

Within the context of the personal prowess map, identifying moments of emotional significance helps anchor our intentions, deepen our commitment, and strengthen the willingness to take purposeful steps toward transformation.

The third academic framework, the flow and motivation theory, proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper, 1990), explores

how individuals achieve a state of optimal performance and engagement—*flow*—when their skills are perfectly aligned with the challenge they face. This state enhances motivation, productivity, and focus, propelling individuals toward successful outcomes or inspiring them to explore new possibilities.

With the personal prowess map, we can actively create a sense of flow triggered by significant life events or emotional reactions. By documenting these moments, we gain clarity on the flow state—identifying the skills we already possess and the ones we need to develop to reach the next level in our leadership journey.

## Embracing Change: The Power of the Personal Prowess Map

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By mapping emotional triggers and reframing experiences, the personal prowess map creates clarity about what drives engagement and aligns actions with a renewed sense of purpose. This alignment makes the pursuit of goals more fulfilling and sustainable.

Each of these theories reinforces the idea that *willingness* is a powerful driver of change. They illustrate how aligning emotional experiences with intentional actions can unlock personal growth and guide individuals toward their best selves.

Together, these frameworks enhance the impact of the WIN mindset, making it a transformative tool for achieving long-term success in business and personal lives.

If you have taken the time to complete your personal prowess map, congratulations on this significant milestone! I know it wasn't easy, but it speaks volumes about your self-perception, self-motivation, and willingness to transform.

It's important to recognize that you will have multiple iterations of your personal prowess maps throughout your life,

each reflecting your growth and evolving aspirations. You're also invited to return this book for reinforcement and guidance as you step into new horizons.

As we transform, achieve new goals, and navigate disappointments, our desire to do more and redefine our personal prowess maps also evolves. This continuous growth aligns with what Marshall describes as our aspirations, one of the As in the triple A model we discussed in the book's Introduction, and we share the interconnectedness to the personal prowess map in the next section.

### The Triple A Model and the Personal Prowess Map

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Marshall's triple A model—action, ambition, and aspiration—intertwines seamlessly with my quest for prowess and pursuit of pedagogical effectiveness.

Each component of the triple A model shapes my journey: my action is to improve my teaching, my ambition is to become a scholar practitioner, and my aspiration is to support the university's academic goals, enhance student success, and contribute to faculty development.

This journey of continuous growth has brought me a profound sense of fulfillment, enabling me to engage in academic discussions that extend far beyond the classroom.

The personal prowess map acts as a guiding framework, helping me visualize my progress and align my actions with my ambitions and aspirations. This blend of teaching and consulting fuels my passion and reinforces my commitment to developing my expertise and honing my skills. Returning to the classroom with more to offer my students, fellow faculty, and my program.

My experiences have shaped every aspect of my life, particularly as an educator, leader, and individual. By leveraging the triple A model within the personal prowess map, I can continuously refine my path, enriching my contributions to students and the broader academic community.

In addition to these pursuits, my leadership as the founder of the Global Connections for Women Foundation has had its own trifecta effect: I became a more strategic, decisive, and effective leader. I gained clarity in defining the mission and vision of the foundation and developed strategies for selecting executive board members, staff, and partners to expand our global initiatives. Through this process, I built confidence in my ability to bet on myself and to trust others who shared my vision for supporting humanity.

This leadership journey became a story I shared with the cohorts of female entrepreneurs we trained and developed. Our entrepreneurship programs consistently received 100% satisfaction ratings, with participants often describing the experience as equivalent to taking a business leadership course at Harvard Business School. These outcomes underscored not only the impact of the foundation but also the power of the triple A model in shaping transformative leadership and success.

## Aspiration: The Lifelong Pursuit of Prowess

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Aspiration is what takes learning and growth beyond the immediate and transforms it into a lifelong pursuit. Aspiration drives us not only to achieve but also to constantly evolve, which is why it's essential to any quest for prowess. Unlike short-term ambition, aspiration embodies our highest goals and deepest values.

As my coauthor, Marshall explains, “Our aspirations may change over time, but they don’t disappear,” and it is this enduring quality that makes aspiration so powerful—it keeps us striving toward our best selves, even as the destination shifts.

During a podcast interview with Penn GSE, I reflected on our innate desire for prowess and how it manifests in the endless pursuit of an earned life. If you don’t take the time to identify and focus on your aspirations, you risk losing the drive that fuels true fulfillment. Without aspirations, life can become centered solely on actions and ambitions, leading to imbalance and a lack of deeper meaning.

Professor Agnes Callard in the book *Earned Life* by Marshall Goldsmith and Mark Reiter (Crown Currency, 2022) refers to this as “aspiring to become knowledgeable.” Aspirations drive our desire to learn and continue learning.

Think of a friend, colleague, or family member who has multiple degrees or certifications and who has also self-identified as a professional student.

Being a professional student is admirable if that is who you want to be, but the difference here is understanding that our aspirations drive our desire to learn.

The balance between them enables us to explore the deepest part of ourselves, and learning is the nexus that creates new pathways to expand our strengths into newer territories.

I once gave a keynote address to a room filled with communication executives, where I shared that our instincts can only get us so far because, most often, our instinct is a knee-jerk reaction based on situational underpinnings, which will plateau at some point.

Knowledge serves as the kinetic energy that supports our vision and our drive to create more possibilities and expand our options. Living an earned life means continuously aspiring to achieve something new at every stage of your career.

It's about pursuing growth that brings lasting satisfaction, peace of mind, and joy. For me, this journey has been about investing in myself in ways I never imagined possible.

While aspirations set the direction for our growth, learning prowess provides the tools and mindset necessary to pursue those aspirations effectively.

## Connecting Prowess to Action

Aspirations set the direction for our growth, while prowess provides the mindset and tools to pursue those aspirations effectively. When action, ambition, and aspiration align within the prowess map, they create a framework for lasting transformation. By embracing this alignment, we can take ownership of our growth, achieve meaningful goals, and continually strive toward becoming the best version of ourselves.

## The Learning Prowess

Learning prowess is deeply personal, and shaped by our mission and purpose. It's about learning effectively and efficiently—acquiring superior knowledge and skills through practice, observation, and both cognitive and emotional engagement.

When executives embrace their learning prowess, and align it with the triple A model, they elevate themselves within their industries, enhance their leadership abilities, and enrich their personal lives.

Aspiration without learning can remain a dream, but when coupled with learning prowess, it becomes a pathway to achieving our highest potential.

In essence, learning prowess is the pursuit of excellence that bridges personal growth with professional fulfillment,

serving as the foundation for lasting impact. However, learning prowess demands our full attention and focus—it requires us to be present, intentional, and, above all, willing.

The first pillar of the WIN mindset is the willingness to learn, and it might surprise you how many of us have lost the desire to pursue meaningful learning.

Yet, the quest for prowess cannot manifest without a willingness to engage deeply with the process of learning—a process that not only expands our knowledge but also transforms our personal and professional lives.

So, where do you stand? It's safe to assume that you desire prowess because you've picked up this book. But the bigger question is, "Are you willing to commit to this journey until the very end?"

This is the essence of the learning prowess arc—an ongoing commitment to grow, evolve, and achieve your highest potential, regardless of the circumstances or challenges that trigger your quest for prowess.

In today's world, the word *trigger* is often associated with negative reactions or difficult emotions. However, in this context, a trigger is something entirely different: it represents the spark—the moment or event—that propels you forward on your journey toward learning prowess.

A trigger can be a powerful motivator, awakening your drive to pursue excellence and embrace the growth opportunities that lie ahead. It's not something to avoid; it's something to recognize and harness for positive transformation.

## Positive Transformation

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When was the last time you experienced a positive transformation? Was it when you treated yourself to something special?

Perhaps when you received a promotion, started your dream job, launched a new business, or made a significant change in your social circle or workplace? Positive transformations come in many forms, big or small.

These moments serve as milestones, reminding us of our capacity to grow, evolve, and reach beyond what we once thought possible. They spark the drive to pursue something greater—or entirely new.

If you want to achieve greatness, ask yourself, “What’s stopping me from starting today?”

If you want to fulfill your aspirations, consider, “What steps must I take to bring them to life?”

If you’re ready to reimagine your personal and professional future, begin by engaging with your personal prowess map.

Take the time to thoughtfully enter the words, goals, or triggers that will help you access your motivation and chart your path forward.

This book was designed to help you reach your next, most empowered level—one step, one insight, and one intentional action at a time.

