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Build Your Winner's Mindset

*Prepare with Confidence,
Compete Without Fear*

No amount of external validation will surpass the power of your own self-belief. It is not other people's encouragement, but your self-confidence and courage that dictate how hard you will work to achieve a goal. Throughout your career, you're going to face messaging that will cause you to doubt your skills, talents, and ideas. But as you receive career advice and feedback from others, it's important to recognize that the widely held belief that the competition is fierce—for jobs, for top university spots, for awards, and for recognition—is simply an idea that stems from a collection of our own individual fears about what we can and can't achieve. Yet, the competition doesn't determine what you are capable of—only your actions do.

Throughout my life—from attending under-resourced public schools to working in male-dominated sectors such as emergency

management, higher education, and business—I found that many people won’t take you seriously based on factors beyond your control. When I was young, I wanted badly to be taken seriously, but I was discouraged by the advice and feedback I received as I dreamed about college and a successful career. But one selection committee can change your life’s trajectory by choosing you. Their selection will also change the way you think about yourself and what you are capable of. When you recognize that you can capture a dream opportunity by inspiring selectors with your story, you will understand why the story of your future potential is so important to create, cultivate, practice, and share. However, to create and share a story that ignites emotion and compels others to invest in you, you must believe that you determine your own future and enter the competitions of your career with confidence and without fear. I wrote this book to show you how, through applying the MATCH ME Formula®.

The MATCH ME Formula® had its beginnings early in my life when I entered the first big competition of my career: applying to college. At 17 years old, I was hardworking and ambitious and ready to make my mark on the world. My goal was to get into Cornell University, the Ivy League university my dad attended in the late 1960s. But I would take a different path than my dad, who, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, decided to leave engineering to work in the inner city as a Lutheran minister, giving up financial success for religious purpose. My dream was to work in public service at the highest level and achieve greater financial security than my parents had, and I felt an elite college degree would help me do just that. I needed not just an acceptance to a top school but also enough financial aid to make attendance possible.

Applying to college was the beginning of my education on how to pitch my potential to selection committees. The competition for a spot at an Ivy League university is one few are truly prepared for, and the adults in my life made this reality very clear. My parents didn’t discourage me, but they strongly encouraged me to apply to less

competitive, local schools like the University of Delaware. With the rise of mailer and Internet marketing in the 1990s, the number of applications to Cornell increased to more than 20,000 per year, and the expectations of candidates were much higher than when my dad attended.

Since there was no family pressure to apply to Cornell, I initially had very little knowledge of the university and no interest in applying. But my dad suggested we visit the Cornell campus in Ithaca, New York, as a last-minute side excursion while we road-tripped for a campus tour at nearby Syracuse University. This unexpected detour changed my college goals. I immediately fell in love with the beautiful Cornell campus floating high above Lake Cayuga, which my dad described for years as desperately cold and hilly. It felt like home when I walked through the Arts & Sciences quad for the first time, and this unexplained feeling caused me to believe I was meant to be there. When I became emphatic about applying, my dad gave me hesitant support. I sensed he was afraid I would get my hopes up, about both acceptance and financial aid.

Surprisingly, the biggest challenge applying to Cornell was not the effort required to apply but the discouraging feedback I received from others in the process. Whenever I have had a big, aspirational goal, I've had someone or something remind me of the probability of my failure based on the number and caliber of people I would be up against.

My first high-stakes encounter with failure rates was in a meeting with my high school guidance counselor in 1996. We met in her cramped office to discuss my plans to apply to college, including my dream school, Cornell. I was tense and excited, waiting for her enthusiastic nod of support. She quietly looked over my report card and combined SAT score, a small frown forming on her face.

"Your 1250 SAT score is not a bad score, but let's not get too excited about Cornell," she said. "Cornell has a very low acceptance rate, which means most applicants don't get in. Your SAT score is not

even in the ballpark of the type of students who go to Cornell. Make sure you include safety schools on your list.” She looked up at me pointedly over her eyeglasses.

Her message was loud and clear: *you don’t stack up to the competition.*

Does this scene sound familiar to you?

It’s true that in applying to Cornell, I had a lot of compensating to do. I had straight As but was attending a failing city public high school that offered only a few AP classes. I was a Girl Scout Gold Award recipient and a leader in virtually every extracurricular activity I joined: senior class president, field hockey captain, and drum major of the high school marching band. Problem? None of my high school groups rivaled others in the state. Then there was my 1250 SAT score. Not a bad score, but possibly too low to make me an Ivy League contender. I also lacked college admissions coaching and had no examples from my high school of graduates who had gone on to Ivy League universities.

I did have “legacy” status from my dad, which I thought could be a big advantage, but I was told this might give me only a slight advantage over applicants with similar credentials.

Despite the odds of being rejected, I resolved to apply and committed to being the most prepared applicant I could be, given the resources available to me. I prepared by researching what Cornell was looking for in candidates and reflecting deeply on what I had to offer in alignment with their mission. I was so obsessed with my goal that I worked on it daily.

In looking for insider information about the selection committee, I didn’t have much to work from. The Internet wasn’t much help back then. So for weeks I scrutinized Cornell’s marketing brochures to spark ideas for my personal statement story. I took detailed notes on their brag points, like the student body’s economic diversity and a statement about how Cornell develops future leaders. I read articles about notable women alumnae in public service, like Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Janet Reno.

During this period, I would sometimes stay up late, while my little sister Katie slept quietly in the bed beside me, and dream with my eyes open.

I envisioned the Cornell selection committee in a poorly lit conference room, reading paper copies of hundreds of personal statements from applicants all over the world.

“Oh gee, another state champion,” one woman in a cardigan would say, rolling her eyes. “Did you read this one?” said a graying professor in a tweed jacket. “She has a 1600 SAT score and spent a summer in Bali saving the white rhinoceros!” The sarcasm was thickening. They were tired and bored.

“Hold on . . . you’ve got to read this one!” said a professor in Harry Potter glasses, standing in surprise.

In this daydream, he was holding up my personal statement, and that statement was telling a story that stood out from the competition.

What was in it? I didn’t immediately know. I wished my active imagination would help me here.

I did, however, have a unique strength as a young person: I understood the power of story. I knew that if I could identify what drives the selection committee’s decision-making and tell an aligned and compelling story about my lived experience, goals, and future potential in my personal statement, my Cornell application would stand out in a sea of other “average” candidates for a coveted spot at the university.

With my writer’s block mounting, I shared some essay ideas with my dad.

“Why not tell them what it’s like to be captain of the state’s worst high school field hockey team?” he said.

A lightbulb went off.

See, my dad is a master storyteller. From early childhood, I watched him give hundreds of sermons telling human stories that deeply moved his congregation from compassion to laughter to tears. I didn’t know it at the time, but I had become an apprentice to his storytelling skills. This is why his essay idea immediately made sense to me.

After many edits, I finished my personal statement, which shared my story of what it was like to be captain of a team with the worst losing streak in the state of Delaware. I expressed my experience with daily practice, ambition, disappointment, teamwork, and friendship. In other parts of my application, I linked this experience to my career goal to become a leader in public service, applying my higher education at Cornell to social impact that would reflect my values.

Only years later could I articulate what was so powerful about this personal statement. The story of my unique lived experience was different from the majority of essays about success and achievement from privileged applicants and the essays about personal struggle from less privileged applicants. More importantly, it expressed a multitude of messages in just a few lines. Without saying it directly, the story demonstrated my leadership skills, strong personal drive, intellect, maturity, and commitment to others, the key factors that Cornell looks for in applicants. It also hinted at my high school's resource constraints and my family's economic challenges, helping to explain the shortcomings in my SAT score.

I got in, and I received almost a full ride in financial aid. It was a dream come true. To this day, I'll never forget the feeling of achievement when I opened my Cornell acceptance letter. It lit a fire in me to always listen to my intuition and strive for the biggest goals I have my heart set on, no matter what.

There is no way to know exactly why I was selected over other candidates. I felt extraordinarily fortunate to be selected by Cornell, and I wondered if my legacy status played a major role.

But, while making friends at Cornell, some of whom went to elite private high schools, I was surprised to learn that there were Cornell legacy applicants from their high schools who did not get into Cornell. Also, my parents weren't donors, and I required significant financial aid to attend, so there was no financial incentive for selecting me.

These points helped me consider objectively all the factors from my application that likely contributed to my success.

Having studied the art of preparing a winning application, I now believe that my story had a major impact on my selection. It helped me stand out among candidates who had great accomplishments but lacked the important ingredients I offered in my application story like mission alignment, reciprocity, authentic desire, and a future vision of positive impact on others. I had begun to crack the code on how to pitch my potential to achieve extraordinary success. But it would be many years before I recognized this and understood why my story approach worked.

In any case, I did not take my acceptance to Cornell for granted. I did everything in my power to make the most of the assets that Cornell provided me toward building a career in social impact, first working for 15 years in public health and emergency management and later founding ProFellow® to help others access opportunities. I believe the Cornell selectors saw this potential in me because of my application story.

My acceptance to Cornell was the catalyst for a life-changing realization that all forms of advice about how to achieve personal goals are subjective and limited by what the mentor does not know. Surprising to me, this experience of being advised that I didn't stack up to the competition happened to me over and over again throughout my life, despite my increasing record of achievement. Every time I applied to highly competitive jobs, fellowships, graduate schools, and leadership opportunities, and when I became an entrepreneur founding my own company, other people advised me to lower my goals and expectations because of the competition I would be up against.

Rather than allow this discouragement to fuel my self-doubt, I developed the mindset early on that I can take career advice and separate it from the truth of what I am truly capable of. I resolved not to allow others' opinions of my probability of failure to stop me from

pursuing big goals. I focused obsessively on being the most prepared applicant in the competition and proving that I deserved the opportunity.

I call this mentality the *winner's mindset*.

Once I learned that the story of my future is more important to selectors than the story of my past, I sought to become a master at painting a compelling vision of my future potential. I honed several specialized skills in investigative research, persuasive writing, speaking, and negotiation that have helped me to become an exceptional applicant in any competition I entered. Later in my career, when others began to come to me for career and application advice, I realized I had the ability to teach these skills to others and provide the positive encouragement I never had.

Even with exceptional communication skills, you can face mindset challenges that can hold you back from applying these skills successfully. Before I get into the seven elements of the MATCH ME Formula®, I want you to gain a better understanding of the mental roadblocks you face when applying to elite opportunities that seem out of reach, and how to overcome their negative effects.

Embrace Your Fear of Failure and Rejection

From a young age, I grew up with the sense that failure and rejection—and even just the possibility of failure—are things we should be ashamed of and hide, as if it is possible to have a perfect record of success. I was trained not to broadcast my rejections and failures, and so like most people, I have a public bio and résumé that highlight only my accomplishments. Even when I wrote the first draft of this book, I didn't mention my experience with rejections out of ingrained habit.

For the record, there are many jobs, universities, awards, and fellowships that I applied to that resulted in a “No” or, worse, no response at all. Despite grappling with my disappointment, I learned from each and every one of these rejections. Through these experiences, I learned that my fear of rejection is a powerful sixth sense that

would help me identify the right opportunities for me. However, I had to resist the urge to suppress this uncomfortable feeling, as we're often taught.

Some influencers today speak about ways to reduce the degree of emotional pain people experience from rejections, and this content has become hugely popular. One of the most popular TED talks of all time, with more than 10 million views, is Jia Jiang's "What I Learned from 100 Days of Rejection" (Jiang 2016). Jiang suggests that we can become more courageous by regularly experimenting with asking for things. Jiang spent 100 days asking strangers for odd favors. Most things he asked for were weird requests like a "burger refill" at a restaurant—requests he assumed would result in a "No." This practice helped him become more accustomed to and less emotional about rejection. In some cases, he received a "Yes," which surprised him. He also started asking for feedback when people said "No," which allowed him to learn the real reasons behind the responses rather than make assumptions, which turned out to be a great learning experience.

But the problem with how Jiang aimed to desensitize rejection is that he asked strangers for things that he did not authentically desire. While strengthening courage is a step in the right direction, I don't think this approach is the right practice for achieving the things that you do want, because emotion is removed not just from the outcome but also from the ask. This type of practice trains our brains to work less hard when we compete, like the "spray and pray" approach: superficially applying to lots of opportunities at once in the hope that at least one will land.

Our minds and bodies are designed to help us recognize and avoid threats that cause both physical and emotional pain. When there is an opportunity that you truly desire, your adrenaline spikes. Your body recognizes the stakes are high, and your mind starts working in overdrive. The fear of not achieving that opportunity can either prompt you to put in your absolute best effort to improve your

chance of achievement (increase positive feelings) or avoid the pain of unrewarded effort (decrease negative feelings). Usually, we lean toward avoiding pain because we assume that rejection is more likely than success. Our minds subconsciously try to reduce the expected pain by reducing the effort to achieve the goal through tactics like procrastination or avoiding the effort altogether.

To be successful, we need to train our minds to do the opposite: we need to allow fear to help us recognize great opportunities as valuable and lean in emotionally on the possibility of success so we try harder. We need to stop telling ourselves and others that we don't expect to get selected just to preempt our disappointment.

Of course, the winner's mindset doesn't address the fact that some opportunities are controlled by different forms of discrimination that cause unfair rejections and glass ceilings. Many people are held back from pursuing elite opportunities due to their fear of discrimination, and perhaps that is exactly what these barriers are designed to achieve.

But when we harden a mental narrative that we are predetermined to fail, it's unlikely we will learn from the process and take personal responsibility for a rejection. This negative mindset narrows our ability to see and access the abundance of opportunities that exist to achieve our goals.

The key is to be intentional and focus on the many opportunities where your candidacy is welcome and use these opportunities to advance into a leadership position where you can create opportunities for yourself and others. We don't have to join the ranks of the people who maintain unfair barriers. We can create new spheres of influence and power as inclusive leaders by building skills, resources, and networks. To do this, we must reframe how we view success and failure as we pursue opportunities today.

In reflecting on my rejections from top jobs and university spots, the things that I did not get chosen for were opportunities that I was not fully aligned with. I did not pitch a compelling vision of my future potential because I didn't yet have the skills or ideas needed to stand out among the competition or I did not apply my best effort to the

application or both. In all cases where I didn't apply my best effort, there was a mindset challenge that was holding me back from giving it my all. Some of my applications to opportunities were driven by a sense of what I *should* do, fueled by society's pressure to climb a career ladder and chase progressively higher titles and pay, rather than what I wanted to do based on my interests. Nonetheless, I gained something from every single one of these applications, including the opportunity to practice persuasive communication skills and better define my personal mission. Applying to competitive opportunities also helped me build the deep professional network I have today.

Rejections also prompted me to be much more selective in what I apply to, but without lowering my high goals. I focused on quality applications over quantity and reminded myself of what I had to gain from each competition I entered. In time, I found my zone of genius: I have a unique knack for identifying exactly what selection committees are looking for, choosing highly aligned opportunities, and carefully and creatively tailoring my application story to each opportunity.

I believe we should leverage our emotional fear of failure to work harder and refuse to be ashamed of rejection. This puts the power back in your hands and helps you overcome mindset challenges that prevent you from putting your best foot forward. Whenever I believed in my possibility of success and put my absolute best effort into the application, ironically, it became easier for me to let go of the outcome, because I was proud of the quality of what I submitted.

Many people I have mentored shared with me that they experienced this same feeling after applying the strategies I teach. Rather than feeling worried about their performance in a job or university application as they awaited the result, they felt great pride and a release of fear, which is an incredible outcome by itself. Many of these applicants built stronger relationships with the people who served as references and the people on the selection committee because these witnesses were incredibly impressed with their high effort. This observation is the foundation of a mantra I repeat often.

There is no such thing as unrewarded effort when you apply your greatest effort. Even if you don't get the opportunity, the selectors and those who recommend you are seeing you in the best way possible. This builds your professional network and reputation and pays off in opportunities that come to you in the future in ways that you can't imagine in the moment.

The lesson is, you can only control your input, so create something you are proud of every single time.

Negate the Impact of Gatekeepers

Another mental barrier comes from gatekeeping. In my experience working with thousands of students and professionals, I found that many talented people have an inner belief that they are below average among their peers despite their strong record of achievement. My theory is that this inner belief stems from a mentor's discouragement when you sought to pursue a high goal—what I refer to as *gatekeeping*. Gatekeeping is an additional hurdle that you need to overcome before you've even made the decision to compete.

Getting into Cornell was my first success in overcoming the discouragement of an academic gatekeeper, my guidance counselor. This early life experience demonstrated to me that all forms of advice, mentorship, and guidance are opinions, not facts. After achieving my first big goal, I realized that if I had agreed with my guidance counselor's assessment and self-selected out of applying to Cornell, my life would have been on a very different trajectory. Worse, I would have had no idea that I missed my opportunity.

There are two types of gatekeeping: deliberate and well-intentioned.

Deliberate Gatekeeping

Deliberate gatekeeping is applied by self-interested people who aim to maintain the status quo of influence and access among certain privileged groups, as well as those who primarily care about maintaining their own record of success as an advisor. This group includes

advisors who exclusively support highly accomplished candidates who have the highest likelihood of being successful in their next competition. If you are not one of these top candidates, you are unlikely to get any help from this type of advisor other than their opinion that you are not ready.

Deliberate gatekeeping is not as hidden as you might think. Some university leaders argue that they play a crucial role as gatekeepers to the application process for national awards. Dr. Kyle Mox, Associate Dean for National Scholarships at Arizona State University, wrote in a 2019 op-ed that some students and faculty are too focused on the money and prestige awarded, and that these adults can “fall prey” to advising services outside the university that encourage them to apply. He claims that he and other university advisors are looking out for students’ “well-being” when choosing who to provide application support. He argues, “In certain circumstances, advising a candidate not to apply for an award is the right advice, and the real success does not happen until 10 years later” (Mox 2019).

When I was in college, I was one of those students advised not to apply to a competitive fellowship because my 3.2 GPA was considered low. This discouragement only hurt my self-confidence and created an unnecessary and unfair hurdle to an application process that was already hard enough. It also angered me because I proved I was, in fact, a qualified candidate when I won the award and succeeded in the opportunity. Especially for students who face invisible challenges to achieving high grades and a stacked résumé of activities, telling some students not to apply based on a cursory review of their résumé is not just biased; it robs these students of a unique learning opportunity to work on their personal narrative and get feedback. I’ve never seen a candidate’s well-being suffer from a mentor encouraging them to apply to a dream opportunity, even when the outcome was a rejection. Often, the encouragement proves more valuable than the award. So, if we value equal opportunity, then all interested applicants should be invited to rise to the challenge and have agency over the outcome. The award selection process can speak for itself.

The reality is, the turning away of interested students from advising happens not because the aspirants can't be successful, but because the advisor thinks they will be more difficult and time-consuming to advise, which is the deficiency of the advisor, not the candidate. Advisors and the institutions they represent are also pursuing awards and accolades that are based on the number of applicants who win, not the number of applicants they serve and advise. So the incentives for deliberate gatekeeping are high. If you are a candidate who is discouraged from applying to an opportunity because of deliberate gatekeeping, don't take this as an accurate calculation of your ability to be successful.

Well-Intentioned Gatekeeping

Even more problematic is well-intentioned gatekeeping. This comes from the protective mentor who truly cares about your well-being and wants to shield you from the pain of disappointment, unrewarded effort, discrimination, and failure. Their advice to lower your goals can stem from their own negative experiences facing rejection and discrimination or their inability to guide you on how to achieve your aspirational goal. The idea of helping candidates recalibrate their high goals to something more attainable, so that they achieve some level of success, is entrenched—and even glorified—as the correct approach in academic and career advising. It is this phenomenon that prompts students to always apply to “safety schools” and explains why women are less likely to apply for jobs where they don't meet all the job qualifications. I feel strongly that well-intentioned gatekeeping prevents millions of people from achieving their full potential. Playing it safe and avoiding disappointment is not a winning strategy for building a great career.

Throughout our popular culture, you'll find many examples of highly successful people who once received discouragement from people deemed to be experienced mentors when they expressed their big goals and sought support.

Todd Graves, the founder of Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers, a franchise restaurant company, is an example of someone who listened to his internal vision rather than external opinions. Today, Graves is a guest investor on the popular television show *Shark Tank*, where start-up companies pitch their businesses for investment. Graves explained on the show that he was once told his business ideas were not just unfeasible but bad. While an undergraduate student at Louisiana State University, his idea for Raising Cane's received the lowest grade for a start-up pitching assignment in his business class. The negative feedback did not stop there; he was rejected from many bank loans when he tried to make the business a reality. But Graves was so certain of his business vision that he saved and used more than \$40,000 of his own money, plus \$100,000 from friends and family and a government loan, to establish his first restaurant. The business grew, and today Raising Cane's is so successful that Graves is estimated to have a personal net worth of more than \$9.5 *billion* (Wu 2024). Imagine if he had listened to the opinions of his business professors and peers when he was first starting out? Millions of business founders quit early when told their ideas are bad.

Michelle Obama is another example. She shared her childhood experiences in her book *Becoming* (Obama 2018). As a young Black woman, she had Ivy League college ambitions as I did. Her goal was entrance to Princeton University, where her older brother was studying. But when she shared her goal with her high school guidance counselor, she was discouraged. "I'm not sure that you're Princeton material," Obama remembered the counselor saying. "Her judgment was as swift as it was dismissive, probably based on some quick-glance calculus involving my grades and test scores." Obama wrote that she "deliberately and almost instantly blotted this experience out" (pp. 65–66). It turns out that erasing this experience from her mind was an effective way to cope with the negative advice that otherwise would have stopped her from pursuing her aspirational goal. Not only did Michelle Obama resolve to apply, she was selected and went on to complete her undergraduate degree at Princeton University. She later completed her juris doctorate at

Harvard Law School and built an extraordinary career as an attorney and nonprofit leader and served as First Lady of the United States. She wrote her best-selling book *Becoming* to share her challenges on the road to success and show that you don't need the external validation of others to pursue and achieve your goals. You can become what you set your sights on.

Scenes of discouragement from a trusted advisor, teacher, colleague, family member, or friend play out millions of times a day to millions of people, to the extent that it's become culturally commonplace to be told to prepare ourselves for disappointment when pursuing big goals. However, unlike Graves and Obama, most young people take this advice as "truth," not knowing the advice is often faulty and based on fear and assumptions rather than fact.

Worse, most mentors and advisors don't realize how damaging the advice to lower your goals can be for the human psyche. This discouraging advice feeds the self-doubt that people naturally grapple with and ignites the impostor syndrome that young adults carry with them well into their midlife careers. It also stops young people from experiencing ambition and failure at the level that develops a key attribute of the successful: grit. If you don't experience failure and rejection because you avoid ambitious goals, you never develop the practice of picking yourself up, improving the effort, and trying again. That resilience is necessary to achieve the highest levels of success.

If you lowered your goals based on advice from a trusted mentor, you may wonder now if that advice held you back from achieving more. It likely did, but you can change that.

Listen to Guides, Not Gatekeepers

The best mentors you can seek out are *guides*: people who have experience, insights, or expertise that are valuable to your career trajectory and who also see your potential and do not discourage you from pursuing big, aspirational goals. They see value in facing your fears and entering the competitive process, no matter what the outcome is. When you experience failure, rather than saying "I told you so," a

guide will celebrate your high effort, make you feel seen, and encourage you to try again.

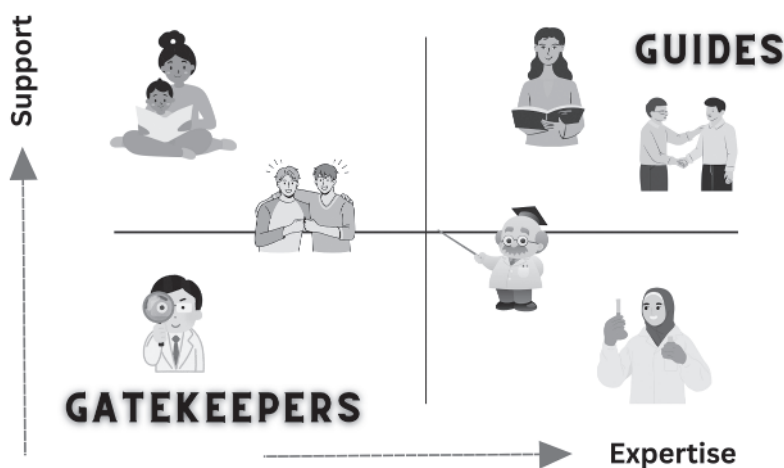
Lauren Wang is an example of someone who leaned into the advice of a guide rather than well-intentioned gatekeepers. She is the founder of The Flex Company. In an interview in the *Masters of Scale* podcast (Berman 2024), Wang shared that when she first had the idea to start a company that sells innovative women's period products, she didn't consider herself qualified to be a CEO, especially because she was a mid-level marketing manager and had not yet achieved the C-suite as a chief marketing officer (CMO). Some of her respected women mentors agreed. Two of them, serving as well-intentioned gatekeepers, reminded her how difficult it is to start a company and raise capital, especially as a female founder, and advised her to work at a small start-up first and experience being a CMO before taking such a big risk. At first she agreed. But Wang said her mind was changed when a male tech founder asked her to apply to be CEO of his new company. She was surprised he recognized her leadership potential. He was the guide that she needed. Wang resolved not to undertake a C-suite opportunity from others but create her own. She founded and became CEO of The Flex Co. that in 2025 grew to a successful private company with a \$15 billion market cap and products in all the major chains, including Target and Walgreens.

Robyn Curtis, Director of Major Fellowships at Clemson University, is another example of a guide. Curtis was recognized for her mentorship when she was awarded the university's 2022 Frank A. Burtner Award for Excellence in Advising. During the first couple of years of Curtis's tenure as director, more than 100 Clemson students, alumni, and faculty won almost every major national award and fellowship, an outcome of her approach to advising. One of her former advisees, Daniel Custer, was accepted to a Ph.D. program in engineering at Stanford University and won a National Science Foundation fellowship; however, he wasn't immediately successful. He says Curtis mentored him on five major fellowship applications over several years, even after he graduated from Clemson. When his

first round of applications was not successful, Curtis continued to advise him, fortified his self-confidence, and helped him identify projects and experiences that would make him a well-rounded candidate. Custer said of his advisor, “Robyn went above and beyond to provide kind, timely, and honest feedback to best prepare me to succeed. It was clear that helping students have the best opportunities for funding and graduate education is a priority in her life” (Cass 2022). Curtis exhibits a key attribute of guides: they won’t give up on you.

Guides are rare, so when you find a mentor like this, do your best to cultivate your relationship with them. The positive emotional support they provide as you pursue big goals will help build your courage and self-confidence, which is just as important as the expertise they offer.

Distinguishing Guides from Gatekeepers



Guides are ideal mentors who provide both a high level of expertise and a high level of positive support and encouragement. **Gatekeepers** may have expertise but withhold it from some candidates; they also discourage you from pursuing high goals. As you meet potential mentors throughout your career, identify where they land on this graph of expertise and support, and cultivate relationships with guides.

Lower Your Fear of Comparison

Beyond recognizing the mental impacts of fear of failure and messaging from gatekeepers, we also must be aware of how social media impacts the way we view ourselves and others and hurts our ability to achieve success.

One advantage I had for the growth of my self-confidence as a teenager and young adult was that I didn't have social media to remind me daily of how I compared to others. Comparison culture certainly existed through print and TV media and social experiences in my community, but without social media, it wasn't nearly as pervasive and immersive as it is now. Today, every aspect of your identity, from your physical appearance to the schools you attended to your employment status to where you live and vacation, is shared online and open to critique from friends and strangers alike. With our divisive political climate, even our very thoughts and values are a subject of comparison and comment by thousands of strangers on the Internet. Frankly, it sucks.

While there is plenty of positive social media intended to help you find your community of like-minded people, there is an equal if not greater degree of media and commercial advertising reminding you of the endless competition for limited opportunities. If you look closely at your social media feeds, you'll see attention-seeking and fear-mongering in most news, advertising, and social sharing. You'll see many "solutions" (often with a price tag) to address your fears of missing out, not fitting in, rejection, financial scarcity, and loneliness. Fear-based news about the increasing competitiveness of jobs, top universities, investments, and awards has reached a fever pitch.

Social media and the intense comparison culture it cultivates are what prompt us to share online how we have achieved our personal ambitions. More than ever, we strive to win opportunities to gain attention.

This is not to say personal ambition is bad. Every great inventor, political leader, scientist, entrepreneur, athlete, and artist has a high level of personal ambition. Ambition is the ingredient that fuels hard work, practice, consistency, and lifelong learning. I know personal ambition well; it drives me every day.

However, what we have lost collectively in the drive to fulfill our personal ambition and display “success” online is our empathy for those who hold the limited resources and opportunities we desire. We look at selection committees as feared judges rather than future collaborators and friends. We allow their selection to make a statement about our worth and a rejection to mean we’re just not good enough. For the individual applicant, competition becomes about being viewed as the best, causing us to fear and compare ourselves to competitors in ways that can negatively impact our mindset.

If you weren’t able to access any information about your competitors, consider how this might change your mindset about the competitions you enter for jobs, university spots, awards, and special opportunities.

Imagine that you are a young professional and aspire to achieve a promotion and move up in your career. You have discovered a conference that you would like to attend because there are sessions on the latest innovations in your field and the conference offers a chance for you to network with leaders and peers.

Consider how you would feel if you planned to make a pitch to your boss to fund your attendance to the conference. You know that your boss has discretionary funding to send you to the conference, but that funding could be used for many other things. So you create a proposal to explain why you want to go, how the conference will positively impact your work and contribution, and how you plan to leverage the opportunity for personal and professional growth after the event. You work hard on the proposal to ensure it is detailed, compelling, and beneficial to the company. You’ll receive one of two answers: yes or no.

Now imagine a different scenario. Your boss announces that they will send to the conference one person from your five-person team, some of whom have been at the company longer than you. Your boss asks that each person pitch why you want to go, why you deserve the opportunity, and how it will positively impact your work and contribution. Think about how you feel now. You start to consider the attributes of your more experienced team members and what they

have that you don't. You worry that the selection process won't be fair. You think about how you will look to others if you're not selected. You work hard on your proposal. You will ultimately receive one of two answers: yes or no.

Although the outcome in both scenarios is the same, a yes or no, which scenario feels more intimidating?

When this exercise is posed in my corporate trainings, the overwhelming majority always pick the latter—the group competition. The reason why is the psychology of comparison. In the first situation, there is no competitor: just you and the power of your pitch. There can be disappointment from a “No,” but there is no chance of comparison with your peers because there was no competition. In the second scenario, you are concerned with how others will make their pitch and about subjective decision-making and favoritism. You worry about how losing to a competitor will look to others.

Unfortunately, many people choose not to enter competitions, or enter but sabotage their effort, solely because of the intimidation created by being compared with their peers and the fear that their failure will be exposed to others. This fear of comparison and embarrassment is why we tell people in advance of the outcome that we don't expect to be selected. We worry that others will be judgmental of our high goals and try to acknowledge the failure before it happens, to make rejection less painful and embarrassing.

But meanwhile, these very actions negatively impact our ability to succeed. By telling yourself and others that you expect to fail because of the caliber of your competitors, you train your brain to expect failure, which leads you to self-sabotage your efforts. These protective mechanisms against comparison and embarrassment cause mindset challenges like lack of confidence, procrastination, writer's block, and avoidance of constructive feedback.

Having a winner's mindset means you don't worry about what your competitors bring. You only concern yourself with being the most prepared applicant you can be, using the resources, people, knowledge, and experiences you have available to you.

Develop Your Winner's Mindset

I've never met someone who got into a highly competitive opportunity who did not sincerely believe at the deepest level that they could achieve it. A person with a winner's mindset believes they can win and that they deserve the opportunity because of the exceptionally high effort they put into their application. Even if you start with low confidence, the more intensely you prepare for a competition, the more confident you will become. Optimism and resolve are important to achieving success, which is why many professional athletes have coaches just for developing their winner's mindset.

To develop your winner's mindset, try to turn off your protective reflexes against the fears of rejection and comparison by actively changing the narrative in your mind and from your mouth. It's not arrogant to say aloud to others, "I believe I can be successful, and I'm going to apply my absolute highest effort." Do this and take note of who steps up and supports you in that effort. Those will be the same people you should turn to for support if you receive a rejection, because they will prompt you to face failure undeterred and try again.

Also, avoid making assumptions about how selectors make their decisions. Part of the reason we are so impacted by comparison culture today is that we can see who is applying for and achieving the roles, university spots, awards, and opportunities that we have our heart set on. The winners' résumés of achievement are displayed proudly online for us to analyze for clues as to why they were picked and we were rejected. Yet, from this limited information, we don't actually know the basis of the decision. We often assume it's because the winner has some things that we lack. This is true, but it's not the things you think.

It's Not a Numbers Game

Because we have limited information about how selections are made for competitive opportunities, we tend to look at people who have achieved the opportunity we desire and assume they were picked because they have better "numbers": more years of experience, more credentials, a

higher GPA, more prestigious universities, more skills, more awards, better publications, or higher test scores. This creates the assumption that to win we need a better résumé. For some people, this fuels an endless drive to accrue more accolades, volunteer roles, university degrees, and certificates. Because we believe these “numbers” are the key to beating out other candidates, we also give this advice to others. When applying to Cornell back in the late 1990s, the primary advice I received was to increase my SAT score and join more extracurriculars.

Yet the competitions of our careers are never a numbers game where the winners are selected because they have the best or most achievements. No selector is numerically grading their applicants by accomplishments and choosing the person with the highest score. While it might seem that way from our limited view of the selection process—because people with big numbers often win—the primary reason certain people are selected is because they are skilled at inspiring selection committees with a compelling vision of their future potential. Those who have achieved a lot of success tend to have this skill from intergenerational knowledge shared in their family and academic networks or from experience applying to many competitive opportunities or both.

Being chosen for selective opportunities is a dynamic process of alignment and human connection. Although we don't start on a level playing field when it comes to access to quality education and intergenerational knowledge, everyone can learn the skills to communicate a story of the future, leveraging their unique lived experience, to inspire a selection committee and become a standout candidate.

Likewise, the reason people with impressive résumés don't always win is because they were up against a competitor who was more prepared and provided a more compelling vision of their future potential. In any competition, a record of achievement cannot compensate for a lack of one of the most important ingredients for success: authentic desire.

The Advantage of Authentic Desire

Whenever someone asks me if applying to a highly competitive opportunity is worth the effort, I know that they don't yet have a

defined purpose and authentic desire for the opportunity. They are more concerned about the effort than the extraordinary things that could be gained from the opportunity and the pursuit.

This realization is not necessarily a bad thing. You should not waste time applying to opportunities that you don't have a clear need for. In any competition, you will be up against a small subset of candidates who are driven by purpose and who authentically desire the opportunity. Even if they have not yet learned how to apply all the strategies necessary to get picked by a selection committee, they will be top contenders because of their enthusiasm and will reap rewards from the application process, including new knowledge, practice, and relationships that will only benefit them in the future. Rather than feel dejected, a rejection will embolden this group to try harder and try again. That resilient mindset is created from authentic desire.

One challenge is that many of us don't know why we should want a particular opportunity beyond the fact that it might make us look successful to others. Often, our career goals are developed through the lens of our family's definition of success. Some young people feel pressure to pursue careers in medicine, law, the military, the family business, or academia because the career track means to the family that you've achieved morality, prestige, security, or wealth.

However, if your career pursuits are not aligned with your authentic desires, one of two things will happen: either you will quit before you achieve the goal because the effort is both difficult and unrewarding, or you will achieve the career goal but become frustrated and disillusioned with the work. This disillusionment with a career track often happens between ages 35 and 45, also known as the infamous "midlife crisis."

To avoid this, it's important for you to intentionally explore and decide what your personal mission will be for the near future so that you can pursue opportunities that are personally fulfilling. This exploration also helps you find new, exciting opportunities you couldn't have imagined or planned for earlier in your career that perfectly align with your deepest interests and dreams for your life. The excitement to achieve those opportunities is *authentic desire*.

When you apply to an opportunity that you authentically desire, you will automatically have an advantage over candidates who are applying for superficial reasons. Authentic desire produces the energy and focus you need to go above and beyond and become the most prepared applicant in the competition.

The strategies in this book are going to help you to find your purpose—your personal mission—so that you can find, recognize, and competitively apply to exceptional opportunities that you truly desire and bypass those you don't.

With the winner's mindset, intentionality, and authentic desire, you have the mental fortitude to be a top competitor in any competitive sphere you enter. The next step is refining your approach to the competition.

Writing a Compelling Personal Pitch

Most of the competitions of our career start with writing. We apply for jobs by preparing a cover letter and résumé. We apply for college and graduate school by preparing a personal statement. We request resources for a promotion or special project by writing a proposal. We enter business accelerators and investment negotiations by preparing a pitch deck. Although our pursuit of these opportunities might start with a conversation or connection, we can't be fairly considered among other candidates without something written about who we are and what our goals are.

While it is an advantage to be a good writer, not all experienced writers have mastered the art of writing a persuasive pitch that effectively answers the question "Why you?" People who have mastered creative, journalistic, and academic writing often struggle the most to prepare a compelling personal pitch.

Now, generative artificial intelligence (AI) writing tools may help level the playing field by enabling everyone to create a functional personal pitch. But what happens when we reach the stage where virtually everyone is using AI tools to apply for competitive opportunities? Even

if fundamentally we are all more coherent in our communications, most candidates' applications will sound the same, just as they do today.

Meanwhile, a small number of people will hone and leverage their own human creativity and originality to stand out. I want you to be one of those people.

Persuasive communication skills, which are built from the tenets of great storytelling, are the key to building an exciting career and becoming an exceptional competitor. Like all great stories, the story that you tell to answer the question "Why you?" must have a clear beginning, a middle, and an end, with a "hook" that captures what you need to get from where you are now to where you want to be in the future. Once you learn how to tell a persuasive story in writing, you'll find that this skill also helps you become a persuasive speaker who can nail interviews, negotiations, and spot conversations that lead to investment.

Your story is a lot more than just finding the right words; it's about finding the angle that will make a personal connection with the selectors. Your pitch must be highly aligned with the pitch selectors make to their stakeholders on how they approach the problems they aim to solve.

Your Winning Application Story

When I talk about your story in the course of this book, I'm not talking about the story of your life, although that is part of it. Rather, I'm talking about your *application story*, the response to the question "Why you?" that you need to provide whenever you are in a competition for a cherished opportunity.

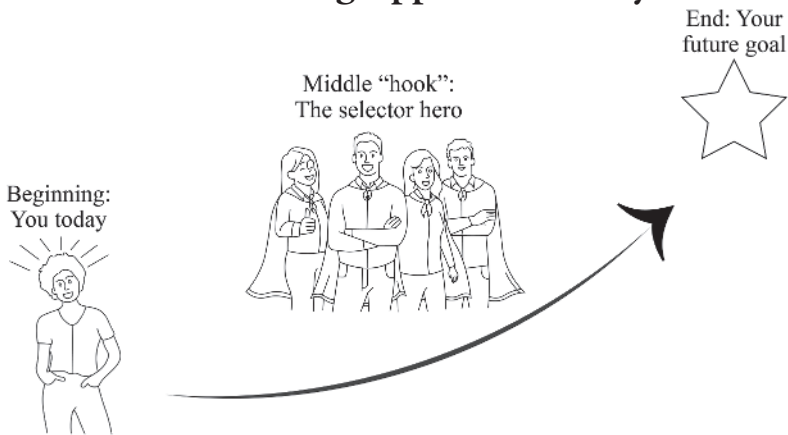
Every application story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Often, you will discuss the beginning and end of the story first in your written applications and interviews. The middle "hook" is the most critical piece of the application story, often discussed last in your pitch for emphasis.

The *beginning* of the story is your background up until this point, supported with memorable anecdotes that explain the motivations behind your career choices and who you are as a person.

The *end* of the story is in the future, after the opportunity you are striving for. The end is the achievement of your highly specific and timely goal, which has a positive impact on others that fulfills both your ambition and personal mission and fulfills the organization's mission, making your selection mutually beneficial. This part of the story defines your future potential.

The *middle*, the story *hook*, is where you couch the organization as the “hero” needed to achieve the goal. You express how the organization offers unique benefits that you will capitalize on to achieve your future goal while advancing the organization's mission. Without the organization's unique benefits, the goal may not be achieved.

The Winning Application Story



The winning application story is a story outline that helps you present a clear, compelling expression of why you should be selected. The beginning of the story is your background and motivations for your career choices. The end of the story is the achievement of your highly specific goal that has a positive impact on others. The middle “hook” is how the selectors’ opportunity offers unique benefits that you will capitalize on to achieve your future goal and further their mission.

The MATCH ME Formula®

The MATCH ME Formula® is a tested, tactical approach to developing an exceptional application story that wins you opportunities that have a competitive application process.

In 2011, my husband Ryan and I founded ProFellow®, an organization that helps level the playing field for competitive educational and professional opportunities by making information about fellowships, graduate study, awards, and accelerators more publicly accessible. At ProFellow.com, we advance our mission by providing a free, searchable database of thousands of competitive opportunities for people at all career levels, as well as application advice through high-quality articles, workshops, and courses.

Over the past decade, I have developed curricula for workshops and courses to help people apply successfully to the world's most competitive opportunities. In all cases, the selection committees want to know your unique story while also getting specific answers to questions about your goals, skills and talents, future work, and expected outcomes, all in a brief written space and verbal interview.

In 2019, I realized I needed a simple way to explain my multifaceted approach to preparing for competitive selections, one that an applicant could memorize. I journaled on all the elements of a winning application, narrowed it down to seven key elements, and created an acronym for it: the MATCH ME Formula®.

The MATCH ME Formula® is a strategic approach to answer the question “Why you?” and effectively communicate your unique skills, background, and career goals to stand out in any competition. The secret sauce of the MATCH ME Formula® is the incorporation of alignment and reciprocity.

Not only does the MATCH ME Formula® encompass seven individual elements, but the two words *Match Me* also represent the power of matching your personal mission with the organizational mission of groups that provide special opportunities and resources.

The MATCH ME Formula®

M = Memorable

A = Aligns with the organization's mission

T = Timely

C = Capitalizes on the organization's unique benefits

H = Highly specific

M = Mutually beneficial

E = Elegant

Each letter of MATCH ME represents an element of a winning application. When applied to a competitive job, university, or award application, these seven elements help your application stand out as exceptional.

(© Pitch Your Potential / Vicki Johnson, Ph.D.)

This book will teach you how to interpret and apply the MATCH ME Formula®, with supporting research and case studies of ordinary people who have applied the formula to break through periods of self-doubt, comparison, and rejection to achieve their most aspirational goals. Namely, this formula will guide your approach to:

- Land dream jobs
- Get accepted to top universities
- Win fellowships and other prestigious awards
- Negotiate promotions or resources for special projects
- Win business pitch competitions and attract investors
- Land special opportunities like speaking engagements and board positions
- Build a large professional network that will increasingly fuel your career growth

You don't need a high degree of self-confidence to begin applying these strategies for success. The beauty of the MATCH ME Formula® is that as you work to apply the seven formulaic elements, you will gain greater confidence in your pitch and ability to answer the pressing question "Why you?" The formula is like a fitness regimen to prepare for competitive opportunities that will help you unlock what you are truly capable of. When you put in your highest effort, you will feel more confident that you don't just want—but truly *deserve*—the achievement of extraordinary opportunities that are aligned with your values, deepest desires, and personal mission for social impact.

Key Takeaways

- Fear of failure is a positive signal that you have found an opportunity that you have an authentic desire to achieve. Lean in emotionally to the possibility of success to put in your absolute highest effort.
- Deliberate and well-intentioned gatekeepers will give you advice to lower your goals. Career and academic advice are opinions, not facts, so resolve to aim for high goals despite discouraging advice.
- Cultivate relationships with guides: people who have useful expertise and knowledge and who also positively support you in pursuing your highest goals.
- We make the wrong assumptions about the criteria for selection, so don't concern yourself with the résumés of your competitors. Focus solely on the unique experiences, skills, and ideas you have to offer and developing a compelling vision of your future potential.
- Do not be ashamed of failure and rejection. If you put in your highest effort, others will notice you in the best possible way, which will result in future opportunities that you cannot imagine now.

- Your *application story* is the response to the selectors' question "Why you?" It includes a beginning (your background and motivations), a middle "hook" (how you will capitalize on their unique benefits to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome), and an end (your future goal).
- The MATCH ME Formula® is a tested, tactical approach to developing an exceptional application story that wins you opportunities that have a competitive application process.

How to Use This Book

To make the most of the "Your Turn" exercises at the end of each chapter on the seven elements of the MATCH ME Formula®, choose one dream opportunity that you will use for the exercises. That could be your dream job, a top graduate program, a fellowship or award, a business accelerator, a leadership role like a board position, or any other opportunity that has a competitive application process and many other contenders.

