

# The Secrets of my Success

... And that of a few friends, including Jeb Bush, Wayne Huizenga, Jorge de Cespedes and others

By Alan S. Becker

**T**here are secrets to success that the people who have reached the top in their fields and the people who enjoy the most accomplished and fulfilled lives have found and apply every day.

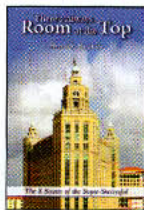
They are not great, unsolvable mysteries accessible only to the privileged few. They are available to each of us, and the purpose of this writing is to share the secrets I have discovered. And when it comes to success, it does not hurt, and it often helps, to draw on the experience of those who have traveled the path before you. For that reason, I decided to interview a number of great Americans who have reached the very top of their chosen careers – be it politics, sports and entertainment or business. What is more, all have done it with style.

Many of the highly success-

ful people I interviewed told fascinating stories of influences in their lives. Among them is Jorge de Cespedes, president of PharMed and part owner of the Charlotte Bobcats. Jorge, who is my next-door neighbor and was a Peter Pan child who arrived from Cuba without his parents, shared an experience with me that could make a wonderful movie, except it was not fiction:

“I remember we got here in October ... so our first Christmas was in December,” he recalled. “We had an uncle, who was a doctor, who was doing OK and was able to get a lot of money out of Cuba, and he invited me to his

Christmas party. I was 8 years old. Picture yourself back then. There was a bus that would leave the orphanage and take you to downtown Miami and from there relatives would pick you up. A relative had to write a letter that they were taking responsibility for you. So I quickly learned that was a way of getting out of there. So anyway, I got to his house on the 24th of December ... There were many children. I remember the house being very close to the Orange Bowl. So I was there, and I partook and ate and so forth. When midnight rolled around all these kids were being passed out toys. I looked and I said to myself, ‘Wow, I’m sure there is going to be something there for me.’ Well, time came and went and all the toys had been passed out and there was nothing for me. I guess a relative



A former Florida legislator, Alan S. Becker founded Becker and Poliakoff, the 15th-largest law firm in Florida. In his new book, *There's Always a Room at the Top: The 8 Secrets of the Super-Successful* ([www.booksurge.com](http://www.booksurge.com)), he shares the traits that have brought him and others financial and personal enrichment.



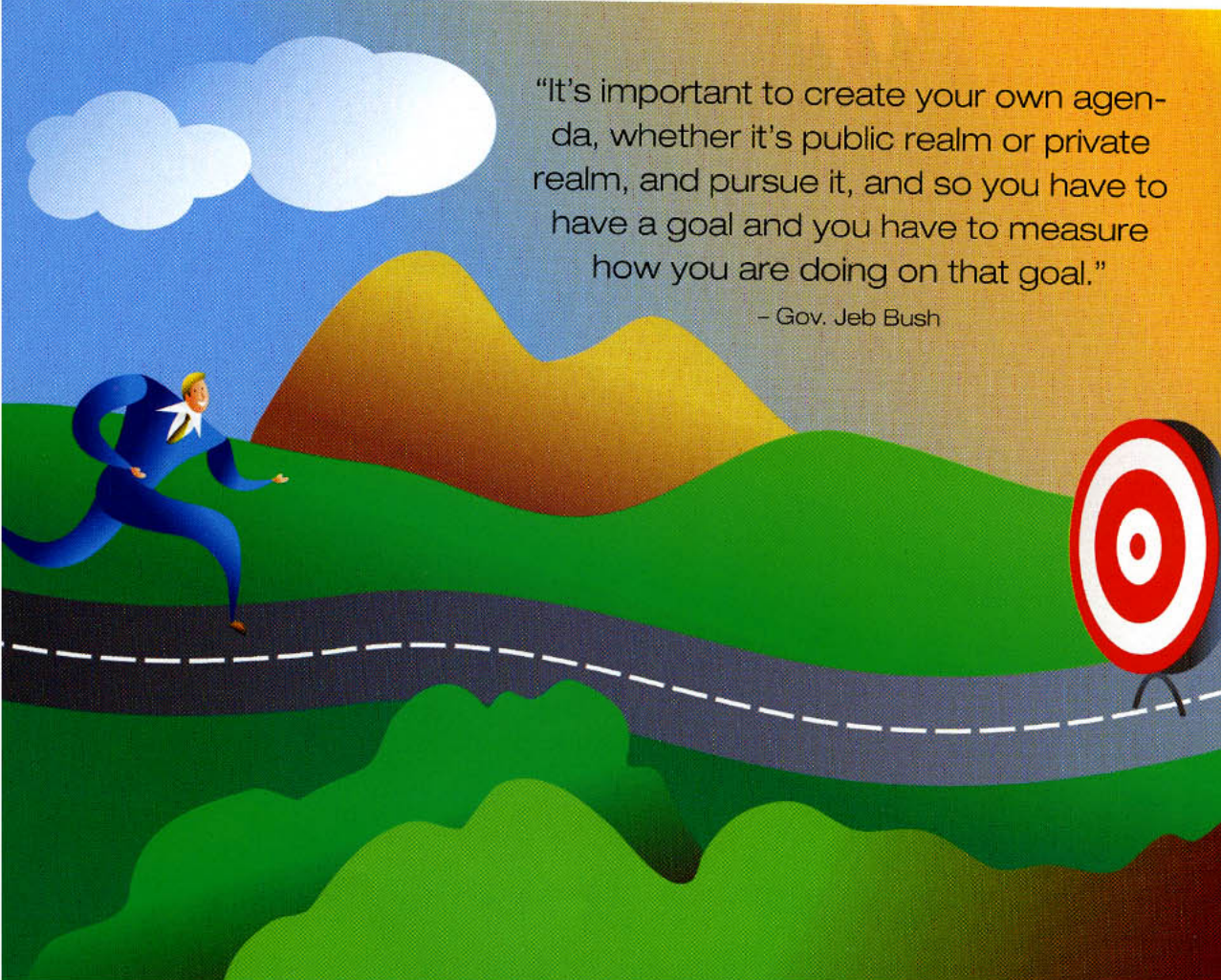
realized when it happened and went to my uncle ... so they went ahead and put a dollar in an envelope, one dollar in an envelope, and gave it to me. At 8 I was man enough at that point where I told them: 'While I really appreciate you asking me here, I don't need this.' And I gave the dollar back. I proceeded to leave the house ... I didn't want to stay with him for the weekend. I knew the Orange Bowl was close by, so I walked over to the Orange Bowl, slept there that night. The following morning I hooked up with a vendor who sold sodas there at the Orange Bowl, and I would be his assistant. He'd pay me \$5 a game for me to get Cokes ready for him, and this and that. So for months and months and months after that, when there would be games at the Orange Bowl, I would get one of the older girls to fake a letter like it was from my uncle so I could get on the bus for downtown. And for months and months I slept in the Orange Bowl on Friday nights and Saturday nights to work there."

## Secret No. 1

### Set a Goal and Do It

How much of his success does Gov. Jeb Bush attribute to goal setting? I asked him:

"A whole lot. I think it's important, it's important to create your own agenda, whether it's public realm or private realm, and pursue it. So you have to have a goal and you have to measure how you are doing on that goal. ... So, when I ran in '98 I had a real clear agenda, and I said what I was going to do. It was totally transparent and some people liked it and some people didn't. But then I did, or I tried to do, what I said I was going to do, which is a novel idea in politics. If I hadn't set the goals and I hadn't articulated what those goals were and how to achieve them, the agenda wouldn't have passed ... There is a process that you go through and without the goal, how do you know if you achieve success? You've got to have something to measure what your pursuit is."

An illustration of a man in a blue suit running on a winding path towards a target. The background features rolling green hills, a large brown mountain, and a blue sky with white clouds. The target is a red bullseye on a black circular base.

"It's important to create your own agenda, whether it's public realm or private realm, and pursue it, and so you have to have a goal and you have to measure how you are doing on that goal."

- Gov. Jeb Bush

## Secret No. 2

### Know Your Limitations

When I was in law school, I encountered an early example of how we let fears and doubts deter us. Confronting those fears actually altered the course of my law school career, and perhaps even the course of my professional life. It was second semester of the first year, and I was in a course on civil procedure. The professor was Minnette Massey. She had been a Dean of the Law School and teaching law at the University of Miami for 20 years at that time. Professor Massey was a tough lady, austere and serious. Students feared her and would wither under her barbed questioning in class.

One day a few of us law students were studying a civil procedure assignment in the library. We came upon an issue to which none of us knew the answer. After some back and forth debate, I suggested: "We can ask Miss Massey."

Everyone agreed that that was better than the alternative of not learning the answer and looking even more foolish in class, so we marched down the hall to her office and stood in front of the door. Then we debated who would knock and lead us in. The others said it had been my idea so I should do it. After some initial resistance, I relented and timidly knocked on her door, desperately hoping she was not in and I would escape to live another day. But it was not to be. We heard, "Come in."

I opened the door slowly and stuck in only my head. Professor Massey looked up from her desk. Then a big smile crossed her face and she said, "Alan! Come on in!" In that moment I realized it had all been a game. She didn't need that name chart. She knew her students and really cared about them. A wave of relaxation passed through me and I was never the same in her class or any other.

After that incident, she would call on me more often. Emboldened now with the knowledge that her classroom demeanor was a show, I would often answer with a wisecrack (generally accompanied by the correct answer, which helps) or a double entendre. The first time I tried it, the other students audibly gasped. But Professor Massey would return in kind, and it seemed at times that we had a dialogue going that we were the only two people in the midst of the large lecture class who got it. One day a couple of classmates said to me that I should not be speaking in class the way I was, that it would anger the professor. So I sought her out and asked, "Professor, does the way I answer in class upset you?" She said, "Alan, it keeps me up all night."

I had my answer and my green light. The green light to be myself, to enjoy law school, and to never again let fear or doubt guide my decisions about school or life.



## Secret No. 3

### Go With Your Gut

When you make a choice and decide to go with your gut, more often than not that choice will prove to be the correct one. Another easy choice is the choice we make (and please do not think it is anything other than a choice) to be an optimist or a pessimist. Whatever your predispo-

sition, how you react to life is a choice and if you repeatedly come down on one side or the other, it is because you have developed the habit of doing so. If the habit is negative, change it to positive.

Nina Tassler, president of CBS Entertainment, told me that optimism is something she was born with:

“Ironically when my mother tells stories of how I behaved as a child or how I reacted to things as a child, it’s that I had a very optimistic outlook on life. I equate optimism with passion and when I approach something or set out to do something, I have a sense that things will turn out for the best and my attitude toward something is that things will be positive and I think there will be a

*I've Got a  
Gut Feeling  
About This*



positive outcome. So, I have a very high level of energy and the prospect of something being successful or something being creatively

fulfilling is exciting to me, and that manifests itself in enthusiasm and passion.

That’s not to say that I don’t feel disappointed if something doesn’t come to fruition, or something doesn’t really achieve the goals that I’ve set out. But I think part of wanting something a great deal or feeling very strongly or passionately is the fact that there will be disappointments. I think that I can feel disappointment with the same degree of intensity that I can feel passion, but again, all of that is a result of commitment and giving yourself to something 100%.”



## Secret No. 4 Never Quit

If there is a single characteristic of successful people, it is their steadfastness, the determination to keep going. Many entrepreneurs struck out before finding their riches. Ted Arison, the founder of Carnival Cruise lines, twice went bankrupt before starting Carnival and becoming both a billionaire and philanthropist.

One of the most difficult parts of getting a book published is for a new author to find a literary agent. Successful author Brad Meltzer received 24 rejection letters on his first book.

“I wrote my first book before I got to law school,” Meltzer told me. “It got me 24 rejection letters, and at that point there were only 20 publishers, and I had 24 people tell me to give it up. Telling me some people were sending me the same letter twice to make sure I got the point.”

“But you wouldn’t take the point?” I asked Meltzer.

“I wouldn’t take the point, of course,” he confirmed. “I’m a lawyer and what happened was, I said, ‘If they don’t like that book then I’m going to write another; and if they don’t like that book, I’m going to write another; and if they don’t like that book, I’m going to write another, and the same week I got my 23rd and 24th rejection letter, it was exactly the same week that I started my next book, which became *The Tenth Justice*.”



## Secret No. 5

### Keep Your Eye on the Doughnut

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Focus. When I was much younger, I heard a silly little poem that expressed this valuable life lesson. It goes:

*As you travel down the path of life,  
whatever be your goal,  
keep your eye upon the doughnut  
and not upon the hole*

I asked Susan Story, CEO of Gulf Power Co., if being successful requires staying on task and maintaining focus, and she replied:

"Really, in most of the things we do, the bottom

line results and the behaviors on which we got there, those are the most important things. People may have different ways to do them, [but] as long as they are honest and ethical and they get the job done, who cares how they do it? And as an engineer, believe it or not, I don't believe in micromanaging, and I actually like the strategy part better than the day-to-day nuts and bolts. But with an engineering background, I can do the nuts and bolts if I need to."

# Secret No. 6

## There's Always Room at the Top

In any field of endeavor, the bottom ranks are crowded. There may be a million lawyers, but only a handful who stand out. There may be a million actors, but only a small number who stand for something and who stand out in the public mind. So, if you are shooting for success in a crowded field, it is best to set your sights where there is less of a crowd, and that is always at the top.

When Gov. Jeb Bush decided to run for office, he did not run first for the Legislature, for Congress or Mayor. He went right for the top. I asked him what he was thinking when he made that decision. He explained:

"Because I thought I could make a difference more in that job and it was an executive job, which fits my personality more perhaps. I mean, I guess to put into perspective, you know I'm in my 7th year starting in January, a lot of people probably want me to run for the next U.S. Senate opening. That would be if I was thinking about this like a career. That would be the next job open, an open Senate seat. But I have no interest. I don't have the temperament or maybe I'm too impatient, but I think the executive office is where you can really make a difference."



# Secret No. 7

## Power Abhors a Vacuum

In 1990 my partner Jeff became a judge and left our law practice. Jeff had been in charge of a major department of our law firm, commercial litigation. When he left, a junior partner, Allen Levine, began to guide the other lawyers in that department, hand out assignments, review their work. No one had appointed Allen to do this. He recognized that there was a void and simply stepped up to fill it. A few months later, he said to me, "A few years ago when I started working here you told me

something I didn't understand, but I get it now."

"What was that?" I asked.

Allen replied: "You told me 'power abhors a vacuum.' I now get it."

And get it he did.

What had begun as Allen filling a vacuum and assuming a leadership role, was later formalized. What Allen came to learn was that a critical element in achieving success is seizing opportunities that present themselves.

# Secret No. 8

## The Paths of Life

OK. Here is the part where I go spiritual on you. Stay with me, though. I truly believe that for each of us there is a pre-determined path, which we are destined to follow. If we do follow that path, we will find purpose, fulfillment and success waiting at the end of the journey. The trouble, if it is indeed trouble, is that we all have free will. The path laid out for us to reach our destiny is full of detours and branches. At any point along the way we can veer from the intended path. We can go wrong; we can go very wrong. The good news is that each branch from the path, in turn, branches many more times. Along the way there is always a branch that will afford the opportunity to find our way back to the intended path.

Wayne Huizenga, billionaire serial entrepreneur, believes in destiny. He told me this story:

"I don't know how to describe it really, but I guess you could call it destiny. Steve Barrard and I have been friends for a long time. He was the CFO at Blockbuster. Then I made him the CEO at AutoNation and he did a heck of a job putting that company together, but he wasn't the right guy to manage the company, and so I had to let him go. But we stayed friends. ... A couple of months ago he called me up and said, 'Hey, I stumbled across a business I think we should do.'

And I said, 'What's that?'

It's a business that operates in 42 states in the United



States and 12 foreign countries, and they've got 2,000 trucks and 70,000 customers. We made the deal and now he owns 50% and I own 50%."

"So," I suggested, "one door had closed for Steve and another one opened."

Wayne replied, "Yes, and one opened for me too."

In other words, as I prefer to put it, you will find and stay on the correct path and be rewarded for having done so. The rewards may be material or may lie in the satisfaction of knowing and achieving your purpose; or it may simply be an inner peace from which you derive true happiness. Most likely, it will be some combination. Without any doubt it will make for a wonderful journey. And on that journey I wish you – success, of course.