

# **AGAINST THE ODDS**

RALPH ANANIA

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*This book is dedicated to  
my beautiful wife Maria  
and our children  
Michaela, Alexandra  
and Christopher.*

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Ralph Anania has spent 30 years running his own nationally recognised businesses and has built and sold over 26 multimillion dollar companies, one of them exceeding \$130M in annual revenue, and has raised over \$300m in capital for various business acquisitions.

His vast experience and reputation in the Fresh Produce Industry saw his involvement in bringing “Fresh For Kids” out to the world, a program run by the Sydney Markets Limited, to promote healthier school canteens across Australia, Now in it’s twentieth year, the program is still growing rapidly.

Ralph is renowned for his ability to turn ailing businesses into finely tuned profitable enterprises. Ralph is always in high demand, with his credible business knowledge and expertise, which sees him constantly play an important role in mentoring Senior Executives and CEOs of companies who are focused on improving their development of strategies to increase millions of dollars to their company's bottom line.

Ralph's years of experience and learning from his own mentors and business coaching executives around the globe, has also provided him the opportunity to develop into a highly sort after international speaker, and has delivered trainings on various business topics to audiences all over the world.

Ralph believes he has been blessed with a talent and passion for teaching and inspiring others. After decades of business success, Ralph has created his own programs, teaching others how

to create a successful and sustainable business model to deliver the results they truly deserve.

None of this would be possible without the unwavering support of his beautiful wife Maria and their children Michaela, Alexandra and Christopher.

*'Successful people are optimistic.  
They can see the reward and will persist  
and persevere until they get it.'*

**CHILDHOOD**

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*What beliefs around money did you grow up with as a child and how has that changed today?*

Growing up I worked before and after school in the family-owned fresh produce store, and this is where I learned some of my greatest lessons particularly respect and integrity, values my father still swears by today.

During those early years I observed my father's business skills like a hawk, not realising until many years later that it would help pave the way to my own entrepreneurial future. I remember going to the Sydney Markets early each morning and watching my father negotiate with

suppliers and then explaining to me how important it was to make sure you paid the right price for produce; because in those days there wasn't the luxury of stock being delivered to you in a refrigerated truck or keeping stock at the correct temperature in a coolroom. The stock had to be sold every day and if you misjudged the market you would get caught out and have to sell the stock at a loss or even throw it out.

I remember this one particular day, when a staff member threw something out without thinking twice about it; my father got really annoyed and went straight up to them and asked them for \$2; when they asked why and my father proceeded to tell them, they answered; it was just old stock and my father said, "To you it was just stock, but to me it's money and it's my money you just threw out."

That and it taught me to respect money as you have to work hard for it and, if

you're not careful, others can take it from you without a second thought. I also learnt how important it is to have good staff that respects these values.

### *Who inspired you growing up?*

When I was a teenager I saw a video of a store in Norwalk, just north of New York, called Stew Leonard's, the largest dairy store in the world. In 1969 Stew started selling milk from vending machines in a store right in front of the farm. The concept was that you were buying milk bottled straight from the cows. It turned out to be a recipe for success and the store extended some 30 times to become a supermarket with a twist.

The store employed over a thousand staff operating 50-plus checkouts selling fresh produce bought in bulk direct from all the nearby farms. The store only carried 800 lines (a standard supermarket at the time would have carried 20,000 lines),

but Stew was different; he had a vision and was a pioneer of many concepts that are standard practice in supermarkets today.

Stew retained the concept of bottling fresh milk in-store, where you can actually watch the milk being bottled while you shop. He was also the first to roast fresh coffee in-store, the first to bake fresh bread in-store, the first to sell fresh fish which came directly from the nearby pier each morning. Growing up he knew the true meaning of “fresh” and lived by it.

Stew Leonard was also the best at customer service and created the policy, “Customers are always right”. He believed in the motto so much he had a huge rock, placed at the store’s entrance with a large sign on it saying, “Our Policy Rule Number 1: The Customer is Always Right. Rule Number 2: Refer to Rule Number 1.” There was even an area out front of the store with farm

animals for children to go and play with. Stew wanted to create a fun shopping environment and in doing so created “spectacular” in many ways.

People from all over the world, including high-level executives from leading companies, attended the Stew Leonard University to learn what made him so good at what he did. He inspired me so much so that in 1996 I made the trip there to meet the man who created the benchmark in customer service.

I have lived my life with the principle, “You don’t get a second chance to create a first impression”. Everything I do is done with that statement at the forefront of my mind. You really do only get one chance at creating that very important first impression, and I have carried that through into everything I do.

## **CAREER & BUSINESS**

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*What made you get into the field of mentoring/coaching and educating others?*

Mother Teresa said, “A tree should grow where it’s planted. Do what you’re good at, you don’t have to be anyone else”. I truly believe I have been blessed with a talent and passion for teaching and inspiring others. While I was operating my own companies I also mentored a number of associates, helping them grow their life and businesses to levels they thought weren’t achievable. The satisfaction I received from seeing their transformation, as their businesses turned around achieving astounding results, was far more than I could have ever imagined.

From guiding business-owners, colleagues and associates on their journeys I saw how easily I could relate to the many challenges they were about to encounter. Helping them through their trying times and seeing their successes brought me great pleasure. After being asked many times why I didn't do this professionally, it drove me to develop my own programs, I now use to teach others on how to create their own success in business and life. This way my 'students' can learn from my experience through points I have already compiled.

*What is the most inspiring story from one of your clients?*

My friend BJ tells it best in his own words:

'My story is like a roller-coaster ride. My father was a successful businessman and I was born into a privileged life. I had a very strong bond with my father until

one day it all came crashing down around me. My parents had spent many years in a loveless marriage and as a result my parents lived separate lives. The strain wore out my father to the point where everything he had worked for so hard and had held together for so many years began to fall apart. He lost everything. His marriage, family, business, house and finances – all gone!

At the age of 13 I was in a situation of utter helplessness and uncertainty. My father broke down and left to start a new life as far away as possible. As the eldest of three siblings I became head of the family, left school at 15 and began working in my grandfather's business, starting at the very bottom and working my way through to a senior position which took 10 years, which I enjoyed immensely. I also married my partner of eight years, found a new home and was ready to start a family. After years of just managing to get by, I was on top of the world again.

I had just started to rekindle a relationship with my father when I received news he had been rushed to hospital and was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Three months later he passed away. The guilt I live with that went so long without communicating, is crippling. Not after this I fell ill and ended up in hospital for a month and out of action for a year. I had a rare bowel condition, which had become badly infected and ruptured, and it wasn't sure whether I would make it or not. By the time I recovered there was no longer a position for me at the company so I started a small business with a friend, but it turned out to be a complete disaster. In less than a year my partner ended up selling the business for a fraction of the price we had invested and declared himself bankrupt, leaving me liable for all the debts as I had given my personal guarantees. I was out of work and broke. I felt I had lost identity and I entered into a deep depression.

Ralph Anania was always there to help

me through. Anyone else would have walked away, but that was never an option with Ralph. I can clearly recall the day he turned my entire life around. He sat me down and was quite stern when he told me I was in a deep hole and needed to stop digging. That was when the penny dropped. I really needed to get rid of all the baggage that was holding me back and keeping me down. He showed me how to see through to the bigger picture, to see that things would not be this way forever, and not long after this awakening my world turned around for the better once again. It was like a spiritual, euphoric feeling. Everything broken in my life started falling back into place.

Because of Ralph's persistence and belief in me, I am back on top once again in all aspects of my life; family, career, finances – everything; and I owe it all Ralph's guidance and knowledge and his unequivocal commitment to me realizing my potential, opportunity and

future. Thank you for never, ever giving up on me. Your dear friend, BJ.'

It's testimonials like this one that drives me to do what I do.

*What challenges have you experienced in life/business and how did you overcome them?*

In 1992 two of my biggest clients went into receivership within weeks of each other to the tune of \$30m, of which I had extended a substantial amount of unsecured credit to. This was one of the lowest points of my life as I found myself staring at the possibility of bankruptcy. However, I learnt very quickly that failure was not about falling down; failure was about not getting up. Against all the advice from my solicitors and accountants I sold everything I had and, though I had been married for only a short amount of time, moved back home to live with my parents – but I didn't go bankrupt.

I personally guaranteed company debts to all suppliers and negotiated a deal where everyone was paid in full within 30 months. What I had learnt many years earlier from my father about integrity was about to become crystal clear. Money couldn't buy the respect I had gained from my suppliers, and this opened the doors to some great opportunities.

One I'm particular fond of is the role I played in the development of the Fresh for Kids program in the Sydney Fresh Produce Markets. This introduced fresh produce education into many schools across Australia to help promote healthier canteens and control childhood obesity.

In 1994 I was approached by the owner of a large IGA supermarket for some guidance and advice on how to take his business to the next level. In the space of just four weeks, with the changes I had implemented, the IGA store's fresh produce sales doubled to \$40k per week. This was the start of a strong

partnership and in a short space of time I was supplying 22 independently owned supermarkets across NSW.

However, as I focused on the growth of the business I became reliant on my general manager and CFO, someone I had known for years and trusted, to take control of the administration. Unfortunately temptation got the better of this person and in 1999, the day my second daughter was born, I returned to work to find the National Australia Bank at my doorstep with papers to wind up the company. They claimed the company had failed to pay out a short-term line of credit which was now six months in arrears. I couldn't believe it as my general manager had kept showing me glowing figures each week only for it to turn out that he had embezzled a huge amount of money and not made the payments to the bank.

I was on the brink of disaster again, but I wasn't about to let this get the better

of me either and I quickly went into overdrive in an effort to negotiate a deal with the bank. The bank, of course, made it difficult and I was forced to fund an extensive financial audit that eventually gave the company a clean bill of health; I was able to trade out of the debt via a ridiculously high repayment schedule. I worked day and night to pay off the debt in the shortest possible time and, today, if you were to ask me to describe banks I will tell you that, "Banks will lend you an umbrella when the sun shines and want it back when it rains".

I also discovered that it can be commercially cheaper to buy out your opposition rather than go head-to-head losing money trying to outdo them. In 1999 I again put everything on the line and made a bold move to acquire my biggest competitor; after many months of negotiations a deal was done.

In 2001 Franklins Supermarkets sold some 250 stores, 50 of which were

purchased by the South African Pick'n'Pay supermarket group who then approached me to supply them with a total fresh produce offer. Annual sales exploded to \$50m, which put a great deal of pressure on the warehouse facility. In late 2002 I visited distribution facilities in Sweden, Holland, South Africa and the United States to help me design the 'perfect' warehousing model. In 2003, exactly four years to the day after the bank had wanted to foreclose on the company, I moved the business into a brand new state-of-the-art distribution centre. The facility also incorporated a training and handling centre to assist and develop the next batch of fresh produce managers coming through the industry.

Growth continued and in 2005 annual sales fast approached the \$100m mark but, less than a year later, Franklins decided they no longer required our services as their fresh produce supplier; again I faced the possibility of disaster, trying to sustain large overheads with the

remaining business. It was time for some serious strategic thinking, so I called my biggest competitor to a meeting that very afternoon and, after some serious brainstorming and compromises, we merged the two businesses and became the largest independent procurement, distribution and logistics fresh produce company in the state.

The challenges didn't stop there as I still had to pay creditors, some of them quite ruthless in their pursuit of payment. I had no intention of running away from the debt and, after many months of negotiation with creditors and administrators, I reached a deal where everyone would be paid and I could continue growing the new business.

*What advice could you give to someone who is just starting out that could avoid going through the same or similar experience?*

Building a business is no different to building a house; the foundations are what will hold it up and the more effort that goes into ensuring the foundations are solid, the better chance you have of the building standing up for a long time. The same applies in business. I have made hundreds of mistakes and have learnt the hard way, and by that I mean it has cost me a lot of money for the experience. Had there been someone I could have gone to in my early years, someone who could have guided me and made me aware of what roadblocks I might encounter and how to avoid them, or at least be ready for the challenges when they appeared, it would have saved me a lot of time and money.

Most businesses thrive from the outset purely from the original passion and

drive. The problem is that while there is a lot of activity on the outside and it all seems to be going well, we miss the small cracks that start to appear on the inside; these cracks become bigger and still no one has noticed, until the cracks become so big you can almost walk through them; when you stop and wonder, 'How did that just happen?', it's too late. Most people in new businesses become flustered and find themselves in a hole they don't know how to get out of, and that's when they throw their hands up in the air and say 'Game Over'. Why? Because no-one taught them how to look for the cracks when they started to appear or how to fix them before they become irreparable.

*What makes you and your business stand out from your competitors?*

When you look at the success of companies like Apple, Google and McDonald's you realise that all these

companies are doing is something a little better, a little faster, a little cheaper or a little healthier than someone has already done before; that's exactly what I'm doing. I have learned many lessons on my business journey and listened to plenty of advice and researched a lot about the challenges faced by business owners and the solutions available to them. Basically I have taken all the information available to me and improved on it, made it better, more digestible, to a point where I can effectively coach business owners and help them achieve their own success.

I enjoy what I do and don't view it as a job, and I guess that passion shines through. I believe integrity has played a huge role in that my rules are fairly simple yet extremely effective. All I expect is that you do the right thing, do the very best you can and show others that you care. It saddens me when I look around and see a world full of greed; many successful people have fallen because of it and I decided many years

ago that greed would never be a factor in my life. If you are genuinely fair, the results will prove it.

*If you had to start all over again what would you do differently?*

I would start with the end in mind. Clearly define where it is that you want to go, create a roadmap that will help get you there and don't deviate from your path. I have been presented with many opportunities over the years and from these came plenty of good ideas; let me tell you quite clearly that all of my problems started out as 'good ideas' at the time; what I learnt was that these ideas distracted me from my core objectives for the business.

I also realised that businesses can't run on auto-pilot, you have to be at the controls at all times. Now by that I don't mean becoming a control freak and doing everything yourself, I mean having the

right people in the right positions who can deliver on the tasks and KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) you have set in place.

I once made a mistake in promoting an operations manager to general manager. This person was an exceptional operations manager, meticulous and his integrity was second to none. I thought he was ripe for the GM position but eventually found that there were areas he just couldn't handle. I didn't pay enough attention in nurturing him into the role and in the end I lost a good employee because I assumed he would be able to handle it. Never assume as it's so true it makes an ass out of you and me. Put the right people in the right positions.

**MINDSET**  
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*In your opinion, how does someone stay motivated and inspired on a daily basis?*

My family keeps me motivated and my kids don't realise how much I learn from them. Today we live a much faster life than what our parents did and we forget the true important things in our lives. Balance in life is essential no matter what role you play in your company or how demanding that role is.

Too many people have become so entrenched in their work that life has become a blur; this is how you lose all motivation and find it hard to be inspired. You're better off doing something non

work-related that takes your mind off whatever it was you were doing and you will find that you'll come back to the task with clarity and direction. I also look at each day as a gift and don't want to waste it, so I try and learn something new be it researching something or just by talking to someone.

I was at a conference a few years back where Bishop T.D Jakes was a guest speaker. I remember him saying that his mother would tell him when he was growing up, 'Son, the world is a university and everyone in it is a teacher. When you wake up in the morning be sure you go to school.' If you have an open mind you can learn from everyone and I try to do that every day. Surround yourself with positive people and try to get rid of any negativity at all costs; don't even hold grudges as this will only hurt you. Clear heart, clear mind – don't waste it.

*In your opinion, what are some characteristics that define successful people?*

Success requires full payment up front. Successful people in business love what they do; they are prepared for the challenges and obstacles that businesses face on a daily basis, and they have a plan, they have done enough research to give them the confidence that whatever they are doing is going to work. Successful people don't focus on problems, they focus on finding solutions. They are prepared to make some mistakes in order to learn and grow. The risk, however, should always be a calculated one and not a blind one. Successful people are optimistic; they can see the reward and will persist and persevere until they get it.

*What are your tips for getting through difficult times in your life/business?*

Failure is not about falling down; failure is not getting back up. Can you imagine what would have happened if as babies, when we took that first step and fell over, we never got back up and tried again? No one would ever walk! When you take a knock, get up, brush yourself off, look at why or where you fell down in the first place and go again, only this time learning from the experience of that fall.

No matter how bad things get there is always another option; the secret is how you decide to look at the problem. If you choose to look at problems in a negative way then you will undoubtedly end up with a negative outcome; I guarantee that if you look at them in a positive way you will always get a positive outcome; the problem hasn't changed, your outlook on it has; there is always a way, you just have to find it, and to find it you must try to have a clear frame of mind; don't ever

rush or get pushed into making a decision if you are not prepared for the outcomes; step back and look at the situation from other perspectives or you may find yourself patching and not fixing.

There's a story about an athlete who was jogging along a river one morning when he heard a splash and scream for help. The athlete stopped and quickly looked around to see a person drowning in the river, so he dived in and saved them. No sooner had he got back to the river bank when he heard two splashes and two screams for help and looked up to see two people drowning, so he went in again and rescued them. When he got those two out he heard three splashes and three screams for help, but by this time the athlete had no more energy left. The problem wasn't that he couldn't save those people from drowning; the problem was that he didn't go and see who was throwing them into the river in the first place. The same applies in business. Sometimes we get so entrenched in

what we do that we just keep patching things up rather than fixing the problems completely. Stop, make the changes that need to be made, fix the problem and move on.

*What do you believe holds people back from achieving the financial success they desire?*

There are a few reasons why most entrepreneurs won't succeed long-term: lack of preparation is usually the big one; by failing to plan, you plan to fail; the misconception is that you just have to come up with a great idea and build it, and then everyone will come. Wrong! If you don't do your homework and study the market and its demographics, you can build all you want but it certainly doesn't mean anyone will come. You only have to look at the number of fast food chains that opened with a bang and then failed to see the idea alone isn't enough. Another reason for business failure is that some

people just don't have a second idea and are not innovative enough to create one at short notice.

Speed is another way to disaster. You can't build an empire overnight. If you don't have the structure for growth and systems to handle it then you are doomed to fail. Of course, you will never succeed in business if you run out of money, which also comes down to the lack of preparation.

Some people fail because they're obsessed with their product and lose focus on everything else. Have you ever been to a restaurant where the food was fantastic but the service was really poor? Will you ever go back? No, because the focus was on the food and nothing else. Don't ignore the important aspects of your business.

Other business owners become fixated on their technical skills and get so caught up in how much they know about a product

that their focus on everything else is lost. Have you gone to buy a computer or TV and you know exactly what you want, but the sales person keeps going on about the technical side so much that he actually confuses you and you end up walking away without it. If the sale is made, it's time to take the money.

There's also a psychological side to why some entrepreneurs don't achieve financial success in that they're carrying what I call 'baggage' and it weighs them down. I have seen many people who are amazing at their profession and could make a fortune working for themselves, but chose not to because someone in their past told them they would never achieve anything. Past baggage will stop a train and, if you let it, can haunt you forever. I have seen many people fail at business and spend the rest of their life paying off debt and learning absolutely nothing from the experience. The past does not equal the future.

When you hear that little voice in your

head tell you won't succeed because 'you're not strong enough', 'not good enough', 'it's too risky', 'don't deserve it', 'no one will help', 'it will take too long', etc, simply say, 'thanks for sharing now go back where you belong'. You need to stretch your mindset and start thinking, "I can do this. I will do this. I'm not going to let the past dictate my future." Think positive thoughts, exercise your mind in the right direction and you will be amazed at the results.

*What do you believe is your purpose in life?*

The purpose of my life is to love and care with my heart and soul, to lead with direction and strength, and I thank God for each and every day of this wonderful journey of life.

*Do you think everyone should seek a mentor or coach?*

Absolutely, look at Tiger Woods. He is regarded as the best golfer in the world but he still needs a coach. Tiger can't watch himself swing; he has a coach to tell him what he's doing wrong and then gives him the advice to correct it. The same applies in business; find someone who is successful and study what it is that made them so successful. It will save you years of heartache and in most cases a lot of money that you probably don't have.

**WEALTH & GENERAL**

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*Apart from material possessions money brings significant opportunity. What opportunity are you most proud or fond of that money has given to you?*

I have been fortunate enough to be able to afford some pretty amazing “toys” over the years but I would have to list earning my helicopter pilot’s licence among my most proudest achievements. Flying helicopters is something I’ve always been fascinated by, and I can say that it’s also one the best escapes from a hectic business life. As operating a helicopter requires the use of both hands and both feet, you really must focus your attention on flying.

*What do you say to yourself to get you to do the things that you really don't want to do?*

I don't really say anything; I just know that no matter what the task involves or how much "dirty work" needs to be done, I see every step along the way on my journey as an investment in my business. I find it can help to do the least appealing jobs first and get them out of the way. I have learnt the hard way that putting off things I didn't want to do only made the task harder when I finally got around to it. If you leave the worst parts of your business to the end, or for someone else to do, you leave yourself open to the job not being done properly, and this can also have a negative impact. Do them first and know they're done.

*How do you stay organised?*

I always use a diary so I know well in advance what I have on. I will always plan

my day before it starts as this keeps me focused and allows me to cater for some "me" time, and gives me the flexibility to move things around if an emergency happens. I also read and write my goals out every single day to make sure I stay focused on my personal objectives. For my business I have a good filing system. I know where everything is and this saves me a lot of time and stress. People who are fastidious about their filing are often criticised by others as being pedantic, but the truth of the matter is that a good filing system will save you time – and the company money – in the long-run

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