



Proactive or Reactive?

by Four-time Olympian Ruben Gonzalez

The thought processes that help you get to the Olympics are the same thought processes that will help you succeed in business and in life.

Successful people in all walks of life think big, focus on the possibilities, and take consistent bold action towards their objectives.

When I decided to come out of a six year break to try to qualify for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics at the age of 47, most people I talked to were sharply divided into two camps.

Some of the people tried to talk me out of it. These people said I had nothing to gain by making another Olympic team and that if I didn't make it would not look good – not for a professional speaker in the business of inspiring others to achieve more. The International Luge Federation said I was too old and that I had been away from the sport too long. They were afraid I would get hurt.

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On the other end of the spectrum was a group of people that believed all I needed to do was to have a positive mental attitude and everything would just work out. I laughed, because PMA by itself will not do anything for you. You'll always have better results with a positive attitude than with a bad attitude, but PMA does not guarantee you'll win. PMA will keep you going when the going gets tough, but it does not guarantee you'll win.

When I told the PMA crowd that I thought my chances were 50/50, their jaws dropped and you could see their whole body slump with disappointment. I told them that if it was a sure thing, going for the Olympics would not be an adventure. I was after the adventure. I was after the challenge.

Two years before the Olympics I started training and raced in three World Cup races but my times were simply not competitive. Many people said I should give it up. I thought it would be crazy to quit. Quitting was simply not an option for me. I was too emotionally invested to quit. I figured that even if I didn't make it, the things I would learn about myself would make the struggle worthwhile.

I believe that in life you have to keep risking failure otherwise you atrophy. You have to always put yourself out on the line. You have to push your limits. You have to live life to the fullest. That's why I ran with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. That's why I went skydiving in South Africa. That's why I climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro.

I do challenging things because those experiences help me learn more about myself. They also give me insights into what makes successful people win in life. Risking failure makes you dig deep inside and find out what you're really made of.

Then when life hits you with a storm, you know that you have what it takes to weather it.

One year before the Olympics I realized that unless I did something different I would keep getting the same results. So I had to do something different.

I had a couple of bad habits that were hurting my sliding times. The proper luge position is shoulders back, head down and feet pointed. Head down and feet pointed help you aerodynamically. Shoulders down help keep the sled stable and help you with steering. But it's hard to keep your shoulders and head down when you get into trouble in the track. As soon as you run into trouble, the knee-jerk reaction is to lift your head to see better. And as soon as you do that, your shoulders rise and you lose all stability. It's like if you were driving a car on the freeway, someone cut in front of you and your reaction was to take your hands off the steering wheel. It just doesn't make sense.

I had wrestled with this problem for 25 years. All my coaches told me I needed to relax and put my shoulders back but they didn't tell me HOW to relax.

Knowing that I needed to do something to improve my times or else, I decided to call my good friend Don Akers. Don is an expert in how to condition your mind through the words you say to yourself.

Don spent a couple of hours with me. At one point he asked me what went through my mind when I got to a difficult section of the track. I told him that I always thought to myself, "Here it comes." Don got excited and said, "Here it comes?" That's it! You're being reactive. By saying 'Here it comes.' You're mentally putting yourself at the mercy of the track. Saying 'Here it comes' is making you defensive and you will never be at your best if you are in a defensive state of mind.

You need to say to yourself, "Here I come!"

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“Here I come” will make you proactive. It will help you attack the track and feel more in control. “Here I come” will shift your thinking from victim mentality to victor mentality.

It made perfect sense. I actually wrote “Here I Come!” on top of my sled where I could see it before all my luge runs. And it started working. Slowly but surely, “Here I Come” helped me feel more relaxed and in control on the sled. My position started getting better and so were my times. The sport of luge started to be fun because I felt more in control. I was no longer thinking “I hope I make it down...” I started thinking, “I’m going to nail this run.” And all of this started by simply changing what I said to myself.

Once I could control my sled better, my coaches were able to do things to my sled that allowed me to go faster. We loosened the suspension and changed the shape of the steels to give me more speed.

Three months before the Olympics I still thought my chances were 50:50. But I kept training and making adjustments to my sled and slowly I started moving up in the standings.

Three weeks before the Olympics I still didn’t know if I was in. The qualification races were over and I was actually ranked 42 on the list at the time so technically I had not qualified for Vancouver (you have to be in the top 40 to qualify).

But I decided to continue training in Salt Lake City just in case something happened (you never know whether countries will send their athletes in or not). For example, a couple of weeks before the 1988 Calgary Olympics, the top ranked luger got appendicitis and missed the games.

So even though I had not yet qualified for Vancouver, I planned to continue training just in case. You never give up until the final whistle is blown.

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I had a couple of off days three weeks before the Olympics and on one of the days I was speaking to several hundred sales people in Minneapolis. I was telling them how you have to act boldly on your beliefs. Your actions show what you believe. You need to jump (take a chance) and the net will appear.

I told the salespeople how even though I still didn't know if I was going to the Olympics, earlier that day I had actually purchased non-refundable airline tickets to Vancouver for my wife, my kids and I. They looked at me like I was crazy. They probably thought I'd hit my head once too many in one of my luge crashes.

Well the next day I got the news. Norway decided not to send their three athletes because even though they were ranked in the top 40 in the world, it turns out that Norway only sends athletes that are in the top 20 in the World. With

Norway out, I got bumped up to number 39 and I got to go. I made it by the skin on my teeth. I jumped, and the net did appear.

By not quitting when there seemed to be a very small chance of making it to the Olympics, by getting advice from an experts, and by doing things I had never done before, on February 12th 2010, when I marched into the Opening Ceremonies of the Vancouver Olympics at the age of 47, I became the first person to compete in four Winter Olympics each in a different decade.

I was so happy that at the Opening Ceremonies I was about ready to carry the Norwegian flag!

How about you? What do you do when you're in a slump? What do you do when you get discouraged? What do you do when it looks like you will not reach your goals? Do you throw in the towel?

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Sometimes it's OK to cut your losses and quit. Sometimes it's smart to quit. But don't quit right away. Think. Who's the top performing person you know that could possibly help you get through your personal or professional minefield? Call them, meet with them and take advantage of their knowledge and experience. They may be able to come up with a game plan that will take you to the next level and let you shine.

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