
YOU CAN'T
TEACH VISION
*The Twenty-First
Century Law Firm*

JOHN MORGAN



TRIAL GUIDES, LLC

You Can't Teach Vision: The Twenty-First Century Law Firm

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INTRODUCTION

While I was in college at the University of Florida, my brother Tim was injured in a lifeguarding accident that rendered him a quadriplegic. It was the worst day of my life. Through Tim's workers' compensation case, I was exposed firsthand to the legal system. My brother was severely injured, and his employer fought him tooth and nail on his claim for compensation. I watched a very powerful corporation and their lawyers fight to deny benefits to my brother, whom I dearly love. We were poor people and had no real idea where to turn or who to hire. We were at the mercy of a lackadaisical lawyer who, in retrospect, we never should have hired. We didn't know. We had brought a knife to a gunfight, and Tim never got a full measure of justice. I became enraged and vowed that I would one day be a plaintiff's lawyer to get revenge for my brother.

Tim's accident gave me focus and purpose and passion. I knew exactly what I was going to do with my life. I graduated from the University of Florida law school in 1982. I had job offers from some silk-stocking law firms, but that was not for me.

A gentleman named Jerry Billings, a plaintiff's lawyer in Orlando, Florida, gave me my first job and my first break. I will never forget him for that. Every year, I take Jerry to lunch and thank him for giving me that opportunity.

For nearly thirty years, I have been a trial lawyer. It is all I have ever done and all I have ever known. I have never billed a client by the hour or represented a corporation or an insurance company, though there have been plenty of offers—and lucrative ones at that—along the way.

During these years, I made so many mistakes and had so many missteps. I was also lucky enough to have made some right decisions and good calls as I went forward. Failure and success are great teachers. The past is the best predictor of the future.

I will be sixty years old on my next birthday. I still feel thirty, but the mirror and the scale tell me I am wrong. Throughout my journey, I have learned so much from so many. Mentors and role models and great lawyers at seminars have taught me so much. I wanted to write this book to say thank you to all of those who have taught me and shared their knowledge and insights all these years. I wanted to write a book that appeals to the lawyer just starting out, to the lawyer with decisions to make at the midpoint of his career, and to the lawyer, like me, that finds himself in the last quarter of his life. This book will tell you all of the things that I have done wrong so that you won't make those same mistakes. I will also share some of the things that I did right when building my firm. I want to share with you the visions that I had and the visions I have for the future. I want you to know how I think and how I move my firm forward every day. Today, my firm has almost three hundred lawyers and two thousand staff members in offices throughout the United States. There has been some method to my madness as I built this firm; I hope you will be able to take some of my techniques and vision and implement them into yours.

Many very successful lawyers throughout America have their own visions and methods. None of them are all wrong or all right. Different people can get very different results doing the

same things in very different ways. As you read this book, you will undoubtedly find things that I have done that you are currently doing. You will also find yourself headed down paths that I traveled years ago—some with success and some not so much. Many of the things I recommend, you may have done well for years. Even if you only pick up a few new nuggets, the book was worth writing for me.

Trial lawyers have always done a wonderful job sharing their knowledge and their secrets. I believe that is why the civil justice system has worked so well in America. I would rather have one trial lawyer making the difference for safety in America than all the bureaucrats in Washington, DC combined. Our joint efforts have saved hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of lives. Lives of people we will never know. Our collective efforts have changed the conduct of insurance companies, product and drug manufacturers, and crooks on Wall Street.

This book is a thank you to those who have helped me and taught me all these years. It is my way of saying thank you to all those who have meant so much to me on my legal journey. It is a thank you to Jerry Billings, who hired me out of law school, and to my law partners throughout the United States, who have put up with me for better and for worse.

This book is for you. The trial lawyer. I hope you enjoy the read.

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VISIONMAKERS

In the summer of 2009, at my beach home in Ponce Inlet, Florida, I wrote a book entitled *You Can't Teach Hungry*. Since then, I've met and heard from people who've read the book, and I have appreciated all the good wishes and kind words. I tell people that if I have to explain to them what *You Can't Teach Hungry* means, they should not bother reading the book. If you don't understand those words, there is no way you could grasp the book and all of its meanings. *You Can't Teach Vision* is a little different. For most of us, vision is defined as "the faculty or state of being able to see."¹ Our vision allows us to see everything around us. Of all of the five senses, I think losing our vision would be the most excruciating.

In business, people use the word "vision" constantly. The only word that may be used more often is "passion." I have heard the word "passion" used so many times I can barely stand to hear it once more. There is no doubt that without passion for your work, it would be

1. "Vision," *Oxford Dictionaries - Dictionary, Thesaurus & Grammar*, 2010, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/>.

hard to get up in the morning, start your engine, and go to the same place over and over again. It is well established that people do better work when they like what they do. As much as I believe in the power of passion at work, the subject has been dealt with ad nauseum.

What really excites me is the concept of vision in business. We are all familiar with the great names in American business. Henry Ford. Thomas Edison. John Rockefeller. Andrew Carnegie. Alexander Graham Bell. And, more recently, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Oprah Winfrey. These are people who had an idea, a thought, or a curiosity and set out to see where that took them. We call them visionaries. I have read all of the biographies I could about these people. They fascinate me.

As a young boy, I had the privilege of working at Disney World in Orlando, Florida. I also had the good fortune of having two of the best jobs a young boy could ever have. I did magic in the theme park and later performed as Pluto. Those days at Disney World were some of the best days of my life. Every day, I had the opportunity to meet with people and families who were having the time of their lives. It was an awesome experience. Some mornings we were dispatched to stand at the main gate when the first guests were coming off the monorail. Standing there with Mickey, Minnie, Donald, and Goofy was the rarest of company at Disney World. For those guests coming off of the monorail, it was like seeing Elvis Presley, Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, and Bono all standing there to greet them, one by one.

Their reactions will stay with me for the rest of my life. Grown men in Bermuda shorts, T-shirts one size too small, dark socks, tennis shoes, and Mickey Mouse ears running at full speed to get the first picture taken with Mickey. Sometimes, these fathers were so taken with the scene that they forgot they were a parent for a moment and they left their children far behind. Running like an All-American halfback, they were determined to have their pictures taken with each of us. When all of the guests on the monorail had disembarked, we were surrounded, like the Beatles when they first came to America. By the way, I used the word “disembarked”

because that is the word that Disney used to describe getting off of the monorail.

The man behind this theme park in Orlando and another in Anaheim, California, was none other than the great Walt Disney—one of the greatest visionaries of all time. After years of drawing cartoons and making movies, he decided to have his characters come alive, first in Disneyland and then in Disney World. His imagination may be unparalleled in the history of mankind.

Other companies have built amusement parks, but not one in all the world has ever lived up to the ideals and vision of Walt Disney's. If you have ever been to a Six Flags park or something similar and then experienced one of the Disney theme parks, you know it is like night and day. Working there was one of the proudest times of my life, and I can tell you that the other cast members, as we were called, had the same pride working for Walt Disney. Cleanliness was a virtue. The attractions and rides were beyond belief. The company made us all feel that we were a part of its journey. It belonged to us.

There were so many things Walt Disney did right that I could spend an entire book enumerating and expounding upon them. The thing I found most creative was the way he had us buy in. In the early seventies in Orlando, Florida, there was a culture at that company that made us feel we were a part of something very, very special. We were working at the Most Magical Place on Earth. Every day, we got in our cars and drove to the Magic Kingdom. I believe that the most ingenious thing Walt Disney ever did was have everyone call him Walt. Not Mr. Disney, just Walt. His brother, Roy Disney, was just called Roy. Every employee, from the high-level executive to the street sweepers on Main Street referred to each other by their first names. This made us all feel that we were in it together. This was our company. We were called cast members because we put on a show every day for the millions of people who spent, in many cases, their life's savings to give their families this magical experience.

Vision and culture go hand in hand. Too many companies and businesses put no emphasis on a firm culture, and without

culture, all the vision meetings and strategic planning sessions in the world will be for naught.

It has been commonplace for us to describe these business titans and creative geniuses as visionaries. However, the more I think on the term, the less I like it to describe people like Walt Disney and Steve Jobs. Not to belabor my love affair with Walt Disney and all that he stood for, but his parks had a slogan that has had great meaning to me throughout the years.

“If you can dream it, you can do it.”

Those words are very powerful. Think of all the people in the world and all of the dreams, ideas, and inventions that have raced through their minds. Yet today, relatively few men and women are described as visionaries. The reason I don't like the word “visionary” is because millions of people have had their own visions. Sadly, some of these unrealized visions and ideas may well have been far greater than those that came to fruition. Those visionaries had an idea but didn't have the fortitude to see it to its conclusion. Think of what we have missed out on as a result of their inaction. Many of these people woke up one day to see their own idea in the hands of someone else.

Have you ever seen the pyramids? Have you ever visited St. Peter's Basilica in Rome or traveled to Venice, Italy? Have you ever walked the Great Wall of China and wondered how it was built? These great, man-made wonders of the world were inspired by men and women who had the fortitude and the will to see them through. That is why I never refer to these great individuals as visionaries but rather as *visionmakers*. A visionmaker is someone who not only dreamt it but also did it. Dreaming is the easy part. Going to the laboratory, sleeping a few hours a night, almost going broke, and not knowing what will become of you if you fail is the difficult part. The dreamers who do it are the visionmakers that have made our world so wonderful and enjoyable. Not only did they have a vision, but they also had an internal drive that cannot be taught. That is something you are born with.

I would describe myself as a serial entrepreneur. When I was in the second grade, I sold Christmas cards door to door. Later, I advanced to having my own paper route in Lexington, Kentucky. I have long believed that paperboys and papergirls all grow up to be entrepreneurs. Having a route means being tied to a responsibility that never goes away and a job that needs to get done. Nothing can stop them—not rain, not sleet, not snow. I have noticed many of the great CEOs and business titans had paper routes.

Although my primary occupation in my adult life has been a trial lawyer, I was never satisfied to have one small office in one town. My dream was to have many offices and many lawyers spread across America. Today, we have almost three hundred attorneys and two thousand people on staff throughout the country and into Canada and Europe. As much as I enjoy representing people against bullies, I have thoroughly enjoyed the business side of building my firm. As a serial entrepreneur, I was not satisfied to have just the law firm. I don't golf. I don't hunt. I don't fish. I don't collect anything. I don't like woodwork. I like to eat, but I don't like to cook. I don't like boating. I have no hobbies other than moderate exercise, reading, my family, and my businesses. I have had the good fortune of building an attraction business, inspired by you-know-who. The attractions, called WonderWorks, are located throughout the United States. I have been a general partner in some Marriott Hotels and have had the good fortune of seeing how a company like Marriott maintains a commitment to excellence. As a result of my expertise in legal advertising, a partner and I have built a very successful advertising agency that caters only to lawyers. When I owned some nightclubs in Orlando, I ran across a young man whose dream was to own a sports agency, and today, Tom O'Connell and I have a very nice agency focusing on Major League Baseball players. Over the years, I have built and owned apartment complexes, shopping centers, and raw land. One of my best business ventures was a billboard company in central Florida. Each one of these ventures started as an idea. A vision, if you will. The

dream is the easy part. It is making that dream a reality that separates visionaries from visionmakers.

In preparing to write this book, one of my greatest joys has been recalling the past and all of the people I met along my way here. One such meeting was with a famous Florida banker by the name of Jim White. Flagship Bank, a chain of local banks in Florida, had fallen on hard times, and the regulators were about to swoop in and take it over. However, in looking at the bank, they found that Jim ran the bank's one profitable region in West Florida and he assumed the bank's presidency. The story has a happy ending. Flagship Bank became the most profitable bank in the South and was later acquired by SunTrust Bank. Jim then went into retirement and played a lot of golf.

My college roommate, Ray Parsons, called me one day and said, "I would like to take you to dinner and talk about us starting a bank." When Ray called me, we were both thirty, just starting out in our careers—me as a lawyer and him as an architect with his brother and father in Kissimmee, Florida. My wife and I were living paycheck to paycheck with barely two nickels to rub together. That night at dinner, Ray convinced me that we should start a bank in Osceola County and that banks had a bright future. A bank in Winter Park, Florida, had just been sold for 3.5 times book value, and the founder had made, to us, a small fortune. When I asked Ray what he knew about banking, he was very honest and told me, "Nothing." There was a fellow in Kissimmee by the name of Tom White who was our contemporary. Tom worked at what was then called Barnett Bank, which later morphed into Bank of America. Tom was Jim White's son.

We hatched the idea that we would approach Tom and then Jim about coming out of retirement to start this bank. Tom said yes, but he doubted that his father could be moved to start up with a bunch of kids. It was left to me to visit Mr. White in Haines City and lay out our plan. Looking back, he must have thought I was a nutcase on my first visit with him. However, I hung in there and kept selling him on the idea of coming out of

retirement and doing something great with his son. I was selling the dream. He told me he would think about it and let me know. So much time has passed that I don't know how long it was before we got back together, but when we did, it was one of the greatest moments of my life.

Our next meeting was at a Denny's. Mr. White laid out a napkin on the table. He put two dots on each end of the napkin and drew a line between them. He told me that one dot represented Orlando and other dot represented Tampa. He added three Xs on that straight line. The Xs represented Osceola County, Polk County, and Pasco County. He looked at me and said, "Here is what we should do." The idea was to build three separate banks between two fast-growing cities and let the population fill in. The banks would run separately and perhaps, one day, merge into one.

I was watching vision firsthand. The thought of having three banks strewn down I-4 was more than I could ever have imagined. I had no real money and my parents had no money. Yet here I was with one of Florida's most successful bankers hatching a plan to build a string of banks along the I-4 corridor. As life went on, Mr. White did everything he dreamed that day at Denny's. We built a bank in Osceola County. Then Pasco County. Then Polk County. Then, later still, another bank in Polk County. Four national banks in all.

Starting that bank and serving on the bank board was probably the single greatest learning experience of my life. I saw people go broke. I saw people lie on their financial statements. I saw companies overleverage themselves and collapse. But I also saw Mr. White in action. And of all the lessons that he taught us, one of his great lessons was that the regulators are our friends. He believed in doing things right and by the letter of the law. He believed in ethics and morals and doing what you said you were going to do. As a result of his vision, our banks had very few bad loans. He was not a risk-taker. If you have ever heard the story of the Tortoise and the Hare, Mr. White was the Tortoise personified.

We later rolled all of the banks up into one holding company that operates today as CenterState Banks and trades publicly. During the Great Recession in the late 2000s, when banks were closing their doors, CenterState Bank prospered and acquired troubled financial institutions. To this day, I have never sold one of my shares in CenterState Bank's holding company. Jim White was a visionmaker. He saw it and did it. His dream for himself and all of us came true.

The truth is, all of us have vision to some extent. What I hope to accomplish with this book is to make your vision more focused. To take the scales from your eyes. To put binoculars and telescopes that will enhance your business vision into your hands. By the end of this book, I hope to have given you tools that will make your businesses more successful. To help you dream it and do it.

By the way, after all those years working at Disney World, I determined that if I ever had the good fortune to own my own business, everyone would just call me John.