



## What is the Best Business Education? Run a Marathon (Transcript) | 1

*What is the Best Business Education? Run a Marathon* by Andrew Johnston  
at TEDxYouth@MileHigh - Transcript

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### **MP3 Audio:**

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### **YouTube Video:**

#### ***Andrew Johnston - Business Faculty, Red Rocks Community College***

As a business instructor at a community college, one of my favorite courses to teach is Intro to Business. It's one of my favorite courses because in this class I assign the students a company project. In this project the students go out, they find a small business, they meet with the business owner, and then they share with their classmates key technical information about the business. Information such as: what's the company's product? How do they price their product, how do they promote their product?

It's a great assignment because it really brings to life all the technical theory that the students have been reading about in their textbook. But you know what the biggest insight is from this assignment, you guys? The biggest assignment is when the students share with their classmates what the single biggest piece of advice the business owner has for a young person starting their business career. You know what that biggest piece of

advice almost always is?

Before I tell you what it is, let me first tell you what it's not.

Business owners are telling my students that success in business is not about being an expert at writing pivot tables in excel. They say it's not about being a jockey at the ten key calculator. They say it's not about being able to recite accounting regulations, no. Instead, what business owners are telling my students the key to success has everything to do with the development of this: character, life skills, things like passion for your work, work ethic, persistence, determination, and good old fashioned grit. That's what business owners are saying is the key to success for a young person starting their business career.

How do you teach grit? How do you teach these life skills? Some schools are trying to teach it through self help books and seminars. Here's the problem with self-help books and seminars: they don't cut to the chase, they don't force the student to actually apply what they're reading about in the textbook. It's all theory. It's like if I want to learn to ride a bike. I could read a book about riding a bike, I could watch a video about riding a bike, but until I'm actually on the bike pedaling, and braking, and ringing the little bell on the handle bars, have I really learned how to ride a bike? I don't think so.

Again, how do you develop these skills? How do you develop the skills to develop the resilience to keep going when life circumstances, and maybe even the people all around you are telling you to quit? That's just the question my colleagues in the business department, two years ago, and I asked.

In 2013, we launched a new class called "*Change through Challenge.*" The premise of change through challenge is very simple: all the life skills that I

mentioned, persistence, determination, grit, all these life skills can be acquired and mastered through the power of training for a marathon.

Guess what the final exam is in this class? A 26.2 mile marathon.

Why a marathon? Because a marathon gets to the heart of the matter. Because a marathon doesn't goof around. Because training for a marathon is the perfect vehicle for teaching all these life skills that business owners are saying is the key to your success in business and in life.

Because you see my friends, mother marathon, she's a strict teacher. She doesn't allow cheating, and she doesn't grade on a curve. Because you see guys when you're at the start line of a marathon, I don't care if you're the CEO, or if you're the janitor. If you haven't put in the work, if you haven't put in the training, if you haven't mastered these key life skills, you're not going to finish the race no matter who you are.

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The goal of the course is very simple: just finish the marathon. I don't care if you run across the finish line, I don't care if you walk, I don't care if you hop, skip, and jump; just finish.

Everyone from the 19-year-old single mom to the 60-year-old vice president has taken this course. The students train three days a week on their own. We meet on Saturdays for the long group run, and then we meet on Monday night for the seminar.

In the seminar we talk about three very simple things. We talk a little bit about diet, talk a little bit about training, and then the discipline of the

week, and how that discipline relates to their school work, how it relates to their business, and how it relates to life.

One of the disciplines we talk about is goal setting. How do you take a big hairy, scary goal like a marathon and break it down into weekly, even daily tasks so it's not overwhelming?

Think about that old riddle: how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time, that's what we're doing here. I think about a student that I had the very first semester we taught this class. Her name was Mandy. Mandy in addition to going to school full-time and training for the marathon, Mandy was opening up a hair salon.

Upon opening the doors at the salon, Mandy immediately realized that opening a small business was not unlike training for a marathon, especially that whole overcoming adversities piece. When she opened the doors, she had nay-sayers that were telling her that she ought to quit because it will never work. She had bankers that wouldn't loan her money when she needed it most. She was encountering code enforcement officers that harassed her every week and worst of all, a lot of times, she would come in to the morning plumbing disaster. How did she get through this?

She took all these setbacks, all these to-do lists, all these issues, all these problems, and broke them down into small weekly tasks, and wrote them down and slowly checked them off. In other words, she was eating the elephant one bite at a time. Just like marathon training.

Another discipline we talk about in this course is the power of consistency. In fact, one of the mantras of this course is, *"It's not about doing the occasional big things, it's about doing the consistent small things."*

Hydrating, eating right, exercising, not just on the warm days, but on the

cold days too, and not just exercising on the days you feel like it, but exercising on the days that you don't feel like it. That's how you achieve the big goals, that's how you go 26.2.

I'm reminded of a student that I had this past semester in the class. Her name was Sandy. Sandy was a high school guidance counselor. She had hip replacement surgery nine years ago. Because of the hip replacement surgery, Sandy wasn't able to exercise, she had fallen badly out of shape, gained a lot of weight, but Sandy signed up for the course anyway as a form of personal renewal. But also she wanted to dedicate the marathon to her mom, who had recently passed.

Sandy was also a realist; she knew that given her health condition, the 22-week training was going to be difficult, and finishing the marathon in the seven hour cut-off was going to be a particular challenge.

But Sandy persevered, and you know what she did every Saturday for those long group runs, you guys? Every Saturday she would come, and she would walk two minutes, and she would jog two minutes, and walk two minutes, and jog two minutes. Mile after mile, consistently, week after week, consistently, for 22 weeks.

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Fast-forward 22 weeks on January 17, 2014, Sandy crossed the finish line at the Phoenix Rock-n-Roll Marathon. Guess what her time was? 6 hours and 48 minutes, 12 minutes under the cut-off. Oh, and by the way, when she crossed the finish line, she was 35 pounds lighter than when she

began the course 22 weeks prior.

You see guys, it's not about doing the occasional big things, it's about doing the consistent small things.

One of my favorite times in this class is about week five. In week five, students are really seeing the benefits of eating right, hydrating correctly, sleeping right, and exercising four days a week. They're taking on what I would call "the glow".

But the best part, at week five and throughout the rest of the semester, is that students are really seeing the benefits on those weekly long runs of setting a scary goal and reaching a scary goal. So for instance, week one, the goal is run a mile; they run the mile. Week two, it's run two miles; they run two miles. Week three, they need to run four miles; they run the four miles.

Set a scary goal, run a scary goal. Week after week after week. Guys, this process not only becomes life-affirming, this becomes habit-forming. Students get used to doing and reaching huge goals every week and doing something that most people will never do. So guess what happens? The DVD player up here and the self-talk up starts to change. They start saying things like, *"You know, if I can run a marathon, of course I can get through that algebra class."*

*"If I can run a marathon, of course I can get that college degree."*

*"If I can run a marathon, of course I can open that hair salon."*

Let me close with this:

In 2013, we launched the "Change Through Challenge" class. To my knowledge, it is the only community college business course to be featured

in a national running magazine "*Runner's World*".

But more important than that, I suspect this course has changed the course and allowed many young people to arrive where they want to arrive, to which I say to you guys, every one of you in five years from now is going to arrive somewhere. Some of you are going to be in college, some of you are going to be in the work force. Some of you might even be married and have kids.

Here's the thing: so many people - and us adults are the worst at this - we just throw our lives up in the air, and rely on chance, and just hope it all works out.

Guys I would submit to you this afternoon, and hear me on this, I would submit to you this afternoon that marathon training, yes, marathon training, can help you and give you the life skills and the character skills so you don't have to throw your life up to chance. Your life can be a choice, and you can choose where you want to go the next five years and beyond.

Guys, technical skills and technical training will get you a job that will get you a paycheck, but let me tell you, if you develop character and life skills, my friends, you will find work that will build you a life.

Guys, I wish you the absolute best as you choose the course for your life, and I look forward to seeing each and every one of you at the next marathon.

Thank you very much.

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