

Screw It, Let's Do It

Lessons in Life

Richard Branson

Published by Virgin Books

Extract

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INTRODUCTION

THE PRESS CALL ME and my partners at Virgin 'Mavericks in Paradise'. There's no doubt that we tend to do things in a less stuffy way than most businesses – and I have ended up with two tropical islands to have fun on – so it must be true. And for me it works. I work hard and I play hard.

Though I have never followed the rules at every step, I have learned many lessons along the way. My lessons in life started at home when I was young. They carried on at school and in business from as early as my teens when I ran *Student* magazine. I am still learning and hope I never stop. These lessons have done me good throughout my life. I have written them down and I hope that you will find something in these pages that might inspire you.

I believe in goals. It's never a bad thing to have a dream, but I'm practical about it. I don't

sit daydreaming about things that are impossible. I set goals and then work out how to achieve them. Anything I want to do in life I want to do well and not half-heartedly. At school, I found reading and writing hard. Back then, dyslexia wasn't understood and my teachers just thought I was lazy. So I taught myself to learn things by heart. Now I have a very good memory and it has become one of my best tools in business.

When I was starting out in life, things were more certain than they are these days. You had a career lined up, often the same one your father followed. Most mothers stayed at home. Today nothing is sure, and life is one long struggle. People have to make choices if they are to get anywhere. The best lesson I learned was to *just do it*. It doesn't matter what it is, or how hard it might seem, as the ancient Greek, Plato, said, 'The beginning is the most important part of any work.'

A journey of a thousand miles starts with that first step. If you look ahead to the end, and all the weary miles between, with all the dangers you might face, you might never take that first step. And whatever it is you want to achieve in

life, if you don't make the effort, you won't reach your goal. So take that first step. There will be many challenges. You might get knocked back – but in the end, you will make it. Good luck!

Richard Branson

1. JUST DO IT!

**Believe It Can Be Done
Have Goals
Live Life to the Full
Never Give Up
Prepare Well
Have Faith in Yourself
Help Each Other**

THE STAFF AT VIRGIN have a name for me. It is 'Dr Yes'. They call me this because I won't say no. I find more reasons to do things than not to do them. My motto really is: 'Screw it – let's do it!'

I will never say, 'I can't do this because I don't know how to.' I will give it a go. I won't let silly rules stop me. I will find a legal way around them. I tell my staff, 'If you want to do it, just do it.' That way we all benefit. The staff's work and ideas are valued and Virgin gains from their input and drive.

I don't believe that that little word '*can't*' should stop you. If you don't have the right experience to reach your goal, look for another way in. If you want to fly, get down to the airfield at the age of sixteen and make the tea. Keep your eyes open. Look and learn. You don't have to go to art school to be a fashion designer. Join a fashion company and push a broom. Work your way up.

My mum, Eve, is a perfect example of this. During the war, she wanted to be a pilot. She went to Heston airfield and asked for a job. She was told only men could be pilots. Mum was very pretty and had been a dancer on stage. She didn't *look* like a man. That didn't stop her. She wore a leather flying jacket and hid her blonde hair under a leather helmet. She talked with a deep voice. And she got the job she wanted. She learned how to glide and began to teach the new pilots. These were the young men who flew fighter planes in the Battle of Britain.

After the war, she wanted to be an air hostess. Back then, they had to speak Spanish and be trained as nurses, but Mum chatted up the night porter at the airline and he secretly put her name on the list. Soon, she was an air

hostess. She still couldn't speak Spanish and she wasn't a nurse. But she had used her wits. She wouldn't say no. She just did it.

Mum wasn't the only person in our family who said, 'Let's do it!'

The famous explorer, Captain Robert Scott, was my grandad's cousin. He was a man of great courage. He made two trips to the Antarctic. His goal was to be the first man to the South Pole. People said it couldn't be done. He said, 'I can do it.' And he nearly did it. He reached the South Pole, but he was second. Roald Amundsen got there first. It was a great blow for Scott. He died on the return journey. When people say there are no prizes for being second, I think of him. He is famous for being second to the South Pole. He also made the first balloon flight over Antarctica, but people don't remember that.

I started *Student* magazine when I was fifteen years old and still at school. Some people said I couldn't do it. They said I was too young and had no experience. But I wanted to prove them wrong and I believed it could be done. I did my sums with care. I worked out how much the paper and print bill would be. Then I worked

out the income from sales and from selling advertising space.

Mum gave me four pounds for stamps. My school friend, Jonny Gems, and I spent almost two years writing hundreds of letters trying to sell space. I also tried to get interviews with famous people. Writing those letters and waiting for the replies was more fun than Latin lessons. It gave me a huge buzz when we got our first cheque for advertising space. It was £250, a huge amount. My belief had paid off.

I wasn't very good at passing exams at school. I knew I would do better on my own in the world. My parents let me make that choice. They were behind me, whatever I did. So I left school when I was sixteen to work full time on *Student*. Jonny and I camped out in the basement of his parents' London house. It was great to be young and free and in London. We drank beer, had girlfriends and listened to loud music. We were like students who didn't have to study. We worked just as hard, though. I got some first-rate interviews, with John Lennon, Mick Jagger, Vanessa Redgrave and Dudley Moore. We had more famous names than some of the top magazines. Famous people started dropping

by. Life in the basement was glorious chaos. It was like a non-stop party.

But we had a serious side as well. We sent our own people out to cover the big issues of the day, like the war in Vietnam and the famine in Biafra. We felt we were changing things. What we did was important as well as fun. We were a close-knit team. Even my family helped to sell magazines. Mum took a big bundle to the park and sold them there. Each time a chance came, we grabbed it.

We branched out by being the first people to sell cut-price records by mail order – the first advert went in the last edition of *Student*. When a postal strike stopped us, we looked for another way. We wouldn't give in. Our goal was to open record shops but we didn't have enough money. So we talked a man who owned a shoe shop into letting us use his spare space. We worked hard to promote the opening. We made the store a 'cool' place for students to go. And one store led to a second and a third. Soon, we had stores in almost every big town – and I was still under twenty years old. Cash was pouring in fast. But I didn't sit back. We had reached that target but I still had more goals.

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One of my big goals in life is that, like Captain Scott, I have always wanted to live life to the full. So, in 1984, when I was asked to sponsor a powerboat to win the Blue Riband for Britain, I agreed at once. The Blue Riband is a prize for the fastest ocean crossing from America to Ireland. I said I'd join the crew and trained hard. There was only one slight hitch. Joan and I were due to have a baby and I had promised her that I would be there for the birth. Then we were told that the weather was just right for the record attempt. I would let down the team if I didn't go.

I asked Joan, 'What shall I do?'

'Just do it - go,' she said. 'The baby's not due for two weeks. You'll be back before then.'

We set off, crashing across the waves in *Virgin Atlantic Challenger*. At the end of the first day, I got the news that my son, Sam had been born. We cracked open the champagne and kept going. The prize for the fastest crossing ever was within our grasp until we hit a huge storm off Ireland. Sixty miles from the end, we were hit by a giant wave. The hull split and we sank.

'Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!'

We were in the sea in the middle of a storm, in a life raft. A boat on its way to America saved us. We had failed in our first attempt to win the Blue Riband, but we didn't give in. Six years later, I was back with *Virgin Atlantic Challenger II*. Things were going well until we found that sea water was getting into our fuel tanks. The engines stopped. We spent hours cleaning the tanks and trying to start the engines. It seemed hopeless. The others at last said we had to give up. They said it was over. But I knew it was our last try. If we didn't do it now, we would never do it. I had to persuade them not to give in. I said, 'Come on, we've got to do it. Let's try.'

We were all done in. Our eyeballs were red and tired. We were all seasick. We hated the boat. We hated the sea. We wanted to sleep for a week.

'We've got to go on,' I yelled.

'All right,' they agreed. 'We'll give it one last shot.'

Somehow we started the engines and got going again. It seemed hopeless. We were so far behind that there seemed little point in trying. But we kept going. We made up time. In the end we beat the record by just two hours and

nine minutes – but we did it. The lesson I learned from that and that I live by is to keep trying and to never give up.

The day after we had won the Blue Riband, a Swede named Per Lindstrand asked me to cross the Atlantic again – in a hot-air balloon.

I thought of my old hero, Captain Scott. He had flown in a balloon over the South Pole. I had never been in a balloon before. No one had ever flown that far in a balloon before. It was mad. It was too risky. By then, my companies were dealing in hundreds of millions of pounds. What would happen if I died?

There were many problems. But I can't resist a challenge and the chance to try something new. I said, 'Screw it – let's do it!'

But first, I asked Per, 'Do you have any children?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I've got two.'

That was good enough for me – if he would take the challenge, so would I. I shook his hand and said I would join him.

I always tell people that if they want to do anything well, they must plan and prepare. So I went to Spain with Per and learned to fly in a

balloon. I didn't know it then, but those lessons saved my life.

One of the things I learnt was that each hot-air balloon carries fuel, which is burnt to heat the air in the balloon. Hot air rises and so does the balloon. When the fuel is not burnt, the air cools and the balloon drops lower in the sky. When flying a hot-air balloon, the pilot must heat or cool the air so that the balloon is at the right level to catch the wind going in the direction the balloon needs to go.

The winds and the jet stream blow from America to Europe. We left from America and 29 hours later, we were over Ireland. We were the first to cross the Atlantic in a hot-air balloon. There was only one problem – how to land. We had some full fuel tanks left and it was too dangerous to land with them. We might crash and burn. We chose to come down low and drop the tanks in a field. We reduced the flame in the balloon and came down low. We cut the tanks free. But then we were too light. We bounced across a field and shot up into the sky, out of control.

'Let's come down on the beach, where we won't hurt people,' Per said.

We flew into thick fog and missed the beach. The sea looked very black and stormy. If we landed in it with the balloon, we could drown. I struggled into my life jacket. Suddenly, from around 56 feet up, Per jumped into the icy sea. Without his weight, the balloon shot up too high for me to jump. I was on my own.

I floated higher and higher into the clouds. The winds took me north, towards Scotland. I was alone, flying in the biggest balloon ever built. I had about an hour of fuel left. When it went, I would fall into the sea. I tried the radio. It was dead. I didn't know what to do. I could jump out in my parachute or stay put. I wrote in my notebook, 'Joan, Holly, Sam, I love you.'

'While I'm alive, I can still do something,' I said to myself. 'Something will turn up.' Something did. As the balloon drifted down towards the grey sea, I came out of the clouds and saw a helicopter. It was searching for me! I waved and the crew waved back. I was safe.

Close to the waves, I jumped into the sea, away from the balloon. Without my weight, it flew up and out of sight. The helicopter fished me out of the icy water. I asked about Per, but they had thought he was with me. He had been

in the sea for hours. We had to find him quickly. I told them where he would be and he was rescued just before he froze to death.

The whole trip was an amazing experience. I learned many lessons: not just if you want to do something, just do it, but also to prepare well, have faith in yourself, help each other, never give up.

All of these lessons can be used in life. You don't have to run a big business, fly in a balloon, or break records in a boat to learn from and use the lessons I learned. Your goal can be small. *Student* magazine was very small at first. I sold space in it from a payphone at school because I believed I could and would do it. If something is what you really want to do, just do it. Whatever your goal is you will never succeed unless you let go of your fears and fly.