

When Your Number Is Called

Imagine wearing a jersey to work and your number is being called. What would you feel like?

Gary Payton II, whose father was a well known, prominent basketball player, has had a wildly successful last few months. Gary's athleticism, defensive ability, and impressive dunks made him a basketball highlight reel staple. Spectators chanted his name and gave him standing ovations often as he amazed them with his bouncy vertical leap.

Although one would have expected that his pedigree and abilities would have led to lucrative contracts from the start, this was not the case. Gary was not taken seriously. According to a basketball coach cum scouting agent who worked with Gary at a preparatory academy, "...it was weird because the film spoke for itself, but convincing coaches to make the trip (to watch him) was like pulling teeth.'

Gary, who is now 29, spent nearly a decade bumping around the minor leagues and training camps just to impress any team that might sign him to a guaranteed contract. Gary was relatively short and small for a professional basketball player, and could not fill the molds of what teams and coaches expect from players. No one knew what position Gary should play.

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Even the team that eventually offered him a contract, the Golden State Warriors, which plays 'positionless' style of basketball, not only had to let him go twice, but had to go against the wishes of its star players to eventually sign him. In other words, few understood Gary's value. But when Gary's number was called, he delivered more than he had been asked for.

It takes grit to hang in there, stay focused, remain committed, and step into your high-performance zone when your number is called. The greatest enemy of all sportspeople - time - is present to Gary as well as financial uncertainty. Missing an opportunity every year means becoming slower, less agile, less strong and taking longer to recover from injuries. But Gary was purposeful and intentional in his pursuit. Before making the cut on The Warriors team, Gary rented an Airbnb unit near the training facility and made sure that the coaching staff, players, and decision makers saw him every day. Gary lived everyday being intentional.

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It is a mindset espoused by the first African American female principal dancer of the American Ballet Theatre, Misty Copeland. “Hearing the words ‘no’ and auditioning over and over again. (And once selected) It takes a lot to make it through and keep the same energy throughout entire performances”, said Misty.

How would you benefit from being intentional? In coaching, I had encountered executives who stared at me blankly when I asked them, ‘What was your objective when you attended that meeting?’, ‘What will be your focus this month?’, or ‘Three years after your MBA, what has been your ROI?’. Also, some C-suite executives I shadow-coached (in shadow-coaching, coaches like myself shadow and observe our clients) behaved like doctors, taking their subordinates for walk-in appointments - there was one meeting after another, and they were not purposeful in their meetings. Their numbers are constantly being called, but unlike Gary and Misty, who were habitually prepared and put on performances like a show, these executives drifted from meeting to meeting without an intentional ‘play-by-play’ mentality, compromising their effectiveness. In our coaching work together, we focus on intentionality and mindfulness (on being conscious of human dynamics, spatial dynamics, observing, being curious, etc.).

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Sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? It sure is, as Misty Copeland puts it, "We work so hard to make it seem effortless."

A prepared, intentional mindset can be of great benefit to corporate executives.

Basketball players like Gary learn and practice set drills daily, just as dancers like Misty practice and rehearse every day. Like corporate executives, Gary and Misty encounter surprises on a daily basis no matter how well prepared they are; after all, anything can happen during a basketball match and dancers have to pretend enjoyment even if they were in physical pain while performing on stage.

Would it be possible to shorten a few years of wandering in your career if you were more intentional? Would habitually being intentional help you advance professionally? What if you were better prepared? If you are younger in the corporate world, you can probably 'wing it', i.e. excel without much preparation, but that grace period doesn't last very long. Let's work on it!

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