

Excellence: Tuck in the Shower Curtain

So a success and failure in business, what is the essence of it? Is it having a blue ocean strategy or is it buying all of Michael Porter's sophisticated books on business strategy? Or is it something else? Years ago, the great hotelier, perhaps the greatest ever, Conrad Hilton, in his mid-80s, was finally retiring. And as part of that whole process there was one of those rather typical roasts somewhere in New York, and 15 people walked up to the podium and they said, "I remember when Conrad Hilton ...," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and told these cute stories.

At the end of it all, as is also the tradition, Mr. Hilton himself was asked to come up to the podium. And he was a very regal looking man. So, as the story is told, Mr. Hilton walks up to the podium and squares himself away in front of the podium, and the MC had said, "Mr. Hilton, will you share with us your secrets of business success?" And, again, as the tale is told, Mr. Hilton squares himself away behind the podium, looks at the audience, and says, "Remember to tuck the shower curtain into the bathtub."

And with that, he turns and he walks off the stage. And at some level—when you look at car companies crashing and banks going down—to some extent, it was because all sorts of people didn't remember to tuck the shower curtain into the bathtub.

Years ago, I worked in Washington, D.C., more or less on the White House staff for a while, and I had this boss by the name of Fred Malek, who was a very successful entrepreneur doing his Washington stint. And I remember the one-liner from Fred—I shall remember it until my next to last breath—and he said, "Execution is strategy." As far as I'm concerned, we talk too damn much about strategy. The deal is getting the job done and getting it done with excellence.

You want to be a success in life? Don't forget to tuck the shower curtain into the bathtub. That's it.