

Dr. Rainer Zitelmann Delves Into Resilience in ‘Unbreakable Spirit’: An Exclusive Interview



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Dr. Rainer Zitelmann is a renowned German historian, sociologist, and economist who has made significant contributions to the fields of academia, entrepreneurship, and literature. With a diverse background that spans across multiple disciplines, Dr. Zitelmann has established himself as an influential thinker and a sought-after expert in areas such as capitalism, success psychology, and resilience. Known for his thought-provoking books, including “The Power of Capitalism” and “Dare to be Different and Grow Rich,” Dr. Zitelmann’s work challenges conventional wisdom and offers fresh perspectives on wealth creation, leadership, and personal development. His latest release, “Unbreakable Spirit: Rising Above All Odds,” delves into the inspiring stories of individuals who have demonstrated extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity, adding another dimension to his exploration of the human spirit and success.

Beyond his prolific writing career, Dr. Rainer Zitelmann is a successful entrepreneur, having founded and managed multiple businesses. His ability to bridge academic insights with practical experiences has positioned him as a thought leader who can effectively communicate complex concepts to a broad audience. With a commitment to exploring the intersections of history, sociology, and economics, Dr. Zitelmann continues to contribute valuable insights that inspire individuals and businesses to navigate the challenges of the modern world with resilience and an unbreakable spirit.

What do you think are the key factors that differentiate successful entrepreneurs from those who may struggle to achieve their goals?

For any person, it is the scale of their goals that has the greatest influence on their life. Larry Page, who created Google, is a strong proponent of what he calls “a healthy disregard for the impossible” ; “You should try to do things that most people would not.” Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, which was at one time the largest corporation in the world, explained the secret of his success by saying, “I’ve always held the bar pretty high for myself; I’ve set extremely high personal goals.” I have studied the careers of a number of extraordinarily successful men and women, most of them entrepreneurs, but I have also included top managers, athletes, and others who were successful in various areas. By analyzing their life stories, I have found that what distinguishes them above all is their courage to be different from the majority of those around them and to question traditional ways of thinking. They also set their goals and ambitions considerably higher than most people.

Can you provide an overview of your new book, “Unbreakable Spirit: Rising Above All Odds,” and what inspired you to explore this particular theme?

My book contains the life stories of 20 famous and lesser-known people who, despite their many differences, all achieved incredible things in their own, very unique ways. Among the people featured in this book, you can read about

- a blind mountaineer who summited the loftiest peaks on all seven continents, including Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world;
- the “Blind Traveler,” a blind Englishman who, roughly 200 years ago, traveled far and wide with only a little money, experienced 200 cultures and whose journeys took him further than the distance between the Earth and the Moon;
- Ludwig van Beethoven, who was almost completely deaf when he composed his Ninth Symphony;
- Stephen Hawking, the explorer of black holes and the most famous scientist of our time;
- Nick Vujicic, the motivational speaker and author, who was born without arms and legs and has encouraged millions of people in 63 countries with his inspirational speeches;
- Helen Keller, who lost her sight and hearing at the age of one and a half and later became an internationally successful writer;

– Ray Charles, the “High Priest of Soul,” who lost his sight at the age of seven and went on to become one of the most successful singers of all time.

The personal motivation for writing the book was that I myself had a serious eye condition and therefore began to become more and more interested in the lives of successful people living with disabilities. But there is also a political motive – proponents accuse the majority in society of discriminating against minorities and robbing them of opportunities in life. The successful people with disabilities I talked to, or whose biographies I analyzed, do not accuse anyone else; not even when they have faced massive problems.

Contrast this with the philosophy of ‘identity politicians’ who tell people, “you are a victim of circumstances, and you have no chance to live a better life within these structures – so join us and fight against these structures.” Labeling people as victims makes them helpless and powerless. In contrast, examples of people who seized fate in their own hands despite – and sometimes even because of – adverse external circumstances can be valuable sources of encouragement. They represent strength, not helplessness.

In your research on successful individuals, have you identified any patterns or trends related to the impact of economic and cultural factors on success?

Systems that guarantee a high degree of economic freedom are a prerequisite for people to have the opportunity to strive for success. The more the state interferes in the economy, the more difficult it makes it for people. From a political point of view, I therefore think it is important to campaign for economic freedom, and there is a lot wrong on this score today, almost everywhere in the world. However, when it comes to personal success, I recommend that people focus more on their mindset than on external conditions. It is much easier to change your own attitude than to change society as a whole. And even under political and economic conditions that are anything but perfect, it is possible to achieve great success if you have the right mindset. Karl Marx thought that consciousness was determined by being, i.e. by the external circumstances of a person’s life. Although there may be something to that, the reverse is also true, and far more important for all of us – we are what we think. By thinking of success, health, and wealth, you will attract success, health, and wealth. Watch out though, because here too, the reverse is equally true – by thinking of failure, illness, and poverty, you will attract failure, illness, and poverty.

What books or authors have had a significant influence on your thinking and approach to success and wealth?

I love biographies and autobiographies about successful people. For example, I would like to mention the autobiographies of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael Bloomberg, and Howard Schultz, or the biographies about Steve Jobs, Steven Hawking, and Warren Buffett. However, I have also studied the subject of success scientifically. I would like to mention the scientific studies by Edwin Locke and Gary P. Latham, e.g. “New Developments in Goal Setting and Task Performance.” This is the finest scientific book on goal setting that I have read to date. Its subject is the connection between setting challenging objectives and goal attainment. The goal setting theory is, in a nutshell, a motivation theory that is supposed to explain what causes some people to perform better on work-related tasks than others. Hundreds of empirical studies confirmed two findings above all: There is a linear relationship between the degree of goal difficulty and performance. Locke found that the performance of people with the highest goals exceeded that of people with the easiest goals by more than 250 percent. Specific, difficult goals lead to higher performance than no goals as well as vague, abstract goals such as ‘do your best’.

What advice would you give to young entrepreneurs who are just starting their journey in the business world?

Stamina and tolerance for disappointment are of major importance but they won’t get you far unless you are willing to experiment and open to new ideas. If you stick to a rigid plan no matter what, all your stamina will get you nowhere. Michael Bloomberg, one of the wealthiest men in the world, doesn’t believe in detailed planning. “You’ll inevitably face problems different from the ones you anticipated. Sometimes you’ll have to ‘zig’ when the blueprint says ‘zag.’ You don’t want a detailed, inflexible plan getting in the way when you have to respond instantly.” Those who act proactively and are able to learn quickly from mistakes tend to be more successful than others who keep working on perfecting their ideas, but hesitate to put them into action. If you are starting a new company, don’t try to stick slavishly to a plan, but always be willing to learn and to experiment. Bloomberg has always stressed that predictions about new business ideas are mostly useless and meaningless, however many banks and other investors may insist on them. “The noise in the assumptions you have to make is so great, and the knowledge you have of strange areas so limited, that all the detailed analysis is usually irrelevant.”