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The Guide to (Ordinary) Greatness:
Fifteen Simple, Everyday Habits to Help You Create a Life
of Success

If you've ever longed for greatness, it's not too late. Here are some secrets for propelling yourself out of a life of mediocrity—and they're not what you think they are.

By Pam Bilbrey

When you hear the word “greatness,” certain people probably spring to mind: Michael Jordan, Albert Einstein, Mother Teresa. Think a bit harder and you’ll realize you know a few real-life “greats” as well. Perhaps your officemate is a computer whiz or a teacher at your child’s school is a genius at inspiring kids. Heck, maybe *you* have some hidden talent, too. If only you’d been born with that elusive “greatness gene” or raised by superachieving parents or accepted to an Ivy League college, your life would be soooo much better...right?

Wrong. Greatness has far less to do with that “one special thing” about a person than it does about his or her day-in-and-day-out habits and his or her character as a whole.

Most people think that there is some silver bullet to being great. And while it’s true that certain circumstances may give you a leg up in life, they don’t determine greatness. Your own actions do. Greatness is really about doing the ordinary, everyday things consistently well.

In other words, no matter what your past (or even your present) looks like, you have the ability to achieve greatness—starting now. You just need to hone in on the small things you do every day—those tasks and chores that may seem trivial and unimportant—and start doing them well, all the time.

My new book, which I co-authored with Brian Jones, *Ordinary Greatness: It's Where You Least Expect It...Everywhere* (Wiley, July 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-46172-3, \$24.95) offers up a set of practical “how to” tools readers can implement right away, as well as a wealth of thought-provoking (and often deeply moving) real-world stories. For leaders, the book provides tips for removing the “blindness” that prevent them from identifying, leveraging, and cultivating the greatness that is occurring all around them.

But back to you and your wish to become great (or, depending on your level of self-assurance, even *greater*). In the book, Jones and I reveal some surprisingly simple habits we can all adopt that can launch us from mediocre straight to great. Here are some guidelines for greatness to help get you started:

Walk your talk. Is there an intersection between what you *say* matters to you and what you actually *do*? There should be. If you swear up and down that nothing is more important than family, but you miss every ball game or dance recital, your actions will speak louder than your words. Or if you make a grand pronouncement about living frugally but run out and buy a flashy new car the minute your neighbor does, no one will take you seriously.

Nothing is more irritating than a hypocrite. It's the opposite of greatness.

If you make a promise, keep it. Sounds obvious, yes? Actually, it's rarer than you think. We all know someone who makes big promises and announces lofty goals to their colleagues and friends, only to let them fall by the wayside. The secret is to make only commitments that are manageable and realistic and keep them—consistently. While saying you'll deliver the big project first thing tomorrow (instead of 5:00 on Friday, which is what will actually happen) sounds good at the onset, your hero status will quickly falter when you can't come through as promised.

Think about it like this: While a homerun every once in a while is great, a solid base hitter is someone you can depend on. When you're tempted to make a promise, think realistically about whether you can keep it. If you're not sure, keep your mouth shut.

Do sweat the small stuff. (Or at least pay attention to it.) With jam-packed schedules and busy days, it's easy to let the little things escape your notice. But it's those tiny details that can set you apart from the rest. Pay close attention in meetings and interactions with others and keep thorough notes on things that will be important later: Does your client have a food allergy he mentioned in passing? Remembering this tidbit for future dinner meetings shows him you can be trusted with detail-intensive projects. Is your boss a morning person? If you've noticed she's more productive in the early hours, you can plan your interactions around her schedule, getting more work done more efficiently and improving your relationship.

Plan for the worst. It may seem a bit “doom and gloom,” but it will save you in a pinch every single time. Even if things go according to plan 99 percent of the time, it's that other 1 percent that can really get you into trouble. Let's say you're working on a big project with a tight deadline. Carefully think through any obstacles that might arise and lay the groundwork for solutions, in advance. When trouble strikes, you'll be prepared and your work won't suffer—a true sign of greatness.

No matter how good your work has been in the past, you are only as good as your last mistake. So think like a Boy Scout and be prepared. And if everything does go smoothly, you can enjoy being pleasantly surprised.

Align yourself with the other “greats” in your life. Once you understand how ordinary greatness works, and how to recognize it in yourself, you’ll begin to notice glimmers of greatness in others around you. Team up with these people. Cultivate relationships with them. And it may go without saying, but be sure to also disassociate yourself from the not-so-greats who surround you.

Two heads are better than one, but two *great* heads are phenomenal. Three, or more, are even better. You’ll find that you are much happier partnering with people who consistently build you up and keep you energized. Having teammates with like values keeps you accountable and makes your ordinary greatness extraordinary.

Always act as if someone is watching you. It may sound like the same warning you give your kids before school, but it applies to you, too. Work every day—in your personal life as well as at your job—as though your boss were standing beside you taking notes for your evaluation. In other words, use your time wisely, meet deadlines, and don’t cut corners. You’ll be less likely to make mistakes and more likely to pick up good working habits and life skills. Your efficiency and diligence will be noticed by others—and not just at your quarterly review.

Surround yourself with people who don’t think like you. When you meet someone who shares the same interests and ideals as you, it’s easy to become fast friends. But do those people really help you to grow in the long run? Challenge yourself to make friends and acquaintances with the people who are going to challenge *you*. Forming friendships with near-clones of you nurtures the person you are rather than the person you can become.

Great people are able to look at the world from perspectives other than their own. That doesn’t mean they lose their own convictions; it just means they expand their field of vision. There are many rich life lessons to be learned from people who are completely different from you.

Be known for your integrity. Your mother was right: Honesty is the best policy. Integrity may mean owning up to a mistake or admitting a failure, but it also means the people around you can depend on you for transparency. And that goes a long way in the business world.

Even when you do make mistakes, people are willing to overlook them to work with someone they know will be honest and do the right thing. Think about the “greats” throughout history and try to name one who wasn’t also a person known for his or her integrity. Coming up empty? There’s a reason!

Know when to ask for help. Being great doesn't mean that you have all the answers all the time (just ask any parent!). Take the president of the United States for example: Even the leader of the free world works with experts and advisors every day before making important decisions. A big part of greatness is recognizing it in others, and knowing when their expertise is more efficient than your own.

Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It's a sign of intelligence. It's also a powerful tool to have in your arsenal. You'll be able to guarantee that you can always get the job done—no matter what your own personal level of expertise may be.

Read at least six books a year. Sound like homework? It doesn't have to be! Start each year by making a list of books you want to read. And if you're not a big reader, don't worry—pace yourself! Pick six books from all different genres and topics (and maybe slip in a fun read or two!) including a few that you wouldn't normally think of choosing. By the end of the year you will have expanded your horizons—you will have learned about new topics, considered differing points of view, and perhaps even developed a palette for a new writing style.

Books are a great way to open yourself up to new experiences from the comfort and safety of your own home. They also help you remove the blinders you may not even know you are wearing and serve as conversation starters for meeting new people!

Keep your curious spirit. As children, we were curious about everything in the world around us: How do things work? Why do people act a certain way? Where do things come from and how are they made? Our interest in the world around us made us great observers and spurred the questions that grew into the knowledge we have as adults. We should hold on to our curious nature. The minute you think you know it all is the minute you close the door on your pursuit of greatness.

The more we pay attention to our surroundings and the more we increase our knowledge, the better our chances for greatness. Be an insatiable student of life.

Shape your life around your passions. The reason is simple: When you're passionate about something, your devotion can lead to a lifetime of dedication and practice that makes you the expert in a given field. Without that deep well of emotion to draw from, you're unlikely to get very far. It's pretty tough to build a great career in a profession that you feel ho-hum about. Many people try, but they usually fail.

And don't underestimate the importance of having people and interests in your life that you feel passionate about. They infuse you with energy that keeps you going when you have a rough patch in your career.

Talk to strangers. It may seem odd, and yes, a little awkward, but talking to strangers is a great way to expose yourself to the ordinary greatness around you. The next time you are in line at the grocery store, sitting in the airport terminal, or out walking the dog at the park, take

the time to talk to someone you don't know. You never know when you may meet someone extraordinary, and by not taking the chance to meet new people, you are passing up greatness every day!

You may be amazed at the people you will meet and the new things you will learn if you just let down your guard and say hi to the person sitting next to you. It could be anyone from a rocket scientist to a CEO to an archaeologist. Think of the connections you can make and the new things you can learn just by taking the time to get to know someone new.

Be a risktaker. Imagine all of the things we would be living without if it weren't for risktakers: electricity, airplanes, even the Internet! Taking the easy route is safe, sure, but it rarely leads to greatness. Success isn't easy, and it's not going to come to you while you're sitting idly at your desk. So get out there—go against the grain—you could be behind the next great discovery of something we can't live without!

What if Benjamin Franklin had decided he wouldn't fly his kite in the storm because it was too dangerous? Do the things that make your spine tingle and your heart race. Those are the things that are worth doing.

Practice the fine art of humility. There's one in every office...or family...or team. You know, the guy who likes to toot his own horn? How about the coworker who announces every sale she makes? Aside from being a little on the annoying side, her insistence on pointing out her achievements may also be a clue into her overall character. Not only does it signal low self-esteem, it may well indicate that she doesn't have many other impressive achievements under her belt. Ordinary greatness often goes unnoticed because the person doesn't feel the need to broadcast her talents.

Not only is humility an attractive quality in a person, it's also a pretty good indicator into the type of person he or she is. Strive to do great work consistently and let your talents and actions speak for themselves.

Greatness is about being extraordinary in ordinary circumstances. It's the mother of four who is always on time, the employee who gets his work done by the deadline, the friend who anticipates your needs before you do yourself. It's about doing the small stuff, especially when nobody else wants to, and doing it well. Embrace this philosophy and in the end you'll be like the proverbial tortoise who wins the race while those flashy, boastful hares sleep through life's big moments of truth.

About the Book:

Ordinary Greatness: It's Where You Least Expect It...Everywhere (Wiley, July 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-46172-3, \$24.95) is available at bookstores nationwide, major online booksellers, or directly from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797. **For more information, please visit www.ordinarygreatnessbook.com.**

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Pamela Bilbrey helps organizations maximize their current strengths and bring out their ordinary greatness to achieve extraordinary results. A sought-after consultant, coach, and international speaker, she has authored three books and over fifty articles on employee engagement, leadership and team development, and organizational change.

Brian Jones has been described by his clients as “a breath of fresh air” and “the most effective consultant we’ve ever hired.” He travels around the USA helping teams and organizations achieve real results with ordinary yet great tools and advice. He is the author of several articles on leadership development and employee engagement.

For more information or to contact the authors go to www.OrdinaryGreatnessBook.com