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FLAMIN' HOT

**THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY
OF ONE MAN'S RISE FROM
JANITOR TO TOP EXECUTIVE**



Introduction

Let Your Hunger Be Your Guide



Which university did you graduate from?” someone asked me years ago during the Q and A period after a talk I’d given about entrepreneurship.

I froze. In those days, I rarely spoke about my humble beginnings. Nor had I planned to do so after being invited to speak at a prestigious program connected to a top Ivy League university. Almost all the previous guest lecturers at this business school had been Fortune 500 CEOs or famous professors with impressive pedigrees. Sure, I’d risen up through the ranks of Frito-Lay to become a vice president in charge of my own division at PepsiCo, our parent company, but the reality was that I hadn’t made it to high school, let alone to college. Even though I was already known by then as the “Godfather of Hispanic Marketing,” very few people knew of my start as a janitor or much about the real story of how I had

invented *Flamin' Hot Cheetos*—the multibillion-dollar brand that went on to become the most beloved, top-selling snack on the planet. How was I supposed to answer? Thinking fast, I decided to use the name of the township where I was born and raised in Southern California.

With a grin, I replied, “The University of Guasti.”

The grad student looked skeptical and pressed the point, asking if that was where I’d also received my PhD.

“Not exactly,” I answered and went on to explain that life had awarded me my PhD for being Poor, Hungry, and Determined!

Everyone laughed, including the student who had questioned my credentials. It wasn’t a new line for me and usually got a laugh. But that’s because it’s true!

With that encouragement, I decided, *Why not?* and began to tell my story, highlighting the lessons, secrets, and practical advice that had revolutionized my career and transformed the fortunes of my family and the corporation that had employed me. More than anything, I emphasized, when you choose to think like an executive and act like an owner, you’ll fire up your imagination with flamin’ hot ideas that can turn poverty into prosperity overnight.

Now I had their attention. More questions followed, especially, “How do you do that?”

“You learn to turn up the heat on your own powers of observation, and hidden opportunities will reveal themselves. And you know what? It only takes one great revelation to become a revolution.”

The MBA students were initially incredulous. These prin-

ciples of success that had taken me from the poorest part of the Spanish-speaking ghetto, the barrio, all the way to the boardroom were apparently not the standard business grad school fare.

Some of their remarks reminded me of the “Who do you think you are?” reactions I’d received from coworkers, managers, and higher-ups at Frito-Lay whenever I’d dared to break ranks and attempt to present my latest idea to top executives and decision makers.

“How did you overcome the obstacles?” asked one of the students who sat way in the back. “Weren’t you intimidated?”

She’d raised the excellent question that I hear all the time, in one form or another, from a range of people who face real obstacles and fears about how to take charge of their own destinies. It’s easy to be intimidated. You might be just trying to do well in your first full-time job, but you have a cranky manager who has no intention of mentoring you. Where do you go? What do you do? Or maybe you’re hoping to break into your dream industry, but you don’t know anyone who knows anyone who can open a door for you—so how do you barge in? Or what if you’ve been in the same spot for a long time and are considering a career reinvention but are afraid of the competition you’ll face? And what about that fear that coworkers, bosses, or customers might perceive you as lacking legitimacy because of your background or because you don’t have a fancy pedigree?

The first step to overcoming those obstacles is finding the courage to get past your fears.

“Intimidated? Are you kidding?” I admitted to the student who had asked if I was scared. “One hundred percent.”

Luckily, however, I knew of an antidote to fear that I’d found when I was eight years old and growing up on the wrong side of the tracks. *Literally*. There were actual train tracks that ran through the barrio of Rancho Cucamonga, California, which is adjacent to Guasti—a township that had been built in the middle of a sprawling vineyard. People who lived *south* of the tracks, including in the labor camp where my parents worked the fields (and where my nine siblings and I grew up, all of us crammed into one room of the dormitory-style housing), were classified as *really* poor. If you grew up north of the tracks, you were still in the hood, but people there seemed to do slightly better at keeping a roof over their heads and their families fed.

By the age of eight, I was old enough to feel the prejudice that came along with being brown skinned and at the lowest economic level. One of the great injustices to me at the time was that the teachers had two separate after-school reading programs—one for the white students and one for the brown students. Apparently, some of the teachers offered a reward to students who showed up on Tuesdays and got in line to come in for extra reading enrichment: cookies.

What eight-year-old doesn’t love cookies? But not all of us got to have them. Why? Because when the education authorities created the program, they set up two different lines and two different trailers—one for the Latino kids and one for the non-Latino kids. Nobody got cookies in the Latino line. No explanations. It was so hush-hush, I only heard a rumor that

there were cookies in the other trailer. Every Tuesday when we lined up for reading, I felt a pain in the pit of my stomach. Besides the familiar pang of hunger, I hurt from the injustice of being told: *This is your line; get in it.*

One Tuesday, I couldn't take it anymore. Forgetting my fear momentarily, I left my line and crossed over to the line for white kids. The minute I moved over, my friends looked at me like I was out of my mind.

"Richard, you're in the wrong line!" "What's wrong with you?" "Are you crazy?"

To them, this was a suicide mission. Obviously, I'd be given a serious beating from someone for stepping out of my line. But it didn't matter. I had to know if the rumors were true. Somehow, the thought of a delicious cookie made me forget my fear of being punished. Before long, I looked into the trailer and caught a glimpse of the most beautiful sight. There weren't just a few cookies, there were plates of them!

My friends watched with dread as I neared the point of no return. Determined to convince the nice white ladies of how eager I was to learn to read, I took a step inside and vanished from my friends' sight.

A half hour later, I emerged from the trailer, a paperback reader under my arm. When my friends finished their lesson after waiting in the line chosen for them, they ran over, anxious to hear how bad the beating was. I shrugged and told them there was no punishment. In fact, I said, "Look!" and revealed the contents of my pockets, which the teachers had filled with cookies for all of us!

That day I became a hero in my friends' eyes. More impor-

tant, I learned a lasting lesson about how to avoid getting stuck in the line of someone else's choosing. As I shared with those MBA students and as I continue to share with audiences from all walks of life, there is already a plate of cookies somewhere that has been baked especially for you. Your job is to get out of the line that isn't getting you anywhere and get into *your* cookie line.

Your hunger is more than an antidote to fear. It can also give you the mojo to get out of the poverty line and into the prosperity line. You can get out of the dead-end-job line and into the line of executive leadership. You can get out of the uneducated line and into the educated line. You can get out of that line where you are not recognized for your potential and into the line of opportunities for advancement. If you don't have the skills or the experience to be in the line you want to be in, if you lack connections, money, or opportunity to open the right doors, this book has been written to provide you with the strategies and mind-set shifts that can help. Even if you do have expertise and resources but have found yourself in a line that's not moving you forward or if you're looking for a new line that inspires you to achieve the greatness that's in you, I've included pointers meant to inspire, encourage, and remind you of your true destiny.

There's nothing wrong with admitting you're not where you want to be or that you are hungry—even if it's just for needed guidance from someone who's made it that you can apply to your own life. There is actually a craving for credible advice that I hear from people everywhere and at every step along their climb. Questions I hear run the gamut from “How

can I even get a job in this economy?” and “At my company, you get hired for a job and you’re expected to stay in that position, nobody gets promoted—should I quit?” to “What’s the best way to find a mentor at work?” and “How can I come up with a billion-dollar breakthrough idea and persuade my bosses to hear me out?” or even “What does it take to become an entrepreneur and set your own terms for advancement?” and “What specific policies help corporate executives empower frontline employees and managers to do more than punch the clock?”

The answers to those questions and more are covered in the chapters ahead. My story of making it all the way from a janitor’s broom closet on the ground floor to a top-level executive suite can be your story too, and this book will show you how.

You can start your journey by putting your hunger to work for you so you can move past your fears. There’s something better waiting for you on the other side of those walls—solutions to everyday problems that you can offer, ideas and opportunities you have the ability to create. Once I accepted the premise that my destiny was in my hands, the wheels began to turn, first in my mind and then in reality.

My heartfelt belief is that even though we’re not all born successful, each one of us is born to succeed. My proof is in the time- and hustle-tested approach that I’m proud to share in my voice and with my flavor, and that I hope may turn some conventional wisdom on its head. I mean, why go along with the crowd when you can throw your own party? My invitation goes out to everyone—from janitors to CEOs. In my hood, all


are welcome. These lessons are for you if you're ready for a revolution in your life, or if you're fascinated by rags-to-riches stories or by business in general, or you want to better understand branding, diversity, marketing, and the new paradigm of the empowered worker. The lessons of leadership and entrepreneurship apply universally, whether you are a frontline worker or a top executive, or anywhere in between.

Let your hunger be your guide and see just how far you can go. Your very own flamin' hot revelations await.

**Flamin'
Hot**



You Are Flamin' Hot

 evelations can begin in the most unlikely places. For instance, they might occur in the shopping aisles of a supermarket in the mostly Hispanic neighborhood of South Ontario, California—located just off the I-10 corridor in an agricultural/industrial stretch known as the Inland Empire. A revelation can even take place in the imagination of a janitor, somebody others might consider the least likely candidate to have a major flash of inspiration.

At the age of twenty-eight, I had been part of the janitorial team at Frito-Lay for more than nine years and had already been toying with ideas and side hustles that I hoped would add to my family's much-needed income. The garage was packed with my efforts to develop a signature product. We'd even made a little profit from door-to-door selling of my wife Judy's homemade tortillas and salsa.

Snacks, in my opinion, have always been essential to the good life. Let me tell you, there's nothing like eating Cheetos, Fritos, or Doritos right off the line. It's like getting bread fresh from the bakery. The chips are still warm, and the crispness, done right, can be close to perfection. The famous line in the much-quoted ad from back in the day—"Betcha can't eat just one!"—was no hype.

The whole chip/food production process was basically in my DNA. Growing up in Guasti with a vineyard in my backyard—coincidentally within walking distance to Frito-Lay—I was able to observe the planting, growing, and harvesting seasons. I'd also learned the entrepreneurial story of the township's Italian immigrant founder, Secondo Guasti, who had come to America in the 1800s with nothing but some grapevine cuttings. When he heard about a plot of land being sold dirt cheap, he looked at it and did what visionaries do—*he saw the unseen*. Not the same dry sandy soil awful for crops that others saw. The earth he saw reminded him of home—perfect for a vineyard. He imagined everything he could create from almost nothing. That's a revelation. Guasti and his wife not only planted grapes and began their winery, but they also built housing, a store, a post office, and a church for their workers. That's a revolution.

My parents, grandparents, and other relatives had come to Guasti in the 1950s as migrant farmworkers at a time when the demand for unskilled cheap labor had skyrocketed. They, too, imagined better lives, if not for themselves then for their children and grandchildren. As a first generation American, I never lost my sense of pride that my family's hard work had

helped put food and wine on the table for others. Despite our close quarters, we made the most of it—especially at dinner when our family gathered with other farmworkers and their children in a central dining room. The food was basic but hearty and flavorful. We may have been among the poorest families in the area, but as a young child I thought of us as “fun poor.”

Once I'd grown up, married, and had a family of my own to feed and clothe, money woes were no longer fun. At all. Fortunately, at the age of twenty-eight, I had a steady job as a janitor and had learned enough to help out on the production line when extra shifts were available. Unfortunately, by mid-1986, it had become apparent to most of the plant managers and frontline workers at the Frito-Lay facility in Rancho Cucamonga that the salty snack business was in trouble.

Sales for even our top brands were down. Rank-and-file workers like me usually didn't get the sales reports, but we could feel their effect. Hours were being cut. Maybe you know how scary that can be, as it is for anyone who has gone through a downturn in the economy—including past recessions and especially the disastrous toll from the recent global health pandemic. An atmosphere of fear spread through the ranks. Workers who usually clocked in for forty-hour shifts saw their time go down to thirty hours a week, then to twenty-eight and still falling. All I could think about was how to create more hours for myself and for fellow employees too.

Then I watched a memorable video sent from HQ in Dallas, Texas, created by Roger Enrico, on his way at that time to being made CEO of PepsiCo. To solve the problem of sagging

sales, rather than go to outside experts or only to his food scientists, the charismatic and down-to-earth Enrico decided to empower every one of the employees at Frito-Lay. On the video he explained that he wanted everyone who worked for the company to act like an owner.

He seemed to be speaking directly to me, or so I thought. With production down and all of us in need of more work, it made sense that we could use a new product or promotion to change the status quo—and the sooner, the better. My co-workers and I were hungry. Our families were too. As hourly employees, none of us were on salaries, so any drop in income created hardships like not being able to pay rent, utilities, the phone bill, the car payment, or worse. It's one thing when you have to tighten your own belt, but it's brutal when you have to watch your growing children go without basic needs.

The breaking point came when my shifts took yet another hit and I saw work sink to twenty-four hours a week. There was a feeling of doom and gloom at the plant, a sense of powerlessness. For the first time since I'd been a parent and an employee of the corporation, I had to do the one thing I'd dreaded all these years: apply for food stamps. That went against the resolution I'd made to never return to my childhood of being dependent on government assistance. When I became a parent, I had made a promise to never again live that way or have my children grow up as I had. The generational cycle of poverty that I was determined to escape suddenly seemed to have dragged us back into survival mode.

Often when economic disaster strikes, our first instinct is just to survive it. Instead, as I was going to learn, we do

have the choice to escape it and not only survive but even go on to thrive. The lesson up ahead was that prosperity is always on the other side of poverty.

Maybe that's why Roger Enrico's video message lit up my imagination the way it did. He was looking for solutions and so was I. If I could offer an idea worth investing in, that would lead to more hours. The problem, though, was that my knowledge of our business was limited to the production side of things. Once the product left our plant, I had no clue what happened next.

For answers, I decided to tag along on my day off with one of the route drivers. At each of the stops, our job was to unpack the boxes and arrange the various bags of chips on the different sales racks—not rocket science, but it gave me a whole new appreciation for the importance of packaging and presentation.

Our last stop was Ontario Ranch—a big grocery store or *supermercado*, as it's known in the Latino community—and, ironically, the same store where my wife and I did our regular shopping. We were about to leave when I found myself staring at the section right next to snacks, featuring all the spices popular with Hispanic consumers—crushed chili powder, ground cumin, large bags of dried oregano, dried chili peppers of different grades and varieties (from mild to burning hot off the charts), paprika, cayenne, onion and garlic powder, and spice mixes straight from Mexico.

The spice rack had been there all this time, and I'd gone by it or had even picked up items from it many times before. Something different caught my attention this time as I

surveyed all the spices and flavors, reminders of the richness of my culture and our cuisine. Down the aisle on the other side was the rack with all our brands of Frito-Lay snacks. None of them offered any real spices or flavors that tasted authentic to people here in my community.

My eyes opened wide. The contrast was unavoidable. That's when it hit me: the time had come to do a chip with some heat, some real spice!

One week later, on a hot and dusty Saturday morning, the family and I went back to Ontario Ranch to do our weekly grocery shopping. As usual, Judy and I and the kids—Lucky (Richard junior), age eleven; Steven, age six; and baby Mike, not even a year old—set out to run a list of errands that we tried to approach as a day-long adventure. Even if there was serious work to do, I figured you could turn it into some fun. What else should you do with your day off?

When we exited the store, the dry heat blasted us, but the wind that blew down from the hills into the valley helped to keep us cool. There was an edge in the air—one part excitement, one part stress. Money was getting tighter. With more hours getting cut at the plant, I wondered how much longer we could hold out before I had to try to find a second job. None of the Montañez family side hustles had panned out. That familiar hungry feeling had started to leave a knot in my stomach.

As we stepped outside that morning, we were tantalized by the rich smell of melted butter and roasted corn on the cob. Our favorite vendor was stationed by the door. The *elote* (corn) man José could be found out front on the weekends

whether it was blazing hot in the sun, or cloudy on colder days, or when the Santa Anas were blowing, or the rainy season had come.

This was business, his real, legit operation. All his. In the arena of the freshest, most flavorful corn on a stick, he owned 100 percent of the market share (even if I didn't know what that was yet). He only sold corn, and he made an art of it. At your request he'd add more butter, salt and pepper, along with grated white cheese (cotija), chili powder, fresh cilantro leaves, lime juice, salsa or hot sauce (the wet chili), or other condiments.

Now, a major plus of the Ontario Ranch market was that the owner knew me and would always cash my paycheck (in those ghetto-poor days, I didn't have a bank account), so I had a couple of extra dollars on me. I held up three fingers to José for our order (one for each of my two older boys and one that Judy and I could share with a couple of bites for the baby). Then IT hit me over the head.

Oh my God . . . I'm looking right at the corn and I think—of course! It looks like a Cheeto. Well, okay, a hot Cheeto. The question in my brain spun immediately into words. "Judy," I began, "what would happen if I put chili on a Cheeto?"

Judy did not laugh. She looked closely at me and said, "Tomorrow, first thing, go to the plant and bring home some Cheetos with no cheese. As many as you can get."

Ironically, the fact that Frito-Lay had recently cut down on so many shifts may have made that errand easier. Whenever there was stoppage with the seasoning process, some naked Cheetos would be left behind that we'd have to throw

out. If there was a backup, we'd set them to the side for a couple of hours in white tubs with lids and then put them in the trash. Because of the shift reduction, the set-asides were where I found lots of unused, unseasoned product. So I did as directed by my wife and filled a huge garbage bag full of Cheetos without cheese powder and took it home.

That day and for the week that followed, we went to work as a family, setting up an assembly line in our little rental house that soon resembled, in part, the laboratory of a mad scientist, the kitchen of a top chef, and the packing room of Santa and his elves. Judy and I experimented with several versions of her chili—a sauce that uses hot peppers with various ingredients like tomatoes, vinegar, and even sugar. Once we felt the amount of heat and spice was correct, and the consistency (different from salsa but nothing like traditional chili, which is a meal itself) was what we wanted, we were ready to test the homemade tumbler I'd developed that looked like a plastic bag for roasting a turkey. We had to do two stages—first, putting on the chili and making sure the exploded/fried cornmeal didn't get too soggy and, second, coating the hot naked Cheetos with cheese powder and making sure it was evenly and completely, 100 percent, distributed.

The boys and Judy and I were better than any food scientists. Our first batches were wimpy and tasted too bland. We upped the amount of chili and they were too wet. The cheese wouldn't stick. We experimented some more. We had a range of reactions from the kids and my wife and me: "Too mushy," "Too hot," "Not terrible, but something's missing."

A light bulb went off. We were missing the magical ingredient: *oil!* To achieve the right absorption, oil, the golden elixir for all chip making, would act as a conductor. So that's when I took a household spray bottle, filled it with oil, and spray-coated the Cheetos, followed by a second spray bottle filled with the chili. Finally, after drying them slightly, we put them into our makeshift tumbler with the cheese powder.

We improved our tumbler method by adjusting the amounts of speed and pressure. If you're too slow, the coating doesn't hold. If you're too hard, the Cheetos break and you get crumbs. At long last, we got the balance just right.

When I removed that first Cheeto from the tumbler, we all could see that we'd hit the jackpot. "This is it," I proclaimed. We did not eat it. The color—fire engine red—wasn't exactly what I'd envisioned, but it started to grow on me the more we refined and repeated our steps and then tasted our wares. We were ecstatic. Watching our prototype come to life was almost like witnessing the birth of a member of our family!

Before going to bed that night, we made up several Ziploc bags that we'd decided to carefully share with a few friends and coworkers. The response was over the top. To a person, they were a monumental success, and so addictive that the next question asked by everyone was—*How can I get some more?* Nobody could eat just one. This was no weakling amount of heat, though. One friend commented, "These Cheetos are hot all right, *flamin' hot!*" And that's where I got the name. It stuck: Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

Still clueless about how much pushback and outrage I'd soon face from my immediate and upper-level bosses—*You*

did what? Put chili on a Cheeto? That's a sacrilege!—I figured it was time to get an official greenlight to move forward.

A lot of people who had no idea about corporate protocol urged me, “You gotta call the CEO.”

In the executive hierarchy in those days, only the top tier executives of Frito-Lay would ever have a reason to call the CEO of our parent company directly. Otherwise you'd be breaking ranks. This was how the chain of command worked. Still, I reasoned, the CEO had made a direct appeal to me—and other employees—to act like an owner. Wouldn't it be appropriate to respond directly and tell him my big idea? Besides, if I didn't take action to let somebody in power know that this solution could actually make a difference for our division, soon everyone could be out of a job.

With that logic, and with hunger for work as my guide, I took a chance and nervously, against many odds, broke ranks to make the call. The ordeal made me feel eight years old again, refusing to be stuck in the line that others had set up for me and not giving up until I'd gotten into the line where there were cookies.

“Roger Enrico's office,” said the woman who answered the phone. A visionary in her own right, as I'd later learn, she was his indispensable executive assistant. She added, “This is Patti.”

“Patti, I was hoping to speak to the CEO, Mr. Enrico.”

“May I ask who's calling?”

“This is Richard Montañez. From Frito-Lay.”

“Good afternoon, Richard. I don't think we've spoken before. Are you the vice president?” Again, that was because

the only executives who would call the CEO would be his direct reports. Even a vice president would usually defer to a president of a division to call the head of a large corporation.

"No, I work in Southern California."

"Oh"—she sounded like she was flipping through the directory—"you're the VP out in Southern California?"

"No," I explained, "I work in a plant."

She apologized for making assumptions, then checked to see if that meant I was the vice president of operations.

"No," I said, keeping my tone upbeat, "I work inside."

Patti paused, then asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm the GU." This was basically the giveaway. GU stands for general utility. She asked me to repeat, so I said, "I'm the GU. I'm the janitor."

There were a few seconds of complete quiet. Dead air. Finally she broke the silence and said, "Oh. I'm going to have to find out where he is at the moment and am not sure he can pick up. Can you tell me what this is regarding?"

What could I say? All that came to mind was the truth—"Sure, Patti, um, I have an idea. A good one. I want to share it with him."

Another several seconds of silence followed. At last, she said, "Hang on, Richard. Let me locate Mr. Enrico. Give me a couple of minutes, just stay there. I'm going to get him on the line."

"No problem," I said. "Thank you."

Two minutes later, Patti came back and said, "Richard, thanks for holding, I have Roger on the line for you."

Not Mr. Enrico, but Roger. Wow.

Roger Enrico's tone put me at ease. "Richard, how are you? I heard you have an idea?"

"I do." I got right to the point, letting him know I had developed a prototype of a snack that was getting a great reaction. Roger sounded impressed.

"Richard," he said, "I'm glad you called. You know what? I'd like to see what you've got. In person. How 'bout I head out to the plant in two weeks? We'll make it a priority."

Roger Enrico, by every account over the course of his legendary career, was a visionary. He was able to see the unseen. He recognized something of value in me. He didn't see someone who only mopped the floors. He saw my potential.

When I hung up, I was dizzy with shock and excitement. My revelation was a priority. The revolution had begun.



DID I KNOW FLAMIN' HOT CHEETOS WOULD BECOME THE NUMBER ONE snack of the entire world, kicking off several other products and generating billions of dollars of revenue a year? No way. Was it an easy road? Absolutely not. But in my heart, I did know that I was doing more than creating a new product. This crazy idea, I knew, would be a means of creating a bridge for people to come over and try something that was different, something they would like.

Could a spicy snack cooked up in the imagination of a janitor actually bring people of different backgrounds together?

Without any proof that could happen, the possibility gave me a sense of pride and purpose that I would need to overcome the challenges, obstacles, and twists and turns that lay ahead. Even though I was fortunate to find a handful of mentors who quietly gave me advice, I would also have to face an onslaught of corporate backstabbing—including the time our top food scientist sent out a memo telling sales and marketing to kill the new product before it made it to the store shelves. At several points, I would encounter rampant racism, both overt and covert, including ill-informed remarks about whether I would need a translator when I first visited our corporate headquarters. Not only would I have to draw on lessons learned earlier in my life, but I'd have to fight tooth and nail to ultimately get Flamin' Hot Cheetos and subsequent brands I invented to the public. The effort would require developing a guerrilla marketing strategy that involved spending my own money and taking my family with me to visit more than a hundred corner shops and mini-marts all around the hood in East Los Angeles, buying out their inventory to trigger bigger reorders.

Before I'd even conceived of Flamin' Hot Cheetos, I had to consciously examine earlier accomplishments and lessons learned—including those from smaller ideas for products, innovations, and improvements that eventually saved the corporation tens of thousands of dollars. During my tenure at the company—which culminated in my becoming the first Mexican American to be promoted to an executive role at PepsiCo—I never stopped relying on the power of great ideas. Even when the system worked hard to keep me down (oh, and

it did), I kept my faith in great ideas and plain old practical solutions; that's what helped me find hidden opportunities to get ahead that even my bosses couldn't see—basically making a science out of walking through closed doors.

None of us really “comes up” with our biggest, boldest ideas. Instead, I believe, they arrive into our awareness by means of revelation. That's why, in the moment when the idea pops into your head, like the classic light bulb flipping on, you feel that you're seeing something that has been there all along, *unseen* by you before—or by anyone else. You'll wonder—*How come I never thought of this before? How come I didn't see it before?*

All that is necessary to rock your world is a subtle shift in thinking.

Mind-set shifts can truly be as simple as refreshing your understanding of certain words, say, for example, the words *idea* and *vision*. At many of the stages of my success, I saw over and over how the words I spoke had the ability to change or influence behavior. That got me thinking about the meaning and derivation of words, so much so that I developed a fascination for etymology and made it a habit to meditate every morning on a particular word.

One of my favorite discoveries is the origin of the word *idea*, which comes from the late-fourteenth-century Latin as an “archetype, concept of a thing in the mind of God.” Earlier we also get a verb from the Greek word *idein*, meaning “to see.” From the 1610s, the word *idea* (from the Greek *ennoia*) was defined as a “mental image or picture” or a con-

cept of something that needs to be done that's different from what is observed.*

This inspires us to consider the possibility that an idea revealed to us by ourselves already exists as a concept in what some would call the mind of God or in what others call the mind of the Universe. All this is telling us is that when we choose to tap the resources of our imagination for ideas of doing things a little differently, the concepts have been waiting for us to find them. An idea that has not come into being yet can still be seen in our inner vision as a mental image or picture.

After I had convinced myself that it was possible for anyone to have a revelation, small or large, my next step was to use the power of *vision* in new or different ways. The thirteenth-century word *vision* has meant “something seen in the imagination or in the supernatural.” Other than the act of seeing and the thing that is being seen, by the twentieth century, the word *vision* had begun to describe a quality of leadership that commands “statesman-like foresight” and wisdom.†

When you allow yourself to imagine a better future, your vision will show you the way to that awesome destiny. When you embrace the power of vision, you will see that your future is not ahead of you—*it is in you*.

The real secret to finding traction with the hottest ideas is that it's not the vision that counts the most: it's the visionary.

**Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “idea (n.),” www.etymonline.com/word/idea.

†*Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “vision (n.),” www.etymonline.com/word/vision.

When you start to realize that *you* are the hot stuff, magic happens. Others will begin to notice. Some will gravitate toward you and want to bask in your flame. Some will be jealous and resentful. They may want to snag your destiny.

There was a time, some years ago, when I questioned whether it was really possible to overcome the odds and achieve the American dream. Sadly, like a lot of us who grew up in the hood or who face daily struggles, I once believed that only a fortunate few ever get to come up with ideas that gain real traction.

Well, let me assure you, I was wrong. Being from the ghetto, by the way, I don't easily admit to being wrong. Even now, when someone challenges my opinion enough, I've been known to say, "*Hey, let's take this outside!*" Luckily, on those rare occasions, my wife, Judy—who grew up in the same Southern California town that I did—helps me keep my cool.

"Richard," she'll remind me, "don't forget, we've come a long way from the barrio."

Exactly. And as every good husband knows—our wives are always right. Judy and I have come a long way. So, though I may still be ghetto, thanks to the lessons I've been blessed to learn and share with others, I'm *ghetto rich!*

Turns out that good things do indeed come from the hood.

Your riches are waiting for you, as they were for me. I am here to reveal yourself to you, to plug in the voltage that helps you flip on your switch or turn up your heat. No matter where you grew up, no matter your age, your background, or your current position, even during the toughest of times you have the means to achieve *your* American dream.

In this book I've chosen the top ten core lessons for achieving your dreams that I've been blessed to learn over the course of my multifaceted, highly successful career, which, frankly, almost no one ever thought possible.

These lessons are drawn from my story and also from the experiences of mentors who have encouraged me and from the stories of individuals I've helped to mentor. All together they're meant to give you the tools for entrepreneurial thinking and for taking action as the rightful owner of your own destiny. My aim is to empower you with the know-how for creating opportunities to be wildly successful and thrive in your corner of the world. Our discussion will help us examine the following indispensable resources that enable you to develop your individualized action plan for success:

- * **Your sizzling gifts of imagination** and how to light the spark of your own breakthrough *ideas* by using your *vision* to see the unseen.
- * **Your supercharging capacity for *initiative*** and how you can apply it toward understanding the needs of the business that employs you—even if it's not in your job description—so that you can impress higher-ups, potential employers, and yourself.
- * **The art of practicing the future you** by fostering both *competence* and *excellence*—sometimes borrowing strategies that have worked for others whose journeys inspire you.
- * **The habit of knowing when to act and when not to act** on a hot *opportunity*—and how to avoid having your destiny stolen from you.

- * **The unexpected edge you gain** by studying how the most successful *entrepreneurs* dare to look ridiculous, whether launching a side hustle or start-up, or working their way up the chain of command.
- * **The ever useful “What if? What then?” empowerment method for navigating risk** that sets you apart from the competition.
- * **An authentic storytelling approach you can develop** and use to successfully pitch your idea to a skeptical room of decision makers—and why you don’t have to influence everyone, only the right ones.
- * **Your underused talents for taking on the competition** by making sure you have a *strategy* to rise above the haters and, if needed, a whole new game plan they’ll never see coming.
- * **Your own pathway to leadership** and the steps you can take to communicate like a pro and connect to others and *electrify* them as well as the marketplace—whether you’re speaking up for yourself, reinventing your career, or heading up a company of your own.
- * **The true greatness that is already in you** as you forge ahead, without need of permission, living your life with *confidence*, joy, and purpose—even during times when you have to “faith it till you make it.”

Many of the lessons I’ll be sharing showed me the way to resources I didn’t know were already within me, just as I know they are there for you, for free, waiting to be put to use. You have not only what it takes to be more successful than

you realize, but you already have the makings of your own flamin' hot ideas. Your own sources of inspiration are right there for you—within your grasp or slightly past your reach, in your line of vision or just beyond it.



AFTER I CALLED ROGER ENRICO THAT DAY, THE UPROAR FROM MY managers was insane. They were beside themselves—*Who let the janitor call the CEO? We don't pay you to come up with new products!*

Their opinion didn't matter. What mattered was how my sons looked at me with new eyes and bragged, "Oh, my dad is something." Long before promotions or attention or more, they'd tell me, "Dad, you're gonna be somebody big."

To them, I was the real entity who was flamin' hot. Everything that I hadn't been early on was going to help me be everything that I would become.

If you don't know how flamin' hot you are, I'm here to light the fire. And there is no better time to get started than now. For anyone who thinks you have to start at the bottom and claw your way to the top, I say, "I didn't start at the bottom, I started at the beginning."

That's where we're starting—at *the beginning*. So let's begin. *Vámonos*.