

THE LESSONS NOBODY TEACHES

Six Business Principles from an Industry No One Needs

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*For every operator in a business
people want but do not need,*

*And for Natalie,
who was sitting right next to me when she told me she
wanted to own my dive shop.*

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Introduction

Nobody Needs This

Nobody needs scuba diving. I have said some version of that sentence more times than I can count — to students on the first night of a class, to my own daughters, to a reporter from Dive News Wire who looked a little surprised to hear it from the guy who owns the dive shop. It is still the truest thing I know about the business I have run for more than twenty years, and it is the right place to start this book, because everything in the six chapters that follow only makes sense once you accept it.

You cannot eat scuba diving. It does not get you to work in the morning. It will not keep the furnace running through a Michigan January. Every person who has ever handed me money for a certification card had a hundred other places that money could have gone and a hundred other ways to spend the weekend it took to earn it, and they chose this instead — freely, with nothing forcing the decision. That is not a marketing insight I picked up at a conference. It is the actual operating condition of the industry I have spent my career in, and once you sit with it honestly, it explains more about running a business like mine than anything they teach in a certification course.

I am the owner and operator of Divers Incorporated in Ann Arbor, Michigan — not the founder. That distinction mattered less to me when I bought the shop in 2004 than it does now, and it comes up again in Chapter One, because the difference between building something and being trusted to carry it forward turns out to be most of what this book is

about. I am a PADI Course Director, which is the highest instructor-level credential recreational diving hands out, and I have spent a good portion of the last two decades in rebreathers, trimix, and overhead-environment diving on top of the ordinary work of certifying beginners. In 2007 I took on the concession to run the bottomlands at White Star Quarry, a dedicated training site outside Toledo, Ohio, with no coastline, no warm water, and no coral reef anywhere near it. Cold, fresh, landlocked water has been my entire market for most of my career. If the lessons in this book hold up in that market, I think they hold up anywhere.

Here is how each of the six chapters works, so you know what you are getting into. It starts with something specific — a story from the shop floor, or the water, or a conversation I should have had sooner than I did. Then it steps outside the dive industry entirely, because I have found that a principle which only works in one narrow business was never really a principle to begin with; it was a coincidence. And it ends with something you can actually go do, because a lesson that does not change anything is just a story with better lighting.

I did not learn any of this quickly, and I did not learn most of it on purpose. I learned the value of range because I could not afford to hire around my own limitations. I learned about pricing by getting it wrong in front of customers who were too polite to tell me so. I learned who my best customer actually was only after I spent years chasing everybody else. None of it arrived as a framework. It arrived as a Tuesday, the way it usually does in a small business, and I had to go back later and figure out what had actually happened.

That is the shape of this whole book, and it is the shape of the industry I stayed in longer than I ever expected to. I was, and still am, what people in my world call a jack of all trades. It took me most of a career to learn that the proverb everyone quotes about that is missing its own best line.

Chapter One

Better Than the Master of One

“Jack of all trades, master of none, though oftentimes better than master of one.”

The proverb that most people quote stops halfway through. “Jack of all trades, master of none” — you have heard it used to dismiss people who have done many things rather than one thing deeply. The implication is that breadth is a compromise. That if you have not committed fully to a single discipline, you have somehow failed. What most people do not know is that this is only half the original proverb. The full version, as it appeared in the seventeenth century, reads: “Jack of all trades, master of none, though oftentimes better than master of one.” The second clause changes everything. The people who dropped it did the rest of us a real disservice, because that second half is not a consolation prize. It is the whole argument. The proverb was not a criticism. It was an observation — and a favorable one — about the value of range.

What a Typical Tuesday Looks Like

On any given Tuesday at Divers Incorporated, I might start the morning doing equipment repairs — rebuilding a first-stage regulator, tracking down a slow leak in a buoyancy compensator, diagnosing why a wetsuit zipper that worked fine last week is now binding. By mid-morning I could be teaching a class, walking students through the physics of pressure and the foundational skills they need to stay alive

underwater. After that: a call with a manufacturer, a look at the books, a social media post, a trip itinerary, or troubleshooting why the air compressor is making a sound it should not be making. People who run narrowly specialized businesses look at that list and see chaos. I see a Tuesday.

The dive industry requires range. The technical side — equipment maintenance, gas blending, understanding how pressure affects the human body at depth — is demanding, and the consequences of errors can be severe. The instructional side requires patience, communication, and the ability to read people under stress. The business side requires everything else: marketing, financial management, customer relationships, team building, and the ability to make decisions quickly with incomplete information. If you can only do one of those things well, you are going to need help with all the others. In a small business, that help is expensive and often unavailable exactly when you need it most. What I discovered over the course of running this business is that the ability to do many things competently is not a character flaw. It is a competitive advantage. And it is rare enough that when you have it and use it deliberately, it is worth considerably more than mastery of a single discipline.

The MacGyver Problem

I have always been what people in my world call a MacGyver. If something is broken and needs to work before the next class starts, I will figure out how to fix it with what is on hand. This used to embarrass me slightly — like a real professional would have the right part on the shelf. I no longer feel that way. Improvisation is a discipline. The ability to look at a problem with the available materials and find a workable

solution — quickly, under pressure, without the luxury of handing it to a specialist — is exactly what a small business needs most. Specialists are expensive. They are also unavailable on Tuesday morning when class starts in forty minutes.

The MacGyver mindset does not replace expertise. In the dive industry, expertise on the technical side is non-negotiable — people's lives depend on properly maintained equipment and properly trained instructors. What I am saying is that technical excellence combined with the ability to handle adjacent problems independently is worth more, in the daily operation of a business, than technical excellence alone. Think about the last time something went unexpectedly wrong in your operation. Did you have to call someone? Wait? Pay emergency rates? Each of those moments is a cost in time, money, or both that a broader skill set would have avoided. The MacGyver is cheaper to run than the pure specialist and more adaptable when things — as they always do — go sideways.

When Specialization Becomes a Trap

I have watched dive instructors build careers around a single specialty — technical deep diving, rebreather instruction, cave diving — and do it brilliantly. When the market for that specialty shifts, they are stranded. The market for deep technical diving contracted in the early 2000s as recreational diving grew and moved toward accessible, shallower experiences. Some of the most skilled technical instructors I knew could not make the pivot. They had spent fifteen or twenty years mastering one thing and had built no adjacent capability. They either left the industry or continued

in the narrow discipline for a dwindling pool of customers. The instructors who survived and grew through that shift maintained range. They could teach a recreational class on Tuesday and run a technical program on Saturday. They knew equipment well enough to service what they sold. They could speak credibly with a first-time student and an experienced trimix diver in the same afternoon. That range was not divided attention — it was deliberate breadth, and it made them significantly more durable.

This pattern exists in every industry. The specialist whose entire professional identity rests on one discipline is dependent on continued demand for that specific thing. When the market moves, they have fewer options than they appear to. The person with depth in their primary area and competence in adjacent ones can move when the market moves.

The Hidden Cost of Narrow Expertise

There is a cost to narrow expertise that most people do not calculate: it creates organizational brittleness. When the one person who knows how to do the critical thing is unavailable — sick, burned out, recruited away, or simply needing a day off — the operation either stops or degrades noticeably. This is not a hypothetical problem. In every small business I have worked with, there are one or two functions that are dangerously dependent on a single person's knowledge. Sometimes that person is the owner. Sometimes it is a long-tenured employee whose expertise was never documented or distributed because it was always easier to just ask them.

Distributing expertise is a deliberate act. It requires investment in cross-training, documentation, and the patience to let someone less skilled than you do something you could do faster yourself. In the short term, it looks inefficient. Over a period of months, it creates an operation that can handle the Tuesday morning problems without a crisis every time the specialist is not available. In the dive industry, I have seen operations ground to a halt because the one person who knew how to blend gas mixtures or service a particular regulator brand was unavailable. The equipment failure was the visible problem. The actual problem was organizational brittleness built on narrow expertise that was never backed up. Your business almost certainly has the equivalent. The question is whether you have identified it and whether you are doing anything about it.

Beyond the Dive Shop

The breadth-versus-depth debate plays out in every profession, and the real world rewards range more generously than the career advice literature suggests. In software development, the developer who can move across the stack, understand the deployment environment, and communicate clearly with non-technical stakeholders removes more friction per week from the operation than a pure specialist — not because they are better at any single thing, but because the friction they remove compounds across every engagement. They are cheaper to run than a deep specialist for most of what the work actually requires, and more adaptable when requirements shift.

In the trades — plumbing, electrical, HVAC, construction — the most successful independent operators are almost

always the ones who can diagnose problems that cross discipline lines. A contractor who understands enough electrical to know when a plumbing problem is actually a grounding issue saves themselves and their customers from the delays and costs of specialist-to-specialist handoffs. That diagnostic range has real dollar value in every job, repeated across every engagement, adding up to a meaningfully different business over a career. The contractor who cannot read across disciplines sends the customer to three different specialists. The one who can often solves the problem in one visit.

In professional services — consulting, accounting, law, design — the single-discipline practitioner is consistently undercut by the practitioner who can speak credibly across adjacent areas. A marketing consultant who also understands financial modeling, or a lawyer who deeply understands the industry they serve rather than just the law, is not just answering the question asked. They are identifying the question that should have been asked, which is the most valuable service any advisor can provide and the one that commands the highest fees. The MacGyver shows up in every field. The question is whether you are embarrassed by yours or building with it.

The Work

Stop being embarrassed about your range. If you have done many things, that is not evidence of indecision. It is evidence of adaptable capability. Start describing it that way, to yourself and to others. Take an honest inventory of what you can do competently — not just your primary expertise, but everything adjacent. Most people undersell their range

because they compare their adjacent skills to specialists. The standard is not world-class. It is: can I handle this without calling someone? For most of what comes up in a small business, good enough is the right standard. You are almost certainly more capable in more areas than your professional self-description suggests.

Identify the gaps that are actually costing you — not theoretical ones but real ones showing up as dollars, delays, or risk. Those are worth closing. Not to achieve mastery. To achieve self-sufficiency in the areas where dependency is creating real problems. Then identify where your organization carries brittleness — where a single person's knowledge represents an unmitigated risk to your operation. Build the cross-training, documentation, or redundancy to address it. This is not busywork. It is the structural difference between a business that survives the loss of a key person and one that does not. The proverb ends with “though oftentimes better than master of one.” That is not a consolation. It is an observation about what real, operating businesses need every day. Own your range. It is worth more than you think, and it is worth actively protecting.

Chapter Two

Find Your Megan

“Every dive center needs to find a Megan. I love ours.”

In December 2019, I was in Bonaire. It was the end of the best year Divers Incorporated had ever run — not the best year in recent memory, the best year, period — and the trip felt earned. My family was there. The business was pointed straight up. Then something went wrong at the shop. Not a small thing. The person I depended on most to keep the operation running when I was not in the building did not show up, did not call, did not explain. I was thousands of miles away with no good options and no contingency plan. That is when Megan showed up.

Megan is a member of my team at Divers Incorporated. She has been for years. I will not detail exactly what she did that December, because the full story belongs in the main book where it has the context it deserves. What I will tell you is that what she did was not required. Not in her job description. Nobody would have faulted her for not doing it. She did it anyway, because that is who Megan is and because she genuinely cared whether we made it. I sat with that for a long time afterward. Not just with gratitude, though there was plenty of that. With something more useful: the recognition that what Megan did was not random. It was the entirely predictable behavior of someone whose values aligned with the business she worked for, who felt genuinely invested in its outcome, and who was in a role that gave her the room to act on that investment. Every business needs a Megan. Almost

nobody talks about how to build the conditions where one can exist.

What Loyalty Actually Is

We talk about loyalty as if it is a fixed trait — something people either have or do not have. That framing leads to the wrong hiring criteria and the wrong management approach. Loyalty is not a trait. It is a response. People become loyal when they feel genuinely seen, genuinely trusted, and genuinely invested in the outcome. In a business context, that means they understand why the work matters, they have real ownership over a piece of it, and they believe — based on evidence — that the person running the business actually cares whether they succeed.

Most small business hiring is transactional. Post the role, screen for skills, hire the best available option, treat the relationship as primarily economic from that point forward. Pay them, they work, both sides keep the arrangement. That produces employees. It does not produce Megans. The distinction is not about salary. I know operators who pay above market and have mediocre teams, and operators who run lean who have people who would walk through a wall for them. The difference is not the paycheck. It is whether the people on the team feel like participants in something or like vendors fulfilling a contract.

They Usually Announce Themselves

Here is something I have observed over decades of building teams: the people who become essential tend to announce themselves before they are officially part of the operation. They ask questions in the interview that go beyond

the role — about the direction of the business, the problems being worked through, the things that keep the owner up at night. They offer observations that have nothing to do with the position they are applying for. They follow up without being prompted. They behave, in the early interactions, as if they already work there and already care about how it goes.

Most hiring processes filter this out. Structured interviews and competency matrices are designed to measure what is measurable. A candidate who shows up with opinions about improving the operation before they have the job can seem presumptuous. The instinct is to redirect them back to the scripted questions. I have learned to do the opposite. When someone demonstrates investment before I have given them any reason to be invested, I pay close attention. That kind of engagement comes from a person who is genuinely interested in the work — not just the compensation or the role, but the actual thing the business does and whether it succeeds. That is rare, and when I find it, I take it seriously.

In the dive industry, passion for the work is sometimes pre-installed — people who want to work in diving usually love it. The challenge is finding people who love it enough to bring that energy to the parts of the job that are not glamorous. The paperwork. The equipment maintenance after hours. The student who needs five attempts at a skill that everyone else completed on the second try and who still deserves patience and respect on the fifth. In other industries, finding that quality requires more deliberate searching. But it is in every field. The people who genuinely care about their work show it in details — how they describe past roles, what they are curious about, what they notice that others miss. You have to know what you

are looking for and be willing to prioritize it above credentials that are easier to measure.

How You Keep Them

Compensation is necessary but not sufficient. Pay your people fairly. If you are materially underpaying someone critical to your operation, you are borrowing time and will eventually pay a much higher cost than the raise would have cost. But salary does not create the loyalty that produces a December moment. What actually retains the right people — the ones in the roles that matter most — is something less transactional. Autonomy: real authority over their domain, the ability to make decisions in their area without asking permission for each one. Recognition: not programs and reviews but the regular, specific act of noticing what someone did and telling them directly and genuinely. Growth: the clear sense that you see where they are going, not just where they are today.

In the dive industry, one of the most effective retention investments I have found costs relatively little in money: professional development. Paying for an instructor's next certification. Supporting a Divemaster who wants to move toward teaching. Helping someone add a specialty that makes them more valuable. These investments signal something important — you see this person's future and are contributing to it. The translation to any industry is direct. Invest in the development of the people who matter. The investment is rarely wasted. The people who stay will stay longer and perform better because of it. And when someone eventually moves on — and some will — they leave as advocates for what you built, not cautionary tales.

When You Cannot Find One

Not every team has a Megan. Some business owners read this chapter and feel something closer to absence than recognition — the realization that they are not sure anyone on their current team fits the description. That is information worth sitting with, and it points in two directions. The first direction is inward. Are you creating the conditions where a Megan could emerge? Have you built an environment where people have real ownership, feel genuinely recognized, and have a stake in the outcome beyond their paycheck? If the answer is no — if the operation is primarily transactional — then a Megan, even if she joined, would not stay a Megan for long. The environment shapes the behavior.

The second direction is toward the hiring process. If the conditions are right and the right people are still not showing up, the issue is the pipeline. You might be advertising in the wrong places, screening for the wrong qualities, or making the role sound less compelling than it could. The Megans of the world are not looking for a job posting. They are looking for a mission and a team that is actually going somewhere. Your description of the role needs to communicate that. Building a team with a Megan in it is not a single hire. It is a culture, built over time, that makes it possible for the right person to show up and choose to stay. Start there.

Beyond the Dive Shop

The Megan principle is not about passion industries. The harder test of whether this kind of person exists is in fields where the work itself is less obviously compelling — and the answer is yes, in every industry I have observed closely, but

you have to know what you are looking for and be willing to prioritize it above credentials that are easier to measure. In the restaurant industry, the Megan equivalent is the server or cook who treats the restaurant as if they own it — who notices that a regular has been seated in a bad spot and moves them without being asked, who fills the salt shakers without a manager mentioning it, who stays past the end of their shift because the table they have been taking care of all evening is still there.

In the trades, this person is the crew member who reads the plans the night before and calls the foreman on a Saturday when they notice something on a drive-by of the job site. In professional services, this is the associate who understands that their job is not just the deliverable on the engagement letter but the success of the client's underlying situation — who follows up without being prompted and notices when something is off before the partner has to ask. What all of these people share is not a job description. It is a disposition: genuine investment in the outcome of the place they work. That disposition can exist in any field. You find it by asking the right reference questions — not what was this person good at, but can you describe a time they did something that was not required of them, and did they treat the organization's problems as their own.

The Work

Think about your team right now. Not the org chart — the actual people who make your operation work. Who is your Megan? If a name comes to mind immediately: does that person know it? Have you told them specifically and recently — not at the annual review, but recently — what they mean to

the operation? Most business owners think this more often than they say it, and the gap between thinking it and saying it has a real cost in the person's sense of whether they are seen. If a name does not come to mind, be honest about which problem you are actually dealing with: you either have not found your Megan yet, or you have not built the conditions where one could emerge. The solution to the first is a hiring and pipeline problem. The solution to the second is a culture and leadership problem. Neither is solved by waiting.

Chapter Three

The Price of Toxicity

“The cost of keeping the wrong person compounds every day you wait.”

You already know who I am writing about. Hopefully it is not you. There is someone in your operation right now — or recently, or soon — who fits the description. You hired them, or inherited them, watched them change or you are them. Somewhere in the last several months you had the thought: this is not working, and something needs to change. Then you went back to work and did not change it. I am not judging. I have done this more times than I should admit. The decision to address a toxic employee is one of the hardest calls in small business, for reasons that are entirely understandable and almost entirely wrong. This chapter is about why we avoid it, what it actually costs, and how to stop paying a price you never agreed to.

Three Ways to Get Here

Toxic employees come from one of three places. The hiring mistake: someone who presented well and performed poorly, or whose values turned out not to match the ones the business actually operates by. This is the most common origin. The mismatch was present from the start, and every week of delay compounds the cost. The circumstantial change: the employee who was genuinely good — maybe excellent — and then something shifted. A life event, a change in their role, new dynamics in the team. People who were once real assets

can become real problems when conditions change. The honest question here is whether conditions can be restored, not simply whether the person needs to go.

The power problem: the employee who has accumulated informal authority through tenure, institutional knowledge, or customer relationships, and is using it in ways that damage the team. This is the most dangerous category because the value they bring is real — and so is the cost. The longer the informal power goes unaddressed, the harder it becomes to address without appearing to punish competence. The response to each is different. The first step toward each is the same: name the problem clearly, to yourself, instead of managing around it indefinitely.

Micromanagement Is Usually a Symptom

Before addressing the toxic employee directly, we need to talk about micromanagement — because the two are more connected than most people recognize. Micromanagement is usually diagnosed as a management style problem. The boss needs control, cannot delegate, does not trust people. That is sometimes true. In small businesses, I find it is more often a response to a prior experience of broken trust — usually with a specific person who produced inconsistent work, misrepresented their effort, or failed in a way the owner could not afford to repeat. Checking behind people is a rational response to getting burned. It becomes a management problem when it gets applied to everyone, including the people who have never given you a reason to doubt them.

If you are micromanaging your entire team, there is a real possibility you started doing it because of someone specific —

and that person is still on your team. You have organized your management approach around your weakest link, and everyone else is paying the price. Genuine empowerment means giving people defined authority over a defined area, clear standards for what success looks like, and the expectation that they will deliver it without requiring your involvement in every decision. You cannot genuinely empower someone you do not trust. Before you can build real team culture, you have to be honest about who you actually trust and what you are going to do about the rest.

The Real Math

Here is what the person you have not addressed is actually costing you. Your best people are watching. High performers identified the problem before you did. Every day that person stays is a message about what standards actually mean here. High performers have options. When they start exercising them, you will know — often after they are already gone. Your attention is being diverted. Think about the last week. How much time went to managing around this person, cleaning up after them, preparing for difficult conversations, or simply thinking about them in an unproductive way? That attention has a real value. You are spending it on the wrong problem.

Your customer experience is downstream of team culture. In any service business, internal dynamics leak into customer interactions in ways that are subtle and persistent. A team managing around a difficult person is not at its best, and that gap is visible to customers before they can articulate it. The cost compounds. A toxic team member who stays three months too long costs more than one who stays one month too long. Damage to morale, culture, and talent accumulates.

Every week you wait is a week of compounding cost on a problem that was already expensive on day one.

The Empowerment Framework

Empowerment is one of the most used and least understood concepts in small business management. It is often confused with abdication — turning people loose without standards and hoping for the best. That is not empowerment. That is neglect with a positive framing. Real empowerment has three components. First: defined scope. The person knows exactly what decisions belong to them. Not everything — a specific, bounded area of the operation. Second: clear standards. They know what excellent looks like within that scope. Not a vague directive to “do your best” but a specific, describable outcome. Third: explicit authority. They have been told, clearly, that the decisions within their scope are theirs to make without escalating.

Most business owners get the first two right and skip the third. They define the role and the standards but never explicitly grant the authority. The result is that people check in anyway — not because they are not capable, but because they have never been told they do not need to. The owner stays in the loop. The loop stays bottlenecked. Nothing changes. The connection to toxic employees is this: in an operation where authority is clear and standards are defined, a toxic team member is easier to identify and address. Their behavior is measurable against a standard rather than a vague sense that something is off.

Beyond the Dive Shop

The pattern of the kept toxic employee appears in every industry, and the cost calculation is identical regardless of setting. In retail — a floor manager who has been with the company twelve years, knows every system, handles the schedule, and also quietly undermines every new hire's confidence within their first thirty days. The owner keeps them because of the institutional knowledge. The real cost: four good new employees have quit in two years, and the culture of the floor is measurably more defensive than the owner imagines.

In professional services, this person is often a revenue generator — the account manager who brings in significant billings but treats junior staff badly enough that the firm's best future talent is quietly being driven toward the exit. In healthcare, a front-desk staff member who handles scheduling efficiently and is visibly rude to anxious patients approximately once per shift: the scheduling knowledge is worth far less than the patient retention it is costing. The common thread in every case is that the longer the situation continues, the higher the extraction cost and the lower the organizational willingness to do anything about it — because confronting it requires someone to admit that waiting was a mistake, and the longer the wait, the harder that admission becomes. Act earlier. The admission is cheaper before it compounds.

The Work

The conversation is not as dangerous as you have built it up to be. Direct, specific, respectful — naming the behavior, stating the expectation, giving a real opportunity to change — produces one of two outcomes: the person changes, or they

show you they will not. Both outcomes are useful. The first is the best case. The second tells you exactly what you need to know, and gives you the documentation to support what comes next.

On approach: behavior, not character. “You interrupted two team members in yesterday's meeting” is a behavior. It is specific and addressable. “You are difficult to work with” is a judgment that produces defensiveness and nothing actionable. State the expectation precisely. Not “try to be more collaborative.” That means nothing. The specific, unambiguous, measurable version of whatever “collaborative” means in your operation. Set a timeframe. Thirty days is usually enough to see a pattern. Follow up at the end of the period. If the behavior has changed, acknowledge it specifically. If it has not, you have the information and documentation to act. In thirty years I have never regretted addressing a personnel problem directly. I have regretted, many times, waiting. The cost of acting is almost always lower than you imagined. The cost of waiting compounds in ways you do not feel until the damage is already done.

Chapter Four

Stop Competing on Price

“The most valuable thing you sell is the change you create in the person who buys from you.”

Here is a question I ask every operator I work with: what is the most valuable thing you sell? The answers come back as gear, trips, certifications, memberships, instruction — products and services, line items. None of them are the answer. The most valuable thing you sell is the change you create in the person who buys from you. In the dive industry, that change is the ability to breathe underwater — to enter an environment fundamentally hostile to human life and move through it with competence, confidence, and a sense of wonder that most people on earth will never experience. That is not a commodity. That is a transformation. The certification card or certificate at the end is a receipt. What happened to the person is something they will describe to others for the rest of their lives.

Most dive shops price the instruction like a commodity. They keep the numbers low because gear margins are where the real money is — so the thinking goes. They discount to close the hesitant prospect. They apologize before saying the price. They compete with the shop across town on the number and discover that someone always has capacity to go lower. That race has no floor. The only winning move is not to run it.

The Atomic Aquatics Argument

Atomic Aquatics was founded in 1994 in Huntington Beach, California. Later they were acquired by Huish Outdoors. From the beginning, they built high quality, expensive scuba equipment — regulators, masks, fins, BCDs — priced at a meaningful premium. They never apologized for this and never chased the volume end of the market. They also earned a Tester's Choice Award from Scuba Diving magazine for every product they have ever brought to market. Every, one. No other manufacturer has matched that record. They are not expensive because they decided to charge more. They are expensive because they built something worth more. The premium price is the consequence of genuine performance, not the cause of it. And the customer who buys Atomic gear is not shopping for the cheapest regulator. They are looking for the best — a different customer entirely, with different loyalty characteristics, different referral behavior, and a fundamentally different relationship to price.

The same logic applies in any industry. When you price for value — when the number you charge reflects the outcome you deliver, not just your cost plus a margin — you attract a different customer. One who is there for the result. One who is harder to lose because no competitor is offering what they are actually buying from you.

The Thing Underneath the Thing

Every business has a surface-level offering and a deeper offering. The surface level is what appears on the invoice. The deeper offering is what the customer is actually buying — the change, the result, the shift in their situation or sense of themselves. Businesses consistently charge for the surface level and give away the deeper thing. In the dive industry: I

am not selling a certification card. I am selling the ability to travel anywhere in the world and enter the water with confidence. I am selling access to something — the reef, the wreck, the silence, the creatures that appear on no other itinerary — that the customer will describe to people for the rest of their life. How much is that worth? More than the discounted open water course at the shop down the road.

What is the deeper thing in your business? Not the deliverable — the result. Not the service — the transformation. Not the product — what changes for the customer's life or business because they chose you. A useful test: finish this sentence — “I help [who] do [what].” Now describe what changes for them when you do it excellently. The gap between what you charge and what that change is worth — that is the pricing opportunity sitting right in front of most businesses.

Finding Your Premium Position

Pricing for value does not require you to be the most expensive option in your market. It requires you to be honest about what you deliver and to price it in a way that reflects that honesty. There are four components to finding the right price. First, the cost of the outcome you deliver — not what it costs you to deliver it, but what it costs the customer not to have it. What problems does your service solve? What opportunities does it create? What would the customer have to do, or pay, or forgo, if you were not available? That calculation is almost always higher than the number you are charging.

Second, what the market will bear at your quality level. This is not the same as what the cheapest option charges. It is what a customer who understands quality in your category expects to pay for excellence. Third, what the price signals. Price is not just a transaction — it is a communication. A low price communicates that what you sell is not particularly valuable. A premium price communicates the opposite. Fourth, the energy cost of the customers your price attracts. Low-price customers require more energy to serve — more hand-holding, more justification, more complaints about value. Premium customers, in most service businesses, are easier to serve and more satisfied with the result. The difference in energy expenditure across a week of work has a value that does not appear in your P&L but is very real.

Beyond the Dive Shop

The race to the bottom on price plays out identically in every service category, and the operators who refuse to run it almost always outperform the ones who do. In the fitness industry, the studio that competes on membership price against the large gym chain will lose. The chain has scale, real estate leverage, and marketing budget the studio cannot match. The studio that refuses to compete on price — that instead competes on coaching quality, community, and the measurable transformation its members experience — wins a different customer entirely. This customer is not price-shopping between the studio and the gym. They are in a different conversation, and that conversation is one the big chain cannot have at scale.

In legal services, the attorney who offers flat-fee arrangements for defined scope — and prices those

arrangements to reflect the outcome rather than the hours — attracts a client who makes a purchasing decision based on a known number tied to a known result. In residential construction, the contractor who leads with their process, their track record, and their guarantee of outcome attracts a customer who has already decided they want quality and is looking for someone credible to deliver it. In every case, the key is knowing what you are actually selling and charging for that — not for the hours, the materials, the deliverable, but for what changes for the person on the other side of the transaction.

The Work

Stop apologizing for your price before you say it. “I know it is a bit expensive, but...” communicates that you are not sure the price is justified. If you do not believe it, they will not either. Say the number. Stop talking. Let them respond. A genuine prospect who pushes back on price is usually asking for reassurance that the value is real. Give them that. Walk them through the result they are buying, not the line item they are questioning. That conversation closes more reliably than a discount does, and it closes with a customer who understood what they bought.

If the only thing they want is a lower number, let them find that somewhere else. The transaction you declined is less costly than the customer relationship that was never going to be satisfying for either of you. Look at your pricing structure and identify where you are charging for time and cost when you should be charging for outcome. In most service businesses, that gap is largest in the core service — the thing you are most expert at. Raise the price that should be raised.

Say the number without apology. The customers who belong with you will not flinch.

Chapter Five

Your Best Customer Isn't Everyone

“Defining who you are not for is one of the most clarifying decisions a business can make.”

The most dangerous sentence in small business is “we work with everyone.” It sounds like confidence and openness. What it means is that you have not made a decision. You have left the definition of your customer open to whoever walks in, which means you will spend significant time and energy on people who are a poor fit for what you do best — at a cost that does not show up clearly in the financials but shows up reliably in your team's performance, your culture, and your own energy. Defining who you are not for is one of the most clarifying decisions a business can make. It is also one of the most avoided, because it feels like leaving revenue on the table. In nearly every case I have seen, the opposite is true.

Two Businesses That Cannot Share a Building

In the dive industry, there are roughly two kinds of customers: the person who wants to try scuba diving once, on vacation, as an experience — and the person who wants to become a diver. These are not two ends of a spectrum. They are two different businesses, and the operations that serve each well look almost nothing alike. The first customer wants convenience, low commitment, and an experience that costs less than expected. They will not buy gear, return for advanced training, or generate meaningful referrals. Serving them

requires a specific, efficiently delivered product priced for their expectations.

The second customer wants to build a skill that changes how they travel for the rest of their life. They want a serious instructor, a thorough experience, a relationship they can return to. They will buy gear, return for more training, refer their friends. The lifetime value of this customer is ten to twenty times the first. The operations that try to serve both with the same approach usually serve neither particularly well. The casual customer finds them too serious and too expensive. The committed diver finds them too transactional. Both leave underwhelmed, and neither becomes a reliable source of referrals. The operations that choose — that declare clearly who they are for and what they deliver — build something that compounds. A reputation. A referral network. A team that knows exactly how to deliver the experience their specific customer expects. A business that gets measurably better at the thing it does over time, rather than remaining mediocre at a broad range of things.

The Non-Customer Profile

Most businesses have a customer profile of some kind. Very few have a non-customer profile. The non-customer profile is the more useful document. Build it this way. Think about the customer who, when they show up or land in your inbox, makes you feel vaguely tired before the work has started. Not because the work is hard — because the fit is wrong. They want something slightly different from what you deliver. They negotiate in ways that suggest they do not fully value what you do. The transaction completes and you did acceptable work and have no desire to repeat it. That

description — the specific characteristics of that customer — is your non-customer profile. Write it down. Once you have it clearly, you will recognize this customer earlier, and the earlier you recognize them, the easier it is to redirect them gracefully toward someone who is actually built to serve them.

In the dive industry, my non-customer is the person who needs a certification card for one specific upcoming trip with no intention of diving again. I have served this person many times. The experience is reliably unsatisfying for both of us. They find the course more rigorous than they wanted. I feel the instruction was less engaged than it deserved to be. Neither of us is at our best. Gracefully releasing the wrong customer is not losing revenue. It is preserving the energy and attention that belong to your actual customer.

The Profitable Niche

One of the most counterintuitive lessons in small business is that narrowing your focus almost always improves your profitability, even as it reduces the addressable market. This is because profitability is not just a function of revenue — it is a function of how efficiently you can deliver excellent results to customers who genuinely value them. When you serve a clearly defined customer, everything gets more efficient. Your marketing speaks directly to people who are already looking for what you offer. Your sales process is shorter because there is less mismatch to overcome. Your delivery is better because you have done this exact thing many times and you know exactly what excellent looks like. Your team knows who they are serving and can calibrate their performance accordingly. Your referrals are higher quality because your customers are recommending you to people who are like them.

In the dive industry, a shop that serves serious, committed divers — people who dive regularly, care about equipment, and are building a long-term relationship with the sport — operates very differently from a shop that tries to serve everyone who might ever be curious about scuba. The serious-diver shop has better gear in stock, deeper instructor expertise, more specialized trip offerings, and a customer base that refers your shop to other serious divers. They are not competing on price with the resort-course shop because they are not playing the same game. In your business: identify the specific problem you solve best for the specific customer you serve best. That intersection is your profitable niche. It is probably smaller than what you currently describe as your target market. It is almost certainly more profitable.

Beyond the Dive Shop

The principle of the defined customer shows up as one of the clearest differentiators between businesses that build compounding value and businesses that stay flat despite working hard. In accounting, the generalist firm that will take any client operates at a perpetual efficiency disadvantage against the firm that has declared a niche. The firm that specializes in small manufacturing companies has built systems, templates, and institutional knowledge that make them faster and more accurate with that client type than any generalist can be. They also have a natural referral network, because small manufacturing companies talk to each other. The generalist is always starting from scratch. The specialist is always compounding.

In coaching and consulting, the coach who works “with executives and entrepreneurs” is in a different market from the

coach who works specifically with first-time CEOs navigating their first board relationship. The second description is so specific that the right prospect immediately knows they are in the right place — and the wrong prospect knows they are not. That is exactly what a well-designed customer profile is supposed to do: attract what fits and repel what does not, before either party has invested significant time. In physical products, Yeti built a cooler business on the explicit premise that their product was not for price-sensitive buyers. That clarity made every marketing decision easier and every brand decision more consistent, and it produced a customer base that generates the kind of word-of-mouth that advertising cannot buy.

The Work

Write two profiles. The first: your ideal customer. Be specific — not “small business owners” but the particular kind of small business owner, with the particular kind of problem, at the particular stage of their business, who makes the work feel worth doing. What do they already understand about what they are buying? How do they talk about price — as a question of value or as a negotiation? What does the relationship look like a year from now? The second: your non-customer. The person who exhausts you before you have started, whose expectations are slightly off from what you deliver, who haggles in ways that tell you they do not see the full value of what you do. What are the specific characteristics of this person that you now know — because you have served them before — predict a poor fit?

Use both profiles actively. Let the first shape where you spend your marketing energy and what language you use. Let

the second help you recognize a poor fit earlier in the intake process, before you have committed time and energy to a relationship that was never going to work well. The second-order benefit: once you have clarity on who you are not for, every other decision in the business becomes easier. Product development, marketing channels, hiring criteria, team culture — all of them are shaped by who you are actually building for. Clarity about the non-customer is clarity about everything else. Your best customer is not everyone. Build everything around the one who is.

Chapter Six

Are You Running a Business, or Are You Just Kidding Yourself?

"If you are irreplaceable, you do not have a business. You have a job with overhead and a congress of monkeys."

Here is the test. It is uncomfortable, and that is the point. If you disappeared from your business for ninety days — no phone, no email, no decisions made through you — would it still be running when you came back? For most small business owners, the honest answer is no. Not because they have built something weak, but because they have built something dependent. The business works because they are present every day, making decisions, solving problems, holding relationships, serving as the connective tissue of the entire operation. Take them out and it slows significantly, struggles visibly, or stops. That is not a business. That is a job with overhead. I say this with genuine respect for what it takes to build and sustain a small operation — the work is real, the accomplishment is real. I say it because this distinction is the most important one in determining what your business is actually worth, what it can become, and whether it has a future beyond your personal ability to show up for it every day.

How the Dependency Gets Built

Nobody sets out to make themselves irreplaceable in a way that traps them. It happens as a natural side effect of being good at what you do. In the early years, the founder being the center of everything was necessary. There was no

one else. You are the operations department, the marketing department, the customer service function, and the cleaning crew. That is appropriate for year one. What happens in too many businesses is that the structure of year one persists into year five, year ten, year twenty. The operation grew. The revenue grew. The team grew. The decision-making structure did not change. Things come to the owner; the owner handles them. The cycle continues because it works — the owner is faster than anyone else, knows more context than anyone else, and it is genuinely easier to do it themselves than to build the system that would let someone else do it reliably.

The result is a business that has scaled the owner's hours rather than its systems. Owners have a fixed supply of hours. You hit the ceiling eventually. And when you do, the business cannot grow past you — not because the market is not there, but because you are the bottleneck. In the dive industry, this pattern is extremely common. The head instructor is also the equipment director, the trip coordinator, the primary customer contact, and the person who handles all complaints because no one else has the authority to resolve them. That person works sixty hours a week and earns a reasonable living. What they have built is worth almost nothing to a buyer — because without them, there is nothing to buy. There is a building with equipment in it.

The Succession Question Nobody Asks Early Enough

Succession is a word most small business owners connect with retirement. It belongs in the conversation much earlier. I did not think seriously about succession until a period when I was unable to work at full capacity for long enough to find out what my business could and could not do without me present

for every decision. I will not dramatize the event. What I will say is that it was clarifying in a way that no planning exercise could replicate — it showed me, in real time, where the dependencies actually were.

Some areas held. The systems we had built around those functions worked. The people we had developed to own those areas made the right calls without needing to reach me. I came back and found those areas in good shape. Other areas did not hold. Not because the team was incapable — in most cases they were fully capable. But because we had never built the systems or distributed the authority. They did not know what decisions were theirs to make. Things backed up waiting for someone who was not available. That experience gave me a map I had not had before — a concrete picture of where the business existed independently of me and where it was still running on my personal presence. Everything on the second list became a project. You do not have to wait for a difficult event to get that map. The ninety-day thought experiment will give you a version of it right now.

What Systems Actually Require

When people hear “build systems,” they hear “write manuals.” A manual sitting in a folder nobody opens is not a system. It is documentation of good intentions. A system is a documented process with a named owner, defined inputs and outputs, and the explicit authority to operate without the owner's involvement in every decision. All four components matter equally. Named owner: a specific, named person is responsible for this function and its outcomes. Not “the team” or “whoever is available” — a named individual who owns the result. Defined inputs and outputs: everyone involved knows

what triggers the process and what done looks like. No ambiguity about when something starts or when it is finished. Explicit authority: the owner has been told, clearly and verbally, that the decisions this function requires are theirs to make without escalating.

In the dive industry, a student enrollment system built on these principles means: a defined inquiry response protocol with specific timing and language, an enrollment process with clear handoffs between roles, a student preparation checklist, and a defined set of decisions the enrollment coordinator can make without escalating. That person can run the function. The owner does not need to be involved in every enrollment. What is the equivalent in your business? Start with the function that costs you the most time or creates the most inconsistency when you are handling it yourself. That is your first systems project.

The Handoff Test

Here is a practical diagnostic that is more useful than the ninety-day thought experiment for identifying specific dependencies: the handoff test. For every significant function in your business, ask this question: if I had to hand this off to someone tomorrow — not build toward it over six months, but actually transfer it tomorrow — what would be missing? What knowledge lives only in my head? What decisions would they not know how to make? What relationships would not transfer? What context would they not have? The answers to those questions are your dependency list. Each item on it represents a place where the business cannot function independently.

Work through the list methodically. For each dependency: who could own this function, what would they need to do it, and what explicit authority would they need? Then give them that. Document what needs to be documented. Transfer the relationships that can be transferred. Grant the authority, explicitly. The goal is not to make yourself replaceable for the sake of it. The goal is to build something that has real, independent value — something that can exist when you are not in the room, something that can grow beyond the ceiling of your personal hours, and something that gives you the choice of not being in the room when you do not want to be. That is the difference between a business and a self-employment arrangement. Only one of them compounds.

Beyond the Dive Shop

In the trades, the owner-operator who has run every job for thirty years faces a predictable problem when it is time to exit. The business's customers are loyal to the person, not the company. The processes exist in the owner's head rather than in documented systems. A buyer looks at this operation and sees a customer list and some equipment. The owner who spent ten years before the exit building systems, training a lead to handle jobs independently, and transitioning customer relationships from themselves to the company gets a materially different number at the table. In professional services, the advisor who spent forty years building a book of business based on deep personal relationships discovers at the point of succession that those clients follow the individual, not the firm. The advisor who spent the last decade introducing clients to a team and building practice management systems has built something transferable. The difference in exit value between these two

What Comes Next

These six lessons are a fraction of what the water and the shop floor taught me. The full accounting — thirty-seven chapters and an epilogue — is in a book called *Dear Natalie, This Is How It's Done*.

It is built the way I actually think, which is not in tidy business-book chapters. Each one opens as a letter to my daughter Natalie — the same Natalie who was sitting next to me at dinner the night she told me she wanted to take over the dive shop, and who is now working as a dive professional in Bonaire, on her own terms, at a location I did not pick for her. The letter ends in a single sentence I was trying to earn the right to say. Then the chapter steps back into the essay you have been reading for the last sixty pages — the story, the math, the mistake, the thing I should have understood five years sooner than I did.

Thirty-one of those chapters are still untold here. What follows are the honest previews — not one-line summaries, but enough of each argument that you can tell whether it is the one you need next.

The Other Thirty-One

The Business

The Scuba Industry, While We Slept. Thirty years of the dive industry doing the same thing every recession and every boom — chasing volume instead of standards, discounting instead of differentiating — and calling the resulting stagnation a market condition instead of what it actually is: a choice, repeated for three decades by people who never once questioned it.

The Real Competition. Every dive shop owner I know can name the operation across town they consider the threat. Almost none of them can name the actual one — the couch, the kayak rental, the Saturday with nothing scheduled. A prospect who does not choose you did not choose someone else. Usually they chose apathy, and apathy does not run a competing shop, which is exactly why it wins so often.

What Working Outside of Scuba Taught Me. Before I owned a dive shop, I sold diamonds. The lesson that came home with me was not about jewelry. It was that the job of the person across the counter was never to find the cheapest stone — it was to help someone understand the value of what they were about to own. I have been applying that same lesson to regulators and certification cards for twenty years.

The Education Nobody Sells. Nobody teaches you how to run this business. PADI teaches you how to teach diving. The rest — pricing, staffing, the decision that costs you a customer versus the one that costs you your business — you learn by getting it wrong in front of people who were too polite to tell you at the time.

Understanding Seasons and Cycles. A dive shop in Michigan does not have a slow season by accident — it has one on a schedule, and most owners fight it every single year instead of building around it. This chapter is the math of planning against a pattern that repeats whether you plan for it or not.

You Are Best at Something. The dive shops that survive are rarely the ones that do everything adequately. They are the ones willing to be genuinely excellent at one or two things, because that reputation is what makes them harder to replace and easier to charge accordingly for.

What the Industry Does Not Tell You. Every operator inherits a set of assumptions about how a dive shop is supposed to run — assumptions nobody wrote down, nobody defends, and almost nobody has actually tested against their own numbers. Some of them are load-bearing. Most of them are just what the shop down the street happened to be doing in 1995.

Truly Professional Is Sometimes Boring. I have watched genuinely excellent instructors get passed over for flashier ones, and genuinely excellent shops lose customers to operations with better marketing and worse safety records. This is the case for being the boring, reliable, still-standing option — and for understanding why that is a harder sell than it should be.

The Good, Bad and Ugly of Rental Equipment. Your rental counter is a confession. It tells a new diver exactly what your standards actually are, whatever your website says about them. Most shops have never looked at their own rental program that honestly.

What Nobody Saw. For years I invested in rebreather training and technical certification almost nobody was asking for, on a bet that almost nobody could see the return on yet. This is what that bet actually looked like from the inside, before it became a program worth talking about.

The Money

The True Dollar Value of a Lifestyle. Most people who get into this business are chasing a lifestyle, and most of them never run the actual numbers on what that lifestyle costs to sustain. I have run mine. They are not what you would guess, in either direction.

The Money That Isn't Yours. A deposit sitting in your account is not revenue. It is a debt you have not paid yet, in the form of a trip or a class you owe somebody. More dive shops have died from confusing the two than from any dive ever going wrong.

Why the Nigerian Prince Emails You. Every discount you offer and every deal you chase filters your customer base — just not the direction you think. The people who show up because of the deal are, almost without exception, the people who leave the moment a better deal appears somewhere else.

The People

You Are Not Your Customer. I built my first few years of pricing and programming around what I would want if I were the customer. It took an embarrassingly long time to notice that I was not, in fact, the customer, and that my own preferences were quietly costing me the ones who were.

Why This Industry Eats Its Young. New dive professionals get certified, get worked, and get burned out on a loop this industry has been running for decades — and calling it a rite of passage instead of what it actually is, which is a closed economic system that trains its best people to leave.

The Team You Build Over Time. The staff I have now took years to build, not a hiring cycle. This is what that actually costs, what it actually returns, and why most operators give up on it right around the point it would have started paying off.

Your Body Is Your Business. I run a business that requires me to be physically capable of doing the job, and for a long stretch of my life I was not honest with myself about whether I still was. A stent, forty-eight weeks of cardiac rehab, and giving up every animal with a hoof later, this is the chapter about treating your own body like the piece of dive equipment it actually is.

Five Hours in the Bubble. A vertigo event on a dive trip put me in a hyperbaric chamber for the better part of an afternoon. This is what five hours with nothing to do but think taught me about vulnerability, asking for help, and how much of my own health I had been quietly deferring.

The Way We Teach and Sell Diving

What PADI Actually Intended. E-learning was built to solve a specific problem, and most shops have quietly repurposed it to solve a different one — usually at the direct expense of the in-water experience it was never supposed to replace.

You Are Not the Hero. If you are in a room with a hundred scuba instructors, how do you know which ones are the course

directors? They will tell you. This chapter is about the instructors who do not need to, and why the ones who make the student the hero of the story build more loyal divers than the ones who stay in the spotlight.

In Their Face or You Disappear. Do not create content — document. The content is already happening in your business every single day. This chapter is the case for showing up consistently in front of the people already deciding whether to dive again, instead of chasing the algorithm.

The Education You Are Not Getting in the Water. Some of the most useful frameworks I have ever applied to this business came from people who have never once been underwater — a marketing author, a debt-elimination radio host, a physicist who never dove a day in his life. This chapter is the case for reading outside your own industry on purpose.

Every Place Has a Story. I once told a young instructor named Trinity that the story was never actually the product — the dive was just where the story happened. This chapter is about what changes when a guide actually knows the history of the site they are standing on, instead of just the depth and the exit point.

Hotdog Economics. The highest-converting event I run all year has no sales pitch, no agenda, and a grill. This is the argument for why an unstructured Sunday with your community sells more gear and books more trips than any display case ever will.

Building Something That Lasts

Lessons From Multiple Locations. I opened a second location in my own hometown on an anniversary date that already meant something to me, and closed it a few weeks before a pandemic made the decision look prophetic instead of painful. This is what that four-year experiment actually taught me about my own limits.

The Year That Remade Everything. In 2020, an essential-services argument built on years of public-safety-diver relationships kept my doors open when almost nothing else in the state was. The business survived. It was not, by any honest measure, a profitable stretch, and I am still working down what that year cost. This is that story, without the polish.

The Drive-and-Dive Economy. Warm-water partners have called Great Lakes diving the consolation prize for as long as I have been in this industry. This chapter makes the case, with real numbers, for why local diving is the more durable business model — not the lesser one.

The Five-Tier Dive Shop. Tier One fills tanks. Tier Five is defined by exactly one thing: whether the owner still gets in the water for no commercial reason at all. This is the diagnostic for figuring out, honestly, which tier your own operation actually occupies.

Just a Saturday. "I know this is a big deal for you guys, but it's just a Saturday to us." That is what a diver in her twenties said to me on an ice dive in Michigan, without a trace of irony, and it is the closest thing I have to a definition of what excellence actually looks like once it stops being remarkable to the person doing it.

The Profitable and Playful Passport. Not every trip should be sold the same way. This is the difference between an adventure and an expedition, between drive-and-dive and fly-and-dive, and how to build a travel program that serves the customer without becoming a logistical nightmare for you.

What You Can Take With You. I did not buy this business with a bank loan. I bought it on a handshake and a one-year seller-financed deal from a grieving father named Dick, because no bank would lend against a dive shop. This chapter is about why that is still the industry norm, and what it actually takes to sell one of these businesses cleanly.

And Then the Business Lessons End

Epilogue: Buoyancy and Belief. The water does not care what you call it, what you believe, what you have built, or what the room thinks of you. It holds you up anyway. The closing argument for what thirty-seven chapters of business lessons were actually about underneath the business.

Before You Go. A father's last letter before his daughter steps into her own career — the one letter in the book that is not trying to teach anyone anything.

Dear Industry, Here Is How I Did It. Natalie's own response, written after she read her father's draft. I will not tell you what it says. I will tell you that I did not see it coming, and I would not cut a word of it. ---

Recommended Reading

Every book in this list changed how I think about running a business. None of them are about scuba diving. That is the point.

Cunningham, Keith J. *The Road Less Stupid: Advice from the Chairman of the Board.* Keys to the Vault, 2017.

The book that made me understand how much of my business I had been running on gut instinct that deserved better. Cunningham is direct in a way that is not comfortable, which is exactly why he is useful.

DeRutter, Nick. *Career in SCUBA: How to Become a Dive Instructor and be Successful.* BookBaby, 2020.

The book that helped inspire this one. If you are earlier in the path than Natalie — still deciding whether this career is possible — start here.

Ferriss, Tim. *The 4-Hour Body: An Uncommon Guide to Rapid Fat-Loss, Incredible Sex, and Becoming Superhuman.* Crown Archetype, 2010.

Practical and not mystical about the biology of what your body needs. If your career is going to last, so does your body — this book treats that seriously.

Ferriss, Tim. *Tools of Titans: The Tactics, Routines, and Habits of Billionaires, Icons, and World-Class Performers.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Every chapter is short and most of the people in it have nothing to do with diving. That is the point. The patterns that

produce exceptional performance are more consistent across industries than most people want to believe.

Koch, Richard. *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret to Achieving More with Less.* Currency/Doubleday, 1998.

The definitive treatment of the principle that shows up throughout this book. Once you understand where eighty percent of your results are actually coming from, you cannot un-see it — and you cannot afford to keep ignoring it.

Miller, Donald. *Building a StoryBrand: Clarify Your Message So Customers Will Listen.* HarperCollins Leadership, 2017.

The single most useful reframe I have applied to this business. You are not the hero of your customer's story. Once you understand that, everything about how you talk to them changes.

Ramsey, Dave. *The Total Money Makeover: A Proven Plan for Financial Fitness.* Thomas Nelson, 2003.

Written for individuals, but the core discipline applies directly to a seasonal small business: know what you owe before you spend what you have. That sentence alone is worth the read.

Sinek, Simon. *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action.* Portfolio/Penguin, 2009.

The Golden Circle framework behind the argument in this book for starting every sale at the experience. The TED Talk version is eighteen minutes and makes the case as well as the book does — watch it first if you want the short version.

Vaynerchuk, Gary. *Day Trading Attention: How to Actually Build Brand and Sales in the New Social Media World.* HarperBusiness, 2024.

The foundation for everything in the social media chapter of the full book. His central argument is the one I keep coming back to: do not create content — document. The content is already happening in your business every day.

Synowiec, Rich. *Dear Natalie, This Is How It's Done.* Divers Media Group, 2026.

The only book on this list that is actually about diving. I recognize the contradiction. I am including it anyway, because you have gotten this far and you already know why.

Glossary of Dive Industry Terms

Several terms used throughout this book are specific to the scuba diving industry. This glossary defines them for readers who are new to the dive world.

Bottomlands — The floor and substrate of a body of water. The right to control bottomlands — who can dive, operate commercially, or conduct instruction at a site — is a formal legal arrangement, typically established by contract with the land or water owner.

CCR — See Rebreather.

Course Director — PADI's highest instructor-level credential, authorizing the holder to train and certify other instructors rather than students.

DEMA — Diving Equipment and Marketing Association. The dive industry's primary trade organization, best known for its annual trade show held each November.

Divemaster — The first professional-level PADI credential, authorizing a diver to lead and supervise dives for others. The standard pathway to instructor: Open Water Diver → Advanced Open Water Diver → Rescue Diver → Divemaster. From Divemaster, the IDC produces a certified Open Water Scuba Instructor (OWSI).

IDC (Instructor Development Course) — The training program through which a Divemaster candidate becomes a certified PADI Open Water Scuba Instructor (OWSI).

Nitrox (Enriched Air) — A breathing gas blended with a higher oxygen percentage than air — typically 32% or 36%, compared to air's 21%. The extra oxygen reduces nitrogen absorption, extending bottom time and reducing decompression risk at recreational depths.

PADI — Professional Association of Diving Instructors. The world's largest recreational scuba training organization, responsible for certifying the majority of recreational divers worldwide.

Rebreather (CCR) — A breathing apparatus that recycles the diver's exhaled gas by chemically scrubbing carbon dioxide and replenishing consumed oxygen. Allows dramatically extended bottom times on a fraction of the gas volume and produces no bubbles.

Scuba Concession — A formal contract granting the right to operate a dive business at a site owned by someone else, under agreement with the property owner.

Technical Diving — Diving that exceeds the limits of recreational scuba — deeper than 130 feet, using gas mixtures other than air, or making planned decompression stops on ascent.

Trimix — A breathing gas blend of oxygen, helium, and nitrogen used in technical deep diving. Helium displaces nitrogen in the mix, reducing narcosis at depth.

Acknowledgments

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Rob Williams, who I met at my Course Director training in Punta Cana in 2016 and who has been a regular and genuinely useful thinking partner ever since. He did not know when we started talking that we were eventually going to talk our way into the Gold Star Group, but the conversation that produced it was his as much as mine.

Megan, who showed when she needed to and did what the full book explains. There is a version of this operation that does not exist today without what she did then. She knows it, and now so do you.

My daughter Natalie, who was sitting to my left at dinner when she said she wanted to take over the dive shop. That sentence changed the shape of everything I had been building. She has since gone to Bonaire, which is maybe not what I pictured, but it is exactly right. Natalie has a twin sister, Olivia who has been super supportive of Natalie's career choices but has found a different path.

*And Jill, my wife and favorite dive buddy, who
learned how to dive 20 years ago so she would
see me on weekends, and has been patient
through all of it.*

About Rich Synowiec

Rich Synowiec has been a fixture in the scuba diving industry for over thirty years. He is the owner and operator of Divers Incorporated and a PADI Course Director — the highest instructor-level credential in recreational diving — authorized to train and certify other dive instructors. His background spans technical diving, rebreather instruction, trimix, and overhead-environment diving, as well as the full range of recreational training from entry-level certification through instructor development.

He is also, by his own cheerful admission, a jack of all trades. Chapter One will explain why he considers that a feature.

In 2007, Rich was awarded the concession contract to operate the dive shop and control the bottomlands at White Star Quarry, a dedicated dive training and exploration facility southeast of Toledo, Ohio. He works with dive industry operators on business development, staff development, and succession planning, and is available for keynote and conference speaking.

Dear Natalie, *This Is How It's Done* is his first book.

About Dear Natalie, This Is How It's Done

If any of the six lessons in this book made you wish there were more — more of the story, more of the math, more of the specific and unglamorous truth of how any of this actually gets built — that is what the other thirty-one chapters are for.

Dear Natalie, This Is How It's Done is available in hardcover, paperback, and Kindle, on Amazon and in person at Divers Incorporated in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It is not a diving book. It is a book about what it takes to build something durable out of a want instead of a need, written as honestly as I know how to write anything, to the person I most wanted to get it right for.

If these six lessons did their job, you already know whether you want the other thirty-one.