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# How to Become an Actuarial Idol

by Daniel L. Shinnick



Chairperson

*Daniel L. Shinnick, FSA, MAAA, is vice president at Thrivent Financial for Lutherans in Appleton, Wis.*

dan.shinnick@thrivent.com

**M**y adolescent daughters have gotten me into "American Idol." Not because I love how Simon berates the contestants, or because I can't wait until I get to vote for my favorite or because I think JPL is cute. It is because it is a great metaphor for how to be a successful actuary—REALLY! OK, it's because I really wanted La Toya to win.

Let's take a look at what it takes to be an American Idol and see how it applies to becoming an Actuarial Idol. The steps are the same, and the realities are strikingly similar:

## Steps

- Set Goals
- Be Prepared
- Try Many Things
- Get feedback—and act on it
- Have fun, do your best, enjoy yourself

## Realities

- You're always being judged—often by people you don't know
- Life is not always fair—get over it
- What you do, how you do it and who you know are all important
- In the end you have to perform

## Setting Goals

In "American Idol," some people were just happy to try out, like William Hung. Others were thrilled to make it to the finals and a few special people were driven to be the American Idol.

As actuaries we can aspire to many things—becoming an FSA, being a great technician, managing people, being great team members or being organizational leaders. As we go through our careers, we need to look forward and think about where we want to go. And that will be a different place for each of us.

## Be Prepared

The people who were successful on "American Idol" did not just show up on a lark. They were prepared. They planned and worked to achieve their goals. They had taken singing and dancing lessons and performed many times.

To be successful, we also need to be prepared. We develop our technical skills through actuarial exams and work experience. We develop our business skills through work experience and learning about the softer side of working with others.

## Try many things

On "American Idol" they had to perform songs by Elton John, Barry Manilow, Gloria Estefan and perform show tunes, Motown and country. The performers who embraced the different styles and performed well were the ones who moved on.

Actuaries have the opportunity to do many things—valuation, product development, pricing, consulting and project work. The more things we try and excel at, the more valuable we are to our organizations and to ourselves.

## Get feedback, whether you like it or not—and act upon it

The contestants certainly got a lot of feedback and it wasn't always pleasant. Simon may have been mean, but his feedback was helpful. The performers that listened and changed were the ones who ended up going on.

We don't always like to get feedback—especially in areas where we need to improve. But, it is a great way to learn and grow. Get feedback from co-workers, bosses and teammates. Find people who will give it to you straight; they don't need to be as rude as Simon, but as honest would be good. Your willingness to change is as important as getting feedback.

## You're always being judged—often by people you don't know

There was a vote every night and contestants were voted for by millions of people across the country.

At work, we rarely take a vote on your career. However, every day you are being judged. Your work, meeting conduct, presentations and working relationships are all part of what your manager and others in the organization judge you on.

## Life is not always fair

Ask Jennifer Hudson, one of my favorites, who got unexpectedly voted off for reasons unknown. I personally think it was due to a conspiracy by adolescent girls.

This happens at work too. Sometimes you don't get the promotion you want or the plum assignment. When this happens, you need to choose to get over it and move on. If you can, find out why you didn't get it and address the problems you find.

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**Take Charge of Your Success • continued from prior page**

**Recommended Reading List**

*The Magic of Thinking Big* by David J. Schwartz (1959 Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York, NY)

*How To Get Rich* by Donald J. Trump (2004 Random House, NY)

*The 21 Success Secrets of Self-Made Millionaires* by Brian Tracy (2001 Executive Books, Mechanicsburg, PA)

*How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie [Original Copyright 1936] Pocket Books, New York, NY)

*Seeds of Greatness* by Denis Waitley (1983 Pocket Books, New York, NY)

*Failing Forward* by John C. Maxwell (2000 Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN)

*The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* by John C. Maxwell (1998 Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN)

*The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale (1990 Doubleday, New York, NY)

*Success Is a Choice* by Rick Pitino (1997 Broadway Books, New York, NY)

*A Few Keys to All Success* by Jim Muncy (2002 Few Keys, Valdosta, GA)

*The Instant Millionaire* by Mark Fisher (1990 New World Library, Novato, CA)

*Benjamin Franklin* by Edmund S. Morgan (2002 Yale University Press, New Haven, CT)

*Grinding It Out* by Ray Kroc (1977 St. Martin's Press, New York, NY)

*Sam Walton—Made in America* by Sam Walton (1993 Bantam Books, New York, NY)

*The Long Walk* by Slavodmir Rawicz (1997 The Lyons Press, Guilford, CT)

*Frozen Footprints* by Alicia Gilewicz (1998 INTI Publishing, Tampa, FL)

*The Seven Spiritual Laws for Parents* by Deepak Chopra (1997 Harmony Books, New York, NY)

*Rich Kid, Smart Kid* by Robert Kiyosaki

*Awaken the Giant Within* by Anthony Robbins (A Fireside Book, New York, NY)

*The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz (1997 Amerg-Allen Publishing, Inc., San-Raphael, CA)

*Way of the Peaceful Warrior* by Dan Millman (1980 H.J. Kramer, Inc., Tiburon, CA)

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**What you do, how you do it and who you know are all important**

On "American Idol" it's not just singing and dancing, it's also about stage presence, personality and fan base.

At work, It's not just about computing and analyzing, it's also working with others, presentation skills, networking and seeing the big picture. Realize it is important for you to work on all of these. Unfortunately, just being smart isn't enough.

**In the end you have to perform**

Just ask John Stevens—being 16 and having red hair can get you only so far!

It takes the whole package to be successful—actuarial skills, people skills, business savvy and a performance orientation. There really is no way to "Succeed in Business Without Really Trying."

**Have fun, do your best, enjoy the journey**

A final word of advice, actuaries have great jobs, enjoy yours, have fun and do your best. □