

# You Can't Deposit Excitement

*by Fadi Smaidi*

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WEBSITE — OPENING PAGE

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**I've spent 30 years building businesses. I'm still picking up nickels.**

If you're building something and you need someone who's actually been there — not a framework, not a course — pull up a chair.

## **About**

*I grew up making sandwiches. Turns out, that was my MBA.*

My father ran a restaurant in Montreal. From the time I was eight years old — old enough to stand behind a counter — I was peeling potatoes in the back and serving whoever walked through the door. Not thinking about business school. Not dreaming about becoming an entrepreneur. Just learning.

All kinds of people walked through that door. The homeless man who just needed a meal. The former Prime Minister of Canada who happened to be a regular. I learned early that hunger doesn't care about your title — and neither should you.

*“When someone is hungry and they think of you — that's actually very warm.”*

I didn't set out to become an entrepreneur. Back then, you got a degree and got a job. Over 30 years and 14 businesses, I stopped keeping score the way most people do. What looks like a failure from the outside might be the experience that quietly rewired how you think.

What I learned — through all of it — is that you can't deposit excitement. Passion matters. But passion without execution is just noise. The entrepreneurs who make it aren't the most excited ones in the room. They're the ones who pick up the nickels every single day even when nobody's watching.

These days I find myself in my office with entrepreneurs — young ones, seasoned ones, stuck ones — who just need someone who's been there. Not a consultant with a framework. Not a coach with a course. Someone who can look at their situation and say: here's what I'd do differently, and here's how we get you there faster.

I'll be honest with you — some people find that directness uncomfortable. That's okay. The ones who are ready for it tend to move faster because of it.

I wrote all of this down. Eleven chapters. Real stories. No frameworks. It's called *You Can't Deposit Excitement* — and it's yours, free.

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#### A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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I almost didn't write this.

Not because the stories weren't there — they were always there. But because for a long time I didn't think they were worth putting down. I'm not a writer. I'm not a professor. I haven't built a billion-dollar company or appeared on the cover of a magazine. What I have done is build fourteen businesses, across more industries than most people would attempt, through failures that cost me everything and wins that exceeded what I ever imagined — and I've done it while figuring it out in real time, the same way most of you are doing it right now.

That's why I finally wrote it down.

This book is for the twenty-eight-year-old who just quit their job to build something and hasn't told anyone how scared they are. It's for the forty-five-year-old who has been grinding for years and is starting to wonder if it's worth it. And it's for anyone who is simply curious about what really goes on behind the curtain — not the highlight reel, not the LinkedIn version, but the actual thing.

I hope one of three things happens when you finish reading.

I hope you go back to something you put down. A project, an idea, a version of yourself you talked yourself out of.

I hope you keep going on something that's hard right now. Not because it gets easier — it doesn't always. But because the journey inside it is shaping something in you that you can't see yet.

And I hope you put this down, look around, and say thank you to someone. Your partner. Your mentor. Your best friend. The person who stayed on the mattress. You probably already know who they are. Just make sure they know you know.

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*“Throughout my career, I have been given enormous amounts of free advice from mentors who had no obligation to give it. I am still receiving it. I am still learning. This book is my way of passing that forward — freely, honestly, without a framework or a fee. Take what is useful. Leave what isn't. And if something in here makes you move, that is enough for me.”*

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These are not the eleven rules of success. There are no rules. These are eleven stories from a life spent building things — and the lessons that crawled out of each one whether I was looking for them or not.

I hope they find you at the right moment.

Fadi Smaidi

## Sandwich Maker

My father came to Canada as an immigrant, got a degree in computer engineering and had a willingness to do whatever it took to survive. When he lost his job at Philips, he did not fold. He opened a restaurant. A Lebanese joint in the first ethnic food court in Montreal, Quebec. He called it Boustan. And from the age of eight years old, that restaurant was my world.

I started in the back, peeling potatoes. I worked every station as I got older. By the time I was making sandwiches behind the counter, I had already absorbed more about business than most people learn in a lifetime — I just didn't have the words for it yet.

What I remember most is the people. All kinds of people walked through those doors. The homeless man coming in off the street in Montreal, just hungry. The dancer that just finished a shift across the street on Crescent Street. The former Prime Minister of Canada, a regular customer. All of them standing at the same counter, waiting for the same food. I learned early that hunger does not care about your title. And neither should you. Everyone who walked through those doors deserved to be served well. That was my job. Nothing more, nothing less.

There is something that happens when someone is hungry and they think of you. It is actually very warm. That feeling — of being the place someone turns to when they need something real — it's what a business is actually all about at its core. Not the margins, not the branding, not the pitch deck. The feeling that you are the person someone trusts when it matters.

I did not decide to become an entrepreneur. Back then you got a degree and got a job. Entrepreneurship was not a lifestyle or a dream — it was something that happened to

you, sometimes beautifully, sometimes brutally. But everything I have ever built or learnt started behind that counter. Every lesson about margins, about people, about what it costs to keep something alive — I learned it at Boustan before I knew I was learning anything at all.

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*“The most honest education I ever received had no diploma. It had a counter, a knife, and an endless line of people who just wanted a good sandwich.”*

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Whatever you are building right now — go back to the counter. Go back to the simplest version of what you are trying to do. Who are you serving? What do they need? Are you the person they will think of when they are hungry? That is where every business starts. And that is where the best ones never stop existing.

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*You do not need a title to start building. You need a counter and a reason to show up.*

## Chapter 02

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# Do You Want to Be King or Rich?

Early in my career, I was sitting across from a senior executive at IBM. I don't remember exactly how the conversation started. What I remember is the question he asked me — one I wasn't expecting, and one I've never stopped thinking about since.

*Fadi, do you want to be king, or do you want to be rich?*

I didn't fully understand what he meant at first. So he explained it. A king is rich by himself. He rules everything he can see. His word is final, his castle is his, and his servants exist to serve his vision. A king measures success by control.

To be rich is something completely different. When you're rich — truly rich — the people around you are rich as well. A rising tide raises all boats. You measure success

not by how much you control, but by how much you've created for others alongside yourself.

For me, the answer was immediate. I wanted to be rich. I knew it without hesitation — not because of the money, but because of what I had already seen. I had watched what the king's choice looked like up close. I knew its cost.

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*“The question isn't just about money. It's about what kind of leader you are before you've built anything — because everything else flows from that answer.”*

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I also had the opposite example in a mentor of mine, let's call him Ted — a man who had every reason to be king. Successful, respected, someone who had built real things. And yet he spent his time lifting people around him. He walked into a restaurant where a young man was making sandwiches in an apron and treated him like an equal. He was rich — not just in the way that shows up in bank accounts, but in the way that shows up in the people whose lives he changed.

The king versus rich question shapes everything about how you build. It shapes who you hire and how you treat them. It shapes how you structure your cap table, how you run your boardroom, how you make decisions when things get hard. A king manages his team as subjects. Someone who wants to be rich builds a team as partners — because he understands that his outcome is tied directly to theirs.

Most business plans never ask this question. Most mentors skip it entirely and go straight to strategy. But I've learned that you can have the best strategy in the world and still fail — if you don't know what kind of leader you are before you start building.

I know a man who built something remarkable. A business that people loved, that fed a community, that had real staying power. He worked hard for decades and created something from nothing. But he chose king. He held the controls tightly — too tightly to let anyone else in, too tightly to let the thing grow beyond what one person could manage alone.

After he left, someone else took what he built and scaled it. Today that brand has over 65 locations across Canada. It is the largest Lebanese food franchise in the country. It is also expanding internationally.

**He built a big business.**

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*Because he chose king, someone else got rich. Before you build anything — answer the question. King or rich? Everything else follows from there.*

Chapter 03

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## Batman and Cheff

Nobody builds anything alone. I don't care how driven you are, how clear your vision is, or how many hours you're willing to put in. At some point — usually the point that matters most — you are going to need someone in your corner who isn't there because of what you can do for them. Someone who shows up because of who you are.

I have been lucky enough to have two of those people in my life. I call them Batman and Cheff.

Ted — Batman — walked into my restaurant in Edmonton, Alberta the way a lot of people did, as a customer. What made him different is what happened over the next few days. He came in one day wearing a very nice watch. I noticed it immediately — I have always loved watches — and I pointed it out. The next day he came back wearing a different watch, just as beautiful. I pointed that one out too. The third day, another watch. And something shifted inside me — not in a good way. I was young. I was proud. And I was convinced that this man was coming in to show off. To make me feel small. To remind me, the kid behind the counter in an apron, that there were things in this world I couldn't afford.

I went home and told my partner. I think there's a customer who keeps coming to show me his watches. I think he's trying to make me feel like I can't afford them. Her

response was immediate: maybe he just found someone who likes and understands watches. I was convinced she was wrong.

Months later, around Christmas time, Ted walked into the restaurant holding a tray of goodies that his wife Sue had made — she's a great baker. I lit up. He told me the tray wasn't for me — it was for my family. Then he handed me a bag. Inside was a watch. I told him I couldn't accept it. He said: yes, you can, because I know you'll give it to your son one day. My son was two years old at the time. I told him he was right; I would accept the gift, but first I had to get something off my chest.

I told him the truth. That when we first met, I thought he was coming in to make me feel like I couldn't afford his watches.

*Not at all, he said. It was just nice to meet someone who appreciated them.*

Exactly what Carolina had told me. Months earlier.

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*“Ted saw my future before I did. He wasn't giving me a watch. He was telling me I was going to have a son worth passing something down to.”*

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That was the beginning of a friendship and mentorship that has shaped a lot for me over the years. When I moved from the restaurant world into the tech space — a world completely foreign to me, with valuations and cap tables and capital raises that made no sense to someone who had only ever bet on what he could see and touch — it was Ted who pushed me forward. I call him Batman because that is what he is. Shows up when it matters. Quietly. Powerfully. Without needing the credit.

And then there is Martin Cheff. My best friend. Also someone who walked into my life through the door of that restaurant in Montreal.

I want you to think about the people in your life right now. All of them. And I want you to sort them into three categories. The first type is the one that would push you in front of a bus. The second is the person who would pull you away from a bus if they saw it coming. And the third — the rarest kind — is the person who would jump in front of

the bus for you.

Martin is the third person. Always has been. Without hesitation, without keeping score, without needing to be asked. We have traveled together, built in parallel, navigated the highs and the lows of entrepreneurship alongside each other through the years. Coined the word “Humans”. He has never once been anything other than the third person.

Take a look at the people around you right now. Your inner circle. The ones you call when things go sideways. Which type are they? And more importantly — which type are you?

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*You don't need many people. You need the right ones. Find your Batman. Find your Cheff. And be that person for someone else.*

#### Chapter 04

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## Boustan University

My father was originally a computer engineer. When he lost his job at Philips, he made a decision that most people would have found terrifying — he opened a restaurant. Not just any restaurant. A Lebanese restaurant in the first ethnic food court in Montreal. He called it Boustan.

From the time I was eight years old, Boustan was my classroom. I started in the back, peeling potatoes. Not glamorous work. Not the kind of thing you put on a resume. But it was where I learned everything that actually matters in business — margins, relationships, what it costs to keep something alive, and what it looks like when someone gives everything they have to something they built.

I watched my father sleep on a bag of potatoes in the back of that restaurant. Not because he was careless about his family. Because the time it would take to go home and come back wasn't worth the distance from the thing he was building. I've watched him put a little piece of chicken on a toothpick so that people can come closer and try

what we were cooking. The business was everything. He gave it everything.

I learned two things from that image. The first was the discipline of a man who understood that building something real requires real sacrifice. The second was a decision I made quietly, watching him — that I would never be a slave to a business. The business exists to serve your life. Not the other way around. I have gone home for dinner every night I possibly could. If I had to travel for work, I always made sure I was home for the weekends. The only time I sleep in my office is when I was taking a nap in the middle of the afternoon.

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*“The business is there to help us grow and learn. I never wanted to be its slave. I always wanted to be home.”*

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What Boustan also taught me was where value actually lives in a business. Everyone is obsessed with the front of the house — the presentation, the brand, the customer experience, the cash register. What I learned peeling potatoes in the back is that the money is not in the cash register. The money is in the kitchen. It’s in the operations, the margins, the unsexy decisions that nobody sees and nobody celebrates.

Restaurants are brutally honest about this. The margins are razor thin. There is no room for waste, no room for ego, no room for spending money because it feels good to spend it. Every tomato matters. And here is the thing about a tomato — a tomato has been lean forever. It has fed people across centuries, across every economic condition imaginable, without ever being glamorous about it. Expect on a pizza. It just works. It stays lean because it has no choice.

I carried that discipline into every business I’ve built after Boustan. Even when the margins got better. Even when the money was there. I always treated the business like a tomato — watching every dollar, reinvesting carefully, never spending because success had arrived and spending felt like a reward.

Boustan also taught me something about customers that I have never seen written in any business book. I believe that every customer brings me joy. Some when they come.

Some when they leave. The customer is not always right. Logic is always right. Treating every customer with respect does not mean surrendering your judgment to every person who walks through the door. The best businesses know the difference.

One thing I've learned over the years of traveling for business is this: when the word Suite is in the name of the hotel, it's typically not a nice hotel. But when you get upgraded to a suite — that's a completely different thing. Same word. Two completely different realities.

Business works exactly the same way. You have to learn to read past what something is called and understand what it actually is. The restaurant with the fancy menu that can't control food costs. The investor with the impressive title who has never built anything. The partnership that sounds perfect on paper but feels wrong the moment you sit down together.

Boustan taught me that. Not in a classroom. Behind a counter, watching who came through the door and learning to read people and situations for exactly what they were — not what they claimed to be.

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*Find out where the money actually is in your business. It's probably not where you think. Look in the kitchen.*

## Chapter 05

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# I'll Burn It to the Ground

I was invited to a breakfast meeting without really knowing what it was about. I showed up thinking it was one thing and it was something completely different.

Sitting across from me was an investor. Someone with money, with influence, with the kind of posture that tells you he is used to being the most important person in the room. He also pointed out at least five times that he graduated from Harvard. As the conversation unfolded, I realized he was evaluating me. Sizing me up. Sizing up the

business. Positioning himself as someone I should want as an investor in SkillsTrader.

I stopped him. I told him that I would burn this company into the ground before I took a single penny from him. And I meant every word. Not because his money was not real. But because his values were not aligned with mine. And because the moment someone like him walked into my cap table, the feel of every room I had carefully built would change forever. The people around that table — friends, family, people who had believed in me before there was anything to believe in — deserved better than that.

He asked me if I knew what the role of a CEO was. He said a CEO is like a conductor in an orchestra — they don't need to know how to play every instrument, they just need to know how they all sound together. It was a reasonable answer. Safe. The kind that sounds impressive at breakfast meetings or in Harvard.

I told him he was right. But I added one thing.

**To lead the orchestra, you need to be able to turn your back to the crowd.**

I paid the bill and walked away.

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*“A real leader serves the work and the people behind them — not the applause in front of them. You cannot lead from the front if you are playing to the crowd.”*

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What happened after that breakfast? SkillsTrader kept growing. We built our team, expanded our partnerships, opened offices in Edmonton, Calgary, and Dallas. We went to Washington DC. We launched an initiative with the federal government, putting our product into trade schools across the state of Texas. Presented at Berkshire Hathaway. The thing he implied we needed him for — we built without him. Because I protected the room.

Here is what I want you to understand about investors, partners, and the people you let into your business. Going into a partnership is a marriage. And like any marriage, it starts with attraction — a shared set of values, a feeling that you could sit across from

this person when things get hard and still respect what you see.

If at the first coffee there is no attraction — if something feels wrong, if the arrogance is already showing, if your values are already bumping against each other before a single dollar has changed hands — there is no need to continue dating. It will not get better in the boardroom. It never does.

He might have had the right money. But from the moment he sat down his attitude made him the wrong person. Knowing the difference — and being willing to act on it even when the money is real and the pressure is on — is one of the most valuable things I can share with you.

Know your values before someone tests them. Know your limits before someone crosses them. And when someone shows you who they are at breakfast — believe them.

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*Everyone will be there for the wins. Very few will be there during the building days. Choose those people carefully — because once they are in the room, they change it forever.*

## Chapter 06

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# The Real Boss

When I speak at universities — MBA students, sharp young people with ambitions and spreadsheets and five-year plans — someone always asks the same question. It comes in different forms, but it always has the same thing underneath: how do you manage all that risk?

I always give them the same answer. And it's never the one they're expecting.

Her name is Carolina.

She came to Montreal in the year 2000 from Alberta, through a university exchange program, to learn French. She found something else instead. Twenty-five years later,

she is still here — through 14 businesses, through the wins nobody saw coming and the losses I couldn't always explain. Through every version of me.

I have a photo I keep. It's from one of the hardest periods of my life — a business had collapsed, and I had lost everything. The only thing I was able to take from my loft was my mattress. In the photo, Carolina is sitting on that mattress on the floor of my mother's basement. She stayed. Not because things were good. Because she believed that who I was mattered more than where I was.

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*“She can see past the Ferrari. In 25 years, I have never once seen her be fooled by the shiny thing.”*

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I was always honest with her. About how hard things were. About where we stood. That's not heroism — it's just who I am. I don't sugar coat. I don't hide. If you are going to be my partner in life, you deserve to know exactly where the situation is. No surprises. No protected version of the truth. Honesty isn't just something I practice in business — it's the foundation of everything that matters to me.

What I didn't expect, when I was young and building and falling and rebuilding, was how much I would come to rely on her steadiness. Not the big dramatic saves — she's not that kind of person. She's something harder to find. She is consistent. She is wise. She keeps the home safe in a way that has nothing to do with locks on the door and everything to do with how it feels when you walk in.

Entrepreneurs talk endlessly about risk tolerance. About how to manage uncertainty. What nobody talks about is the person at home who absorbs every version of you — the version that comes in flying because the deal just closed, and the version that comes in quiet because it didn't. You need someone who can hold both. Someone who isn't dazzled by the highs or destroyed by the lows. Someone who sees you, not the scoreboard.

If you are going to take the risks that entrepreneurship demands — real risks, the kind that keep you up at night — you need that person. Not just support. Not just

encouragement. A rock. Someone whose belief in you is not conditional on your last result.

I have been lucky enough to build fourteen businesses. I have been even luckier to build them with Carolina at home.

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*When someone asks you how you manage the risk — tell them the truth. The answer is probably a name.*

## Chapter 07

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# Crooked Teeth

Growing up as the son of immigrant parents, there are certain things you learn to notice. Who has what you don't. What the gap between you and everyone else looks like. For me, it was teeth.

Everyone around me had braces. Straight, white, Colgate smiles. My family had limited resources — my father was building something from scratch, and orthodontics wasn't where the money went. So I grew up with crooked teeth. I didn't enjoy smiling. I was aware of it in every room I walked into, every photograph, every moment where confidence was required and mine had a small crack running through it.

What I didn't understand at the time was that the crooked teeth were doing something for me. They were keeping me tethered. Keeping me honest. No matter how many boardrooms I walked into as I got older, no matter how much the businesses grew or the circumstances changed, I could never fully forget where I came from. The kid in the back of the restaurant, serving sandwiches, watching his father sleep on a bag of potatoes because going home wasn't worth the time — that kid came with me everywhere. The teeth made sure of it.

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*“Humility isn’t something you decide to have. It’s something that gets built into you — by circumstance, by where you started, by what you carried that others didn’t.”*

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It took a long time — and a lot of convincing — before I finally got the braces. I was well past the age where most people do it. I kept thinking: I’m past my prime. Why bother now? But Ted — who was also a dentist — had been telling me for years that fixing my teeth might help with the migraines I had suffered from since I was young. He was right. The migraines eased. The treatment worked.

When it was done, I could smile without thinking about it. I could walk into a room without that small, quiet awareness in the back of my mind. And I told myself I should feel relieved.

Instead I felt like I had lost something.

Here is the thing I have never been able to fully explain until now: even today, when I smile, I still feel like I have crooked teeth. The teeth are straight but the feeling never left. And I think that’s exactly right — because the feeling was never really about the teeth. It was about remembering. About carrying the kid from the kitchen with you into every room, every deal, every moment where it would be very easy to forget where you actually started.

I made a decision when my own children were born. I told them I would give them two things: straight teeth and an education, if they wanted it. Not because I was trying to erase what I had experienced. But because I knew what it cost — in confidence, in comfort, in the small daily weight of feeling like you don’t quite belong in the room. I could spare them that specific tax.

But I also hope they find their own version of it. Their own crooked teeth. Their own reminders. Because the entrepreneurs I have watched lose their way — the ones who stopped working hard, stopped staying humble, stopped picking up the nickels — they were usually the ones who forgot where they came from the moment things started

going well.

The teeth are straight now. Have been for years.

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*But when I smile, I still feel the crooked ones. Don't be in a rush to fix everything about where you came from. Some of it is holding you together.*

Chapter 08

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## Put Your Hand Up

Before SkillsTrader, I was running three autobody shops and growing a franchise across Canada. I am nowhere near someone who can weld a quarter panel. What I learned in that business is something that sounds simple but takes real humility to actually practice — you have to trust the people around you to do what you cannot do. In the body shop, I needed to trust my bodyman. Because if I didn't, the car was not safe to go back on the road. My job was to run the business. Their job was to do the work that made the business worth running.

Restaurants were different. I grew up in a restaurant. I can do everything in a restaurant — every station, every role, front of house and back. But autobody taught me something the restaurant never could. It taught me what it feels like to lead something you cannot personally execute. And that lesson followed me directly into tech.

SkillsTrader had gotten real. Microsoft had invested. We had been voted one of the top ten companies in the city. We were no longer flying under the radar — we were out, with credibility and momentum and the eyes of the room on us. And I knew what we were missing. I needed a CTO. Someone to lead the technical side of what we were building the way a bodyman leads a repair. Without that person, no matter how good the idea was, the car was not safe to go back on the road.

The room had been put together by Christian Idiodi and the Silicon Valley Product Group — people who worked with some of the best product minds in the world. I was

aware I did not belong on paper. I put my hand up anyway.

I was nervous. Not because I didn't know my product — I knew it better than anyone in that room. I was nervous because I was about to stand in front of software engineers and tell them about a tech company that did not yet have a CTO, led by a sandwich maker. I was about to show them the gap. The thing I could not do myself.

I went up anyway. I explained the concept, the vision, what we had built and where we were going. I did not hide what I was missing. I knew I could build businesses. I also knew I could not code. And I said so.

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*“I will never tell you where I am strong. You will figure that out yourself.  
What I will tell you is where I am weakest — because that is how we find out  
if you can pick me up.”*

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After the presentation a man approached me. His name was Stephen. We went for breakfast the following day. I laid out the full vision for SkillsTrader — where it had come from, where it was going, what it needed. We talked for a long time. And at the end of that breakfast Stephen looked at me and said four words that changed the trajectory of the company.

### **I am your new CTO.**

We shook hands. No lengthy negotiation. No posturing. Two people who recognized something real in each other and made a decision over eggs.

That is what vulnerability actually unlocks. Not sympathy. Not pity. The right people. Stephen was in that room because he was looking for something worth building. I was in that room because I was looking for someone to build it with. Neither of us would have found each other if I had not put my hand up and told the truth about where I stood.

Impostor syndrome does not go away when you put your hand up. You feel it on the walk to the front of the room. You feel it while you are talking. But the thing you need

is often sitting in that room waiting to find you — and it will never find you if you keep your hand down.

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*Stop waiting until you feel ready. Put your hand up. Tell the truth about where your gaps are. The right people will run toward them, not away.*

## Chapter 09

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# You Can't Deposit Excitement

Everyone has ideas. I want to be clear about that from the start. The world is not short of people with great ideas, exciting ideas, ideas that could genuinely change something if they ever made it out of the conversation they were born in.

But you cannot deposit excitement.

Passion matters. Energy matters. Belief in what you are building absolutely matters. But none of it pays the bills, funds the team, or builds the product. What separates the people who make it from the people who don't is almost never the quality of the idea. It is the ability to execute. To go from idea to concept to product, without waiting for perfect conditions that will never arrive.

I have a process I use every time an idea comes to me. Before I get excited — before I tell anyone, before I start building in my head — I try to kill it. I sit across from the idea and I challenge it. I raise every objection I can find. I look for the reasons it will not work, the reasons the market does not need it, the reasons I am not the right person to build it. I fight against my own excitement deliberately.

And then I argue back. I rebut my own objections one by one. If the idea can survive that process — if it holds up under honest pressure from the person who wants it to succeed most — then it is worth moving on. If my objections end up winning, then the idea was not strong enough in the first place. And I let it go without grief.

The founder in that story is me. I am the most excited person in the room about my own ideas — and I am also the first person trying to tear them down. That tension is not comfortable. But it is honest. And honest is the only thing that builds something real.

If you can execute on your excitement — if you can take that energy and turn it into action, into product, into something the market will actually pay for — then the excitement becomes something else entirely. It becomes proof. It becomes momentum. It becomes the thing that attracts the right people, the right investors, the right partners. The excitement was never the problem. The execution is what makes it real.

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*Try to kill your idea first. If it survives you, it can survive the market.*

## Chapter 10

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# Nickels

Everyone is looking for the home run. The big deal, the massive exit, the moment everything changes overnight. I understand the appeal. But in thirty years of building businesses across more industries than I can count on one hand, I have found that the home runs are almost never where the game is actually won.

The game is won in the nickels.

Nickels are everywhere. Every day, in every business, there are small wins sitting on the floor waiting to be picked up. A process you can tighten. A relationship you can deepen. A cost you can trim, a margin you can improve, a customer you can serve better than you did yesterday. None of these things feel significant on their own. That is exactly the point. The entrepreneur who bends down for the nickel when nobody is watching is the one who builds something that lasts.

Small wins compound. That is not a metaphor — it is the actual mechanics of how businesses grow. One nickel becomes ten. Ten become a hundred. Somewhere in that accumulation, quietly and without fanfare, the thing you are building becomes

something real.

I was at McDonald's once. There was a quarter on the ground. I picked it up. The person behind the counter noticed me picking it up. She also noticed the watch on my wrist — I was wearing my Rolex — and she made a comment. Something about the contrast. The implication being: why would someone like you bother picking up a quarter?

*I told her the truth. That is why I have a Rolex.*

I never stopped picking up the quarters. Not because I needed them. Because that is the habit. Because the person who bends down for a quarter on the floor of a McDonald's and the person who built something worth wearing on their wrist are the same person. One did not replace the other. The habit created the outcome.

To this day business partners, entrepreneurs I have mentored, people I have sat across from in my office send me photos of nickels they find — on sidewalks, in parking lots, on the floors of their own businesses. It has become a language between us. A reminder that the work is in the small things. That the discipline of noticing what others walk past is exactly what separates the ones who build something from the ones who are always waiting for their moment to arrive.

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*“The home run is exciting. But it is the nickels — picked up every day, without applause, without anyone watching — that actually get you the Rolex.”*

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If it were easy, everyone would do it. It is not easy. It is just simple. And simple, done consistently, over a long enough period of time, is the most powerful force in business.

Pick up the nickels. Every day. Without exception.

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*The home run will come or it won't. The nickels are always there.*

# Bite the Elephant

You would never expect a professional athlete to compete at a high level without a coach. Nobody argues that. Nobody tells a young hockey player to figure it out alone, or expects a tennis player to reach the top of their game through sheer self-belief. The coach is not optional at that level. The coach is the reason the level exists.

So why do so many entrepreneurs take on the highest stakes game there is — building a business from nothing, risking their money, their family's security, their entire identity — and convince themselves they can figure it out alone?

I have never understood that. And I have never done it.

During the height of SkillsTrader I was traveling constantly. Canada, the United States, city to city, meeting to meeting, airport to airport. I was exhausted in a way that is hard to describe — not just physically, but in every way a person can be depleted. I was running on momentum and not much else.

In my corner during that chapter was Bob Leibel — at the time the president of Sherwin-Williams Canada, and one of the most well-traveled business people I have ever met. Air Canada had given him his own commemorative model plane for crossing a million miles in the air. I remember telling him once that I wanted one of those.

He looked at me and said: no, you don't.

That is coaching. Not cheerleading. Not telling you that you're doing great. It's someone who has already stood where you want to stand, looking back at you and saying — trust me, you don't want this part of it. Keep going. But don't romanticize the cost.

I called Bob from an airport one day, overwhelmed and honest about it. I told him exactly where I was — not just geographically, but emotionally. I didn't perform. I didn't pretend. I said: I'm completely overwhelmed. I feel like I'm constantly on the

road and I don't know where I'm going with this company.

He told me: put your head down. Bite the elephant one bite at a time. Before you know it, you'll have the elephant chewed.

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*“That is what a coach does. They don't remove the elephant. They remind you that it can be eaten — and that you've already taken more bites than you think.”*

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The morning of the Berkshire Hathaway presentation in Dallas I walked into that boardroom — the tables, the chairs, the catered breakfast — and something hit me. I looked at my buddy standing next to me, told him to follow me to the bathroom, and asked him to hold the door. I got sick. Vomited sick. Washed my face. Walked back out. And crushed the presentation.

*That is what biting the elephant actually looks like. Not the highlight. The bathroom before the highlight.*

Bob and I went to New York together. We watched the US Open. We shared expensive bottles of wine. He was an important person in my life during an important chapter. And then that chapter closed, and life moved in different directions, and Bob and I naturally lost contact. I love him to death. If I see him across a room I am running to give him a hug. But that is the nature of some relationships in business and in life.

Some people come into your life for a reason. Some come for a season. Both matter. Both leave something behind. The wisdom to know the difference — and to be grateful for each without confusing one for the other — is something I have learned slowly over thirty years in business.

Now I sit on the other side of that table. Entrepreneurs come into my office — young ones chasing shiny objects, seasoned ones who have hit a ceiling they can't see through, stuck ones who just need someone to sit across from them and listen. All kinds. And my job in that room is not only to coach. It is to listen. To learn. Because you learn from everybody — even the twenty-five-year-old who doesn't yet know what

he doesn't know. Especially him, sometimes.

Coaching didn't stay in the boardroom for me. I coached youth football with the Sherwood Park Rams. I've been on the floor of an NBA arena at a Nike Basketball Camp surrounded by kids with basketballs who just needed someone to show them something. The trophy I'm most proud of in my office says Coach of the Year. It sits next to a photo of my kids.

The principle is the same whether you're on a field, a court, or across a desk from a founder who doesn't know which way to turn. Show up. Tell the truth. Give what was given to you — freely, without keeping score. That's the whole job.

The best coaches I have had were never yes-men. They were people who loved me enough to tell me the truth — including the truth I didn't want to hear. That kind of honesty is rare. When you find it, hold onto it. And when you are in a position to give it — give it freely. The way it was given to you.

You are playing the highest stakes game there is. Get a coach. Be a coach. And never stop being a student — because the moment you think you have nothing left to learn is the moment the elephant starts growing back.

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*Some people come for a reason. Some for a season. Both matter. Know the difference — and be grateful for each.*

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BACK COVER

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**How does the son of a Lebanese immigrant — peeling potatoes at eight years old in a Montreal food court — end up presenting to Berkshire Hathaway, launching products with Microsoft, and building franchises from coast to coast?**

In his honest and unfiltered memoir *You Can't Deposit Excitement*, Fadi Smaidi charts his journey from behind the Boustan counter to fourteen businesses across thirty years — through failures that cost him everything, wins he never saw coming, and the hard-earned lessons that live somewhere in between.

This isn't a book about having the right formula. It's about what actually happens when you show up, tell the truth, find the right people, and pick up the nickels every single day when nobody's watching.

**Fadi Smaidi**

Entrepreneur, mentor, and franchise builder based in Sherwood Park, Alberta. Founder and operator across 14 businesses including SkillsTrader, Dahlia's, and Shoot 360 Canada. Coach of the Year, Sherwood Park Rams.

*fadismaidi.com*