What Sylvester Stallone Has Taught Me About Business

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First of all, a disclaimer: I don't know Sylvester Stallone. I've never met him. But I admire him. To me, he embodies the values, foibles and determination that make people fundamentally admirable and make entrepreneurs successful. I've learned a lot from Stallone, both from the man himself and from the iconic characters he's created over his remarkable career.

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1. Create your own niche

Stallone's biography is a classic rags-to-riches tale. A struggling, briefly homeless, wannabe-actor, Stallone bounced from bit part to bit part, roles that are only notable now because the actor did indeed achieve greatness. How did he do it? He stopped waiting for a great role to land in his lap. He wrote the damn movie himself in 1975, the iconic film that would go on to be nominated for ten Academy Awards: *Rocky*. The sometimes gritty, working class hero of the film, Rocky Balboa, understood that he had to find success on his own terms. As Rocky said, "I stopped thinking the way other people think a long time ago. You gotta think like you think." In business, you've got to find and develop your points of difference – those things that make you unique and valuable.

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2. Early trauma doesn’t have to limit future success

When Stallone was born, forceps were used during the delivery. He suffered nerve damage as a result, leaving him with a partially paralyzed face. Rather than letting a challenge intimidate him, Stallone instead created characters for whom a distinctive sneer and slightly slurred speech were plausible distinguishing qualities.

3. Fitness forever

Stallone is currently 73 years old, and he looks more fit than most men half his age. He’s made staying healthy a priority his entire life. Though he may not have the 2.8 percent body fat he attained while training for *Rocky III*, his 2005 book, *Sly Moves: My Proven Program to Lose Weight, Build Strength, Gain Will Power, and Live your Dream*, details how important fitness is to both mental and physical health. That’s inspiring.

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4. Stay humble

Stallone isn’t an angel. He’s a real person with real faults and weaknesses. After he found fame and success, he also found himself seduced by the trappings of wealth. A 1982 article in *Rolling Stone* explains: “Sylvester Stallone remembers the exact moment when he realized that he was a self-aggrandizing asshole. He was purring along in his Clénet, which is a car priced above $80,000, and he had owned it for two weeks and thought it was a beautiful machine right up until he glanced

out and saw the image of that extraordinary vehicle reflected in a store window, and he said to himself: ‘What self-aggrandizing asshole would drive a car like that?’” He sold that car the next day. Flashy cars don’t make us good, successful people, and I learned that lesson from Stallone. Likewise, running a successful business isn’t just about the money and status. It’s about creating jobs and making our communities better.

5. Winning isn’t everything

It’s funny. If you ask most people (okay, most normal people who aren’t Stallone-obsessed) what happens at the end of *Rocky*, they’ll tell you he wins the big fight. And they’re wrong. The first movie in the *Rocky* series doesn’t end in victory, at least not a victory in the ring. Rocky Balboa’s triumph in the film isn’t a knockout, and it’s not even the judges’ decision. Spoiler alert: Rocky’s opponent, Apollo Creed wins in a split decision. Rocky is victorious because he worked hard, labored against incredible odds and went the 15 rounds with the world’s best. And, of course, he did it with dignity, humility and tons of heart. My professional goal reflects a similar ethos: I want to work hard, deliver excellent results and be proud of my work, just as Rocky Balboa found victory on his own terms.

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6. It’s okay to be silly

Sylvester Stallone made a career playing tough guys, from Rocky Balboa to John Rambo. But what did he do when his young son, Sage wanted to see his dad on *The Muppet Show*? Stallone donned a gladiator costume, engaged in ridiculous “combat” with a life-sized, floppy lion in front of an audience of Muppet and sang a bizarre version of “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off.” That’s right, Sylvester Stallone appeared on

episode 320 in 1979. It’s campy, it’s silly and I love it. Prioritizing fun and family over image is heroic in my book.

7. There’s value in struggle

Success that comes easily is never as cherished as the success that’s achieved as a result of hard work and dedication. And Stallone has a deep understanding of the value of struggle: “If you don’t have a mountain, build one and then climb it. And after you climb it, build another one; otherwise you start to flatline in your life.”

If anyone earned the right to rest on his laurels, Sylvester Stallone has. But he doesn’t. With new projects in development and production, he’s not stopping. Why do I love Stallone? Because he embodies the nobility of hard work. He is the entrepreneurial sprit, personified. He faced difficulties, literally from day one, and he’s created his own success.

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