



This exclusive guide provides a chapter summary and study questions to help you receive even more value from the book “Cumulative Advantage: How to Build Momentum for Your Ideas, Life, and Business Against All Odds” by Mark Schaefer.

Let’s begin with the book’s important Introduction.

## INTRODUCTION

The book begins by setting up a fanciful competition between the author, Mark Schaefer, and Tim Ferris, a fellow author who skyrocketed to unexpected celebrity-level success.

On paper, it seemed like Mark might have had a more successful opportunity based on his position at a “standing start.” But Tim generated massive momentum against all odds. How did this happen? Tracing this journey helps see the proven patterns that lead to unstoppable momentum.

In the Introduction, the definition of Cumulative Advantage is introduced:

**The Principle of Cumulative Advantage states that once a person gains a small advantage over others in their field, that advantage will compound over time into increasingly larger advantages.**

The purpose of this book is to explore how we can make Cumulative Advantage work in our own lives and businesses, even if the odds seem stacked against us.

### Study questions

1. The Principle of Cumulative Advantage -- Do you believe this statement? Does it happen all the time? Why or why not? What would stop it from coming true?
2. Can you guess from the Tim Ferriss story what his small initial advantage might have been?
3. Is there an initial advantage that sparked momentum in your life or career?

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PORCELLIAN CLUB

The Winkelvoss twins gained fame from their depiction in *The Social Network* movie. This chapter looks at their life more fully and shows how Cumulative Advantage worked for them as an extreme example. Family wealth and status led to an elite education, important connections, rare opportunities, and considerable wealth. Their success seemed inevitable as advantage led to advantage.

The name of the chapter comes from a secretive Harvard men's club. This elite advantage provided the brothers with lifetime access to leaders at the highest levels of business, government, and society.

This story of privilege is contrasted by the life of R. K. Merton, a poor immigrant who fought his way to an accomplished career as a researcher and sociologist. In 1968, Merton authored a significant paper called "The Matthew Effect" which showed how Nobel Prize winners benefitted from a lifetime of snowballing advantages, not necessarily earned through merit.

Over decades of research, this idea that "the rich get richer" through unstoppable momentum has been shown to impact career advancement, wealth, social status, educational opportunities, and even health.

Merton said the momentum of Cumulative Advantage would continue unabated unless there were *countervailing processes*.

The author provides evidence from case studies and original research that there are five factors, or countervailing processes, that can help anyone build momentum, even without a lifetime of inherited benefits:

1. Identify an initial advantage
2. Discover a seam of timely opportunity
3. Create significant awareness for our project through a "sonic boom"
4. Gain access to a higher orbit by reaching out and reaching up to powerful allies
5. Build the momentum through constancy of purpose and executing on a plan

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Consider this quote from Malcolm Gladwell: “People don’t rise from nothing. We do owe something to parentage and patronage.” How does this fit with the self-made narrative of The American Dream? Can these ideas co-exist? What are the implications for the initial advantage that sparks momentum?
2. You might consider obvious factors like family wealth, private education, and physical prowess as advantages for the Winkelvoss brothers. What else could be an advantage that leads to momentum? American versus non-American? White versus non-white? Male versus female? Tall versus short? Able-bodied versus disabled? What are some non-obvious advantages you can think of?
3. If the Winkelvoss twins had not been born into a life that led them to Harvard and Mark Zuckerberg, could they have had the same success? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER TWO

### ONE SMALL SPARK

The author shows how a random request from his boss ultimately led to his career as a writer and digital marketing authority. The event that led Tim Ferriss to his massively successful book and career? The loss of a girlfriend. **Random life events!**

Researcher Frans Johansson showed that most successful ideas and businesses begin with a random collision of events – a conversation, an observation, seeing something in a new way. Famous innovations and products start through accidental events.

This chapter re-sets the popular mindset that success comes to only the advantaged. Momentum begins with an initial advantage, and that is accessible to anyone because there are ideas all around us, all the time.

“Luck” can play a major role in success but we don’t necessarily know it or discuss it because the heroic entrepreneurial journey is such a popular and powerful story in Western culture. This phenomenon is called *hindsight bias*.

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Ask some friends if their career success was based on a goal or plan, or if it happened due to some random circumstance along the way. How prevalent is luck and serendipity in the start of momentum?
2. How is randomness part of your own story? Does your own success narrative contain hindsight bias? Does it matter?
3. With this fresh perspective on the true nature of success, how can you make randomness work for you and create new opportunities?

## CHAPTER THREE

### ACTING ON CURIOSITY

This chapter makes the important point that luck alone does not build momentum. The *energetic quest* separates the successful from the lazy. Several inspiring case studies demonstrate the power of acting on curiosity.

Chapter 3 provides six practical and proven ideas to harness the power of random events and pursue curiosity that leads to momentum:

1. Connect present ideas and observations with your own knowledge, experience, and heritage to create something useful and unique.
2. Combine intellectual perspectives collaboratively.
3. Go to a place that impacts your success and generate ideas through observation. This is also known as *gemba*.
4. Pay close attention to anomalies. If something didn't happen that you expected would happen, follow the clue.
5. Observe how needs and expectations change in a crisis or cultural shift.
6. Create an environment that enables synergistic collisions.

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. During the 2020 pandemic, there were a record number of business startups. Can you imagine why this was the case? How would a crisis provide positive momentum for ideas?
2. Where is your opportunity for *gemba*? Where are new ideas happening in a visual way? Where are new ideas happening in your community?
3. What's the difference between *having* an idea and the *energetic quest* of an idea?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SEAM

The author suggests a new model of strategic success built on speed, time, and space. He uses the analogy of an American football team looking for vulnerabilities in the competition and bursting through in one opportunistic moment ... and then looking for the next one.

A seam is an undefended or under-defended opportunity. It is a fracture in the status quo. Seams of opportunity are opening continuously as the world changes!

Studies show one common thread among billionaires with no significant early advantages -- Every one of them recognized an early trend and capitalized on the undefended opportunity by bursting through the seam.

Every initial idea or advantage needs a seam. Sometimes when an idea is low risk, it's simply best to speed ahead through a seam to see what happens. But to know with more assurance if there is a seam of opportunity for your ideas, there are three questions to answer:

- Is the opportunity you've discovered undefended, or at least underdefended, in viable territory?
- Is the opportunity a personal fit for you and your life?
- Is the timing of the opportunity right?

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. The author says: "Don't confuse what you sell with what people really buy." What does this mean to you? Have you ever made this mistake?
2. What does "personal fit" have to do with a successful idea or viable opportunity? What does *ikigai* mean to you?
3. Consider the ideas you have. How would you test the seam? What person or resources could help you? Do you need to test it at all?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE CERTAINTY OF UNCERTAINTY

As we learn through case studies and expert views, timing seems to be *everything* when it comes to a successful launch of an idea ... and yet this is so unknowable and uncertain. Strike too late or too early and your opportunity might be lost.

Rather than accept timing as something left to chance alone, the author suggests you can nudge the odds in your favor by putting ideas through a “worthiness test:”

1. **Is your idea worthy of a customer?** (Is your idea ego-centered or market-centered?)
2. **Is it worthy of a battle?** (Do you have the resources and time to give yourself the best chance of success?)
3. **Is it worthy of the truth?** (Are you responding to demonstrated needs? Are you minimizing risk through research?)

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- At the beginning of the chapter, the author uses a quote from Tom Peters to acknowledge the importance of passion. How important is passion when it comes to momentum or can an idea fly on its own merits? When does passion become an “over-done strength?”
- In 1984, Peter Drucker wrote: “Successful innovators are conservative. They’re not ‘risk-focused.’ They’re opportunity-focused.” Is this still true today?
- The author says momentum comes from following both your head and your heart. Are you balanced in this perspective, or does it cause a problem for you? How can you overcome this?



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **THE SONIC BOOM**

Nearly every idea and initiative can benefit from widespread awareness that pumps up the momentum. This chapter reveals two key ideas when it comes to promotion in the digital world.

The first concept – the sonic boom -- is based on research that shows how content goes viral by obtaining critical mass of meaningful audiences. A validation effect occurs, building exponential momentum quickly.

“Social proof” is about the little environmental clues that provide direction when we don’t know the truth about something. If we don’t know what to choose, we may look at reviews as social proof, for example. The research study for the music industry demonstrates how even a small amount of positive social proof early in a project can completely change and dominate the outcome.

Setting the stage for an early, positive narrative about your idea or business can create significant momentum.

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Consider your own industry. Who are the influencers who could generate a critical mass of awareness for your project? Industry experts? Academics? Celebrities? Business leaders? Who are your fans?
2. Why would powerful individuals want to support and promote your ideas? What is your role in providing a mutual value exchange?
3. How does the network effect of social proof work in your business? Is this something that can be influenced and controlled, or is it out of your hands?

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **PERSONAL VELOCITY**

This chapter connects the dots between the opportunity to create massive awareness through a sonic boom and your personal brand and authority. The author acknowledges that the ability to generate momentum can either be held back or perpetuated by the quality and reach of your network.

By working on your personal network in a consistent manner over time, you'll increase the opportunities for the reach of your momentum. This can be achieved by anyone, but it does take consistent work over time. There are no shortcuts.

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. In the book "KNOWN," Mark Schaefer says that an effective personal brand means you have the authority, presence, and reputation to give you the best chance to succeed. How do you assess your own personal brand in this moment? How could momentum build for your ideas if you were more widely known in your industry?
2. The author provides several case studies showing how momentum normally builds steadily over time. How does this connect to your own view of success?
3. What do you think is a more important contributor to momentum: Consistent effort or a wildly great idea? How do they work together?

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **REACHING OUT AND REACHING UP**

The author proposes that the traditional view of mentorship is outdated. Instead of a long-term teacher, a mentor today provides short-term introductions and opportunities that drive unstoppable momentum.

Citing original research, Schaefer says that mentorship is unparalleled in its ability to change the course of a life, career, or business. The care and nurturing of mentors is a craft to be honed and taken seriously.

This chapter provides many actionable concepts to reimagine mentoring and establish an effective relationship that drives momentum. Ideas include:

- Being clear about your goals
- Studying potential mentors holistically
- Developing a mutually beneficial value proposition
- Reaching up to an aspirational level
- Letting the relationship develop organically
- Establishing a personal board of directors

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Think about an important mentor in your life. Did the person create the most value through teaching, or by creating new opportunities for you?
2. How would your momentum change if you reached out and reached up to a person outside of your normal circle of contacts?
3. How could you use the ideas in this chapter to blast through old obstacles and open new doors?

## CHAPTER NINE

### CONSTANCY OF PURPOSE

Once momentum is established, we need to avoid the “doom loop” when inevitable problems surface and recall what created our momentum in the first place.

This chapter acknowledges the challenges of sustaining momentum in an ever-changing world as seams come and go. The author helps you determine the ongoing relevance and sustainability of your momentum. There are proven ideas in this chapter to help you sustain momentum over the long-term including:

- Setting stretch goals that drive action
- Establishing an environment conducive to your goals
- Considering historic patterns that can hold you back
- Connecting with a team that can hold you accountable

Citing original research, the author discusses the role of resilience and grit in a long-term effort to build Cumulative Advantage.

To complete the narrative contrasting the success of Tim Ferris and the author, Schaefer reveals the final decision that ended his momentum and his dream of meeting Oprah!

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

- Considering your life, can you name the decisions you made that ended or propelled your momentum? Were there circumstances out of your control?
- One theme of the entire book is the importance of intellectual honesty when assessing opportunities and market needs. Sometimes seams eventually close. How would you know if this is happening in your business?
- Considering the Benton’s Bacon case study, which was the bigger contributor to his success – sticking to a plan, or the “sonic boom” created by the chefs?

## CHAPTER TEN

### AFTERWORD

Chapter 9 represents the end of the “formal” lessons of the book. In this last chapter, the author provides an inside view of how this book impacted him and his worldview.

Through personal accounts, he connects the principles of Cumulative Advantage to current events and provides an idea on how every person can act to turn Cumulative Disadvantage into advantage in their community by “reaching out and reaching down.”

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Schaefer turns the idea of mentorship upside down and states that reaching down might be as important as reaching up. Was there a time when a friend, mentor, or family member reached out to you in a way that changed the momentum in your life?
2. Is there a systematic and sustainable way you can apply your experience and skills to create hope to those in “the undertow?”
3. The author states that we are all surfing the crest of a wave that started long ago. What happened to you that set your wave in motion? How do you build on that advantage or change course today? Is it possible to change that course for others?