

The Switch for Seniors: Interview Project Guide

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Projects and Stories - Part 1 of 4

Let's talk about projects...

A story has a beginning, middle and end, right? So does a project. We'll find a few more components for a project shortly, but a concept worth fighting for is this:

A project is nothing more than a story WHILE it's happening.

Okay, projects – unlike most stories – do have well defined victory lines, or what we can call a black and white separation between success and failure. A project has a deadline, which is the moment in time when the end is done, and when either success or failure has resulted. Also unlike stories, projects always have plans, planning, an actual decision to get started, etc.

Always? Well yes, actually. Even in the very name, that is, if you call something a project, you've indicated some sort of intention if not formal planning and robust deadlines.

Let's list out these elements:

- 1. Beginning**
- 2. Middle**
- 3. End**
- 4. Victory Line**
- 5. Deadline**
- 6. Planning**
- 7. Decision**

Thing is, there are some problems that attach to projects. **First**, and maybe most important, unlike stories they sound boring. Kind of stuffy and formal, technical and something you'd only do at work, or if you have a pushy teacher in school.

Second, we're all simply expected to be good at them, but most of us aren't.

Third...this is the tough one...you cannot do a project with just your head, or even your head and your heart. To truly enter most powerfully into a project, it requires your soul.

How do normal people access their souls? Why, such endeavors are always called dreams.

Here's another problem – **fourth** – the older we grow the less we seem to realize the power and importance of our dreams. Also – **fifth** – no one ever asks us about our dreams at work, and we don't regularly use such language, let alone talk about our souls in a business setting.

So forget about work! Just think about getting old. I say again, the older we are, the more likely we grow toward forgetting our dreams. But, let me wrap this back around, now...

A project without a dream as its motivator is just work.

Last thought. Do you know an aging person, an elder; are your parents still alive? If so you're losing time if you don't crack open this topic with them for serious conversation.

Add the word "dream" to the list above and these 8 things will build an amazing conversation. In fact, you should commit to this as a...

Project!

Wiki-Switch Process - Part 2 of 4

Everyone online knows Wikipedia. It's of course a distributed project where any person inspired to invest the effort can contribute as an author of the ever-growing knowledge base. As I've contemplated where we need to go with this little series, I've come to believe we require a similar project.

I'll sketch out my vision and some specific action steps we will engage in together in my next posting. Today though, please allow me to share a story of my own.

The original idea for this series occurred to me in 2012, during a visit to my Mother-in-Law and her boyfriend, Fred Fromherz, in San Jose, CA. Living on the East Coast, my wife and I were only able to visit every year or two. But this time it became obvious to me that there wasn't very much time left.

Often, my Mother-In-Law (Mom), facing so many health issues, found it an almost impossible challenge just to get out of bed in the morning. But, no matter, not only did she always pull it off, she'd then spend up to an hour or so making herself beautiful. She never once came out of her room without makeup, hair groomed to perfection and a lovely outfit gracing her lovely form.

If you think of a 1940's era movie, you can hear an actor like Glenn Ford saying, "That dame's got class!" And boy did she.

No matter how much pain she suffered, there was always a bright light shining through her eyes and a quick laugh coming right up from her soul. As the years had passed, Mom used the word "love" more and more. She never missed a chance on that last visit to tell us that she loved us with all her heart.

Well, to say that observing all this moved me is obviously an understatement. But, the moment that this series was inspired was one I'll never forget. In spite of the great difficulty she faced, Mom would never use a cane. One afternoon, dressed to the nines as always, Mom was sitting on the sofa in the living room and we were talking. She decided she wanted to get some coffee, and there was no persuading her to let us do it for her. So, she started to get up. She couldn't. There just wasn't the force in her legs to lift her up from the deep, plush sofa. But, she had strategy.

So, she slid herself forward and balanced on the edge of the sofa cushion and began to lean forward. For the first several attempts this almost worked, but each time she lost her balance and dropped backward into the cushion. No matter, she caught her breath, readied herself, steady, steady, and scooted forward again.

I'm proud that I didn't let the tears of amazed hero worship burst out of my eyes watching. I can't tell you if it was three or four attempts or the fifth or maybe even the sixth time before she was able to balance over her feet, leaning so far forward I feared she'd tip right over. Then, rocking a bit as she stabilized and finally steadied herself successfully, she stood up slowly, so slowly...looked around the room at us, her worshiping audience, and beamed the most brilliant smile of pride and achievement you've ever seen in your life. Just a moment or two of basking in her glory and onward, into the kitchen for her coffee she went.

That battle and her glorious conquest will be in my soul for the rest of my life. Never, ever, have I been more deeply moved, nor more in awe of a warrior's victory.

So that was the moment this series was born. I wrote the first draft of the first essay that day, and read it out loud to Mom and Fred the next day. I was able to complete and share five of these essays with Mom and Fred before Mom passed away. Until now, in the two years since, I was not able to return to complete the series. I always knew I would, of course, but I had to let time and grief pass.

And that brings me up to the new vision I'd like to share. Mom and Fred, near as they were to their passing – Fred died about 4 months or so after Mom did – were not able to follow my essays with any sort of technical rigor. But, they responded so powerfully, both of them, to the spirit in each. We didn't discuss life stories or any such because their attention spans had already atrophied and their energy was weak. But, they loved listening to me read out loud, and responded to general ideas, and quite powerfully.

The most important single idea was victory, battle and victory. They both knew that each day was a great struggle. What they both thanked me for again and again was the idea of winning. That had not crossed either of their minds. In fact, after reading each of my essays to them, they always asked me about that every time. And, each time I'd walk through something they were fighting for right then and identify the victory that motivated them. You simply cannot imagine the power of this, if you don't try it yourself.

Aging souls must fight for each and every day. But, few people ever see, let alone acknowledge the power of their many victories. It is so easy to lose sight of winning. That was what moved both Mom and Fred the most. I became their cheerleader, and I gave my all to showing, even proving to them, how meaningful and how many were the victories they were winning.

Turning to your own conversation with your aging parents or beloved elders, keep in mind each soul has its own attention span and powers of focus. Each elderly soul has its own perspective, interest and process of engagement. It may

be that you're in time to ask for stories, life history, learning and context, lessons and guidance for yourself. We'll discuss these variables and the processes they inform as we go.

For now, please know that it can never be too early to commence. In my next post, I'll map out our initial steps focusing most of all on the idea of a formal interview, a series of them, actually, that I hope to inspire you to engage just as soon as you possibly can.

Structured Interviewing - Part 3 of 4

To begin building our vision, let's start out by discussing the idea of a formal interview, along with a structured interview process. Everyone in business has experienced this, most often in the setting of a job interview.

Sure, most interviewers have no clue how to do a decent, let alone a great interview. And no, interviews do NOT have to be formal or even structured. Honesty, fun, a light-hearted human approach will often bring you home with no training, analysis or worst of all, memorization or manipulative tactics, dominance moves and the like.

Still, there can be no question that if you have to judge between a few people for the same position, having some pre-established questions and a format you're comfortable repeating will help any interviewer, as well as serve those being considered for the position.

All of which is to say, a formal, structured interview can be a very powerful and very good thing...if we do our homework and preparation for it well, and then learn how to execute effectively also.

There are three, most-fundamental elements in a structured interview. Here they are, and we'll work through each part below:

- 1.) Written Questions, or possibly Question Areas**
- 2.) A Flow, that is: a Beginning, Middle and End**
- 3.) Topic or Content Matter**

What questions should we use, and in what format? Myself, I rather hate scripts, but we'll come back to why you might want to use one. What I want instead of a script, for my own interviewing is more of a concept, an idea, or even a very specific area of focus. Here's an example of an area of focus:

Strengths: If I focus on this one area, I can ask all kinds of questions about it until I trigger a response from my interviewee.

Here are a couple of examples.

“While you were doing such and so, how did your strengths lead to exciting victories, and what was the most important strength your most exciting victory demanded most?”

Or, I can ask that question again, same area, like so: ***“What was your most significant contribution to the team's key outcomes?”***

Do you see? It's just one area, but I can ask scores of questions, as many as I need to, in order to elicit the most meaningful response possible. I don't need the questions to be precisely worded or memorized, since I'm able to turn a concept into a question-generating machine interactively in real time. An important process point if you take my route is this. Often the interviewee needs time to process the question. Sometimes silence and patience following a single question will serve perfectly. But, other times, the interviewee needs help kind of "walking around" the idea until an answer begins to percolate up.

The ability to reframe and rephrase your questions can be one of the most powerful gifts a great interviewer gives to her interviewee.

Enough on questioning per se, let's turn to the interview's process and flow. The best breakdown is a very simple one:

- **Introduction**
- **Questions, Answers, Interactive Free Flowing Conversation and Note Taking**
- **Summation and Conclusion**

When building your process, the first principle is to pretend you're the ONLY person ever going to engage, and more, that YOUR mother or father, or any beloved elder, is the ONE AND ONLY person that will ever experience this work.

So, think about your process as would BEST serve you, and you alone, or more importantly, your parent or beloved elder. How would you engage him or her? What would get your father's attention? Would he enjoy it if you read something out loud to him? Or, would your mother possibly enjoy coming here to the blog and reading one of these essays for herself? Or, possibly, should you summarize the contents of an essay in your own words and go from there? Map out your **Introduction** in your mind, or in writing, and picture the resulting extraordinary interview.

When it comes to the **Questions**, I cannot too strongly emphasize the power of writing them down BEFORE you attempt to ask them. Once you get into the writing flow, you'll have 20 or more composed before you realize it. When it comes to the actual interview, my own rules stipulate that I must NEVER have more than 6 questions, and as you read above, 6 question areas. Often I must have fewer.

That brings us back to the beneficial use of a script. First, they can be wonderful, empowering and sometimes if you work with the script well, your interviewee will enjoy the script as much as you do. The qualifier is this:

If you're not a fantastic actor, you must NEVER pretend you're not working with a script if in fact you are.

The question, “May I read these questions to you, please?” is a wonderful, honest and disarming way to engage. What you don't want is to allow yourself to care more about the scripted questions, or their presentation, than you care about the interviewee and his or her answers. In fact, the questions are really just a means to an end. What you really want is an absolutely interactive, freely flowing conversation. You simply want to employ the power of focus since your interview does have an area of important discussion to cover. When answers to questions start turning into stories...make sure you're truly listening with your heart, your entire heart. If you discover your parent has a HUGE message to give you, one you've never really heard fully, listen now, and maybe for the first time in your life, with your entire heart, opening your mind and jettisoning all resistance. Listen. Don't argue or defend or take over the topic yourself. You're here to take the answers and truths into your mind, heart and soul.

Tactically, the biggest mistake an interviewer can make is to keep speaking. Ask. Shut up. Really, really listen. And then...

TAKE NOTES! I'm tempted to offer all kinds of tactical guidance on this art, but the truth is, all you need to do is do it. Do it.

When it comes to **Summation**, one of the most powerful things you can do is read back what you wrote down and ask your interviewee if you got it right? Don't be afraid to dig into more details, and inspire more revelations as you do. This is absolutely what you want to happen. Another aspect of summation is finding the larger categories that were covered and listing them back as simply as:

“We discussed these points....”

Nothing conveys how much you care as your willingness to go back over the points of discussion, correct or add to them, and be clear together about what was shared.

The **Conclusion** should, in my opinion, always include the promise of further thought and contemplation. If any actions were inspired during the interview, these should be tied down and placed on a calendar or action list of some form, with follow up, accountability and real commitment. Never lie about these things and hold yourself to your word. If the interviewee promises something, build a follow up schedule for that too. Yes, these are just normal conversational or good team skills and nothing special. For all that, they're pretty special. Really.

The final element of your interview is the **Topic or Content Matter**. ***The Switch for Seniors*** is comprised of 10 essays. It is possible that all 10 will inform just that many interviews. I suspect that the 7-essays in the middle, numbers 3 – 9, are the actual core and would inform an almost perfect chain of interviews if completed. But, let's return to the vision of you being the only person to ever do this project, all by yourself with your parent or beloved elder. In that case, maybe just one interview is all you might ever want to do. If so, you might select any one of those essays (again numbers 3 – 9), and employ it as your basis in generating your interview questions.

Then last, what's next? That is, let's say you've gotten all the way home and have completed the interview in real time, and even have your notes. Oh please, please, please...do share your notes with me if you can. BUT...confidentiality may be an issue. If so, then DO NOT share.

On the other hand, if your parent's or beloved elder's answers can be shared, we will begin collecting and publishing these interview notes and my hope is that we'll inspire, perhaps, even just one other person to follow your lead. Of course, my real hope is that this project will grow to hundreds or maybe even thousands of such interviews.

But again, if this happens only one time, I will smile with pure joy, and find my satisfaction right there. I promise.

Interview Creation Help! - Part 4 of 4

The strategy of imagining that you're the one and only soul that will ever build the method of interviewing a parent or beloved elder appears to demand a bit more help than I've offered so far. How so?

First, there is the e-mail flow that's commenced in response to these postings and the series as a whole. Here's a for instance. One of my correspondents stated: **"I think that people like me will want some more guidance on the actual questions."**

Second, of the several clients who have decided to get started (each as if he's the only one, of course), the intensity of the project has proven a bit overwhelming.

Third, even the idea of abstracting questions out of an essay appears to be very challenging in its own right. While I'll soon need to offer some help on that point – maybe that will be my next posting – what I've decided to do is pull out a few of the more specific requests I've received and simply attempt to respond. If my guidance helps you, I'll be thrilled. But, if you find your question or hurdle remains unaddressed, by all means, please reach out to me and I'll continue to give you all the additional help I can.

Here are the questions I've culled from my e-mails and sessions, and I'll respond to them below...

Should I go for:

- 1. The long detailed life story?**
- 2. The top five moments?**
- 3. Insight to best and worst relationships?**
- 4. Things they shouldn't have done?**
- 5. Things they should have done more of?**
- 6. Facts?**
- 7. Jobs?**
- 8. Keys to happiness?**
- 9. You said no more than six questions and you are time boxed – say 90 minutes. Do the six allow follow up, or 'tell me more,' or 'oops not what I was after,' etc.?**

1. Should I go for the long detailed life story?

Yes. That is, if you can, and if your interviewee has the will to share, then this may be the one thing that's more important than anything else. A little prep here

can go a long way. Do you think you know your interviewee already? Do you have a thumbnail sketch of his life in mind, or do you really know that you do NOT know this person's story? The command, "tell me a story," is one of the most natural that children demand. It is of course a request, a question in the form of a statement. For adults, you might try something like, "**Grandpa, you know, I really don't know what your life has been like? Would you be willing to tell me some stories, or just share some of your life story with me?**"

By the way, such life stories often get rolling all on their own. Here, the key is to indicate that you DO have the time, please don't stop, and simple questions over details or people, events or emotions will keep the storyteller's fire burning as long as energy, focus and time allow. Once this story gets started, you really do NOT want to stop it. It needs to come out, and badly.

In fact, let's drop a level down. In studying the process of dying, we've discovered that one of the most powerful forces in the human heart is the need to understand. As we walk through life, things happen, we deal with them, and we move on. But there are always important elements of our lives that we never fully face, deal with, or even comprehend.

When facing the great abyss of death, the most painful things may not be the biggest or the most obvious. They appear to be mostly what we failed to understand. The sense of peace that one gains heading into the long night of death comes from knowing one's own story and coming, to the degree you can, to understand what it all meant, why it occurred the way it did and how it worked.

That's why the need to tell one's life story explodes into one of the most powerful motivations an aging soul feels. So again, if this commences, you must do everything in your power to support it. Subordinate all other agenda items or purposes and simply become a little child, listening to your parent tell you a wonderful story.

There is another hand, though. Often the aging person does is not and may never be ready to share. In that case...let's turn to our second question...

2. Should I ask about the top five moments?

This may be the very best surrogate for the long story. I love this one! When I ask this question, I always offer a range such as the very best, maybe the greatest one or two, or even just a disorganized, random list of some of the top moments ever. Don't worry about how you ask it, though. However it comes out will be fine.

Here again, though, sometimes a person isn't ready to identify his best moments. So some alternatives will help. What were you most proud of? What was the greatest victory you ever fought for and won? Were you in business? If so, is there a story behind the largest check anyone ever wrote for you that you might share? Are you an artist? What was the one work you loved the most, or that won you the most praise and recognition? These are all surrogate questions that can elicit the same kind of information, and they all serve to help the interviewee's mind process what you're looking for, find it, and build a way to share.

3. Would a request for insights gained from best and worst relationships be a good question?

This question is a bit tricky. We'll consider the needs your interviewee will have in this precise area when we look at question 9 below. Insight can be problematic. Sometimes it is only in the telling of the tale that insight pops into clarity these years or many decades later. Another problem with insight is that it pulls the interviewee out of the telling and forces them into assessing. Perhaps a slightly softer way to ask might be, **"Do you feel like you learned anything you can share from your best and/or worst relationships?"** But, even still, my own preference is a bit less removed from the story, a bit closer in. More like, **"Would you be willing to share the stories of your best relationships with me; or even more fun, your worst relationships?"**

4. How do people feel about sharing things they shouldn't have done?

Like the question about insights, this calls for judgment. I don't want you to be shy to ask for judgments, but always remember that the emotions and essence of the past are more important than anything we think or analyze out of the past. Still, the key to getting this question right isn't so much in the moral or practical case as to why it shouldn't have been done, but rather their feelings about it. So, I'd ask this question focusing on guilt, regret, remorse and perhaps most powerfully a sense of real shame. If you have a somewhat stuffy or officious person, you might ask about frustrations or irritations and don't push too hard for their own deep emotions of sadness or self-critique. Focus with such people on others' many failings and inadequacies.

By the way, gossip has a bad rap. We all love it and the older we get the more joy we take from it. Don't be afraid of gossip. It can be our shared guilty pleasure.

5. We always hear that people regret most what they didn't do. Should I ask about the things they should have done more of, or didn't do but truly wish they had?

Absolutely. My only hesitation takes us right back to the point about judgment and analysis. Let me ramp up the threat here...intellectualization. Clearly, my own emphasis is on the story, the players, the plays and most of all the emotions. I adore outcomes, good and bad, and often the worse the better! That said, if I'm going to go to this "bucket list" style question, then I'll amplify it all the way to a GREAT WHAT IF? What might have happened if only...?

Going there, we want to let the fantasy and imagination run free, no limits. And, if you're engaging in fantasy right now, together, why not ask about the fantasies and day dreams they remember as well? Sometimes we are far better people in our mind than in our reality. Who's to say that Walter Mitty isn't, in his imagination, the very best person he can possibly be?

6. How important is it that we collect facts?

I can certainly make a case that facts, above and beyond all things else, are the most important thing. I'm probably wrong, but I really could make the case. After our parents pass, it is often the hunt for facts about them that dogs our tails and literally drives us. The smallest fact can be the very greatest treasure. If one of your parents had an affair, don't you want to know? Did your Mom have a teacher in school she absolutely detested? If your interviewee ever stole something, what was it and why did they do it? Houses, rooms, the color of the room, carpets, furniture, dishes and silverware, neighborhoods and friends, churches, clubs, sports, activities...on and on the details, the facts go. Yes. You must collect facts. You absolutely must.

7. In our culture, we really do often define ourselves by our work, our jobs. I obviously want to know all about that, don't I?

Certainly. What's more, the more a person worked, the more his or her life was lived at work. To know the person, but not know about work would be a hollow knowledge. Still, we have to be careful. Just as we wouldn't want work to be the only parameter of our own lives, we don't want to look over a parent's life as if work was all there was. The best answer, though, is in emotions again. Love and hate, especially. What jobs were loved most, hated most? What colleagues were loved most, hated most? Also, if you do go here, do NOT skip details. Ask how much money they earned. Ask about the promotions they struggled for and won or lost. Ask what their work life dreams were, and their nightmares, and whether they were fulfilled, frustrated, or simply not that deeply into work, per se. Details here are simply invaluable.

8. Could it be that the most powerful lessons learned could be called keys to happiness?

Oh yes indeed. We've covered the risk of asking for too much judgment. This one cries out, though, that judgment, accumulated experience and certainly wisdom beg to be shared. My only additional advice if you go here is you have to do more than listen. You have to carefully imagine how the life lessons your interviewee is sharing might benefit you, might even change your life.

9. You said no more than six questions and you are time boxed – say 90 minutes. Do the six allow follow up, or 'tell me more,' or 'oops not what I was after,' etc.?

Oh indeed! This is really what I meant when I described the difference between a question and a question area. If you give me a hundred minutes to write, I can generate a list of more than a hundred questions for you. What you really want to do is simply tap into your own organic skill to simply hear what someone tells you and find a question to ask, in order to serve that person in expressing more about himself.

One of the greatest mistakes we make in business training is to fixate on the question we've decided to ask, in such a forced and artificial way. For instance, when you ask the question written down on paper, you realize – they train us in business to do this – that you must shut up. But, for how long? When you decide, if you do, to break the silence, do you repeat the question or do you do something else? Here, you must enter not only into the moment in real time, but more. You have to be able to judge the meaning of the silence.

Judge is probably the wrong word. You have to feel it. Its art, not science. Does this silence indicate just wait more? Do so! Does this silence indicate that you've asked a question your interviewee doesn't want to answer? Then you have to reframe your question, or turn in another direction altogether. No script can cover all these dynamics and choices you must make.

Here's another. Often, when someone can't trust you, its time for you to share rather than ask. For example, in a job interview there is, of course, the candidate's desire to be hired. But, this cannot be simply assumed. There is absolutely – and it is HUGE – a mandate to sell the opportunity to the candidate and to persuade him that this is a great change to make. But more, the interviewer often has to prove himself as well. So...if a candidate is hesitating at a question, often the interviewer should step right in and answer the same question about himself. And I really do mean himself, not just about the company or the opportunity. Again, how could a script possibly indicate this? It is different every single time you enter the live stream of the interview.

So, again absolutely yes. Here's a final thing to emphasize. Have fun. Sure, you may go to very painful places. There may be issues that arise between the two of

you and that can be both scary and massively uncomfortable. Anything but fun. Still, if there is any warmth or love between you and the interviewee; or if you even just like each other a little, the process should be measured by the goal of having as much fun as you can possibly have. It is not really the information where the power is, awesomely powerful as information may be. It is rather the encounter, the time spent sharing, the bond of human companionship taken to a place most people never experience it. But let me say this last point this way.

Most people are never really listened to, never really heard. We go through our entire lives trying to get our story, our stories out, and face resistance and time and attention, spotlight competition. It can be impossible to get a word in edgewise, as we all know. I promise you, if you give your ears, your eyes and your heart, your time and attention to someone, truly hoping that they will share, the process, the act of sharing is one of the most fulfilling and important in life. And...

It will be fun!