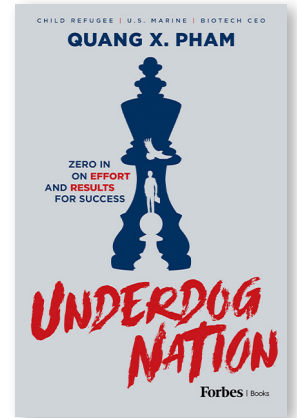


Underdog Nation

Zero In on Effort and Results for Success

by **Quang X. Pham**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

How do you reach success? Do you have to work hard? Or do you have to get lucky?

None of these. What you need is the underdog approach.

In his book *Underdog Nation: Zero In on Effort and Results for Success*, Quang X. Pham uses his own extraordinary life story to show how the underdog approach works: by putting in the effort and analyzing the results.

Following this concept helped Pham move from Vietnamese refugee to pilot in the U.S. Marine Corps, to founder of Cadrenal Therapeutics, one of the most successful biotech startups in recent years.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Discover the underdog formula for success
- Understand how building your success is similar to an airplane's approach to landing
- Learn how to analyze and accept your past identities
- Find out how to turn failure into a source of future success

Introduction

When I look back at my life, from the decisions my parents made to leave Vietnam, to my choice to join the Marines, to my choice to go into pharmaceutical sales, to my choice to become an entrepreneur, I see that two simple ideas have always been at play: Effort and Results. ER. And going back to the ER.

Look at any underdog, and this has also been their approach. They put in the effort. They looked at the results. And then they adjusted their efforts until they finally achieved the results they wanted.

Being an underdog means people don't expect much from you—certainly not a success story. Most people want to back the top dog. So I'll let you in on a little secret: Don't try to be like most people. Be your underdog self.

Chapter 1: Start with Success

Life has taught me that your best approach is often to start by assuming success. This may sound counterintuitive, but underdogs go into the fight assuming success.

Your first step in success is to define success first. If you let others define success for you, it becomes a moving target. You will either never hit it, or even if you do, it will never bring you the satisfaction promised.

What sets underdogs apart from everyone else is their willingness to take action and risk.

Therefore, the framework is what I call the underdog approach. And rather than complicate success, it relies on the simple equation:

$$\text{Success} = \text{Effort} \times \text{Results}^3$$

In the equation of success, we have to face the fact that there is a clear relationship between your effort and your decisions. Good effort alone is not enough. It's about the right effort.

Let's not pretend this means everything magically works out. Without results, it doesn't matter how much effort you pour in. The math has to add up.

Where you lack experience, you can turn to the people you admire who are ten steps ahead of you: the Admirables. They're the people you admire specifically because they embody a version of the success you have defined.

Chapter 2: Coincidence of Destiny

When you're facing a sudden disruptive change you have to

think on your feet and adapt. Adaptation is rooted in survival. No one adapts in the midst of a comfortable environment. So when coincidence comes your way and disrupts the status quo, you have to make a choice.

Once you adapt, only then do you have the chance to adopt. And that means to assimilate. With adoption, you start making choices not from a necessity to survive, but from the opportunity to thrive.

A thriver never wants a handout. You thrive through your efforts. You have to adopt the attitude and behaviors that will get you there, even when others might not understand, especially those who look and talk like you.

Opportunities will come along if you put in the effort and results for the destination you want. But it will require some discomfort. It will require you to integrate yourself into the right environment around the right people.

The secret to integration is that you need to be a little bit of an outsider and an insider. If you're already an outsider, then you have to accept the norms, expectations, and the creed of the society or organization you find yourself in. You can't make changes as an outsider. Only insiders can do that. Changes come within.

Yet you have to maintain enough of your outsider's perspective to see the challenges that need to be fixed. Otherwise, you will sink to the status quo. As an outsider-insider, you can set yourself apart—and know when to pivot.

Avenue of Approach 1 Commit

Chapter 3: Love What You Do Until You Can Do What You Love

Maybe you're reading this book because you feel stuck or jaded. The first action you have to take is to heighten your self-awareness. Wherever you are now, you have to make the best of it. Right or wrong, you make a decision. You take yourself to the ER and pivot as needed. And you commit to excellence until you reach your jumping-off point.

What if you don't have a jumping-off point determined yet? What should you do if you realize you're on the wrong track? Maybe you feel like you have no options, but you actually do. Start identifying the skills you want to grow in. Even when you are making an industry or career shift, there are skills in every job that you can transfer over to the next role.

You need to feel like you're contributing to the success of

Several underdog strategies can help you love what you do until you can do what you love.

the organization, even when you know it's not forever. Because the success you have there will be the building blocks for your destination.

Several underdog strategies can help you love what you do until you can do what you love.

The first is time management. It's human nature to do the easiest tasks first, but underdogs fight that nature. They do the most important stuff first. When you prioritize the most important tasks, you're aligning your efforts to your results.

The second strategy is to build a rationale around every task. Even when you don't see how the skill could possibly help you in the future, create a reason.

The third strategy is to aim high. When people jeer at you for aiming high, look for the ones who cheer. Find your supporters.

Chapter 4: Individual Accountability

Teamwork doesn't happen if the members of the team don't take individual accountability for their role within the team. There is a responsibility to do your best because if you don't, you're not only letting yourself down, but you're negatively impacting everyone else around you.

Individual accountability doesn't happen without emotion. You have to actually care about the outcome. When emotion is missing, then the work is an obligation, not a calling. Only when you have a sense of individual accountability can you take responsibility.

Practice taking responsibility even when there is no immediate payoff for doing so.

In some ways, success and failure should be treated the same. If you take all the credit in success, then you should do the same with failure. The problem is that when failure happens, many people are prone to play the blame game.

Overcoming the blame game is a personal choice. It starts by taking yourself to the ER—recognizing how your efforts created the results you see.

When the results are what you hoped for, take accountability by making a plan to repeat the success. When the results are not what you hoped for, take accountability for your failings so you can improve upon them.

The power of failure is how it gives you the chance to make accidental discoveries. Failure helps transform coincidences into destiny. When you have your clear definition of success, you can recalibrate your effort and results no matter how many failures or rejections you encounter.

Chapter 5: Be Ready When Your Number Is Called

One of the great underdog stories of all time is that of the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" Olympic hockey team who bested the Soviet Union—a team who had gone undefeated in the Olympic Games since 1968.

Coach Herb Brooks's goal for the team was simple—he wanted the U.S. to be the best-conditioned team on the ice. This belief is reflected in two of his most famous quotes:

- "Success is won by those who believe in winning and then prepare for that moment."
- "Great moments are born from great opportunities."

You can't say it better than that. When you prepare, great opportunities and great moments follow. None of us can control the timing of the opportunity, but we can control the preparation piece of the equation through our efforts.

So the real question we all must answer is "Will you be ready when your number is called?"

Many people believe they are prepared. The problem is that they are indeed preparing and putting in the effort, but all for the wrong purposes. Or without any purpose at all. This leads only to burnout, frustration, and all too often, hopelessness.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Take yourself to the ER. The power of preparation comes full force when seen through the lens of effort and results.

So much of preparation is about developing confidence, not

only in yourself but in others. The wonderful thing about confidence is that you can build it at any time from wherever you are. You have the internet at your disposal to develop your credentials within your industry, network with the people you want in your circle, and develop your reputation.

Avenue of Approach 2 Confront

Chapter 6: Identifying Barriers

Everyone's emotional barriers look different. And it's human nature to bury them, to want to hide your cards from the world. But you can't play the game if you're not willing to put the cards down in front of people.

The most difficult barrier is when you're in a situation with no obvious course correction to take. This could include being let go from a job—maybe even your dream job. That's when you'll have to do the most difficult task of all—facing your emotional triggers.

Unresolved personal issues will become triggers, and they can be set off in the most unexpected ways.

To deal with your own emotional triggers, you have to be highly cognizant of your past identities. This is true in any field, whether you're a military veteran entering the private sector, a teacher transitioning into owning a business, or a professional athlete leaving the game. Those past identities are part of your story and your glory, but if you don't become aware of the emotional triggers attached to them, they will hold you back from the new identity you need to form.

As much as is humanly possible, take the time to identify your emotional triggers. Think back to the times when you experienced fight, flight, or freeze. What happened? By revisiting those moments from a safe distance, you can gain some perspective and be better prepared for the next time they come around.

The greatest barrier facing any of us doesn't look like a barrier. Complacency. And the greatest danger with complacency is that it can reverse success.

Complacency skews your efforts. It tells you that you're already doing enough. It tells you that you don't need to learn anything new.

And on all counts, it's wrong. Complacency will undo all your effort and results. It will pull you into self-sabotage mode and make you vulnerable to both internal and external threats.

Your ultimate enemy isn't a toxic boss, lack of opportunity, or competition. It's complacency. And no one can fight it for you. You alone have to confront it.

Chapter 7: Clearing the Path

People like to say, "Leave the past in the past. Move on. Don't reopen old wounds." The problem is that the advice fails to acknowledge how the past can be a cage. And no amount of looking forward will get you out of the cage. What you need is the key. Only then can you move forward.

Though it sounds counterintuitive, sometimes you need the emotional trigger to spur you on to find closure. At some point, you will have to confront your past. You cannot avoid it forever.

When you look back at your professional journey thus far, you likely have regrets. In all of these, finding closure can help you create your next opportunity. You can rise again like a phoenix.

Everything described here requires immense mental stamina. Mental stamina is about knowing when you're feeling out of whack. It is forward thinking to fight complacency. Just like with a long-distance race, you don't build up mental stamina overnight. It's a process. The more situations where you have to be mentally tough, the more resilience you develop, the more stamina. You'll be more prepared for the journey ahead.

Avenue of Approach 3 Course Correct

Chapter 8: From Loser to Winner

My first sense of being a loser happened at my first Little League baseball game. A fly ball sped toward me, I missed the catch in the lights, and the ball struck me so hard in the chest it knocked me to the ground.

Everyone laughed. Being laughed at made me extremely uncomfortable. I took it as a challenge. In my mind, I said, Let me show you, and I dedicated my efforts to learning everything I could about baseball.

By the next spring, the story had changed. At our first practice game, I was the lead-off batter—and hit a homer over left field.

But I've also experienced going from winner to loser. You can still be a winner, even in the midst of a failure. But it starts with a decision to course correct by finishing what you start.

It sounds ridiculous to be grateful for failure. But if failure teaches you to be more dedicated, then it becomes a source for gratitude.

Despite your best efforts, the results still may not be what you hoped for. When that happens, you can still course correct. Choose to see failure as an asset. It creates a brand of motivation that perpetual winning can never do. And that's why underdogs are so powerful—because they have learned how to course correct by redefining success. But also by redefining failure.

The psychology behind failure is fascinating. Many athletes have spoken about being more motivated by the fear of failure than the desire of winning. Failure allows you to course correct rather than become a part of your identity. Never let failure define you. Redefine failure as something to be grateful for.

It sounds ridiculous to be grateful for failure. But if failure teaches you to be more dedicated, then it becomes a source for gratitude.

Gratitude is always aligned with ownership. It's impossible to be grateful for something that isn't yours. When you have personal ownership in the failure or success of a business, it becomes much more difficult to drop out. You're far more grateful for what you create.

Chapter 9: Overcoming the Darkest Days

You don't get to quit the darkest days when they come. You don't get to quit difficulty or setbacks. We all have to face them.

The darkest days don't have to define you, but they are pivotal. What matters most is the next step. How do you overcome the darkest days? What are the course corrections you have to make after defeat?

Most people are “on the fence people.” They have no strategic plan for their lives, so they straddle. That's the beauty of the darkest days—they push you off the fence. Once you fall, then you have the choice to get up. You have the choice of resilience.

What do you do when the darkest days involve defeat? You'll find three paths to take on the other side of defeat:

PATH 1: DROPPING OUT

These are the people who live in the “if only ...” for the rest of their lives. Instead of going to the ER by looking at their effort and results, they abandon the course altogether. They live in a state of victimhood and blame everything and everyone for their lack of success.

PATH 2: RETURN TO STATUS QUO

The people who return to the status quo do so because they would rather live with the devil they know than face the unknown. The problem is that the status quo becomes comfortable, and once you're comfortable, you can become complacent.

PATH 3: DIG DEEPER

The third path is for the underdogs. These are the people who learn from their defeat, go to the ER to analyze their effort and results, and then make the proper adjustments. They are digging deeper to unleash their underdog energy.

You'll find two types of persistence in the world—intelligent and unintelligent. Intelligent persistence pivots on what the right efforts are, not always what the most logical or smartest efforts would be. But you can't know what that is if you haven't defined success through the lens of your purpose and values.

Avenue of Approach 4 Build Credibility

Chapter 10: Establishing Professional Credibility

Credibility is only developed one way—through action. People must be able to see the proof.

Yet this is a major gap for many driven individuals. They believe they are ready for the next step and yet they have not put in the work to establish their credibility through actions.

But how do you start filling the credibility gap? When possible, you can solve the experience problem by being ready when your number is called. You never know when the opportunity will come, so be prepared by doing the extra.

When you don't have much experience yet, then use the experience you do have to compensate.

What you know is important. But who you know is invaluable. When you have a credibility gap, then one of the best solutions is to borrow someone else's credibility. Consider what happens when you provide a potential employer with your list of references.

In today's digital world, it's never been easier—or more important—to network. Your online profile isn't just a digital résumé for people to stumble across—it's your strategic credibility builder.

Not everyone is going to believe in you. That's good. When people don't believe in you, your inner underdog thrives. And criticism, when filtered correctly, helps you close your credibility gaps.

We all make mistakes, so when criticism comes along, assess whether there is a gap you haven't filled yet. Is there some area where you need to improve more than others? This type of criticism is valuable because it helps you find those blind spots and address them faster. When you close that gap, you only become more credible.

Likewise, no one can perfectly avoid all conflict. Nor should you. Conflict serves to make you stronger. The right amount of conflict helps expose the gaps and develop both your credibility and the company's credibility.

Chapter 11: Navigating Your Identity

Much of life finds you navigating between identities, and it's not uncommon that you reach a crossroads where two identities come into conflict with one another—and you have a choice to make. Most people passively take whatever identity is put upon them. Underdogs fight for their identity.

If you allow others to shape your identity, then you also allow them and the environment to define success for you. But no one else can tell you who you are—or who you will be.

Think for a second about your definition of success. Envision your future self. What is the gap between your identity now and this future identity?

You can't build your future without proving yourself in the present. And you can't prove yourself in the present by only relying on the past. Reshaping your identity doesn't mean you eradicate who you were. Rather, your old identity becomes the building blocks for who you need to be now and in the future.

Chapter 12: Aligning Personal Purpose and Company Mission

According to research, only 9 percent of New Year resolution makers can say they stuck with them. To become part of the 9 percent of underdogs who succeed with their goals, you must have purpose.

In my experience, purpose is a choice. Whether you're in leadership or not, you always have the choice to set personal goals that complement the organization's objectives.

Throughout your professional journey, you need to regularly revisit your personal purpose and how it complements the mission and purpose of the organization you're working for. Don't allow misalignment to go unchecked. Recognize it early and take proactive steps to either close the gap through your efforts—or when necessary, to seek out the environment with a mission more closely aligned to your purpose. Remaining in misalignment is a one-way ticket to burnout and missing your next opportunity.

Conclusion: The ER Approach in Action

The beauty of the Effort and Results approach is you only need the honesty and accountability to take ownership of your effort and results. When that is paired with purpose and commitment, then you will unleash the underdog within.

In a world where most people settle for lives shaped by chance and complacency, commit to being the underdog. Zero in on your effort and results, and success will follow. Because there are no losers in the Underdog Nation.



Quang X. Pham has been a war child refugee, a combat Marine veteran, top-producing biotech salesman, and successful serial entrepreneur. As a perpetual underdog, he is the first American of Vietnamese heritage to become a US Marine aviator and lead a biotech IPO on Nasdaq (CVKD)— Cadrenal Therapeutics, a biopharmaceutical company developing tecarfarin, a novel blood thinner for patients with rare cardiovascular conditions. He is also the author of *A Sense of Duty: Our Journey from Vietnam to America* and has received the EY Entrepreneur Of The Year® award.

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