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This is how I see the world, and it should make one thing clear: I am an optimist. But I am an impatient optimist.

— BILL GATES

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Introduction

Love him or hate him, Bill Gates has been a venerable worldwide business icon for more than three decades, ever since the first mass-produced personal computer debuted in 1981.

Alternately described as an ingenious visionary and a tyrannical, sometimes less-than-scrupulous businessman, he has been all but impossible to ignore. But despite one's opinion of Gates, even his most prominent naysayers have no choice but to admit the obvious: he helped to spearhead one of the greatest revolutions in modern history by turning the inaccessible computer technology of the 1970s into an invaluable and easy-to-use tool for the masses, while also providing jobs and wealth to many along the way.

Gates has consistently been ranked as one of the world's wealthiest men—as well as one of the most controversial founders and CEOs in history—and businesspeople of all stripes have taken their cues from him, using his words and business strategies to help create and grow their own companies. In 2008, after Gates stopped running the day-to-day operations of Microsoft to devote himself full-time to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a kinder, gentler side began to emerge—a contrast to his hard-nosed reputation. As a result, people who are actively involved in their own philanthropic efforts, whether in a professional or part-time capacity, have begun to take a second look at the man behind the foundation.

Despite the fact that he's no longer at the helm of one of the world's most powerful companies, Gates has steadfastly remained in the news. His friendship and philanthropic partnerships with U2's Bono and investing titan Warren Buffett attract the attention of both the media and public, which only helps to gain more attention for his charitable acts —whether he is testifying with former President Bill Clinton about increasing federal aid to earthquake-ravaged cities and villages in Haiti or making the rounds at the Sundance Film Festival to promote the topic of public education reform. And unlike Gates's days at Microsoft, where he was entrusted with protecting a bevy of corporate secrets, today his life is virtually an open book, featuring regular updates on Facebook and Twitter and blog posts at TheGatesNotes.com.

Bill Gates's second act is no less compelling than his first. Anyone interested in his personal life or looking for inspiration to drive their own business endeavors forward can find enlightenment through reading Gates's own words.

Part I

PART ONE: RUNNING A COMPANY

Early Days

THE EARLY DREAM was a machine that was easy to use, very reliable and very powerful. We even talked back in 1975 about how we could make a machine that all of your reading and note taking would be done on that machine.

—*What the Best CEOs Know*, 2005

WE DIDN'T EVEN obey a twenty-four-hour clock. We'd come in and program for a couple of days straight … four or five of us, when it was time to eat we'd all get in our cars, kind of race over to the restaurant and sit and talk about what we were doing. Sometimes I'd get excited talking about things, I'd forget to eat, but then you know, we'd just go back and program some more. It was us and our friends—those were fun days.

—*Triumph of the Nerds, PBS*, June 1996

LIFE FOR US was working and maybe going to a movie and then working some more. Sometimes customers would come in, and we were so tired we'd fall asleep in front of them. Or at an internal meeting I'd lie down on the floor, because I like to do that to brainstorm. And then I'd just fall asleep.

—CNNMoney/*Fortune*, October 2, 1995

WE HAD CONTESTS to see who could stay in the building like three or four days straight. Some of the more prudish people would say, "Go home and take a bath."

—*Masters of Enterprise*, 1999

There were a lot of missteps in the early days; because we got in early, we got to make more mistakes than other people.

—Smithsonian Institution Oral and Video Histories, 2003

WE THOUGHT THE world would be like it is now in terms of the popularity and impact of the PC, but we didn't have the hubris to think that our company would be this size or have this kind of success. The paradox is that we thought, "OK, we can just have this thirty-person company that will be turning out the software for every PC."

—*Newsweek*, September 17, 2000

IF YOU HAD asked me at any point how big Microsoft could be, Paul [Allen] and I once thought we could write all the software in the world with one hundred people. If you had told us that someday we would have more than five thousand people writing software, we would have just shaken our heads.

—CNNMoney/*Fortune*, October 2, 1995

I WAS A huge beneficiary of this country's unique willingness to take a risk on a young person.

—CNBC Town Hall Event, Columbia University, November 12, 2009

PART ONE: RUNNING A COMPANY

Leadership

OUR BUSINESS STRATEGY from the beginning was quite different than all the computer companies that existed when we were started. We decided to focus just on doing the highvolume software, not to build hardware systems, not to do chips, just to do software … It was a strategy that required partners. I think the most successful partnership in the history of American business is the work we've done with Intel. When we started working with them, both companies were worth one-hundredth of what they're worth today. And so, working hand-in-hand in a nice, complementary way, you know, with a little bit of friction from time to time because we're both pretty strong-willed companies, we built two of the most successful enterprises of the era.

—Keynote speech, San Jose State University, January 27, 1998

I ALWAYS KNEW I would have close business associates … that we would stick together and grow together no matter what happened. I didn't know that because of some analysis. I just decided early on that was part of who I was.

—*TIME*, January 13, 1997

IT'S A PHENOMENAL business partnership. I wouldn't enjoy my job like I do if it wasn't for how much fun Steve [Ballmer] and I have brainstorming things. And within the company, everybody has understood that we work very closely together and have a very common view of where we want to go.

—*Newsweek*, June 23, 1997

FEAR SHOULD GUIDE you, but it should be latent. I have some latent fear. I consider failure on a regular basis.

—*Playboy*, July 1994

WE DEFINITELY NEEDED to change. The last few years of trying to do both things [oversee product strategy and act as CEO] were pretty tough. [The transition] has worked out exactly the way I thought it would … I get more time on products than I've had for ages and ages. [And] there is a set of things that Steve [Ballmer] gets to worry about that I don't have to worry about.

—*The Telegraph*, February 1, 2004

PEOPLE ARE GOING to second-guess anything you do.

—*Newsweek*, August 30, 1999

[In high school I told the other programmers], “Look, if you want me to come back, you have to let me be in charge. But this is a dangerous thing, because if you put me in charge this time, I’m going to want to be in charge forever.”

—Smithsonian Institution Oral and Video Histories, 2003

WE'RE VERY BIG on managers who are very much in touch with doing hands-on work, who appreciate the work that people underneath them are doing, and retain the skill sets to jump in and do some of it themselves. So they can understand what is the load like, what's hard, how's that going on, and pitch in when there is something that's particularly tough. We're big into managers that believe in a lot of communication. It's awful when you get a group that's kind of drifted, and the morale has gone down, and you wonder, why didn't you find out early, you know? You should always know that as soon as possible. And so managers really have to be in touch with all of their people.

—Keynote speech, San Jose State University, January 27, 1998

I LIKE QUESTION-AND-ANSWER sessions because they allow me to get a sense of what people are excited about and what they are upset about.

—*IndustryWeek*, November 20, 1995

EXTERNALLY, PEOPLE TEND to identify the company with one person. It's a natural thing so I've had mostly the minuses, but [also] the pluses of that.

—*Newsweek*, June 23, 1997

I WAS THE mover. I was the guy who said, "Let's call the real world and try to sell something to it."

—*Hard Drive*, 1992