A Tuesday With Mitch: Sportswriter, Bestselling Author Reflects on Education and Success

Before he was a nationally syndicated sportswriter, a radio talk show personality, a television sports commentator and best-selling author of "Tuesdays with Morrie," Mitch Albom didn't decide that a 24-hour news channel was a viable option. In fact, he grew so bored with the thinking was, "Naw, that stuff's not gonna work." Now the thinking is, "Let's imitate it." The Fine Art of Communication

It has so little to do with particular skills and so much to do with how you get other people to work with you. If you are working, for example, as an independent printer and try to get other people to work with you, you're going to have to find a way to get through the wall of people that are between you and the person you have to get to. If you just make a phone call and leave a message, that's just another pink slip of paper to them. And you're at home thinking, "I'm so special. Why don't they know how special I am?" But because to them you're a piece of pink paper. You have to make sure that somehow you get an interpersonal connection with somebody, that you find out what they like to do or maybe do it with them. Take an unconventional approach to getting through a wall of people that are conversing with them.

If you're on the other side of it, if you're employing people, it's so easy just to fall into the do-it-because-I-said-so kind of thing. Everybody who has other people working for them falls into that at some point. But one of the things I think you have to try to remember is to put yourself in the position of the person who's listening to you or having to work for you. If they were to say the same thing to you and you'd cringe, then they're cringing at you. You start to realize that everybody is really the same, and Morrie kind of said that in 1988 in his columns "Let's imitate it." And that somehow youth should rule the world, and I don't blame them, because in this country we worship youth. Between MTV and 22-year-old film directors and 31-year-old CEOs, there's a tendency to feel that somehow your glory years and your really productive years are in your 20s. Somehow, if you haven't done it by your 20s, you'd better get it done by your 30s, because you're going to run out of gas by the time you're in your 40s. It's not that way. The truth is, you become much smarter, much more tolerant, much more worldly and wise as you get older. I suggest that people who come out of school look to older people in the business community to try to learn what really matters. The tendency will be to go to the bar with a bunch of guys and girls your age, loosen your ties, kick back a beer and talk about how you're all going to be multi-millionaires next week. If I were them—doing it over again—I'd find the first 60-year-old successful business person I could and sit down and ask them what you have seen, the ups and the downs, not just the ups. Tell me why I shouldn't be optimistic. Tell me why the bear market that we're suddenly in isn't gonna work. Tell me why the boom market that we were in didn't last. Tell me the things that you thought were once true and now aren't any more. Tell me the lies that you hear the most.

Those are your valuable resources, and I wish I had known that a little bit earlier when I was coming up, but I learned it pretty quickly. I've always had a tendency to gravitate toward older people.

"A Tuesday with Mitch" first appeared in the Columbia Business School's Fall 2001 issue of "their publication, Hermes Business School's Fall 2001 issue of the Columbia University Record."