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Amazing Parallels Between

Skydiving

and

Running a Business

by Peter Shankman



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Back in the summer of 2000, I took 100 CEO's, CFO's, and COO's at major corporations in the New York City area skydiving. I did it because I thought it would make a good PR stunt. I never expected to become addicted.

It wasn't until the summer of 2005 that the planets of business travel, work, and personal life aligned enough to allow me to pursue my "A" license – the license that allows you to jump at any United States Parachuting Association recognized Drop Zone.

During my many, many hours of training, I learned more than I thought possible. I conquered more fears than I ever thought I could have, and had experience after experience like no other.

But throughout the entire process, one thought was always stuck in the back of my mind: Through every lesson I learned, every goal attained, and every level completed, I just kept thinking... This is just like running my company.

It was really kind of strange – the similarities were shocking. So I started wondering – is jumping out of an airplane really that different from running your own company? You'd think the two have absolutely nothing in common. But you'd be wrong.

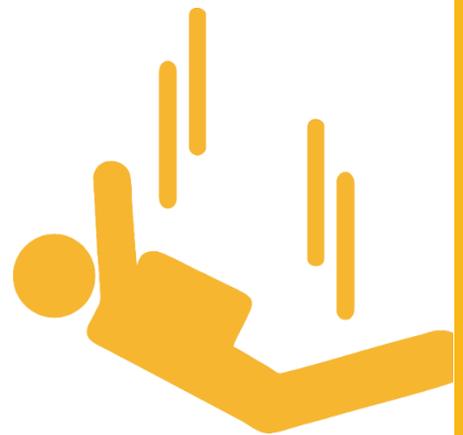
The answer is no – It's not that different at all. In fact, it's shockingly similar.

Skydiving Rule #1: Don't Forget to Pull

Regardless of whatever else you're doing when you're skydiving, you really only have one job: Deploy your parachute in such time that it has a chance to do its job – namely, saving your life. If you forget to do that, nothing else you've ever done or will do (which won't be much) will matter. It doesn't matter how great of a skydive you're having. If you're not floating to earth under your chute by the time you land, nothing else really matters.

Business Rule #1: Don't Forget Why You're Doing This

Something motivated you when you started your own company. Something told you that you could do it better, faster, cheaper, something different than someone else. That's why you've put in the hours; that's why you've slaved. Never ever forget why you're doing this. If you do, you'll lose sight of what you're doing and why you're doing it, and before you know it, you're looking for a job. Depending on whom you ask, having to work for someone else could be considered as bad as forgetting to deploy your chute.



Skydiving Rule #2: Maintain Altitude Awareness at All Times

This happened to me once in my training: I was so focused on making sure I was stable before I deployed my pilot chute, my 5,500 foot pull turned into a 3,900-foot pull. Was I in any extra danger? No, not really. But I didn't do my job accurately – I didn't pull at my assigned altitude. I was too busy worrying about something else. I remembered rule #1, but later than I should have. It happens all the time. Ooh, look at the pretty skyline! Wow, check out the sun glistening off the lake! Wow, look at the sunset! Then you're jolted back to reality by realizing that you're at 2,100 feet and falling at a speed of around 120 miles per hour. This is a problem. Never lose your awareness.

Business Rule #2: Never Forget Your Key Objectives

I was once in negotiations for a contract. I really, really wanted the client, and the company really needed it. I accepted their counteroffer without making a counter-counter offer. This proved to be a mistake. We did the job for way less than we should have, employees weren't happy about it, the client sensed our displeasure. All in all, it was a contract that shouldn't have happened. I was too worried, and I took my eye off the ball. The next thing I knew, we were sucker-punched into doing something for less than we were worth. Always focus on the key objectives, whether they're money, margins, or results.

Skydiving Rule #3: The Only Stupid Question is the One You Don't Ask

During my first non-tandem dive, I was about to make the walk out to the plane. A million things were going through my head: Was I going to screw this up? Was I ready for this? Was I going to be able to land? To get back to the Drop Zone? Was I going to remember to pull? Remember my objectives? Was I going to die? The one question I asked my instructor, though, was none of those. I asked him, "Are these goggles supposed to be this loose?" It turns out they weren't. I'd mistakenly (most likely due to fear clogging my brain) picked a pair of goggles from the "goggles that go over your glasses" pile. And of course, I didn't wear glasses. The second I stepped out of that plane, those goggles would have been off my head and gently floating to earth. I, on the other hand, would have had a hell of a time seeing. My question, if it didn't save my life, it certainly made my first skydive a much better one than it would have been had I been wearing the wrong goggles.

Business Rule #3: Never Assume, Always Ask

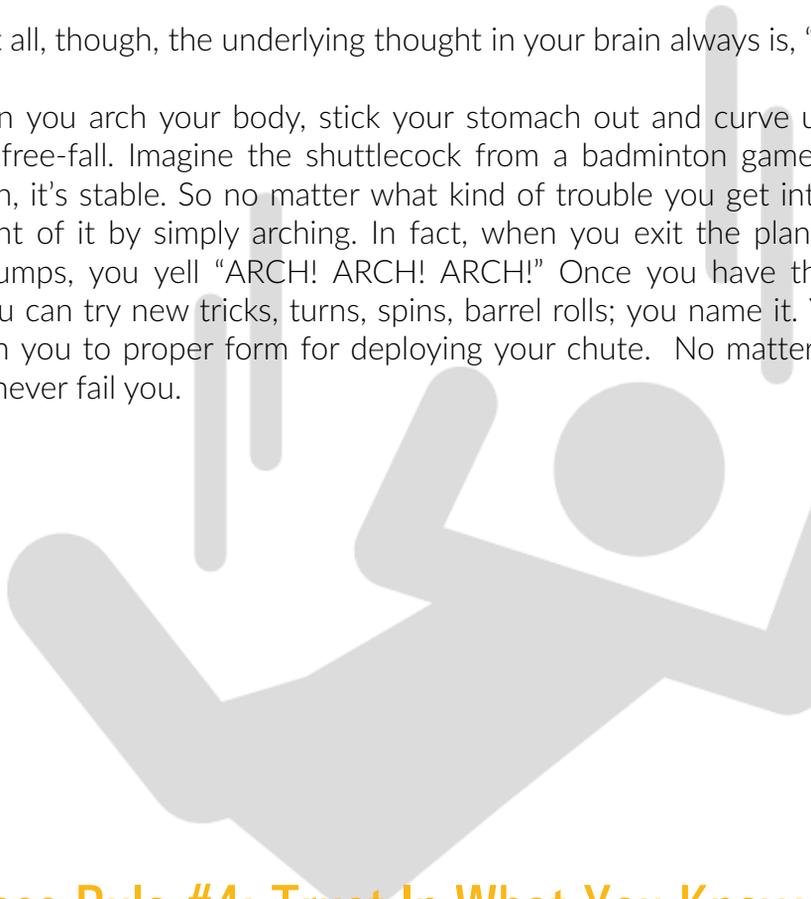
How many times has it happened to you? "No, we never agreed on that." "Oh, well I just assumed..." Never assume. Always ask, no matter how simple. "We'll have those supplies in overnight, right?" "Sure. Overnight." "Overnight as in tomorrow, or overnight as in from the time you place the order?" "Oh, you need them tomorrow?" Always ask. There are no stupid questions. Only stupid CEO's screw up by not asking. We've all done it.

Skydiving Rule #4: Trust In the Arch

When you jump out of a plane, your body is doing about a billion different things. First, every synapse is firing at once. The majority of them are saying “WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST DO?” Others, however, are doing different things. Some are being blown about by the wind from the prop, or the relative wind (the wind that hits you as you exit a plane at 86 miles an hour). Yet others are mentally reviewing what you’re supposed to be doing on that specific skydive, and still one more is going “Wow! It’s really cold up here!”

Despite it all, though, the underlying thought in your brain always is, “trust in the arch.”

See, when you arch your body, stick your stomach out and curve up, you’re naturally stable in free-fall. Imagine the shuttlecock from a badminton game. With the round part down, it’s stable. So no matter what kind of trouble you get into, you can correct 99 percent of it by simply arching. In fact, when you exit the plane during your first training jumps, you yell “ARCH! ARCH! ARCH!” Once you have the arch of stability down, you can try new tricks, turns, spins, barrel rolls; you name it. You know the arch will return you to proper form for deploying your chute. No matter what, trust in the arch. It’ll never fail you.



Business Rule #4: Trust In What You Know

When I ran my first company, I had employees coming in every day asking, “So what should we do today?” My answer was always the same: “Did what you did yesterday get you fired or piss off a client?” They’d always answer with “No! Of course not,” to which I’d reply, “then do that again.”

Trust in what you know, what’s worked for you before. Take the risk, try new things, branch out – but know what you know and trust what you know and come back to it when you need to. It’ll save you.

Skydiving Rule #5: Always Ask for a Pin/Gear Check

On the very first day of instruction, my instructor said something to me that I'll never forget: "Once you leave that airplane, you're dead unless you do something to change that." Makes you think, doesn't it? With that, it makes you realize that your life is only as safe as the gear you have on. If there's something wrong with your gear, well, it might be your last skydive. That's why, before every dive, you ask anyone else in the plane with you for a pin check – that's where they check the pins on your main chute and your reserve to make sure they're seated properly and will open correctly. It's also common (and not just for students) to ask for a gear check – that's where someone else visually and sometimes physically inspects your rig as you have it on. There's nothing wrong with it – it's the cheapest insurance you'll ever get.

Always ask someone for a pin or gear check. It could save your life. It's that simple.

Business Rule #5: Always Have Someone Else Look Something Over Before it Goes Out the Door

When I was 21 years old, I was pretty good at making computer graphic designs. I'd sell them on AOL; I'd have people send me \$5 plus \$1 for shipping and a blank floppy disk (remember floppy disks?) and in turn, I'd send them a disk of graphic designs I made. It was a fun pastime; maybe I made a few hundred bucks from it. One time, I posted my newest photo online and added my usual addendum about how you could get a disk of more goodies. I forgot, however, to mention that it was \$5.00. Of course, I didn't have anyone look it over before I posted, and I was thrilled when I opened my PO box the following week and had over 75 orders! Of course, each order had a dollar to cover postage and a blank disk. No \$5.00. I didn't understand why until I went back to my original page online, and sure enough, there it was.

Since then, I've never let anything go out of the office without being looked at by more than one person. This goes for everything from contracts to lunch orders. It's the cheapest insurance you'll ever get, and it might save your business one day.

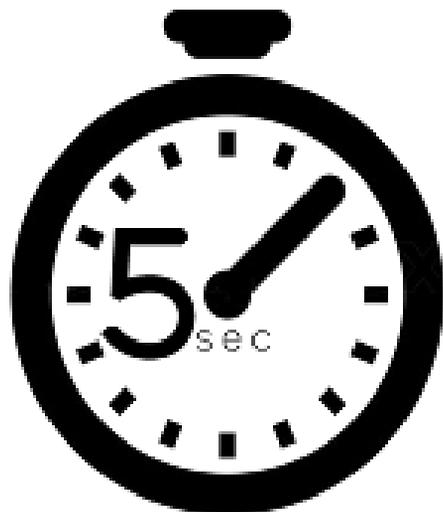


Skydiving Rule #6: The Five-Second Rule: If You're Out of Control After Five Seconds, PULL

What happens when you spin a ball attached to a rope really fast? It doesn't fall down when it reaches the top of the spin. Why? Centrifugal force. The forces acting on the ball are so strong that it defies the ball's natural range of motion, which is to fall back down. Imagine what happens if you're skydiving and you go out of control and start to spin. You'd immediately try to correct it, right? But what if you couldn't? What if you keep trying, but you're just spinning faster and faster? Eventually, you'd go into a flat spin, and the centrifugal force would be so strong, your hands would actually be pinned to your sides – you'd be unable to move them – and unable to reach for your pilot chute. You'd be unable to deploy your parachute, and you'd have a pretty lousy skydive. That's why the five-second rule exists. If you can't regain control after five seconds, deploy your chute. It might not be what you want to do, and you might feel stupid – but it's what you need to do. If not stable in five, pull.

Business Rule #6: If You Can't Get Control of Something, Stop Doing It, Step Back and Reevaluate

I had a client give us an assignment once. It wasn't too frightening; we'd done tons like it in the past. But this one? Something was off from the start. We couldn't put our fingers on it, but something was wrong. Sure enough, four weeks into the project, we presented our work to date. We were so far off the mark; it wasn't even funny. We went back to the drawing board, rehashed, and presented again a week later. Not even close. Finally, we stopped working – we were killing ourselves with no real direction or answer. So we stopped. We went to the client's offices and sat with them for a day. Listened to them. Heard what they were saying between the lines. And then we got it. We were over deadline, and didn't make as nice a margin as we wanted, but we fixed the problem and lived to have that client come back to us with more work numerous times.



Skydiving Rule #7: Work With a Coach to Learn New Things

Once you complete your course, your learning curve is really just beginning. You've got the basics down. You can get stable, do a barrel roll or two, make your turns, deploy your chute, and land. But there's so much more to do. There's relative work in freefall, where you work with other people making designs in the sky. There's free flying, where you sit or stand or lie down or read a book as you fall. There's canopy relative work. There's swooping when you land. There's so much more to learn. That's where coaches come in. Working with them, often for just the price of their lift ticket, will teach you so much more, and in such a shorter amount of time, than you could ever learn on your own.

Coaches are mandatory. There's a reason people are better than you: it's so you can learn from them.

Business Rule #7: Have a Mentor, and Make Sure You Use Them

When I started my first agency, I had a wonderful man who ran his own agency as my mentor. I came to him for advice. I would ask him all the time, "What do you think of this?" Or, "How can I improve that?" My almost daily phone calls to my mentor were a source of great comfort to me, and in some ways, I think a source of great pride to him. We talked often; we still do. I still ask him for advice, two companies later.

Find a mentor – someone you trust, someone whose opinion you value – and utilize that person. Otherwise, you'll have a hard time knowing whether or not you're learning.



Skydiving Rule #8: You're Doing Something Amazingly Cool, Brag About It

The very first time I jumped out of a plane, I asked my tandem master: "Why do you do this?" He was a big, burly Russian guy who spoke very little English, when he did speak, which was rarely. He looked at me for a long time, pondering the question. I was expecting pearls of wisdom from this Russian master of the skies. Perhaps he'd quote Chekhov, or perhaps a word or Dostoyevsky – something to give me a great understanding of this sport, something to put my mind at ease as I stood on the edge of making this life-endangering journey. Finally, right before we exited the plane, he opened his mouth. I leaned in close, to hear his brilliance over the roar of the plane engines. "When I tell women that I jump, it gets me laid." And out the side of the plane we went.

Business Rule #8: You're Doing Something Very Few People Do, Talk to Everyone About It

Whenever I speak at conferences or events, people always ask me, "Can you help me be a better networker?" The key, I tell them, isn't to be a better networker, but to be a more active networker. Too many people assume that networking is only something you do at cocktail parties or corporate trade shows. The fact is, every person you meet in your life is a potential networker. The person sitting next to you on the plane, the person on the taxi line, the person next to you on the treadmill at the gym, even the person ahead of you at the supermarket. This doesn't mean you should go up to everyone you meet and force yourself onto them, but you never know how the person next to you can positively affect your life. Say hi. And see where it goes from there. (And if you happen to be a skydiver, well, that certainly helps, I suppose.)



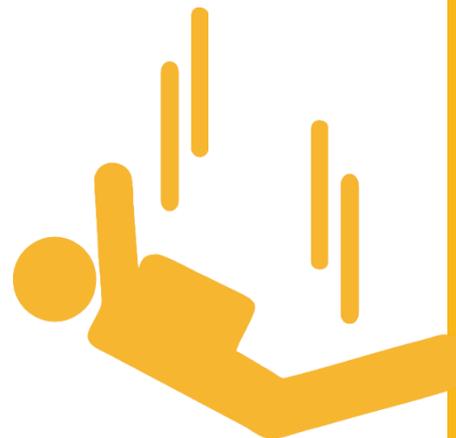
Skydiving Rule #9: The Time to Diagnose a Problem Thoroughly is NOT at 2,000 Feet, It's When You're at the Terminal

You're having a great skydive. You've made a formation or two, the docks went really well, everyone's enjoying themselves, it's a beautiful day. You finish your in-air maneuvers, you track away from the other people in your skydive, you do a barrel roll to see that there's no one in your airspace, you look at your altimeter, and it says 4,000 feet. Time to pull. You reach behind you, deploy your pilot chute, and... Nothing. You look up, your pilot chute is out there, doing its job, except that nothing has come out of your rig. No chute. No deploy bag. Nothing. Just the pilot chute in tow, whipping idly in the wind behind you. Now you're at 3,400 feet. You bang the bag once with your hand, hoping to dislodge the pin and launch your chute. Nothing. 3,000 feet. 2,900 feet. 2,700 feet. You decide to figure it out later. You pull your cutaway handle, then your reserve handle and the most beautiful sight you've ever seen appears above your head: Your reserve chute, wide open, catching air. You're safe again.

Business Rule #9: Work the Problem and Find the Solution Now

Figure out why it happened and how to prevent it later. True story: Phone rings at 3:15 am. (All our clients get our home numbers exactly for situations like this.) I groggily answer it, and I hear the frantic voice of the secretary of the CEO of one of our biggest clients. "He was just arrested! They're taking him downtown tomorrow morning; he's going to have to go through a Perp Walk! A PERP WALK!

What do we do?" (A Perp Walk is how the media gets those amazing photos of the accused walking into the courthouse.) And so to work we went, at 3:15 in the morning. We wrote up talking points, issued a statement to the media, and even got him a suit and an electric razor in the holding cell. It wound up not being so bad. It could have been a lot, lot worse. 3:15 am, while the CEO of a major corporation is in a holding cell, is NOT the time to plan for a year or even a month down the road. It's time to plan for the next twenty minutes, the next hour and a half. When you're faced with these kinds of decisions, make sure you and your team are working the problem and finding an immediate solution. Figure out how to prevent it from happening again later only after the initial (and usually worst) fire has been put out.



Skydiving Rule #10: Never Be Afraid to Speak Up

A friend of mine was jumping one day. He went up and there seemed to be some clouds whipping around really fast, but he didn't say anything. People were commenting that the wind seemed to shift right as they were taking off. He didn't say anything. They got to altitude, and something just didn't feel right. He told the pilot he was going to land the plane – he wasn't jumping. People with thousands of jumps left the plane that day, and they all made it down safely. He felt stupid for not jumping until one instructor came up to him and told him that it took more guts for him not to jump than it did for him to just “do what everyone else was doing.” He told my friend he was proud of him.

Business Rule #10: Never Be Afraid to Speak Up

Something seems out of place? Something seems wrong? A client being obstinate, when you know you're right? Speak up. It's very rare you'll lose a client or a piece of business by speaking up about something you know just isn't right. And if you do? It wasn't worth having that client in the first place.

Skydiving Rule #11: Practice Your Emergency Procedures Over and Over Again

Want to see skydivers in their natural habitat? Watch them on the plane. As they get to around 10,000 or so feet, they all go through their little rituals. I do it, too. They touch their pilot chute. Then they touch their cutaway handle, then their reserve chute. They don't just touch them, though. They grab them and go through the same procedures they would if something were to happen. Pilot, wait, wait, wait, cutaway, reserve. And they do it every single time they jump. It's about doing what you know works, and doing it so well that when you actually do have a problem, it's second nature, without a second's hesitation. Because in skydiving, you don't have a lot of seconds to react.

Business Rule #11: Know What To Do When Emergency Situations Arise

What happens if a key client drops you? How would you react? Do you have a contingency plan if you get sued? What if you or your company is falsely accused of something? What if you're arrested? What if your tech guy is found harboring 30 gigabytes of child pornography on your servers? What if what you think will never ever happen actually happens? Do you have a plan? Is it up to date? Do you know whom to contact first? Does your staff? Make sure of it. It could save your business.

Skydiving Rule #12: Follow Your Trusted Procedures Every Time

I was gently floating down to earth, admiring the view, the beautiful day, the weather, the large piece of fabric above my head that was gracefully doing the job for which it was intended. I'd made my approach, and was heading towards the ground. I put my feet together, flared, and promptly smashed into the ground flat on my tailbone. For some reason, the wind shifted, and my gentle landing turned into a world-class "thud." I didn't plan for it, and it came back to bite me. Hard. I should have planned to "PLF." Parachute Landing Fall. Every time, until you know for sure that your feet are on the ground, and you're stopped, you plan for a PLF. I didn't, and it cost me about two weeks of not being able to sit without pain.

Business Rule #12: Follow Your Trusted Procedures Every Time

You do what works. You change in mid-stream because, "Oh, this untested thing will work, no problem" and you'll get hurt. You might not smack your tailbone into the ground; it might be a hundred times worse. You might lose a key client. You might lose credibility. You might be considered "wishy-washy." All simply avoidable by sticking to what works.

Skydiving Rule # 13: Know Your Load



When you want to go up in the plane, you go to manifest, and you "get on a load." Simply put, it means you pay, and they assign you to a specific aircraft for a specific jump run. You know it, remember it, and get on that plane at the right time. If you don't, you lose your money, look like an idiot, and have to go pay again and restart the whole process. You remember your load number.

Business Rule # 13: Know Your Deadlines

If the client gives you a deadline of 2 pm on Friday for the final report presentation, you'd better be damn sure that it's not 11 am on Monday. Did you write it down? In more than one place? Did you tell your team? More than once? Did you back up your calendar? Did you clear your schedule to find the time to work? Did you make backup plans? What happens if the power in the building goes out? Do you have to travel to the client? Do you have several routes with several different forms of transportation? Did you leave enough time for a delayed flight? A canceled flight? A hurricane? Make sure you've covered all your bases. There is nothing more stupid than the mistake that was completely and utterly avoidable.



Peter Shankman is an entrepreneur, celebrity author, speaker, consultant, and investor. He is most famously known for creating Help a Reporter Out (HARO). In April 2016, he joined Smart Hustle Magazine as a Contributing Editor and Advisor.

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