THE “MODEST ACHIEVEMENTS” OF STEPHEN P. ROBBINS

The views were spectacular from the top floor of the luxury apartment and office building. During the day, Mt. Rainier, the Olympic mountains the ferries, and other traffic on Elliott Bay created a magnificent backdrop to the cityscape. And at night Seattle’s skyline appeared to author Stephen Robbins as a compact New York City. The scenes from his twenty-third floor office—a “40-second commute” below—were similarly seductive.

“Life was equally beautiful,” mused Robbins. The ninth edition of Organizational Behavior had been published a year ago and was now into its third printing and continued to dominate its U.S. and worldwide markets (the first “ebiz” version had come out in the past few weeks). More recent publications included his first Introduction to Business text, the third edition of Fundamentals of Management, and the third edition of Supervision Today! The seventh edition of Management would be out in June 2002, and the seventh edition of Essentials of Organizational Behavior was finished and would go into production next month. Robbins was also toying with the idea of his first trade book, which he thought might be fun to write and to see in airport bookstands during his frequent travels. Although the decision was not final, he had written a large part of the book while in Maui during the previous three months.

Maui had been his regular winter residence the last several years, offering a dazzling escape from Seattle’s winter gloom. Robbins silently groaned, reminded of how Maui had been in one way a “bummer of a trip” this time. He had lost several weeks of training since the track he’d planned to practice on had been closed while the stands were being prepared. In spite of the setback, he still hoped to compete in the 55-59 age-group sprints at the World Master’s Track Championships in Brisbane, Australia. Although he did not expect to win, being 58 and in the upper end of the age group (he had held six world records at various times), Robbins had expected to be in the medal hunt if he could remain injury-free. The missed training certainly wouldn’t be helpful.

Thinking about these accomplishments and challenges reminded Robbins of his fortieth high school reunion in October of 2001. His classmates had included Robert Shapiro (one of O.J. Simpson’s lawyers), Bill Ginsberg (Monica Lewinsky’s lawyer), Larry Flax (co-founder of California Pizza Kitchen), Joel Siegel (entertainment editor on Good Morning America!), and
Norman Pattiz (founder of Westwood One, which had purchased Mutual Broadcasting and NBC Radio). “These success stories keep my much more modest achievements in perspective,” Robbins concluded.

**Early Years and Learning**

Stephen P. Robbins was born in Los Angeles in 1943, the eldest of two children in a middle-class family. At the time his father worked in banking and his mother was a homemaker. His father had attended college for two years before dropping out; his mother had not attended college. Robbins described the family as not educationally oriented, and himself as a very average student in the early years who got worse. His mother complained that he started numerous projects but never followed through to finish. The only endeavor he seemed willing to complete were the short stories he typed out while sitting in his bedroom at night. And by the time he reached high school, Robbins was generally a “D” student. Yet there was one assignment he regularly achieved an “A” on—outlining the *Weekly Reader* story.

In elementary and junior high school Robbins also learned that although he was not generally athletic, he could run fast. The motivation to pursue running was “in the tenth grade they said if you went out for cross-country in the fall you would get a “B” just for showing up.” Robbins noted that he did not work particularly hard to achieve his running success, “The sprinting talent was God-given. It’s the [fast]-twitch muscles. And I never worked hard at it. I would never push myself.” His speed helped Robbins earn city champ in Los Angeles at the varsity level and by his senior year, All-American top ten across the country.

Many universities with top track programs contacted Robbins, but his grades—he was in the lower third of his graduating class—prevented those with higher academic standards (including Stanford and UCLA) from pursuing him further. Eventually he was offered and accepted a full scholarship to the University of Arizona, because at the time they required only that students be in the top three-quarters of their class to be accepted.\(^1\) While unsure of his intended direction, Robbins recollected that from a fairly young age he had a vague idea that he would become a businessperson:

> After working in the bank a few years, my father eventually got into retail, into the men’s clothing business, where after a few years he had his own store. My grandfather on my mother’s side had been in that line of work and had a small chain of men’s stores. So I sort of envisioned myself as maybe having a chain of men’s stores. I didn’t understand anything about what the work might be like, but I thought of going from store to store and visiting with the people there to see how things were going.

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\(^1\) The Regency scholarship that Robbins was awarded required that students be in the upper two-thirds of the high school graduating class. He eventually qualified when they recalculated his standing and included those who needed to attend summer school after their senior year, since this added a group that included many of the poorer students.
College

Robbins viewed college as an opportunity to get away from Los Angeles and a home life that did not support and encourage education. When Robbins arrived at Arizona the coach told him that the registrar said he was wasting his money on Robbins, since he would never make it through his first year. Although he thought about going into physical education, he was concerned that he had to take courses like chemistry and biology, and he didn’t believe he could ever pass those courses. He picked business as a major because it looked like business was something he might be able to get through. The first year was terrible since Robbins gained a solid “D” status. But he met a woman, Alix, in his freshman geology lab and they got married as sophomores. Robbins claimed it changed his life:

She believed in me. She said, “You’re smart. Where do you get this idea you’re stupid?” She taught me how to study, and I finally got serious. Whenever I’d had difficulties before, I’d quit. Now I just told myself that I had to work through this, ‘I’m going to finish, I’m going to get a degree. I’ve got to make something of myself.’ And so I really made the effort and by the time I was a junior I was making all As and Bs, and by the time I was a senior I was all As. And so I went through this dramatic metamorphosis.

Robbins recalled a visit from his parents during his junior year, while this transformation was going on. His mother had always been pretty hard on him since she never thought he had the ability to complete anything. Robbins described his father as a dreamer who talked about doing things but never managed to get them done. So during this visit, they took Robbins and his wife out to dinner, where the young couple described their plans for Robbins to work at providing a nice house and having kids that would be able to go to college. His mother responded, “You know Stephen, you’re just like your father, you’re a loser, you’re never going to be anything. You’re just a fantasizer.” Robbins described his feelings:

What do you say to something like that—when someone says that to you in front of your wife and father (although my father would get this all the time she was always running him down)? And so I think one of the things that drove me—in fact, Alix frequently said that one of the things that drove me—was trying not to be my father. He was dependent, he was dominated by his wife, and he was dominated by his mother. He had difficulty making decisions. The idea of autonomy and taking control of his life, he just didn’t really understand. Being financially independent was never possible for him.

Don’t get me wrong, my dad had some great qualities, he was real personable and everyone liked him. But he had a lot of difficulty postponing gratification—it had to be right now. He wouldn’t invest in school or do things that would lead five years down the line to something better. And I think it’s almost to a fault that I was always postponing gratification. I was always thinking about the future and
the longer term. I’d tell Alix that we had to save for tomorrow, and Alix would say “We may not be here tomorrow.”

Meanwhile, Robbins’ running played a diminishing role in his life while the academics become more important. About the same time he became really focused on school, Robbins lost the excitement about running. The athletic department got copies of students’ grades and the coach said “I’m astounded. I never would have guessed you could be that kind of student.” So two things at that point in his life shaped Robbins in a significantly positive way. The running experience that had been his first success at anything, and then his wife, Alix, who had confidence in him. By the time Robbins reached his senior year, he had abandoned his early thoughts about getting into the retail business:

My grandfather had said he could talk to some of his friends and get me a job in sales on the road with one of the big hosiery outfits. But I just wasn’t interested in the men’s clothing business anymore. And I think I didn’t want the family influence here either... I wanted to make it on my own.

Early Career

After graduating from the University of Arizona in 1964 with a major in finance, Robbins and his wife moved to Los Angeles, where he had accepted a job with Shell Oil as a wholesale credit analyst. He didn’t like the work very much and claimed he was probably marginally competent. Robbins applied to U.C.L.A. and was accepted into their MBA program. Instead of attending, Robbins transferred to San Francisco where he continued to dislike the job he was doing. He thought the work was boring, unchallenging, and seemed like a dead end. So he applied to San Francisco State and was accepted there. But Alix Robbins was very unhappy in San Francisco and pushed to return to Arizona. Shortly thereafter, Robbins gave notice, packed up everything in a U-haul, and moved back to Arizona without a job. He recalled:

My mother thought I was out of my mind. You don’t give up a good job with Shell Oil Company. She still couldn’t believe that I ever graduated or even ever went to college. But we moved to Phoenix where my wife was originally from, and I spent about ten days unemployed until I got a job as an accountant with Reynolds Metals. I got the job through an employment agency, where I’d had to do a little song and dance to get sent on the interview since my degree was in finance rather than accounting. I told them that accountants had only three or four more accounting courses than I’d had. I don’t know where I got this cockiness. Probably out of desperation, since being unemployed was very uncomfortable to me. And I was getting scared, so I said, give me a shot at this. Hire me for a month, and if I don’t work out, then let me go. And they hired me. And I was there for two-and-a-half years.
When they got to Phoenix, Robbins also applied to Arizona State University (A.S.U.), and this time he began taking MBA courses at night. He took two courses every semester and a full load during the summer to complete the program in a year and a half. By this time they also had two very young daughters, and Alix Robbins went back to school. At age 25, they fulfilled part of their dream: the couple bought a nice home, had two cars that were paid for, and Robbins got promoted to be a general accounting supervisor with five direct reports. He also started running again—sometimes working out with the Arizona State track team.

**Becoming an Academic**

While living out the American Dream, Robbins bounced around the idea of getting a doctorate. One of his friends from Arizona, who was a really good student, had shown Robbins his application to Berkeley and Michigan for a Masters-PhD program. When Robbins asked why, he said, “You know, Robbins, I don’t want to be 40 and say, you know I coulda…” Robbins filed that away and kept thinking, “I could go for a PhD and if I get it, I don’t have to tell anybody about it but could just try it to see if I can do it. How far can I push myself; what are my limits?” His wife thought that if he got the degree Robbins could get a job teaching at a community college and they would have the summers off. She came from a family of elementary and secondary teachers, and the idea of high achievement was something she did not understand. Robbins explained the paradox:

> It’s ironic that Alix was the first to believe in me, and did so much to help me succeed academically. Then I got hooked on this drug of competition, achieving, and trying to see how far I could push myself. This she couldn’t understand. The role model for everyone in her family was her uncle, a grammar school principal. Her father was a bus driver in Phoenix, another uncle a fireman, and everybody else had government jobs. They didn’t understand business, or achievement, or risk taking. And my wife thought that way. She still doesn’t understand the other world of trying to get outside that box.

Robbins was accepted to the PhD program in business at the University of Arizona. He planned to specialize in industrial labor relations and economics, envisioning himself teaching labor and HR courses somewhere, while serving as a labor arbitrator or something similar on the side. During the first year he moved into a general management track, which he felt probably reflected the program orientation more than it did a change in his personal thinking. By the time of his second year, he was considering a different future. He began to see what he thought were flaws in higher education, and he thought he would be good at academic administration. He finished up the second year and picked a dissertation topic.

The dissertation Robbins decided to write dealt with the conflicting roles university presidents have with the various factions of constituencies they need to balance. Robbins’ intention at this point was to get a teaching job at a college. From there he would take a department head job and then become a dean, a VP, and eventually a president. A big part of the
reason he was interested in administration was that it did not require the demands of an academic from the school side, the studying side, the research, and writing papers. Robbins thought those kinds of demands were over his head. But the idea of schmoozing with and motivating people or getting up and speaking in front of alumni he thought he could do. When he told Alix Robbins his plan she said, “If you think I’m going to be a university president’s wife and do all that stuff. . . I’m not going to play that game.” Robbins was aware that the ambition thing was beginning to wear on her, but Alix Robbins went along with it. It didn’t really become a problem until Robbins graduated from the doctoral program in 1970, and the marriage ended three years later.

The Early Years in Academe

After finishing his coursework and exams, Robbins decided that for financial reasons he would write his dissertation during his first year in a full-time teaching position. He accepted a one-year appointment teaching at a graduate school in San Diego. It provided a beautiful location, light teaching load, good students, and courses that were all in late afternoon and evening, freeing the earlier part of the day for working on the dissertation. So he came out of Arizona with a fairly definite plan: his first teaching job would be just a stepping stone on the road to becoming a department chair.

Although Robbins took the position with the idea of staying for a while, circumstances changed. The dean hired him, realizing that he was going to be a really good teacher, but not much of a researcher. Yet five months into the job Robbins was very unhappy with the school, and he did not get along well with the dean. It was a very small faculty and several of them were bad-mouthing the school and the dean. The dean got wind that Robbins was part of that group, but despite their differences, near contract renewal time, he offered Robbins the assistant dean position. He turned the dean down, although it seemed ideal from his career perspective, because he just couldn’t see them getting along. That upset the dean a lot, and closer to renewal time he called Robbins to his office and said, “I’ve got your contract here for renewal and I’m thinking about not renewing you.” Robbins had just bought a house right across the street from campus, had two kids and a wife, and thought, “Oh my God, I’m going to get fired!” The dean demanded to hear that Robbins was committed to the school, and that he was going to stop saying negative things. Robbins apologized, promised not to cause any more problems and the dean agreed to put in the renewal. He remembered:

Don’t ask me where I get this courage from but I wrote him a letter saying thank you very much but I have declined your offer of acceptance. I quit. This is about April or May, my dissertation is almost done, I’ve got a house to sell, a family to support, but I didn’t get fired (and I’ve got the letter to prove it). The job market was very poor at the time, and I’m coming from what was then a third-tier PhD program (today it’s an upper-level two, it’s a quality school). But I was not going to put up with this dean any more and his nonsense and the way he was treating me.
Robbins applied to many schools and received only one offer, from the Omaha campus of the University of Nebraska. He gratefully accepted, since the people seemed very nice and the salary was considerably higher than he had been earning. The faculty was full of young people, and Robbins made some really good friends. He enjoyed teaching and got good teaching evaluations. Robbins had lots of ideas, concepts he was thinking of that he decided he would like to write about. So he started working on an article on conflict.

One of Robbins’ MBA students, who quit after the first semester of the program, went to work as a sales rep for Prentice-Hall. He arrived at Robbins’ office with his manager and among other things asked if he was working on any manuscripts. Robbins told him he was working on a book on conflict. His former student said they’d like to see an outline and maybe a sample chapter. Slightly stunned, Robbins replied:

Okay, and after they left I said to myself, geez, I guess I’m going to have to write a book. I had some basic ideas along the lines that the literature was confusing conflict management and conflict resolution. I’d seen enough evidence that suggested to me that there were situations where conflict could be positive, and the literature minimally acknowledged that but didn’t really go anywhere with it. So I had this idea that maybe we should talk about conflict stimulation as well as conflict resolution as being tools for the manager. So I sat down and worked up an outline, wrote a sample chapter, and submitted it to Prentice-Hall. I also sent it to a couple of other publishers.

Several of the publishers indicated an interest, including Prentice-Hall, who wanted to see another three chapters. These chapters were also favorably received, and it appeared to Robbins that a contract offer was near. Robbins told his contact at Prentice-Hall that he had other publishers interested in his work and they needed to move quickly. So they sent the chapters to Herb Simon, a consulting editor of a series with Prentice-Hall. He sent the chapters back with the review: “This is not the definitive work in the field, however, it may initiate it.” Robbins’ contact told him, “When Herb Simon says that, we sign it.” Although they wanted some significant changes, Robbins finished the book during the year and the publisher got it out the following year.

During the same year his first book was published, another significant event occurred in Robbins’ career at the university. He found out that one of the guys they hired in the management department the same time they hired him was making $600 more per year. In an absolute sense, he thought he was extremely well paid, until he found this out. He went to the department chair and said he had heard this rumor, and was it true? The answer was yes, and Robbins asked why, since they both got their degrees at the same time, and from comparable schools. The chair said it was because his colleague was six years older than Robbins. Continuing to state his case, Robbins reminded the chair that his peer’s experience was all in sales, while he actually had management experience as a supervisor. And the chair repeated that he was six years older than Robbins. Suddenly, Robbins blurted, “Well, that just gives him six years less to do anything in a career.” He walked out of the meeting, went home to his wife, and
told her they were leaving. He was not going to work in a situation where he was going to be treated unfairly. Robbins never wanted to be treated better than anyone else, but he didn’t want to be treated less fairly. He recalled:

I checked the Academy placement listing and found a school in Montreal that was looking for someone to teach management. I was using a text written by someone from the school. I thought he was extremely smart . . . the students had a lot of trouble with the book, and so did I. So I wrote him a letter, and they called and invited me for an interview. I found out later I was the last candidate, they’d gone through about ten people already, but the text author I’d written to had turned them all down. I went up, liked Montreal, but wasn’t sure about the teaching job itself. They called me the next day and asked if I’d be interested in being department chair. Given my career plan, I said yes. This made sense if I was going to become a college president. With the book coming out I could now be legit in that role, now having some academic accomplishment.

Robbins returned to Montreal, accompanied by Alix Robbins, for a second interview with a different group of people, this time for the position of chair. He was offered, and accepted, the position, and Alix Robbins thought that Montreal “looked exciting.” Robbins and his family arrived in Montreal in August. Alix Robbins very quickly turned negative about the situation, feeling that the weather was too cold and the people unfriendly. She descended into a serious depression, and around Christmas left Robbins and returned to Nebraska with their two children, now ages 9 and 11.

Sitting alone in their small apartment, Robbins was crushed and now extremely depressed himself. For the first time in his life he was alone and thinking “Is this success, is this what I have been working for?” The separated couple talked regularly by phone until Alix Robbins agreed to come back to Montreal with a better attitude. In June of 1974, Alix Robbins drove back to Montreal leaving the children for a month with Robbins’ parents. They planned to visit Europe for a month to try to put things back together. Instead, according to Robbins:

She walked into the apartment and she’s already screaming . . . this traffic . . . I can’t stand it . . . no place to park . . . I hate it here . . . what am I doing here? And then she wanted me to quit and come back to Arizona. I said I haven’t got a job, what am I going to do there? And that was probably when I made a critical decision between my career and personal life. I’m impressed when I see friends who have actually quit their jobs and gone to where they needed to maintain their relationship . . . I didn’t do it. I was selfish.

Robbins was very unhappy in the marriage. The more time that went by, the more he realized they had nothing in common. He thought that Alix Robbins was the perfect person for him at one time, but they just grew in different ways. The hardest part was not being with the kids. But they stayed on good terms, the kids visited Robbins in the summers, and he always visited them in February when he taught an executive education program at Arizona.
The Textbook Era Begins

Toward the end of the first year of serving as department chair, Robbins decided that he would write a basic text on administration. He thought that college budgetary pressures of the time might result in more integration of public administration and business administration programs, and that there would be a need for management textbooks that combined the public and private perspectives. Around the same time, his book on conflict was being well received by the academic community, including a very favorable review in Administrative Science Quarterly. So he sent out a proposal for a new text on “the administrative process,” and the publishers seemed very excited:

I got calls saying “We’re flying up to talk to you.” People were waving money at me, and I’m going, “Oh my god, this is great.” I had four publishers coming up, all very interested, and all I had written was the proposal, and no chapters. Everybody wanted to sign it. I had shaped it and started to understand markets a bit to present it in a fair fashion. And I had a book on conflict done, so it’s a lot like baseball managers, once you’ve been one, you’re in the set.

The person who had signed Robbins’ conflict book had gone to work for Reston Publishers, and he wanted this book, bad. He thought this would be a real feather in his cap so he made a pitch, and right off the bat he laid a contract on Robbins with an advance. He told Robbins he could keep it for awhile; Robbins put it in the drawer and now knew he had at least one definite option to compare to the others. A person from International Textbooks said, “If you’ll sign a contract we’ll give you a $10,000 advance and bring you and your wife—[they were right at the end of the marriage at this point]—to New York for an all-expense paid weekend.” The $10,000 advance was huge money to Robbins— even $2,000 was a big advance at the time for a text and in relation to salaries. And Alix Robbins was pressing him to sign for the money so they could go to New York. But Robbins decided in the long term that it was not the smart thing to do.

In the meantime, Robbins had heard nothing more from Prentice-Hall. The man from Reston kept calling to find out if Robbins was going to sign. When he finally called on a Thursday, Robbins agreed to make a decision over the weekend. When the young publisher pressed for the probability that Robbins would sign with Reston, he was told 90 percent. Robbins recalled:

That afternoon, it just happens . . . so much of life is serendipity. . . . they’re having the American Sociological Association meeting in Montreal. So I decide—for no real reason—to go over and walk around the meeting. I walk into the publishers’ display area, and over to the Prentice-Hall booth. My conflict book was used in some sociology departments, so I went over to one of the sales people there, and said “Where’s the Robbins’ organizational conflict book?” And he goes, you’re Robbins! I said yes, and he introduced himself, and he was the manager of the guy who’d signed the book at Nebraska, so he remembered
me. And he said, “Oh, we forgot to bring your book here. What else are you up to?” I told him I was about to sign an administration text with Reston, and he said “Why not Prentice-Hall?” I told him that I didn’t think they were interested. He asked me if I would wait until at least tomorrow to sign so he could call and see what was going on.

The next morning I went back to the publisher’s booth, and he told me they were very interested. He asked what it was going to take for me to sign with them. I told him the terms Reston offered, and he called the editor in New Jersey, who said he would meet those terms. But the advance needed approval from the president of the company and he was on vacation in Wyoming. So they somehow contact him, he approves, and they hire a typist at the hotel to fill in the contract and we agree to have a signing party that night. I went back to the office, this is Friday afternoon, and the phone rings, and it’s Fred, the editor from Reston, checking in before the weekend I’ve told him I’m going to sign. He asked me the probability of my signing and I said about 20 percent... and Fred and I were not friends after that. He did later tell me—and this guy was a real pro in the business—he was the man who first signed Horngren in accounting—that he’d learned two things from me. First, never give anyone a contract when they want to sit on it, and two, when you’re dealing with someone with an inferiority complex, where status is important to them, you need to lean on them more heavily at the beginning. He said, “Robbins, if you’d come out of Columbia or Yale or Chicago you wouldn’t have this kind of hang-up, but you come out of Arizona, and you think you need to be with Prentice-Hall.”

That night they had a party right there at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel and Robbins signed with Prentice-Hall—his second book with them. Robbins also went to the dean and told him the book was going to be a big project, and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and that he could not handle the chair thing. They worked out a deal where Robbins was still the chair but he had an assistant chair who did almost all the day-to-day stuff. And it was at that point that Robbins abandoned the notion of becoming an administrator. Although he felt like he had been going down that track, he had found something that he really liked more. He was aware that he was really burning bridges by having taken the job as chair and in the second year leaving it. But he told the dean he thought he could make a better contribution to the department, the university, and his career by writing the book. The dean agreed.

During this time Robbins was teaching three courses per semester, as he always had. He liked teaching, but did not like doing preps, grading papers, or office hours. Essentially Robins loathed all the support things that were time-consuming but went with teaching. The following year, Robbins convinced the administration to allow larger number of students in introductory sections, including those he taught, in order to allow lighter teaching loads and fewer preparations for the faculty as a whole. This allowed Robbins more time for doing what he was really enjoying, which was the writing:
I became very focused in trying to see where I could get the most bang for the buck, and how I could use my time most efficiently. It was clear that a lot of things are required in the academic job, and it could consume you if you allowed it to. You could be a really good faculty member by being around and working with students all the time, taking on master’s theses, and being on a lot of important committees. But when push came to shove, that wasn’t going to help me. I was looking out for my self-interest. It was becoming clear to me that there were choices and that I felt most people were making the wrong choices. Or at least, given the opportunity, I was starting to see that I could make the biggest contribution by writing texts and could actually make some money on it. At the time I didn’t think I could make a lot, but I thought it was an interesting way to maximize my skills—the limited skills that I had.

The teaching schedule in Montreal allowed Robbins three days a week to write. The department ran a Monday-Wednesday schedule, which meant that, regardless of your teaching load, you taught only on those two days. The Canadian school year was two twelve-week semesters. Faculty had five months off in the summer and a month for Christmas. Robbins would teach classes on Monday and Wednesday, then Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and every day during the summer, he was able to write. Robbins claimed that he taught with the least amount of effort possible, “I might be a candidate for an award for having done the least amount of preparing and the least amount of grading. I leveraged the system extremely well.” Despite Robbins cutting to the edge to do the minimum required to teach, among a faculty of 90 he always placed among the top ten in student evaluations.

With a signed contract and a workable arrangement with the University, the project went smoothly. His second book took approximately nine months to write and Robbins described the experience as being the most fun he could ever remember having. Robbins noted that he also did not have a clear long-term plan. After completing the book, he recollected:

I went to New Jersey with this 1,200-1,500 page manuscript and dropped it on the desk of my editor. As we were talking I said, “You know, you really need a low-level basic personnel book.” And he says ‘Gosh, I’ve been looking for one for three years—do you think you could write one?’ Now, I’d never had or taught a personnel course but I said “sure.” And I went home and looked through all the best-selling HRM books, saw what I thought were flaws in them, what should be added or changed, worked up a proposal and an outline, and sent it in. He called right after receiving it asking, “When can we sign?” I said, “Let’s work out the terms,” and boom, I had an HRM book!

It took only two days from the time Robbins first mentioned the idea to his editor until they made the verbal contract. Robbins credited his ability to assimilate information as a major asset. He was able to see what he thought fit and what he believed was redundant or really old in the HRM material already out there. So he started on his third book. Robbins had viewed his
books as independent projects, with each potentially being the end of his writing career. That is until he had an idea that it would be neat to be a series editor.

Robbins was aware of Herb Simon, Ed Schein, Keith Davis, and a few other famous people who were series editors, and thought it that would be a feather in his cap, it would make him feel like somebody to do the same. So he started talking to publishers about being either a consulting editor or a series editor. No one was interested, so Robbins decided he needed something to hook them. That’s when he came up with his idea for the organizational behavior material (OB):

I had been thinking about OB as an area to write a book in. But the way the field was going I thought it might move from cognitive and conceptual to all experiential, and if it went that way I had no strength in that area. On the other hand, 80 percent of the market was still basic conceptual texts and it seemed like maybe the experiential movement had peaked. So, anyway, I started telling the publishers I could write an OB book. Everyone perked up, and said they were interested in talking. And then I dropped the other shoe, “Well, Bud, it’s contingent upon my being a series editor.” I ended up negotiating with maybe three or four publishers, and they were all trying to come up with some idea for some kind of series thing. One said I could be editor of their entire series in management. But I still sort of wanted to stay with Prentice-Hall, since they were a major publisher and had been good to me—why change horses in mid-stream? On the other hand it was a competitive situation, so if they couldn’t make it happen then I was going to go elsewhere. So I had this ongoing discussion with my editor there and one day at an Academy meeting over coffee he says, “What’s it going to take to sign this book?” I had this little piece of paper in my shirt pocket and I said, “Here it is.” I had a signing amount and a royalty amount, but I said I still needed a series. And he said, “I’ve got an idea. . . . we have a book called Essentials of Management. We’ve been thinking about building a series around that. Would that be appealing to you?” And I said yes and that became the vehicle. And so I signed an OB book but I didn’t really want to write an OB book, it just seemed the only way I was going to get to be a series editor.

Robbins finished writing his first OB book and the reviews were incredible. The book became extremely popular, which surprised Robbins, because he really did not know much about the field.

The California Boom Years

Robbins was promoted to full professor after four years at the university in Montreal. His books were doing well enough to supplement his salary fairly nicely. Then another equity issue arose. He was one of only seven or eight full professors out of 90 faculty. And in the absolute sense, when he was promoted to full professor, he was being paid very well. The salaries were
all public and Robbins saw the other full professors were making 30 percent more than he was. Robbins went to the dean and said that needed to be rectified. The dean responded that Robbins was about 15 years younger than the next one. And once more Robbins argued that age was not relevant. Instead here, it was about rank and his vita supported it. Although the dean agreed, he told Robbins it was never going to happen—at that school he was always going to be in this situation.

The pay inequity angered Robbins, who mentioned the issue to some people at a meeting he attended in San Diego. When he returned to Montreal, he got a call asking if he would be interested in a faculty position at San Diego State University (SDSU). So Robbins went back for a visit and they made him an offer. He went looking for a house that afternoon and accepted their offer. Immediately Robbins went back to Montreal—it was late spring—and told them he was leaving. As Robbins described, “To show you not only how equity-sensitive I am, but how stupid I am. I took an $18,000 cut in pay to go to San Diego, but nobody in the college was making a nickel more than me!”

In the summer of 1979, Robbins moved to San Diego. His daughters were still with their mother in Arizona, where his oldest daughter had completed her junior year in high school and his youngest had finished ninth grade. The youngest had been saying for some time she wanted to live with her father, so Robbins’ new house had been purchased with that in mind. On the way to California he picked her up and they completed the move together. She became “Dad’s girl” for the next three years, until she went off to college. Robbins enjoyed having Jenny with him since he did not know anybody in San Diego. He thought it was fun being a bachelor father and having a daughter to raise. He was home when she came home from school and experienced the life of parenting that he had missed.

Robbins’ text writing and sales began to build during the 1980s. His enthusiasm for writing continued, and he became confident in what he was doing. The publishers saw him as someone who could deliver, although he was not a star on the list at Prentice-Hall. The OB book had come out and done okay. The first edition did really well, the second also, the third fell off but came back strong in the fourth, and by the fifth edition it was the number one selling book in the field. Every time Robbins came upon a project, publishers had an interest. Yet he thought that Prentice-Hall was starting to take him for granted. Robbins continued to talk with other publishers (at the time there were 12 to 15 mainline publishers instead of five) but after the fifth or sixth book with Prentice-Hall, the other publishers began to think Robbins was crying wolf when he talked to them. He was never sure whether Prentice-Hall (or the others) believed he could be a star author until 1991, when things changed. As Robbins described:

It’s kind of like I spent 16 years to be an overnight success. You just keep at it, keep at it, and suddenly it all hits. And when it hit, it really started to move and continued to move, all through the ’90s. Every edition was significantly better and every book was much better received. The international thing exploded. I went from being maybe fifth in the market to being first (or maybe third then first), and then started pulling away. I don’t know what to attribute it all to,
except that it took people awhile to see what I had to offer. You know, if you’ve got a big name, and you put it on the book, everyone knows the name and they’ll look at it. But when you’re selling writing style, like my user-friendliness, which is my big plus, it takes a while longer for it to catch on. There seems to be something that students like about my books.

Robbins As Teacher

At San Diego, they had a history of teaching small classes. Robbins convinced the administration that they should try large sections as a way to generate more credit hours inexpensively and allow faculty to teach lighter loads. They tried it on an experimental basis and it worked fine. Robbins was able to leverage his ability to teach large sections and generate a lot of credit hours in introductory courses that were his specialty. Although Robbins believed that San Diego had better teachers, he still got good evaluations—somewhere in the top 20 percent. He would come into the school for one or two hours before class for his office hours. He had graduate assistants to help with the grading. Robbins gave half multiple choice and half essay exams. Robbins had worked out a system where his graduate assistants were able to grade exams in a highly reliable manner across 250 students. Once he had the grading model in place, Robbins felt the tool was extremely efficient for him. At the end of each semester he spent time interviewing people to find the right graduate assistants to work for him the following semester. Then he trained them before the next semester started. They handled all the grading—scoring, putting data into the computer, and giving him the printout so he could make the cut.

Robbins’ class sessions were 75 minutes long with usually 250-275 students. Over the years, he had developed a way of making management interesting. He was acutely aware of where students had difficulty understanding concepts or theories and would take time to go through these areas in class, using numerous examples and stories. Primarily he used a one-way communication approach. He would come in and take questions at the beginning, go over the material from the last lecture, and then go into the new material they had read for the day. With the occasional use of overhead, and perhaps a few videos that Prentice-Hall had done with his book, he usually scored lowest on the evaluation scale, “uses audio visuals to explain things.”

SDSU had an outdoor amphitheater on campus that seated 6,000, and Robbins approached the dean about making use of the facility to cut down on everyone’s teaching load. He suggested the department just load everybody into the thing, generate a zillion credit hours, and free up for all faculty in the department with a one-course load. The dean didn’t go for it but Robbins continued to have large sections that worked for him.

Students told Robbins that his exams were tough. His philosophy had been that he assumed they knew the book, and the lectures, and he wanted to see if they could use that information. Robbins remembered:
In one of my classes in Montreal of about 500 students, a student raised his hand, so I called on him. He said, “Professor Robbins, it’s not fair. What you’re asking on these exams [he’d done poorly] you’re asking us to think.” And I stopped and said, “Am I on Candid Camera or something? I thought that was what education was about.” He said, “I know you’re right, but we haven’t learned that. We don’t know how to think. We know how to regurgitate.” And I said, “Welcome to the real world that does not care about the list that you know—the eight factors of this and the four factors of that, or the definitions you can recite—that’s not what education is about.” He knew I was right, but students really are frustrated because they don’t have thinking skills . . . especially in the large state universities where they are run through in a diploma-mill environment. So students always thought my courses were challenging. They had to work hard and study hard to do well. But from my standpoint it was still a lecture format, and that, in effect, standardized my role. It minimized my preparation time and reduced the time it took in terms of supporting the class.

Robbins as Industry Leader

Robbins became a dominating force in the management text business during the 1990s. His Management: concepts and applications text was in its sixth edition and quickly became number two selling in the United States and number one worldwide. The Organizational Behavior book, which was in its ninth edition, became the number one selling book, outselling the nearest competitor in the United States by about two-and-one-half to one and even better internationally. He co-authored with David DeCenzo the Fundamentals of Management book, in its third edition, that became the number three selling management text in the United States. The sixth edition of Essentials of Organizational Behavior became the number two book in the organizational behavior market (behind his number one book). His Organizational Theory book was in its third edition and made number two. He also had a training and interpersonal skills book in its second edition, co-authored with Phil Hunsaker. The book did really well, but with a narrow niche market it was used mostly as a supplement to a main text. Supervision Today, in its third edition, was the number one selling book in that market. Robins wrote the first edition alone and then took on Dave DeCenzo as co-author who continued to rewrite that book. Eventually Robbins added co-authors to about half his books.

Among Robbins’ newest works was Managing Today in its second edition. This was a new paradigm management book that tried to capture two trends he saw going on at the time. One was toward blending management and OB into a single course and two was to present management in a contemporary approach. The first edition became the fifth selling book in the management market and was in the top three with the second edition.

By July of 2000, Robbins’ most recent book was called Business Today. The book was an introduction to business designed around another new paradigm. Instead of presenting business in terms of silos and the functions—four chapters on marketing, four on finance, etc.—
he used a more integrative approach. He argued that basically business was about gathering information from the environment, processing it internally, developing relationships, and then managing internal activities. So that’s the way the book was organized. While he thought that most editors and decision makers in the introduction to business market were absolutely convinced that a professor would not look at anything that deviated from the standard functional model, he believed his approach made sense. The book was 250 pages shorter than the competition, yet Robbins felt it covered everything that the more lengthy competition did. Robbins considered the venture a high-risk, high-reward situation with a huge potential market. He also claimed that this book was incredibly difficult and the hardest thing by far he had ever gotten into, “trying to make topics like suppliers and distribution interesting to students.”

Given the maturity of the business school text market, Robbins thought it was far harder to break into today than it was earlier in his career. Twenty years ago he felt that almost anybody could come out with an introductory book and do reasonable numbers. There were many new professors coming into the business field who were willing to try new things, and there was less agreement on what the paradigms were. Robbins also thought that the quality of books had vastly improved, compared to when he entered the market. The question became “What new thing can you bring to the game? What’s your value-added hook?” Speaking, candidly, Robbins said that a large part of his success today was inertia. People had used his books, they liked them, and so they stay with them until somebody came along and gave a very good reason to leave. He explained:

Also, I do spend a lot of time going to meetings, reading stuff, listening to professors, trying to find out what the cutting-edge topics are. What kinds of concerns do professor have? What kind of book can I write that will make the professor look good?

Robbins identified a number of other characteristics required to make a textbook successful, including being a name author, having a publisher who was really committed to the project, and offering a high-quality, complete package in terms of instructor’s manual, CD-ROMs, Internet site, and on-line study guides. He described his process for structuring books:

I find it really fun working out the outline of a book and trying to figure out what topics are going to go where. Certain days I’m down or weeks I’m down and other weeks I’m walking around and I’m literally in ecstasy. The only thing I’ve been able to ascertain as a predictor is the degree to which the topic I’m writing about has high agreement on the material that is to be included. The more that everyone agrees that these are the topics that have to be covered in this order, the more depressed I get. Because I don’t feel there’s much room for freedom for me to bring something to the table. An example at the other end is the new chapter on e-business in my Intro to Business book. I’ve never seen a chapter on e-business before, so I was free to go wherever I wanted to. I did a full chapter in Managing Today on trust—I think it’s going to be a very important topic—nobody had written a chapter yet on trust, which again meant I was free to go
where I wanted. I spend time reading the literature, then assimilating it, organizing it in a way that would be meaningful to students, and present it the way I want to. I like the creative side.

Current Work and Lifestyle

As Robbins neared age 50 in 1993, he faced an important decision point. In the California public higher education system, individuals could retire at 50, although almost nobody did. About two years before Robbins reached that milestone, he started to think about how much he really liked teaching but actually loved writing. Since his books had turned into a pretty big business, he thought it might be nice to write full-time. So that was what he started telling everyone about eighteen months ahead of time. He told enough people that he put himself into a position where there was no backing out. So he retired in 1993, and then thought he would like to live in a more urban place. He had been single for nearly 20 years and had not met Miss Right. He simply sold his house, moved to Seattle, and started being a full-time writer. He never looked back.

Robbins had begun to think he was a complete loner and had adapted pretty well to being single. He started to go away in the winters seeking better weather. The first year he went to Arizona and then Hawaii the second. While in Hawaii, Robbins had gone on an organized bike ride, which also happened to include an individual who was a runner. He talked to Robbins about his plan to go on to Maui for the winter to train. His new friend asked Robbins if he knew anyone there. When Robbins said no, he gave him the telephone number of a friend who he said would be happy to show Robbins the Island. Robbins explained:

Her name was Laura and she worked in an art gallery. I stopped in and she showed me around. We became friends and after almost a month I began really liking this person. The changing moment was probably when she called me for Valentines Day. She was really nervous and it came out “Happy Thanksgiving.” That kind of changed things and we started thinking about this as a relationship instead of just a friendship. I was going to be leaving in a month, so our time was kind of short. We decided to kick this up a little and see more of each other . . . like all the time . . . and then when I left we agreed that she would come over to Seattle and visit. And she did, and I said, “Why don’t you move over here?” After considerable deliberation she did and before too long we were engaged.

Stephen and Laura Robbins had been married for nearly three years by 2001. Laura Robbins’ professional background included advertising, art direction, and illustration. In Seattle she worked in freelance illustration, including the covers of two of Robbins’ recent books. Given the proximity of their home to Robbins’ office, Laura Robbins said they were “around each other pretty much 21 hours a day.” Robbins added:
People would likely say that we’re still honeymooning a bit. But, we get along really well and we do spend far more time with each other than most couples do. Neither of us “goes” to work, except for my going down two flights of stairs. We both like to travel a lot, which of course we now do together. We usually go to the gym together several times a week. Although we both run every day, we do that in different places.

Laura Robbins identified Robbins’ most endearing characteristics as his sense of humor, energy, drive, and wonderful personality. She expanded:

Some people might find some of those characteristics more difficult to appreciate than I do. The drive and energy might be difficult for someone who was much lower key than me. Steve does truly have this desire to be number one. If there is a point where things aren’t quite going his way, he takes it very hard. And I kind of feel for him at those times. I know what that’s like . . . way back earlier in my career, I was extremely competitive myself and to some extent I still am, so I can definitely understand it.

Another important part of Robbins’ life, running track, reemerged seriously when he was 48. He learned that there was a substantial worldwide “masters” track and field competition, which was run in five-year age groups (50-54, 55-59, etc.). Robbins had a friend in San Diego who participated, and they started working out together. He learned about the organization and its meets and national and world championships.

I said, wow . . . you’re kidding . . . a bunch of old guys and women . . . this is kind of weird but neat. I think I had gotten to the point where I had achieved almost everything I could have asked for in a professional career, and I was looking for new challenges. And I thought it might be fun to go back and see if I could still run. I had run off and on, and it appeared to me that I hadn’t lost as much as most of the people my age had lost. Most of the people who had beaten me in the old days were gone—they were dead, in jail, or eighty pounds overweight.

So I started back training and I went through a lot of injuries. When I turned 50, I went to Miyzaki, Japan, where I ended up severely injured before the meet but was able to get there and go through the heats. It’s run like the Olympics with heats, quarters, semis, and finals. There were around 160 sprinters in my age group. I won the 100 meters and placed second in the 200. I was fit to be tied after the 200 when a fellow from South Africa beat me. I just couldn’t believe it. But I wasn’t in condition, and he was fast and very good, but I was really disappointed. So I ended up with gold and silver medals.

Once I was in shape and started winning races again, it was a really neat feeling. When you’re in shape, you know that you can only lose if you allow yourself to be beaten. You know that if you run a good race, nobody can beat you. And I
never felt that in high school or college, never. But I had reached that stage in my early fifties—I believed that I could really win, that nobody could beat me. I’ve had that feeling in textbook writing, where I knew I could beat anyone, but I hadn’t felt it in sports before. But in 2003 I’m going to be 60, and I’m going to be ready. I’m going after all those age 60 records.

The Regimen

Robbins believed that his disciplined routine was key to his productivity. He kept a schedule that was highly structured. He devised a very clear plan of what had to be done and what tasks he had to complete in order to get there. Based on having written for a long time, he knew how long it took to do things. Every single day Robbins went into the office. He worked seven days a week, including nights, to get his new introduction to business book out. A task that would take most people three years, Robbins finished in ten months. He revealed a typical work day:

For quite a few years now my day is always the same. I’m up around 4:30 or 5:00 am, and read the Seattle paper and *The New York Times* with breakfast. I’ll be in the office between 5:30 and 6:00, and will work until about 11:30 when I wrap it up and close the office. I have my lunch and read *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Then I take a nap every single day for an hour and a half, from about 1:00 till 2:30 p.m. Then around 3:00 it’s time to work out and I go over to either the gym or the track and work out from 3:00 till about 4:30 or 5:00 p.m., come home, shower, then we go out to dinner. Then, back home and to sleep around 11:00 or 11:30 p.m. So I get six hours of sleep at night and another hour and a half in the day. I started this in 1977 so I’ve been doing it for a long time—I’m now a real pro at napping. It’s a serious nap—in bed, darkened bedroom, for 90 minutes. You can set your watch by the time I get in bed and fall asleep, I always pop back up in exactly 90 minutes.

Saturday and Sunday is a bit different—except this past year when I’ve worked those days like the weekdays. More typically, on the weekend I’ll work from maybe 6:00 to 9:30 a.m. or so. On Saturdays I’ll then work out with “the boys” at around 10:00 a.m. The weekend afternoon I take off. What I’ve learned in terms of time management is that I’m a morning person, and generate 99 percent of my productivity before lunch. When I’m forced to work in the afternoons and evening, it’s like pulling teeth and the quality isn’t nearly as good and the efficiency is horrible. It takes me three times as long to do anything. So I try hard to minimize my distractions in the morning. I don’t like to do chores or similar things or take significant breaks during those hours because I know I can’t substitute the time later. I can’t reproduce what I can between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m. later in the day. I can’t just then do it between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m., or 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. It just doesn’t work that way.
Looking Back, and to the Future

Robbins said he has had “very few regrets.” Starting in his late 20s, he spent so much time on his career—to the exclusion of personal relationships—that he didn’t really think about what he might have missed. On the other hand, he wasn’t unhappy during that time period. He thought the window—to find someone who would be really fun to spend his life with—had probably closed—particularly the four or five years before he met Laura Robbins. Robbins felt that he retired from the university at the right time:

If I had gotten a degree from Berkeley or Chicago, then today I could be a full professor at Stanford. And if that had happened would I be happier? No way. I have the perfect life. I’m able to do exactly what I want to do every single day. I have total autonomy. I make a very good living at doing something that I can’t believe you can actually make a living at. So I feel like I’m sort of retired because I love what I do, and I can’t really have much regret because it ended up pretty good. In the process, I think, I spent time with my kids. I don’t have any problems there. We had great relationships even though there were a few years there where I missed them. But then they came back into my life very closely and have been there ever since.

I don’t think books are any kind of legacy; this is just something I enjoy doing. When I’m gone, I’m gone. I’m enjoying it while I’m here. I’m not religious so I don’t expect nor am looking for an afterlife. I don’t need to leave any wonderful buildings with my name on so the people can say, “Oh, he was here.” I turned out two really great daughters who have good values and are level-headed. What’s to regret?