

# Introduction

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A few years ago, during an annual team-building meeting at the brokerage firm where I work as a financial advisor, my team participated in an exercise in which we took a blank sheet of paper from a yellow legal pad and wrote five words at the top of the page. Those five words were, “My purpose in life is . . .”; with a 15-minute time limit, we were to write down the description to complete that thought.

As the clock began ticking, my mind drifted lazily through a variety of dreams and goals I’d aspired to over the years; then, my thoughts wandered back to the present, and the work I had waiting for me back in my office. By the time I snapped my attention back to the task, a glance at the timer told me that I had daydreamed through 8 of the 15 minutes. Then, as if out of nowhere, the words came to me. I wrote:

“My purpose in life is GROWING. In life, I want to grow and change. I want to be different tomorrow than I am today. I want to grow as a wife—to be more in love with my husband, to hold hands more often, to enjoy

long talks late into the night, and to share our hopes and dreams. I want to grow as a mother—to watch my children mature into their own destinies. I want to grow as a spiritual person—to become kinder, wiser, more hopeful, and more understanding. I want to grow my skills as a financial advisor and help my clients grow their assets. I want to work at my job with joy and honesty and integrity. I want each day to be filled with fun and excitement and challenge. And, I want to help others bring about meaningful changes in their own lives, by sharing my discoveries and ideas. My purpose in life is fulfilled by growing and through helping others grow.”

The timer went off and I looked up at my team members feeling slightly stunned. The preceding seven minutes had encapsulated a defining moment of my life. *The Seven Minute Difference—Small Steps to Big Changes* is a product of that defining moment.

### **Understanding the Seven Minute Difference and Micro-Actions**

At the time I just described, I had spent 21 years of my life working in my vocation; I came to work every day and did a good job. But something was missing. I wanted more—more hope, more joy, more fun, and more fulfillment. I wanted to

*be* more. I wanted to help others find hope, joy, laughter, purpose, and passion in their own lives. In just seven minutes, a simple exercise had helped me reach a whole new understanding of who I was and what I wanted to be. Working with just a kitchen timer, a legal pad, and an ink pen, I had given shape to an idea of my *purpose*, and that idea would help determine and guide the actions that have defined my life from that day on. Over the next several days I kept thinking about the power of those seven minutes. I realized that there were hundreds of things I could accomplish in seven minutes—tiny little opportunities to make my life and the lives of those around me better. I began to look at life through the lens of the Seven Minute Difference. The ripples of that idea are still widening, as I continue to grow in my purpose and passion for life through an ongoing series of small changes.

The subtitle to this book is *Small Steps to Big Changes*. I believe that small steps truly can bring about the biggest changes in our lives. The best part of all is that change happens in an instant—the moment you decide that, you truly *want* to be different. That is at the heart of my message. Change, in fact, is the essence of all life—without change, we die. Of course, most of us would like to make positive changes that represent growth and development, rather than decay. The problem is that we are uncertain of what the nature of those changes should be and what concrete steps we can take to achieve them. Too often, we think of change as being complex, unmanageable, and beyond

our grasp. When we think that way, we ignore the fact that the biggest, most meaningful, and dramatic differences in our lives—and in our world—are really just the result of a series of small, seemingly insignificant changes. When changes are guided by our idea of purpose, they can build, over time, toward meaningful growth and development.

That understanding formed the basis of the first Seven Minute Idea I'd like to share with you:

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*I believe that making even small changes in your actions and behavior can result in monumental differences in your life.*

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In this book, I call the activities that result in these small changes *micro-actions*. Micro-actions are so simple they are often overlooked and underutilized. They are the tiny choices corporate executives and salespeople use every moment of every day to make the difference between mediocrity and excellence. In my experience, the micro-action of writing down a short description of purpose resulted in a major change in my personal and professional life, but micro-actions can take any number of forms, including:

- Outlining a daily plan of action
- Taking time to thank a co-worker for a job well done

- Building time into the day to catch up between meetings
- Being on time or early for every meeting
- Handwriting thank-you notes to two customers a day
- Reading ten pages of a book
- Getting up 15 minutes earlier
- Eating more fruit and drinking more water

When incorporated into a daily routine, these micro-actions take on even greater potential for bringing about immense new levels of productivity and growth in our work and home life. Although individual micro-actions might take 5 minutes, 7 minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, or more, all of them are inspired by what I call Seven Minute Ideas—ideas founded in our purpose and passion that help us plan and carry out concrete steps toward the goal of making an important difference in our lives.

Why “seven minutes”? Studies have shown that the average corporate executive has an attention span of seven minutes. Further, according to Harvard psychologist George Miller, the brain is limited to remembering only seven pieces of information at a time. I know that my own attention can wander easily, so I wanted to create processes and systems for working through the day that were short and easy to implement. Seven Minute Ideas and the micro-actions that support them are my tools for maximizing my ability to succeed.

Seven Minute Ideas are not just limited to identifying micro-actions that contribute to professional growth. I use these tools to grow personally, as well. For example, in around seven minutes I can

- outline and prioritize my top personal goals;
- write a description of where I want my life to be in five years;
- write a love letter to my spouse;
- call my parents;
- talk to my children about their day; or
- take a moment to relax and breathe.

Just seven minutes. What could you accomplish in seven minutes? I encourage you to begin to look at life through the possibilities of the Seven Minute Difference, and realize that in a very short period of time, you can use micro-actions to bring about monumental growth in your personal and professional life.

### **Why I Wrote The Seven Minute Difference**

As a financial advisor, I work with a major New York brokerage firm. I have been in the same career since 1982, and with the same company since 1984. I loved my job since the first day.

Yet, as you can imagine, the past five years have been a challenge for all of us in the financial services industry. After almost two decades of spectacular growth in the stock market, between 2000 and 2002 we faced unprecedented events: the bursting of the technology bubble that resulted in a NASDAQ drop of 78 percent; the September 11 terrorist attacks; and the corporate scandals surrounding Enron, WorldCom, and Adelphia, which accompanied a 48 percent decline in the S&P 500 Index. As 2002 came to a close and 2003 dawned, I knew it was time for a change. A wise man once told me, *“Allyson, you can’t choose to remain the same and expect your life to change. If you want your life to be different, you must be different.”* Although that seems like common sense, far too many of us wake up every morning, repeat the very same motions we made the day before, and wonder why our lives remain the same.

In 2003, after realizing my first monumental Seven Minute Idea, I decided it was time to be different. With the realization that my purpose in life was all about *growing and helping others to grow*, I began to map out a business plan that aligned with my personal goals and values. But, I could not complete this process alone. I work as part of a three-person team at my firm, and together the three of us created team goals. In addition, we began to focus on strategic clarification. We designed systems. We increased our core competencies. It took almost all of 2003 to create the written strategies and processes we were going to implement in our daily business models.

As my team took the road map we had created and began to live it, 2004 became a magical year for us. Not only did our team's business grow by 67 percent in one year, but the level of satisfaction among our team members and clients began to rise geometrically. As our successes grew, I realized that the processes we were using—processes based upon my own ideas for making a difference in my personal life—had the potential to help others realize the same kind of positive change and growth in their own businesses, homes, and family lives. This book, *The Seven Minute Difference—Small Steps to Big Changes*, offers a blueprint for the processes of assessment, growth, and development we created.

### **Who This Book Is For**

This book is written for businesspeople who want to believe that change really can happen in an instant. It is written for corporate executives, team leaders, insurance executives, financial advisors, salespeople, customer service associates, and human resource executives. It is written for accountants, attorneys, doctors, nurses, and teachers. This book is for all people who truly want to make meaningful changes in their professional and/or personal life, and who are willing to undertake the self-examination and small actions necessary to bring about that change.

The framework for this book contains several underlying truths:

1. Change begins to happen the moment you decide to change.
2. You must want change.
3. You must expect change.
4. You should enjoy the process of change.

You can be different tomorrow than you are today. Are you living from your heart? Can you feel that same level of passion and desire that first drew you to your current vocation? If you find yourself wanting to take a fresh look at discovering your hopes and dreams, then *The Seven Minute Difference* is the book for you.

### **What The Seven Minute Difference Can Do for You**

Many of you have known for a long time that you need to make some significant changes in your life. Perhaps you've wanted to be more productive at work, receive a promotion, or even move into a new career. You might want to organize your home life or use better judgment in managing your time. You want to find time to do the things you believe to be most important in your life—to regain control over your health,

finances, and other aspects of your life that feed your body, mind, and spirit.

*The Seven Minute Difference* offers a series of proven ideas that you can use to bring about those important changes. In this book, I'll share with you some of my favorite Seven Minute Ideas and the micro-actions that can bring those ideas to life. I will also outline projects that, with some thought and deliberation, you can leverage to effect meaningful change in your routine habits and actions. This book is filled with hundreds of specific, concrete, actionable ideas that you can begin to implement immediately in your daily life. You will learn specific techniques for

- discovering your purpose;
- changing your life through Seven Minute Ideas and micro-actions;
- choosing success;
- exceeding your customers' expectations;
- building momentum into your business;
- breaking through to your destiny; and
- translating life-changing decisions into life-changing actions.

This is a book about fulfillment of purpose. It doesn't just tell you about other people's successes; instead, it guides you in a step-by-step journey toward your own personal and professional destiny. I will show you simple, proven techniques for increasing your personal knowledge and raising your core competencies. I will guide you in establishing written goals that can outline a road map to your success. You will also learn powerful techniques for mastering core business practices, such as improving customer service, creating a strategy for growing your business, leveraging your key strengths, and overcoming critical weaknesses. Finally, this book encourages you to look for the best in life—both at the office and at home. My goal in writing this book was to help you rediscover the sheer passion and joy of doing what you do best. Above all, this is a book of hope.

### **Some Words of Encouragement from The Seven Minute Coach™**

In addition to serving as a financial advisor, I am also a professional speaker and business coach to thousands of people. Many of the ideas presented in this book have grown out of the workshops and training classes I have taught across the country. Having taught the ideas you're about to discover in this book, I am now called The Seven Minute Coach™. In that role, my personal mission is to educate, motivate, and

encourage others. That is what a coach does. Like a personal trainer who works right beside you, a good coach is always on your side, cheering you on and pushing you to succeed. A coach cherishes your victories and shares your pain in defeat. Many people have been my coaches and my teachers over the years, and I am trying now to pass along the great wisdom and support I gained from those kind and loyal mentors. Through them, I have understood that growing is a process, learning is a gift, and each day is a blessing filled with opportunities beyond our wildest imaginations. As you read this book, I hope you hear me whispering to you my friend and advisor's words of wisdom: "If you want your life to be different, *you* must be different."

What holds you back from becoming the person you want to become? What if that obstacle could begin to crumble in only seven minutes? Today is the day to stand on the edge of life with a new sense of determination and hope. As you read, I know you will come to understand that the first step toward monumental change truly can happen in an instant—and, it can happen to *you*.