



A Small Business Owner's Guide to Navigating an Arbitrary World

By Michael Myers

FOREWORD

a.k.a. Who This Is (and Isn't) For

If you're brand new to business and still in the idea stage, this book is not for you.

If you're excited about your "big launch" and just need a little motivation to get started, this book is not for you.

If you're still convinced that success will come from working harder, optimizing your pitch deck, or manifesting good vibes—this book is definitely not for you.

I honestly say: Good luck—we hope to see you on the covers of those magazines someday!

But—

If you've been grinding for years and it still feels like you're miles away from making it...

If you've watched others leap ahead of you—not because they worked harder or built better, but because they *knew someone*...

If you've done everything right—delivered value, played fair, kept improving—and still find yourself stuck on the outside looking in...

If you're sick of being told to "just hustle harder" by people who either lucked out or never built anything real...

Then this guide is for you.

This isn't about giving up. It's about seeing clearly, so you can play the actual game—not the one sold in motivational slide decks or LinkedIn threads.

This is a guide for survivors: people who know the difference between effort and outcome, who want to build something meaningful *and* resilient—without pretending the system is fair when it isn't.

This guide is for the disillusioned, not the deluded.

1. A REALITY-BASED APPROACH TO BUSINESS

The Unspoken Truth

Behind every "crushing it" success story and every "five simple steps to success" business book lies an uncomfortable truth: much of what determines business outcomes is arbitrary, relationship-based, and disconnected from the actual value you create. Traditional business advice operates within a mythology of meritocracy that bears little resemblance to how opportunities and capital actually flow in the real world.

This guide acknowledges that reality rather than perpetuating convenient fictions.

The Harsh Reality of Business

Let's be brutally honest about what actually determines success:

- You can work 1000x harder and still lose to someone who knows the decision maker (and probably will...).
- You can build hundreds of relationships and still miss out to a person in the room when the pain threshold is reached.
- You can have a better product that costs less and still be unable to sell it because of brand recognition or resistance to change (they haven't hit their pain threshold).

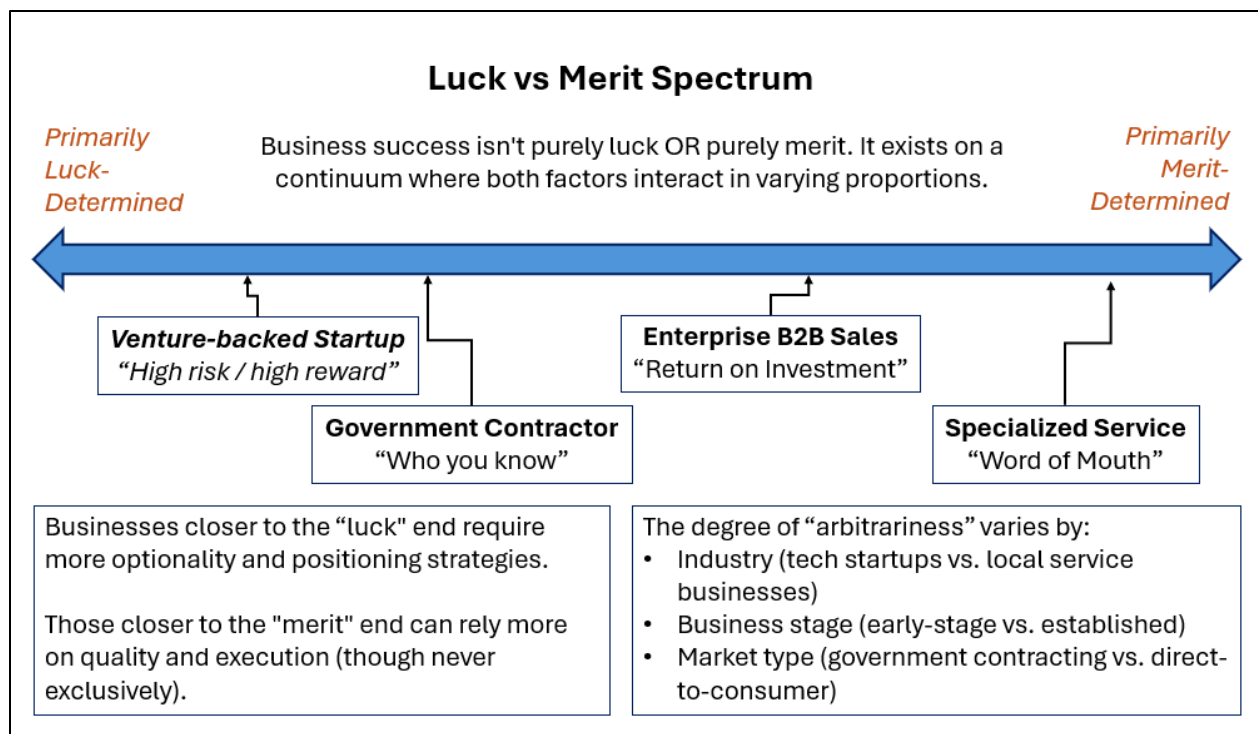
Don't believe it? How can all those 'thought leaders', 'hustle culture' vultures, and paragons of business leadership be wrong? These are studied cognitive biases:

1. **Illusion of Control** - The tendency to overestimate one's influence over external events, especially random ones. Like thinking you won a game of chance due to your "strategy" rather than luck.
2. **Self-Serving Bias** - A cognitive bias where people attribute successes to internal factors (like skill) and failures to external ones (like bad luck). In business, this manifests as taking credit for success that may have come from starting advantages or fortunate timing.
3. **Fundamental Attribution Error** - While usually applied to judgments of others, it can also manifest when people underweight situational factors in their own success.
4. **Overconfidence Effect** - Believing your ability or knowledge played a greater role than it realistically did—common in skill-luck situations like gambling, investing, or early career success.
5. **Survivorship Bias** - Believing you succeeded due to skill, while ignoring others who had the same opportunities but didn't succeed.

Success stokes this self-delusion. Sometimes people succeed in spite of themselves, not because of anything they did. Successful people can be hard-working (that gives them more tickets in the lottery), but they were also in the right place at the right time. Being lucky is more important than being good.

Let's Get Arbitrary - Luck vs Merit

While arbitrary factors (a.k.a. "Luck") influence all business outcomes, their degree of impact varies across different contexts:



The System (As It Actually Exists)

Whether initially designed this way or not, the established business ecosystem currently incentivizes:

1. Preservation of existing power structures rather than reward innovation.
2. Extracting value from creators while minimizing their compensation and control.
3. Commoditizing expertise while concentrating financial returns among capital holders.
4. Creating artificial barriers to entry that have nothing to do with capability.
5. Maintaining the illusion of meritocracy while operating on relationships and timing.

Small businesses face a playing field that is neither level nor transparent. Government contracting, in particular, operates through networks of pre-existing relationships despite the

facade of "open competition." Financing options systematically undervalue intellectual property while overvaluing traditional assets. Decision-makers are incentivized to choose established providers over superior solutions.

Emotional Responses to Business Reality

Let's hit 'pause' for a second and acknowledge something: Understanding the arbitrary elements of business success often triggers strong emotional responses—from discouragement to relief. This is natural. Rather than avoiding these emotions or trying to manipulate them through selective storytelling, consider how this knowledge might actually empower you:

- **Reduced Self-Blame** - Recognizing the role of factors beyond your control can reduce unproductive self-criticism when setbacks occur despite your best efforts.
- **Strategic Focus** - Understanding the real rules allows you to direct your energy toward efforts with higher probabilities of success rather than spinning wheels on activities that appear meritorious but rarely yield results.
- **Validation of Experience** - Many entrepreneurs find that this framework validates their lived experience, which previously conflicted with the dominant narratives about success.

Where Effort and Agency Remain Critical

While arbitrary factors significantly influence outcomes, domains of genuine agency exist where your efforts directly impact results:

- **Learning and Capability Building** - Your capacity to learn and adapt directly affects your ability to capitalize on opportunities when they appear. Developing complementary skills (technical, communication, sales) doesn't guarantee success but creates more ways to recognize and seize opportunities when timing aligns.
- **Resilience Development** - The discipline of showing up daily builds the psychological resilience needed to persist through the inevitable failures. Systematizing operations reduces dependency on any single person and helps your business weather arbitrary disruptions—not by preventing them, but by improving recovery speed.
- **Strategic Positioning** - While you cannot control when opportunities appear, you can strategically position yourself to be more likely to encounter them and be prepared when they do. Building genuine relationships based on mutual value rather than transactional networking increases the likelihood that someone thinks of you when the right opportunity emerges.
- **Surface Area for Luck** - Consistent action increases what some call your 'surface area for luck'—the range of possibilities through which fortunate circumstances might find you. Creating valuable content and building an audience doesn't eliminate gatekeepers but provides alternative pathways for recognition and opportunity.

- **Reputation Building** - Consistently delivering on commitments builds credibility that can sometimes—though not always—overcome relationship disadvantages. While a strong reputation won't automatically trump inside connections, it often determines who gets a second chance after initial setbacks.

These factors don't guarantee success, but they meaningfully influence your probability distribution of outcomes over time. The key insight is that effort matters most when directed toward positioning rather than perfection—preparing yourself to benefit from favorable circumstances rather than trying to force specific outcomes through sheer will.

An Alternative Framework

This guide rejects the fairy tales found in a large amount of current business literature in favor of a clear-eyed approach that:

1. Acknowledges reality without surrendering to cynicism
2. Maximizes optionality instead of optimizing for a single path
3. Creates asymmetric opportunities with limited downside but significant upside
4. Builds resilience against arbitrary setbacks and obstacles
5. Leverages strategic opportunism to capitalize on favorable timing when it appears

Remember - The goal isn't to eliminate uncertainty or discredit hard work. It is to survive, generate as many opportunities as you can, and position yourself to benefit when luck strikes. Consistent application of this framework increases your surface area for luck while building resilience against inevitable setbacks.

Why This Matters

The standard approach to business planning creates vulnerability by pretending we operate in a rational, merit-based system. By acknowledging the arbitrary nature of business outcomes, we can:

1. Make better decisions based on how things actually work rather than how they "should" work.
2. Develop appropriate strategies that account for the real rules of the game.
3. Protect ourselves from unnecessary risk created by false assumptions.
4. Maintain perspective and resilience in the face of setbacks.
5. Identify and capitalize on genuine opportunities when they emerge.

This framework isn't about abandoning principles or embracing cynicism—it's about seeing clearly so we can navigate effectively. The following plan outlines how we'll build a successful business within the system as it exists while maintaining our integrity and creating genuine value.

P.S. - Don't Just Take My Word for It

This guide presents a framework based on observed patterns in business outcomes, but you shouldn't simply accept these assertions at face value. I also make some claims (based on my own experiences) that you may feel are exaggerated or unbelievable. I encourage you to conduct your own research and draw your own conclusions. Here are some topics and search terms that can help you investigate these dynamics independently:

On the Role of Luck and Timing in Business Outcomes:

- *Skill vs. luck in entrepreneurial success*
- *Role of timing in startup success*
- *"Outliers" and success attribution*
- *Survivorship bias in business case studies*

On Relationship-Based Decision Making:

- *Network effects in business opportunities*
- *Relationship capital in enterprise sales*
- *"Who you know" factors in business deals*
- *Influence of social capital on contract awards*
- *Decision-making patterns in government procurement*

On Cognitive Biases in Success Attribution:

- *Self-serving bias in entrepreneurship*
- *Fundamental attribution error in business success*
- *Illusion of control in business outcomes*
- *Randomness and the narrative fallacy*
- *Outcome bias in business decision evaluation*

On System Structures and Incentives:

- *Structural advantages in business competition*
- *Information asymmetry in business transactions*
- *Barrier to entry effects in established industries*
- *Incumbent advantage studies*

- *Risk-reward asymmetry in business ventures*

On Strategic Approaches to Uncertainty:

- *Antifragility in business strategy*
- *Optionality value in entrepreneurship*
- *Barbell strategy for business resource allocation*
- *Resilience-building in small businesses*
- *"Multiple small bets" approach to business growth*

By investigating these topics through academic sources, business journals, and the experiences of entrepreneurs who have navigated these realities, you'll develop a more nuanced understanding of how business success actually works. This independent verification is far more valuable than taking any author's word on faith.

2. NAVIGATING THE ACTUAL BUSINESS WORLD

The following principles and strategies aren't based on how business "should" work in an ideal world, but on how it often operates in reality. These approaches aren't universally applicable—different industries, regions, and business contexts vary significantly. However, they provide a starting framework for navigating environments where relationships, timing, and positioning often influence outcomes alongside merit and effort. Adapt these principles to your specific circumstances while maintaining your own ethical boundaries.

I. Core Principles

1. Maintain Radical Flexibility

- Assume no plan will survive contact with reality
- Build operations that can pivot quickly when arbitrary barriers appear
- Keep fixed costs as low as possible to enable rapid direction changes

2. Diversify Everything

- Revenue streams: Minimize dependence on any single customer or channel whenever possible
- Funding approaches: Multiple smaller sources beat one large one
- Business relationships: No single point of failure

3. Value Optionality Over Optimization

- Keeping options open is more valuable than perfect efficiency
- Sacrificing some profit for flexibility is often worth it
- The ability to say "no" requires having alternatives

4. Focus on Asymmetric Opportunities

- Prioritize efforts with limited downside but significant upside
- Avoid situations where you bear all the risk while others capture most reward
- Look for ways to "fail small" but "win big"

5. Balance Strategic Navigation with Value Creation

- Creating genuine value remains fundamental despite arbitrary factors
- Innovation and quality increase your odds in any environment
- The best positioning amplifies the impact of your actual contributions
- Solve real problems with integrity while navigating system realities

II. Practical Strategies

A. Business Structure

You can't afford fragility. In a world where arbitrary decisions can wreck your pipeline overnight, your business structure should absorb shocks—not amplify them. These tactics focus on operational resilience, not just aesthetics.

1. Modular Organization

- Structure your business as separate components that can survive independently
- Each entity should be viable on its own but stronger together

2. Financial Firewalls

- Keep enough capital outside the business to withstand arbitrary setbacks
- Maintain separate emergency funds for each entity
- Structure to protect your most valuable assets from arbitrary decisions

3. Efficient Legitimacy Investment (The 80/20 Rule)

- Apply the Pareto Principle: 80% of legitimacy benefits come from 20% of traditional "professionalization" investments
- Identify and prioritize the specific formalities that create maximum credibility with minimum resource drain
- Invest deliberately in high-return legitimacy signals rather than blindly following conventional business formalities
- Find the threshold where additional "professionalization" stops yielding proportional returns

The goal here is not to build a "perfect" business shell, but one that can bend without breaking.

B. Customer Relationships

Forget sales funnels and drip campaigns—those come *after* you earn trust. These strategies focus on building authentic, high-leverage relationships with people who actually have the power to act.

1. Look for Decision-Makers with Pain

- Target people who personally feel the problem you solve
- Their self-interest creates motivation to overcome arbitrary barriers
- Avoid committees and processes designed to prevent decisions

2. Under-Promise, Over-Deliver

- Build reputation through consistent, positive surprises

- This creates advocates who'll help navigate arbitrary obstacles
- Word-of-mouth circumvents traditional gatekeepers

3. **Create "Pilot Pathways"**

- Design low-risk entry points that bypass typical approval processes
- Small initial engagements can expand once you're inside the wall
- Find the dollar threshold that avoids triggering bureaucratic immune systems

These aren't sales hacks. They're trust-building moves that create momentum in systems designed to resist change.

C. **Financial Management**

Profitability is a lagging indicator of survival. Liquidity, risk distribution, and fast feedback loops are what keep you in the game long enough to win it.

1. **Cash is King**

- Prioritize liquidity over growth or efficiency
- Cash provides options when facing arbitrary challenges
- Build reserves to weather extended periods of uncertainty

2. **Multiple Small Bets**

- Instead of one big swing, make many smaller attempts
- Distribute risk across different approaches and customers
- Learn from each attempt without betting the company

3. **Revenue First, Funding Second**

- Paying customers provide the least arbitrary validation
- Each dollar from customers is worth 10x from investors or lenders
- Customer revenue gives leverage in funding discussions

Avoid the fantasy of overnight success - people often only see the end result, not the journey. Instead, focus on cash flow (not venture fluff).

D. **Mental Models**

When outcomes are unpredictable, your thinking needs to be antifragile. These models aren't just perspectives—they're behavioral guardrails for making decisions in an arbitrary system.

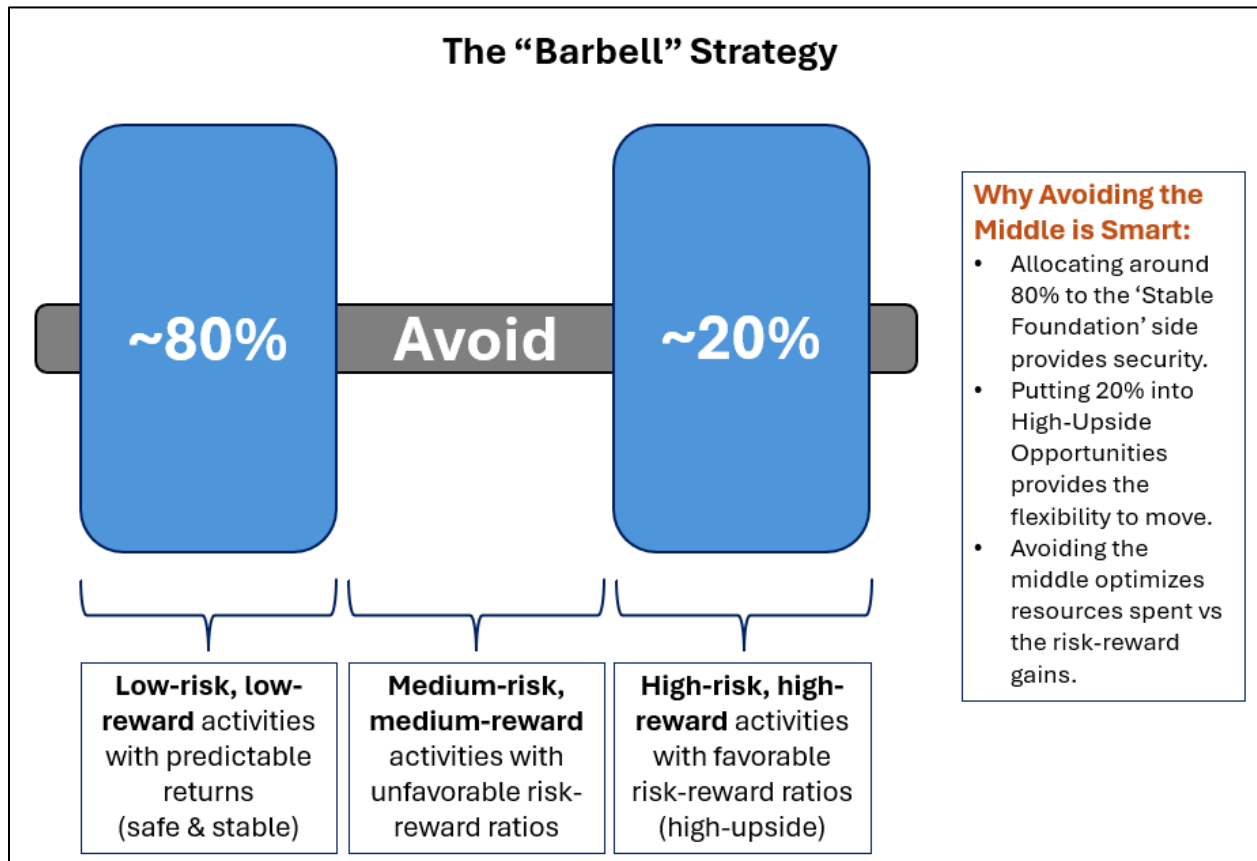
1. **"Outcome Agnostic" Decision Making**

- Focus on process quality rather than specific outcomes

- Arbitrary systems make specific results unpredictable
- A good decision can still lead to a bad outcome (and vice versa)

2. The "Barbell Strategy"

- Combine extremely safe positions with small, high-upside risks
- Avoid the dangerous middle where you take significant risk for modest returns
- Example: 80% of efforts on stable revenue, 20% on moonshots



3. "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back"

- Progress is non-linear and includes setbacks
- Measure success in years, not months
- Small consistent progress compounds despite arbitrary interference

As my statistically minded peeps can attest: 'Don't overfit to past wins or overreact to losses. Play for the long tail.' To put it another way: Don't let success make you overconfident or failure make you quit. The game-changers are rare, but they're out there if you stick around.!

E. Practical Actions

These are your reality checks. If your business can't withstand arbitrary shifts—or if your options rely on a single "yes"—you're too exposed. These actions reduce fragility and increase optionality.

1. Create a "Resilience Audit"

- Identify single points of failure in your business
- Ask: "What would break us if it changed arbitrarily tomorrow?"
- Systematically address the biggest vulnerabilities

2. Build Your "Personal Board"

- Cultivate relationships with 5-7 people who've navigated similar challenges
- They provide perspective when facing arbitrary setbacks
- Diverse viewpoints help identify alternative paths forward

A Note on Authentic Relationship Building: While this guide emphasizes the strategic importance of relationships, effective relationship building is fundamentally about creating mutual value, not *transactional* networking. Authentic connections built on genuine interest, integrity, and reciprocity are both ethically sound and strategically superior to purely instrumental approaches. The most valuable relationships are those where both parties benefit and grow together over time.

3. Implement "No Single Point of Rejection"

- Structure proposals so no single "no" can kill your opportunity
- Always have multiple paths to your goal
- When one door closes, already be knocking on three others

4. Practice "Strategic Opportunism"

- Balance focused execution with openness to unexpected opportunities
- Maintain awareness of shifting circumstances
- Be prepared to capitalize on lucky breaks when they appear

5. Develop "Minimum Effective Dose" Solutions

- Create versions of your offering at multiple price/complexity levels
- Make it easy for customers to start small and expand
- The smallest version that solves a real problem often faces fewer arbitrary barriers

These aren't backup plans—they're primary operating strategies in a world that doesn't play fair.

F. Real-World Success Metrics

Track these metrics instead of conventional vanity metrics:

1. **Decision Maker Proximity** - Average degrees of separation from key decision makers
2. **Option Inventory** - Number of viable alternative paths available at any time
3. **Relationship Portfolio** - Quality and diversity of relationships that can create opportunities
4. **Survival Runway** - How long you can continue without new business
5. **Pain Alignment** - How directly your solution addresses active, funded pain points

III. Perspectives

Business isn't just about surviving the next 30 days. You're building in three time dimensions at once—each with its own priorities, risks, and rules. Treating them separately lets you plan without confusing long-term moves for short-term necessities (or vice versa). Here is one way of looking at them:

Survival Horizon (0–6 months)

- Focus: Cash flow and immediate opportunities
- Metric: Runway remaining
- Rule: Never risk existential threats regardless of potential reward

This is the oxygen mask phase—keep the lights on and the wheels turning.

Positioning Horizon (6–18 months)

- Focus: Building relationships and strategic positioning
- Metric: Growth in decision-maker proximity
- Rule: Invest in relationships before you need them

Lay the groundwork now, so the right people know you exist when the timing clicks.

Advantage Horizon (18+ months)

- Focus: Creating structural advantages and moats
- Metric: Number of paths that don't depend on arbitrary decisions
- Rule: Build systems that reduce dependence on luck over time

This is your compounding edge—what builds freedom and leverage.

Smart businesses don't bet everything on a single time horizon. They plant seeds, harvest crops, and secure the pantry—all at once.

IV. Reality-Based Responses

When facing common business challenges, resist automatic reactions. Each situation requires weighing specific circumstances, relationships, and strategic context before responding. The table below contrasts conventional responses with reality-based alternatives, but remember that these are starting points for consideration, not absolute prescriptions. Stop. Think. Pause. Think Again. Then Act!

WHEN THIS HAPPENS	CONVENTIONAL RESPONSE	REALITY-BASED RESPONSE
Competitor wins through relationships	Work harder on product	Invest in relationship building while maintaining product quality
Decision process stalls without explanation	Follow up persistently	Find backdoor intelligence through network
Requirements suddenly change	Scramble to meet new specifications	Question if you're being set up to lose; consider walking away
Promised opportunity disappears	Chase and ask why	Assess pattern (one-off or recurring?); activate alternative options while maintaining relationships; consider whether follow-up adds strategic value
Goalposts move after commitments	Meet new expectations	Document pattern and adjust future risk calculations

3. A PROCESS FOR REAL-WORLD BUSINESS

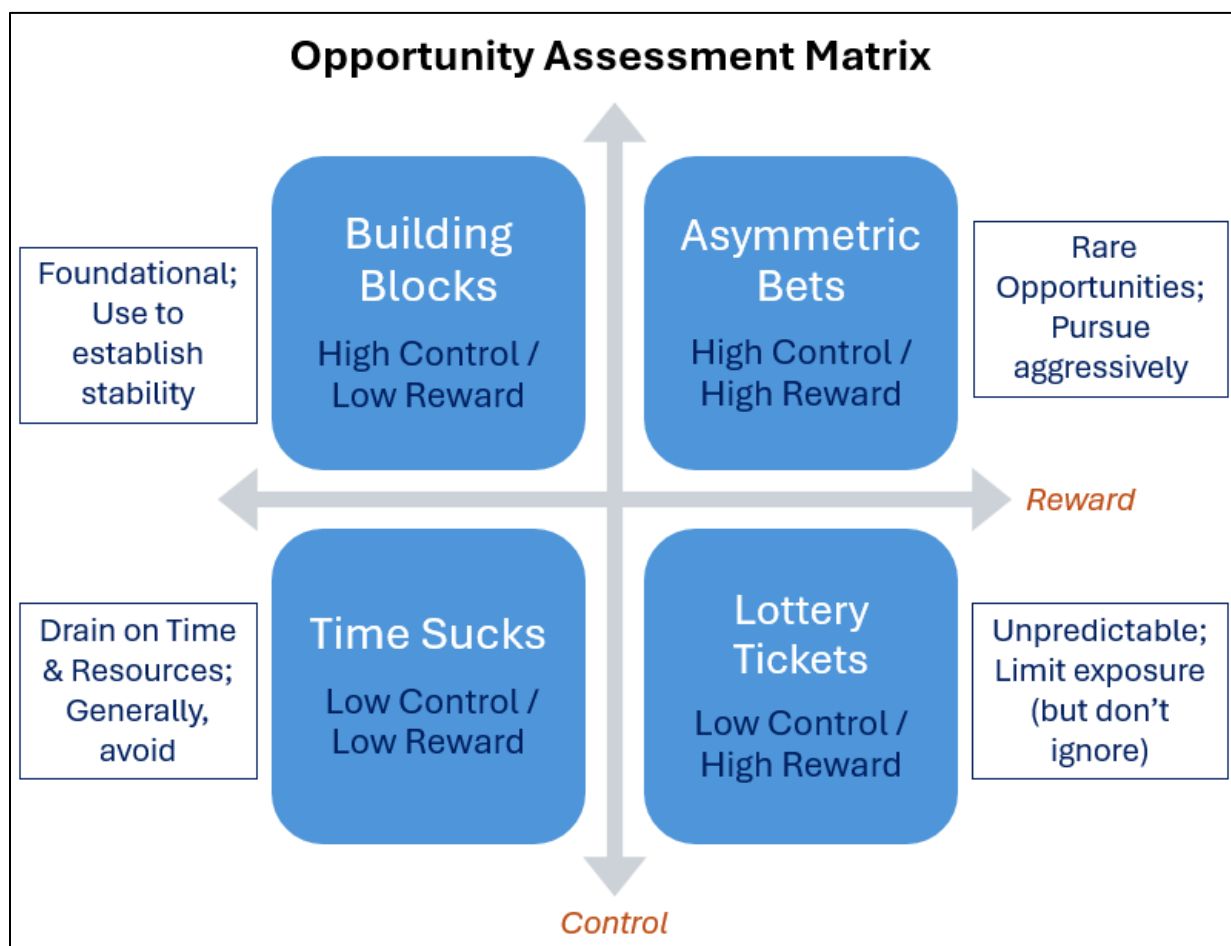
This framework offers a structured approach to decision-making in environments where both controllable and arbitrary factors influence outcomes. While no process can eliminate uncertainty or guarantee success, this approach helps balance opportunism with prudence, and strategic positioning with genuine value creation. As with any framework, adapt it to your specific context rather than applying it rigidly.

There are 4 main steps:

1. **Opportunity Assessment Matrix** – what does the opportunity give us?
2. **Post Assessment Decision Tree** – is it worth pursuing?
3. **Resource Allocation Alignment** – how does it fit into the bigger picture?
4. **Reality Check** – one last sanity check before proceeding

1. OPPORTUNITY ASSESSMENT MATRIX

When evaluating any business opportunity, plot it on these two axes:



Understanding the Axes

CONTROL Axis (Vertical): Measures how much the outcome depends on factors within your direct influence versus arbitrary external factors.

High Control means:

- You directly control the critical variables - Success primarily depends on your execution and decisions; Few external gatekeepers or decision-makers can block you; Limited vulnerability to relationship politics or timing
- You can iterate and adjust based on feedback

Low Control means:

- Success depends heavily on external decisions you can't directly influence - Subject to arbitrary gatekeepers, committees, or procurement processes; Vulnerable to relationship politics and changing priorities; Highly dependent on perfect timing or being "in the room"
- Difficult to iterate or adjust once in motion

REWARD Axis (Horizontal): Measures the potential upside relative to the resources invested.

High Reward means:

- Creates strategic positioning advantages beyond immediate revenue - Significant revenue potential relative to investment
- Opens multiple follow-on opportunities - Potential for exponential rather than linear returns
- Builds valuable IP or assets you can leverage elsewhere

Low Reward means:

- Limited revenue potential even if successful - Limited follow-on potential
- Primarily consumes resources rather than creating leverage - Few strategic advantages beyond the immediate opportunity
- Returns likely to be linear and capped

Priority:

1. **Top Right (High Control/High Reward)** - Rare opportunities; pursue aggressively
2. **Bottom Right (Low Control/High Reward)** - Lottery tickets; limit exposure but don't ignore
3. **Top Left (High Control/Low Reward)** - Foundation builders; use to establish stability
4. **Bottom Left (Low Control/Low Reward)** - Generally time and resource drains; typically best avoided unless they serve a specific strategic purpose

2. THE POST ASSESSMENT DECISION TREE

Before committing significant resources to any initiative, consider these questions to evaluate both opportunity and risk. This decision tree isn't meant to automatically rule opportunities in or out, but rather to prompt thoughtful consideration of critical factors that often determine outcomes: If this fails, can we survive?

- *If NO: Restructure or abandon regardless of potential upside*
- *If YES: Continue to question 2*
- 2. Does success depend on a single arbitrary decision point?
 - *If YES: Can we create alternative paths? If not, proceed with extreme caution*
 - *If NO: Continue to question 3*
- 3. Do we have an inside advantage or relationship?
 - *If YES: Leverage it fully but don't depend on it exclusively*
 - *If NO: Do we have a strategy to create one? If not, reconsider*
- 4. Is our timing aligned with external pain points?
 - *If YES: Accelerate and maximize commitment*
 - *If NO: Can we wait or create pain awareness? If not, seek other opportunities*
- 5. Can we test at small scale before full commitment?
 - *If YES: Always test first, regardless of confidence*
 - *If NO: Require extraordinary evidence before proceeding*

3. RESOURCE ALLOCATION GUIDE

Distribute your resources according to this formula for maximum resilience:

- **40% to Stable Foundation** - Activities with predictable, if modest, returns
- **30% to Relationship Building** - Creating and nurturing connections that provide future optionality
- **20% to Opportunity Exploration** - Testing multiple paths with limited resource commitment
- **10% to High-Risk/High-Reward** - Carefully selected "lottery tickets" with asymmetric upside

Note: These allocations represent a starting point rather than a universal prescription. Early-stage ventures might allocate more to opportunity exploration, while established businesses might increase their stable foundation percentage. Your specific industry, risk tolerance, and business model should influence your actual allocation.

4. THE FOUR REALITIES CHECKLIST

Before major decisions, review these four fundamental realities:

1. **The “Merit” Reality** - Better products and hard work alone do not guarantee success.
 - *Question: Are we depending solely on quality or effort to win?*
2. **The “Timing” Reality** - Being early is often indistinguishable from being wrong.
 - *Question: Are we aligned with current pain thresholds and buying cycles?*
3. **The “Relationship” Reality** - Who you know typically outweighs what you know.
 - *Question: Who can advocate for us when we're not in the room?*
4. **The “Optionality” Reality** - The ability to walk away creates leverage.
 - *Question: Do we have alternatives if this opportunity disappears?*

5. OTHER ‘PROCESS’ CONSIDERATIONS

- **Metrics** – How do we measure success for this? What is the feedback interval?
- **Horizons** – How does this impact our horizons? What else does this impact?
- **Feedback & Responses** – Don’t forget to pay attention to the feedback!

6. PLEASE REMEMBER

This is A Way, Not THE Way!

The steps presented here represent one approach to navigating business realities, not the only valid approach. Different strategies work in different contexts, and the most successful entrepreneurs often develop their own unique methods tailored to their specific circumstances.

I encourage you to research alternative frameworks and perspectives that might better suit your situation or complement these approaches:

- Decision-making under uncertainty (alternative models beyond the ones presented here)
- Portfolio theory applications in small business strategy
- Capital allocation strategies across different business stages and industries
- Opportunity cost evaluation methods for resource-constrained businesses
- Risk-reward assessment frameworks from various business disciplines
- Qualitative vs. quantitative approaches to business decision-making
- Industry-specific adaptations of general business principles

The most robust approach often comes from synthesizing multiple perspectives rather than adopting any single framework wholesale. Your own experience, combined with thoughtful research, will help you develop an approach that works for your unique business context.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This guide and the associated frameworks are tools for thinking, not guarantees of success. The real world presents complexities no model can fully capture. That's why there are literally hundreds of thousands of people making money solely by telling other people how to make money...

So, use these processes to improve your decision-making while maintaining flexibility to adapt as circumstances change. More importantly, be honest with yourself! Don't buy into the 'thought leader' / 'hustle culture' lifestyle and just expect that things will all work out. That is not the case for most of businesses.

- Realistic assessment of the situation. Remember it's largely a lottery.
- Work smart, so you can get the most opportunities for the resources spent. These are your tickets in the lottery.
- Plan for the long haul. You have to be in the game when your numbers get called to win.

The goal isn't perfect prediction, but rather structured navigation of uncertainty with both strategic savvy and genuine value creation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I have a confession to make... I'm a consultant—but not that kind of consultant.

After years of helping big organizations (and, let's be honest, often deeply dysfunctional ones) solve complex technical problems, my business partner and I got tired of making people we didn't respect richer than they deserved to be.

So we started our own consulting firm—with \$5,000, no outside funding, and no roadmap beyond: "Do the work. Do it well. Build something we'd actually be proud of." Since then, we've brought in over \$500,000 and recently launched a second company—one designed to give us space to experiment and spin off new ideas when it makes sense.

We're not chasing "scale" (or anything, really). We just want to work on hard problems with interesting people—and minimize the dumb and pointless as much as possible.

What surprised me most? How little actual substance exists for small business owners trying to figure this out. Lots of people talk. Very few have real answers. Most advice is either too vague ("Just work harder!") or too simplistic ("Just do A, B, and C—everything else will fall into place").

That kind of thinking didn't help us. We had to figure it out the hard way—basically everything, and usually more than once. This guide came out of that: a framework built from experience, frustration, and a refusal to pretend the game is fair.

It's not theory. It's how we stayed sane—and stayed standing.

If it helps you avoid some of the mess we had to learn through, it's done its job.

Credits

This was written by a human. It was polished with help from modern tools. Props to the Anthropic and OpenAI teams!

Cover illustration concept by the author. Visual generated using OpenAI's image tools.