THE FORT LIFE

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STAYING POWER

EGO: The Hidden Fight Behind Lasting Business Success.



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Aiden Aristhomene, April 13, 2019

Longevity demands something far more difficult than ambition or perseverance. It demands humility, particularly when our experience, achievements, and confidence begin convincing us that we know more than we actually do. After more than two decades as an entrepreneur, I've learned that ego never truly disappears. It simply waits for an opportunity to reclaim control.

I began understanding this lesson in an unlikely place: a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu academy, alongside my four-year-old son.

His introduction to martial arts followed an incident at his Montessori school, where another child, who we later learned had a habit of striking classmates, hit him in the face.

My son pushed him away but resisted the urge to retaliate, uncertain how to reconcile his instincts with the school's disciplinary rules.

My advice was straightforward: Avoid conflict whenever possible. But when personal boundaries are crossed, they must be reinforced firmly, deliberately, and with control.

Interestingly, the teacher who witnessed the incident shared that perspective.

I recognized something of my own childhood in his experience. When I was eight, my father enrolled me in Kung Fu and Karate, launching what I imagined would be my transformation into the Black Bruce Lee.

Decades later, watching my son step onto the mats awakened those memories. I wanted to experience the journey with him, not merely observe it. Children, after all, learn far more from our behavior than our instructions.
He began training three times a week, and I watched him discover something that cannot be taught through encouragement alone: the willingness to struggle.

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is unforgiving. My son frequently faced opponents whose size and experience exceeded his own. Yet he continued applying the principles at the heart of our discipline: **Defend. Control. Attack.**

Sometimes he succeeded. Other times, the mountain was simply too high for him to climb. What mattered was his willingness to return, learn, and try again. I soon discovered that the very lessons I admired in him were the same lessons I needed myself.

During my white belt journey, Coral Belt Mestre Totila "Pitoco" Jordan, founder of the legendary INFIGHT Academy in Rio de Janeiro Brazil, introduced me to a fundamental principle: Survival.

He explained that although we spend our lives mastering ordinary movements, Jiu-Jitsu forces us to become beginners again. Our bodies must learn unfamiliar positions, recognize danger, and discover how to respond when instinct alone is insufficient. **His explanation reminded me of FORT's early years.**

When I founded the company in 2004, I entered entrepreneurship without formal training in the field. Instinct helped me make decisions, but instinct couldn't replace judgment. Survival required caution, discipline, managing exposure, and recognizing risks early enough to minimize them before they threatened everything I was attempting to build.

I understood the business lesson intellectually. What I hadn't yet understood was how difficult it would be to accept my own limitations physically. That education began with Professor Rafael "Gordinho" Lima.

During my introductory assessment, he controlled me effortlessly for around five minutes, casually carrying on a conversation while I exhausted every ounce of strength attempting to escape. I had been a competitive athlete, trained in other martial arts, and possessed speed, strength, and explosive power, yet none of it mattered.

His superior understanding of positioning rendered my physical advantages virtually useless. My ego immediately went to work. After all, Gordinho was a fifth-degree black belt with roughly 35 years of experience. Losing to someone of his caliber was hardly surprising. I could live with that explanation.

Then I met Nestor, a 16-year-old blue belt who was apparently quite comfortable turning grown men into pretzels. He caught me in a bow-and-arrow choke, a submission that twists the body sideways while using the opponent's own clothing to apply the choke. My earlier rationalizations suddenly seemed less convincing.



Photo by Macourt Media on Pexels.com

I went home questioning everything I believed about my ability to defend myself. I had always believed that remaining on my feet gave me the greatest advantage in a confrontation.

But what if I couldn't? What if the person confronting me understood a world of combat in which I was effectively helpless? I even wondered what would happen if someone broke into my home and happened to be a blue belt. Yeap... Funny now, definitely not funny then.

The experience revealed something uncomfortable: I had confused competence in familiar circumstances with competence in circumstances I didn't understand, and my ego had been perfectly willing to defend that illusion.
The humility required to accept my limitations was far more valuable than the physical lesson itself. Until I stopped searching for explanations that protected my pride, I couldn't fully appreciate what I needed to learn. That realization would become equally important in business.

Experience is valuable, but it can also become a dangerous source of certainty. The longer we've succeeded using a particular approach, the easier it becomes to assume that our judgment needs no further examination.

Yet every new endeavor, unfamiliar challenge, and changing environment confronts us with the same uncomfortable possibility: perhaps what worked yesterday is insufficient today.

For me, the beginning of genuine learning required a deceptively simple question, one that Ray Dalio, among the most influential investors and thinkers of our time, has consistently asked himself: **"How do I know I'm right?"**

As FORT gets ready to celebrate its 23rd birthday, I find myself once again fighting with the task of reinventing both myself and the business.
AI has turned the world upside down, and if you're unwilling to change and adapt with the times, you may find yourself back on the training mat where you once thrived, only this time facing an opponent your years of experience haven't prepared you for.

As FORT implements new technologies and tools to enhance our operations, with the goal of not only staying relevant but staying ahead, the learning curve remains steep. Comfort continues to tug against the changing tide, making reinvention a challenge even when we recognize its necessity. The struggle is very real!

Realizing when things must change is the first step. Forcing ourselves to learn with an enthusiastic open mind is the second. The third is conveying that same willingness to embrace change to those we lead while maintaining a high level of execution. None of these comes easily, yet all three are equally necessary.

The ego constantly whispers the things we want to hear. Recognizing the difference between the words we want and those we need is the true fight. No one is immune, and no one is exempt. Maintaining a student's mentality in all aspects of life is something Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu has unapologetically reinforced in me. Without this approach, I strongly doubt you'd be reading about FORT today.

Curiosity about the world and its changing circumstances is crucial to business survival. Constantly questioning our modus operandi helps prepare us to absorb the unexpected blows that change inevitably brings.

Nothing in life stays the same, yet much of what we experience is not entirely new, at least in principle.

The past 150 years have brought extraordinary advances in productivity and economic transformation, making even relatively recent generations appear primitive by today's technological standards. Moreover, with the race toward "Super-intelligence" now at the forefront of some of the world's leading companies, I suspect what we consider sophisticated today may one day seem as antiquated as dial-up internet from the mid 90s.

Change is here whether we like it or not. That's life. It pushes us, challenges our assumptions, and forces us to develop and reinvent ourselves.

As a young purple belt in Brazil, Mestre Roberto "Gordo" Correa, the man who awarded me my black belt, suffered a serious knee injury that forced him to rethink his approach to Jiu-Jitsu. Rather than accepting his limitations, he transformed the traditionally defensive half guard into an offensive system, establishing himself as one of the sport's pioneers. Now in his 50s, I observe how he has methodically adapted his game to accommodate the demands of longevity while maintaining the technical effectiveness that defined his career.

The lesson applies equally to business; Longevity doesn't require us to abandon what made us successful, but rather to recognize when our methods must evolve.

Reinvention is not just a plausible byproduct of adversity, but a continuing responsibility to ourselves and everything we've worked to build. If the fruit of your labor is something you care to pass on, the very willingness to adapt what once made us successful may ultimately determine how long that success endures.


Photo by Farkas Marin on Unsplash

Accepting and **enthusiastically embracing the reality that the world will make us white-belts over and over again, often when we least expect it, is perhaps the quintessential struggle.** But it's also an opportunity to discover potential we might otherwise never recognize.

Keeping our ego subdued and remembering that change is inevitable are essential to longevity. The willingness to become a student again, regardless of how much we've already learned or achieved, is what allows us and our operations to continue the growth we desperately seek.

And as the saying goes, "Wisdom reveals itself only when the student is ready." The challenge is keeping our ego from convincing us that our mountaintop is where the journey ends, when in actuality, it's where it truly begins.



Image by Adobe Creative

TRAVEL

Sustainable Travel Versus Constant Motion

For many companies, business travel still looks like a measure of ambition. A crowded calendar suggests momentum. A week of flights, hotel lobbies, client dinners, and conference rooms can make a team feel indispensable. But movement is not the same as progress, and a full itinerary is not proof of a good investment.

The real question is not how often people travel. It is what the travel makes possible.

Some meetings genuinely benefit from being in the same room. A difficult negotiation, a new partnership, a site inspection, or a conversation with a customer who has lost confidence may justify the time and expense. Trust can be built faster when people can read the room, ask an unscripted question, and work through a problem together. A screen is useful; it is not always a substitute.

But companies can also confuse presence with value. Employees fly across countries for meetings that could have been emails, attend conferences without a clear plan, or visit clients simply because the relationship has always required a quarterly trip. The expense report records the cost. It rarely records the opportunity cost: hours lost in transit, delayed decisions, tired employees, and work that waits while everyone is somewhere else.

Sustainable business travel begins with better questions. What decision will this trip help us make? Which relationship will it strengthen? What would be lost if we met remotely? Can several objectives be handled in one journey? And if the trip is necessary, can we choose a practical route, stay long enough to make the journey worthwhile, and work with local suppliers responsibly?

These are not questions designed to make travel joyless. They are questions designed to make it useful.



Image by fanjianhua on Magnific

The same logic applies to the destinations and partners a company chooses. A business visit can bring revenue to a local economy, create opportunities for smaller suppliers, and give employees a better understanding of the markets they serve. Or it can extract value while leaving little behind. The difference often comes down to planning: selecting credible local businesses, respecting community standards, and avoiding activities that damage the places on which the travel industry depends.

There is a broader management lesson here. Organizations that reward visible activity can end up paying for motion rather than results. Sales teams may chase meetings instead of qualified opportunities. Executives may travel to demonstrate commitment without giving teams the authority to act. A company can spend more while learning very little.

That does not mean every trip must produce an immediate sale or a signed contract. Some visits build knowledge, resolve uncertainty, or prevent a costly misunderstanding. Their value may appear months later. The point is to define the purpose before departure and evaluate the outcome honestly afterward.

Leaders should also recognize that travel has a human cost. Constant movement can erode concentration, strain family life, and leave employees permanently catching up. A travel policy that ignores those costs may look efficient on a spreadsheet while quietly exhausting the people expected to deliver the results.

The goal is not to travel less at any price. It is to travel with intention.

A company should be able to explain why a journey matters, what it expects to gain, and how it will know whether the investment was worthwhile. Sometimes the answer will be to board the plane. Sometimes it will be to stay put and let the work speak for itself.

Business travel is valuable when it moves a decision, a relationship, or an idea forward.

Distance alone does none of those things.



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SALES

Long-Term Revenue Relationships

A new customer can make a quarter look healthy. A customer who keeps choosing you can help make a business healthy for years.

Sales organizations naturally celebrate the close. Targets are met, forecasts become real, and the team has something tangible to report. Yet a signed agreement is not the finish line. It is the first public test of a promise. From that point on, the customer will compare what was sold with what the company actually delivers.

Transactional selling focuses on the immediate decision: how to win the order, overcome the objection, and get the signature. Relationship-based selling asks a harder question: how do we continue solving a problem well enough that the customer sees a reason to stay? The first approach can produce a sale.

The second can produce renewals, referrals, expansion, and a more reliable revenue base. None of those outcomes is automatic. Customers remember whether the product works, whether the implementation was realistic, whether invoices are clear, and whether someone takes responsibility when things go wrong. A polished pitch may open the door. Dependable execution decides whether it stays open.

The trouble begins when a company rewards acquisition but treats retention as someone else's job. Sales moves on to the next prospect. Operations inherits commitments it cannot meet. Customer success spends its time explaining delays rather than helping the client get value. Finance sees a recurring contract; the customer sees a recurring disappointment.

Long-term selling requires the whole organization to understand what was promised and why the customer bought. That means involving delivery teams early, setting expectations honestly, and defining success in terms the customer recognizes. It also means checking in before renewal season, when the conversation should be about outcomes rather than an unexpected request to sign another year.

Useful account management is not endless friendliness or a calendar full of courtesy calls. It is informed attention. A salesperson should understand the customer's business, know what has changed, and recognize when the current solution no longer fits. Sometimes the right move is to recommend a different product, adjust the scope, or admit that the company is not the best provider for a particular need.
That kind of honesty can feel expensive in the moment. It is often cheaper than winning a customer under the wrong expectations and then spending months trying to contain the fallout.

Of course, not every account deserves unlimited investment.

A durable relationship must create value on both sides. Chronic late payment, constant scope expansion, or demands that make delivery unprofitable are not signs of loyalty. Companies need clear boundaries, disciplined pricing, and the courage to walk away when the economics no longer work.

The metrics should reflect that balance. Alongside new bookings, leaders should track renewal rates, churn, expansion revenue, customer outcomes, referral business, and the cost of serving different accounts. These measures reveal whether growth is building a stronger business or merely postponing the consequences of poor fit.

Trust also reduces friction. When customers believe a company will tell the truth, conversations become more direct. Problems surface earlier. Teams spend less time defending every decision and more time solving the issue in front of them. That is a commercial advantage, not simply a pleasant feeling.

The goal is not to make every customer a friend. It is to become a partner worth choosing again.

A single deal can rescue a month. A relationship built on relevant value, honest advice, and consistent delivery can shape the future of the business. Closing proves that you won the order. Keeping trust proves that you earned the next one.

OPERATIONS

Designing for Longevity

A process can look efficient on the day it is launched and become expensive by the end of the year. A machine can run at full speed until a neglected component fails. A team can hit its targets while relying on one experienced employee who knows how everything really works. In each case, the system appears successful, until it is asked to endure.

Designing for longevity means planning for the years after the launch.

Organizations often favor what is easy to celebrate: a new facility, a faster production line, a redesigned workflow, or a dramatic reduction in operating cost. Those improvements may be real. But the initial result tells only part of the story. The more important questions are whether the system can be maintained, whether people can use it consistently, and whether it can absorb changes in demand without breaking.



Short-term efficiency can be misleading. A warehouse may reduce staffing to improve its monthly numbers, only to create delays, safety risks, and turnover that cost far more later. A manufacturer may postpone routine maintenance to protect this quarter's budget, then lose a week of production when equipment fails. The saving was visible. The liability was merely waiting.

Longevity begins with understanding the full cost of a decision. That includes purchase price, maintenance, downtime, training, replacement parts, energy use, and the time employees spend working around limitations. A cheaper option is not necessarily economical if it requires constant attention or cannot scale when the business grows.

The same principle applies to organizational knowledge. If only one person understands a critical process, the company has not built a robust capability; it has built a dependency. Documentation, cross-training, clear ownership, and repeatable standards may feel less urgent than the next deadline. They are precisely what make performance repeatable when the pressure arrives.

Good operational design also respects the people doing the work. A process that looks elegant in a presentation may be awkward on a factory floor or impossible during a busy shift. The employees closest to the work often know where delays accumulate, which checks are redundant, and what tends to fail first. Asking them is not a courtesy exercise. It is a way to find risks before they become expensive.

Still, longevity should not be confused with preserving everything. Processes become outdated. Customer expectations change. New equipment and better methods emerge. A company that refuses to revise its routines can become as fragile as one that changes them every month. The objective is to protect the function, not worship the current form.

That requires deliberate review. Leaders should monitor quality, maintenance, safety, employee feedback, supplier reliability, and the actual cost of rework.

They should define which standards are non-negotiable and which methods can evolve.



Image by Magnific

They should also make it easy for employees to flag a problem without being treated as the problem.

Resilience matters because disruptions rarely arrive at a convenient time. A delayed supplier, sudden demand spike, equipment failure, or departure of a key employee can expose weaknesses that ordinary days conceal.

A durable operation has sensible backup plans, realistic capacity, and enough shared knowledge to keep functioning when one assumption fails.

Longevity is not about building something that never changes. It is about building systems that can change without losing reliability.

The best operation is not the one that looks perfect during the launch. It is the one people can depend on long after the launch has stopped being news.



Image by peoplecreations on Magnific

PHILANTHROPY

Enduring Impact Over Visibility

A donation can make a strong announcement. A lasting result usually takes longer than the news cycle.

For businesses, philanthropy and corporate responsibility can serve important purposes. They can direct resources toward urgent needs, strengthen communities connected to a company's work, and give employees a meaningful way to contribute. Public communication can help attract partners and encourage others to participate. Visibility itself is not the problem. The problem begins when visibility becomes the primary evidence that anything useful has happened.

A photographed cheque is easy to count. A community's improved prospects are harder to measure.

Companies sometimes design giving around what can be announced before the end of the quarter: a one-day volunteer event, a sponsored building, a large cheque, or a campaign with a clear launch date. These activities can help. But they may also encourage organizations to favor projects that are easy to display over work that requires sustained funding, local knowledge, and patience.

Enduring impact starts with a different question: what should be different because we invested, and what will help that difference continue?

Answering requires more than good intentions. Businesses should work with credible community organizations, listen to the people closest to the problem, and agree on clear objectives before choosing the photo opportunity. If the goal is to improve access to education, for example, the number of backpacks distributed may be worth reporting, but it does not reveal whether students can attend school consistently, complete their studies, or access better opportunities afterward.



The same discipline applies to corporate volunteering. A day of activity may generate enthusiasm and strengthen employee engagement. It may also create extra work for a nonprofit if the project was chosen for convenience rather than need. A responsible partner asks what help is genuinely useful, what skills the company can contribute, and whether the effort fits the organization's existing plan.

Measurement matters, but it must be used wisely. Organizations should track outputs, such as people served or funds distributed, while also examining outcomes over time. Did the program improve access, capability, stability, or opportunity? What evidence supports that conclusion?



What did not work? Honest answers may be less flattering than a polished campaign report, but they make future investments better.

Long-term results are not always immediate. A workforce training program may need several years before its graduates advance in their careers. A local enterprise may need predictable purchasing commitments, not a single publicity-driven order. A community organization may benefit more from flexible operating support than from a highly visible project with restrictions attached.

This is where business discipline can help philanthropy. Companies understand planning, budgets, performance measures, and risk. Those tools are valuable when they support the mission rather than turn it into a marketing exercise.

A responsible program has a clear purpose, realistic resources, accountable partners, and a plan for what happens when the initial funding ends.

That last question is especially important. If a project depends entirely on a company's attention, it may disappear when leadership changes or a new campaign takes priority. Sustainable support strengthens local capability rather than creating permanent dependence. Sometimes that means funding several years of work; sometimes it means helping a partner build the systems and relationships needed to continue independently.

None of this requires businesses to hide their contributions. Communicating progress can build trust with employees, customers, and investors. The standard should simply be that the story follows the work, not that the work is designed around the story.

A strong philanthropic legacy is not the number of people who saw the announcement. It is the value that remains after the announcement is forgotten.



Image by Drazen Zigic on Magnific

TECHNOLOGY

Building Technology That Lasts

Every year, a new technology promises to make business faster, smarter, and more competitive. Some tools deliver. Others become expensive reminders that a persuasive demonstration is not the same as a sound investment.

The question is not whether a technology is new. It is whether it will remain useful.

Companies often buy software because a competitor has adopted it, a vendor has promised dramatic savings, or a leadership team wants to be seen as innovative. The purchase may be defensible, but the reasoning is incomplete.

Before selecting a platform, an organization should understand the problem, define what success looks like, and decide how the result will be measured. Otherwise, it risks automating confusion or paying for capabilities no one needs.

A durable technology decision begins with business purpose. Will the system reduce errors, shorten delivery times, improve customer service, support better decisions, or help the company enter a market? Which people will use it? What changes to existing processes will be required? If those questions cannot be answered clearly, another product demo is unlikely to help.

The purchase price is only the beginning of the cost. Implementation, data migration, integration, cybersecurity, training, support, upgrades, and eventual replacement all matter. A low-cost tool can become expensive when employees must duplicate work across systems or when a vendor charges heavily for every additional feature. Leaders should evaluate the total cost of ownership, not just the number on the proposal.

Integration is often where the promise meets reality. A new platform may work perfectly on its own and still create problems across the business. Sales teams maintain one customer record, finance maintains another, and operations spends hours reconciling the two. The technology is functioning. The organization is not becoming more efficient.

People matter just as much as architecture. A system that employees do not understand or trust will be ignored, bypassed, or used inconsistently. Training should reflect real tasks rather than a generic tour of menus. Managers need to explain why the system is changing, and teams need a practical way to report problems. Adoption is not a communications milestone; it is a daily operating condition.

Longevity also requires an exit plan. Vendors change prices, discontinue products, get acquired, or stop supporting older versions. Data should be portable, contracts should be understood, and the company should know what migration would involve before it becomes urgent.

Dependence on a single software vendor is not always avoidable, but it should be a conscious risk rather than a surprise.

At the same time, durability is not an excuse to cling to outdated systems. Security threats evolve, customer expectations shift, and old platforms can become costly to maintain. The right question is not whether a tool can be kept forever. It is whether the organization can review, improve, replace, or retire it without unnecessary disruption.

That requires governance: clear ownership, regular performance reviews, sensible access controls, reliable data, and a budget for maintenance. It also requires restraint. Not every new feature needs to be adopted, and not every process needs artificial intelligence added to it. Innovation is valuable when it solves a real problem, not when it creates another problem that needs a steering committee.

The strongest technology often becomes almost invisible. Employees focus on the work, customers experience fewer delays, and managers make decisions with more reliable information. Nobody needs to praise the software every Monday. It simply does its job.

Technology that lasts is not technology that never changes. It is technology chosen for a clear purpose, supported with discipline, and adaptable enough to serve the business as its needs evolve.

The FORT Life

Entertain yourself for a while and solve this Sudoku as quickly as possible. If you prefer you can click on the link below and solve the challenge from your cell phone or computer.

Sudoku Online

Difficulty: Hard

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9		5		2	1		6	

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