



4 First, Humble Jobs of CEOs That Will Remind You Anything Is Possible

When we encounter top industry leaders it seems as though they were always successful. The truth is everyone has to start somewhere. The origin stories of these four CEOs will help us remember how far we've come and how far we can go.

BY GINA RYDER

Cleaning bathrooms



COURTESY TAMMY KLING

You never know where greatness will come from—just check out [the stories of nine ordinary people who changed history](#). CEO of OnFire Books, Tammy Kling has always had the urgency to write. It's not because she wanted to be famous or sell a lot of copies (although she has thousands of followers

and is a best-selling author). Her urgency comes from a real need to speak to a reader one-on-one. When Kling was seven, her father committed suicide. She says, “My number one mission is suicide prevention.” (Check out [this amazing story of a suicide that was prevented.](#)) The message of “never give up” comes up often in the books she works on. Through her role at [OnFire Books](#), Kling helps top executives, celebrities, and other noteworthy influencers tell their stories in hopes to help someone else. Perseverance is a common theme in [life advice from revolutionary individuals](#). Before starting her company from scratch, she worked many grueling jobs—such as being a hostess at Chili’s Bar and Grill and airline executive. Her very first job was scrubbing toilets at an office building, a gig that was supposed to teach her the value of hard work. She’s now against the idea of making kids do dirty work.

She says, “Leadership is about leading, not punishing.” This value is reflecting in a key aspect of OnFire Books’ homeless writer’s division in which homeless shelters are given inspirational reading material and the people facing homelessness are given the opportunity to transcribe interviews and life stories from top executives. She says, “If you know you want to change lives and you’re not doing it, you have to take a step.”

Her words of wisdom: *What matters is who we are, not what we do.*

Ready for more inspiration? Read [life advice from Steve Jobs, Shonda Rhimes, and J.K Rowling.](#)

Working the front desk at the gym



COURTESY ADAM SEDLACK

Adam Sedlack is the president of UFC—Ultimate Fighting Championship—gym. The successful chain features mixed martial arts training. (Here’s how to [save money on your gym membership](#).) Sedlack didn’t realize training and gym ownership would be part of his future when, at the age of 22, he took his first job at the front desk of a gym called Family Fitness. “This was intended as a summer job where I could have a place to work-out and meet girls,” says Sedlack. Officially his job was to greet customers and answer phones. Unofficially he was “the food boy,” a nickname given to him by the management team who liked him. He wrote, “I always seemed to be responsible to voyage out to get food for the team.” Sedlack initially liked the free membership perk of the job, and management’s willingness to promote from within. He moved on to a fitness instructor, salesperson, and assistant general manager. “I intended to continue my education and have this as a summer job only,” he says. “I never considered the fitness industry as a platform that could turn into a career.” At Family Fitness, Stedlack had several business mentors that led to him realizing his passion for the fitness industry was a viable path to follow to reach the top. He says, “The fitness industry allows for people to find the best version of themselves. It is one of the only services that is sold that we can truly say most everyone on planet earth should participate in.”

His words of wisdom: *Hard work creates luck; there are very few examples where I worked hard and failed. Mentorship is critical; people want to know that you have their back and are progressing both professionally and personally. Emotional intelligence can allow you to succeed no matter who you are working with.*

Selling clothes at the mall (for four days)



WEINER

COURTESY JESS

Now CEO of her own consulting company, 43-year-old Jess Weiner began her larger-than-life career 20 years earlier. At the time she had no idea she would go on to help create Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty and become a part of the team that led to the remake of Barbie to include more inclusive sizes. She made this happen through her company [Talk to Jess](#). When she was 24 she worked in the mall at Lerner’s, a women’s clothing store which evolved into today’s New York and Company. Weiner didn’t find herself drawn to selling clothes but she was enthralled by what was happening in the dressing

rooms at work—young woman struggling with their body image and clothing sizes. At this time, she had three degrees under belt in theater, women’s studies, and the classics. She knew she wanted to combine her studies to help women and girls. Weiner isn’t alone in her efforts; she is joined by these inspiring [women who are changing the lives of women across the world](#). That day in the dressing room, she realized she loved helping the women feel better, but she asked herself, “How can I help many more? How do I help change the world women are living in? How could I get clothing companies to be better?” After four days at Lerner’s, Weiner quit. She then got a research grant to start a non-profit theater company where she wrote her own plays around media representation and women’s issues. This led to building a platform that advises global brands on the issues facing today’s women and girls. She says, “I never called myself an entrepreneur. I was selling art, conversation, and empowerment. I evolved into owning my role as a CEO.”

Her words of wisdom? *It always sounds so linear but I couldn’t have seen the ultimate vision of what my life would become. The line is never straight. It’s always a curvy, circular line.*

Digging trenches



COURTESY BRIAN SAAB

Some of the [biggest ideas come from the humblest beginnings](#), and that can include first jobs. Brian Saab is now the Founder and CEO of [Unearth Technologies](#), a technology company that is revolutionizing the construction industry. When Saab was 14, his dad, who ran a construction company, handed him a shovel. Saab’s job was to move dirt. Under the West Texas summer sun, he also dug trenches. The job’s only perk was cruising around with a beat-up truck, a major bragging point for a teenage guy. Saab called his first gig and growing up around his dad’s company “an early education in entrepreneurship,” helping him realize that manual labor wasn’t his thing. But he did learn that he liked being responsible. He also observed the areas in which the construction industry was ripe for innovation. After college Saab, 40, went on to focus on technology with stints at Microsoft

and other digital companies. As new technologies like remote sensing and drones became popular, Saab applied what he knew about technology to construction to create software that improves communication with construction workers, project directions, and work documentation. The path back to the family business wasn't intentional, he says: "I made my way back to construction by way of technology."

His words of wisdom: *A passion for business can put you on the path to leadership.*