

A Self-Help Author Takes His Own Advice

By WARREN STRUGATCH

TO many authors, a looming publication deadline is stressful enough. But when you're Stuart R. Levine, and the book you're writing promises to help people organize their time, improve their productivity and in general teach them how to plan a road map to career success, falling behind schedule is decidedly cause for concern.

"A lot of credibility is lost in the gap between what you say and what you do," Mr. Levine, 56, writes in "The Six Fundamentals of Success" (Doubleday, 2004). Meeting your own deadlines is recommended, heartily. See Fundamental No. 3: Know How to Deliver Results.

With a growing consulting practice to run in Jericho, Mr. Levine had little time for editorial wheel-spinning. When Roger Scholl, his Doubleday editor, took issue with an early version of the manuscript, Mr. Levine realized that they needed to confront their differences ("Face Up to Difficult Conversations," and "Candor Counts," both in Fundamental No. 2). Then they could proceed to work together effectively ("Go for the Buy-In," part of Fundamental No. 3).

So, in May, Mr. Levine rented a conference room at the University Club in Midtown Manhattan. He, Mr. Scholl and several other people associated with the project rolled up their sleeves and papered the walls with fundamentals, principles and other directives that went into the book.

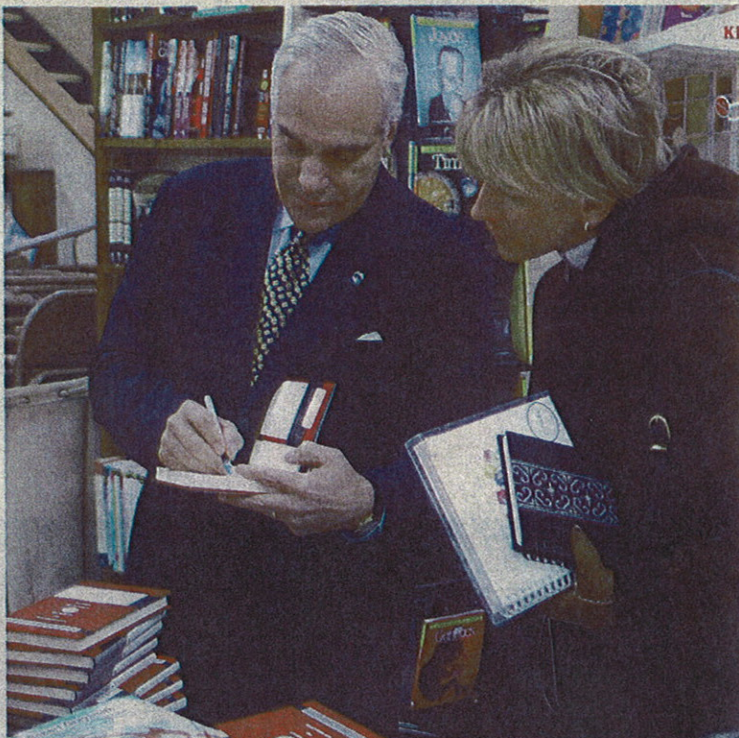
"We had things we ended up discarding and things we ended up moving around," Mr. Scholl recalled. "We wanted to make sure each rule worked the way it should."

When they left at the end of the day, the book's progress was back on track. Mr. Levine met his deadline. Right after New Year's, right on schedule, Doubleday began shipping the first of 20,000 copies to bookstores. The book was selected as the lead title for Doubleday's Currency imprint, its business book division, for winter 2004, meaning that it will get an additional marketing push.

Managing situations that could torpedo a project, or even derail a career, are Mr. Levine's stock in trade, or as he would call term it, his brand. As a novice high school ecology teacher in Plainview in the early '70's, Mr. Levine dreamed of a political career and convinced voters in Bethpage area to send him to Albany in 1972.

In 1974, the voters changed their minds. Mr. Levine returned home. "After I left government, I made the decision to leave the public payroll," he said. Not that it was a good time to do it. The economy was floundering, and demand for a 27-year-old Albany has-been was predictably weak.

Mr. Levine called on Universal Unlimited, a company in Glen Cove that manufactured



Dan Neville for The New York Times

At the Book Revue in Huntington, Stuart R. Levine signs a copy of his new book, "The Six Fundamentals of Success," for Natasha Kall of Cold Spring Harbor.

industrial plastics, and began selling plastic on commission. One afternoon in Manhattan, when he was heading across town to visit a prospect, it began to rain. The drizzle turned into a downpour. Mr. Levine didn't have enough money for cab fare and began running through the rainy streets.

"I learned," he said evenly, "how to sell."

He has never stopped. In 1978, WLIW, then a fledgling public television station, invited Mr. Levine to join its board and later appointed him chairman for a two-year stint. "I'm not surprised they appointed me," he said. "I was a member of the community, I had a background in teaching, and I was a former assemblyman."

Fundamental No. 5 in Mr. Levine's new book is "Invest in Relationships." This is what he did when he got to know the other directors at WLIW, including J. Oliver Crom, who was a vice chairman of Dale Carnegie Inc., the motivation training company, then in Garden City (it has since moved to Hauppauge).

Mr. Levine gave up selling plastics and

went to work for Mr. Crom. His first job was looking for ways to improve organizational efficiency. In 1991, he was named the company's chief executive. His appointment, he said, represented the first time someone from outside the Carnegie family had held that position.

He described the job as a turn-around situation. "I brought in five or six consultants to help me," he said. With one exception, he said, the consultants failed him. They told him what they thought he wanted to hear.

"You need to associate yourself with people who will give you plain talk," he said. The lesson forms the backbone of much of the new book, especially Chapter 4, "Conduct Yourself and Your Business With Integrity."

This book is Mr. Levine's second. The first, under the Dale Carnegie imprimatur, was "The Leader in You" (Simon & Schuster, 1995). It sold 100,000 copies, Mr. Levine said, and was translated into 24 languages. Its success was aided by his being named Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year for Long Island in 1995.

In 1997, Mr. Levine left Dale Carnegie, a move he attributes to wanting to spend less time on the road. He went home to Brookville and appointed himself chairman and chief executive of Stuart R. Levine & Associates. The company, a consulting practice, was based in his home. The associate was his wife, Harriet. The couple had two children in high school and, as yet, no clients.

Despite his change in circumstances, Mr. Levine continued to conduct himself, he said, the same way he had when he headed Dale Carnegie. He kept up with his clubs, his community organizations and his philanthropic activities. At a charity golf event at the Meadowbrook Club, he met Thomas McAteer Jr., who had just been named the chief executive of Vytra Health Plan, in Melville.

"When you meet someone who might further your goals or teach you something, get their contact information, and put it in an electronic file," Mr. Levine writes. "Use a system to remind you who you haven't spoken to recently. Call them, e-mail them, or get together if you have the time."

At Vytra, Mr. McAteer was trying to overhaul the way the company, a health maintenance organization, did business while at the same time integrating it into the operations of HIP, the health-care giant that had just acquired it.

Mr. McAteer said he invited Mr. Levine to visit his company and suggest how he could help change it. At the time, he said, he had not realized that Mr. Levine's consulting practice was formed to do exactly that. "He didn't mention he was a consultant when we met," Mr. McAteer said. "We just talked about business."

Mr. Levine helped Mr. McAteer reorganize the way Vytra worked. "Stuart has been an extraordinary plus," Mr. McAteer said. "Stuart is the real thing."

Mr. McAteer said he has already bought 200 copies of the latest book to give to other executives at Vytra and HIP and is considering making another bulk purchase to give to honors students at Hofstra University, where he sits on a board that shapes advanced academic programs.

"This is such practical stuff," he said, describing the book's message. "If you sit and read it and think about it, well, you'll benefit. It's just a very valuable read."

Mr. Levine said the book's lessons draw prominently from the dinner table conversations held long ago with his parents, the late David and Rickey Levine of Bethpage. His father was a lawyer, and his mother worked as an administrative for his father's law firm. "My father especially had some very strong feelings about ethics and values, which he worked hard at transmitting," Mr. Levine recalled. "And we lived in a community that had a strong work ethic."

"I'm only sorry," he said, "that they aren't around to see this book published."