



Make It Happen: The Hip-Hop Generation Guide to Success

By Kevin Liles

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Kevin Liles' meteoric climb from street kid to unpaid intern at Def Jam Records to executive vice president of the Warner Music Group is far more than a rags-to-riches story. It is a tribute to Liles' work ethic, discipline and confidence in doing his thing his way -- *the hip-hop way*.

In Make It Happen, Liles -- named one of America's Most Powerful Players Under 40 by *Black Enterprise* -- offers his ten rules of business success, which range from "Find Your Will" to "Don't Let Cash Rule" and "Play Your Position." As he outlines these and other strategies for success, Liles shares his own hard-won wisdom about his journey to the top, along with career advice from the various music artists, industry professionals, mentors and friends he has known along the way. No matter what version of the American Dream you choose to explore, this book will help you to empower yourself and *Make It Happen*.

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Editorial Review

Review

"As an African-American business leader, a man like Kevin represents to me everything that is right in the African-American entrepreneurship -- visionary, hard working, entrepreneurial and smart. . . . I encourage everyone to read his book and follow his advice." -- Bob Johnson, founder, Black Entertainment Television

"[Liles'] words teem with confidence, faith, conviction and wisdom." -- *The Dallas Morning News*

"Liles [is] hard at work spreading the message...[of] the importance of illuminating new routes out of urban American poverty...[by] drawing heavily from the world of hip hop for examples of triumph and success." -- *The New York Times*

"Inspirational, touching and powerful." -- Gayle King, *O: The Oprah Magazine*

"Kevin is the face of struggle.... This book is a glimpse into his vision, humility and toughness." - Russell Simmons, founder of Def Jam Records

About the Author

Kevin Liles is the executive vice president of the Warner Music Group. He works in New York City.

Samantha Marshall is a senior staff reporter for *Crain's New York Business*.

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Rule 1

Find Your Will

You better lose yourself in the music, the moment

You own it, you better never let it go

You only get one shot, do not lose your chance to blow

This opportunity comes once in a lifetime yo

-- Eminem, "Lose Yourself"

Willpower starts deep inside you. You can't have ambition without will and the burning passion to do something. Go find your passion.

Figure out what you want, and what you're willing to sacrifice to get it. Some people call it a dream, a mission or a vocation. I call it will. Whatever word you choose, the idea is to identify something that takes you outside of yourself and helps you envision your future. Name it and claim it.

Everyone has a dream or something they love to do. Whether it's about making it big as a rapper or selling enough insurance policies to afford that dream vacation, if your will is strong enough, it will get you through the hard knocks that might otherwise throw you off the path to success.

Tapping into your will can take time. It's an imperfect process of trial and error. Sometimes we think we know what we want because we are trying to live up to other people's expectations. Maybe you're studying accounting because your parents want you to find a steady job, but you hate working with numbers. Maybe you're working as a hairdresser because your mother made a good living at it, but weaving, crimping, cutting and straightening hair is boring you to death.

People from our culture don't always get to know what they want because they weren't exposed to the possibilities. They are only thinking they will be a product of their environment. They're too caught up in surviving in the streets, struggling on welfare, or dealing with a father or mother in prison. Kids think if they're going to escape their corners and see the world, they'd better join the army.

Their only limitation is that they don't know the game. But awareness can change that.

No Guts, No Glory

There's an underground card game we like to play while we're killing time backstage or just hanging out with our homeboys. It's called "Guts."

Guts is a street version of poker, but in this game everybody gets dealt three cards. Each player has to put \$100 in the pot, so if you've got ten people playing, it's \$1,000 at the start of the first round. Once you've been dealt your hand, the dealer calls his game. He can say, "One, two, three, drop." Everyone can either hold their cards up or, if they're not going to stay in, drop them. If you've got guts, if you feel you can win, you hold your cards up to see if you or the others have to match what's in the pot. Calling "guts" helps us flush out the people who aren't real players.

The stakes get high, especially when you have a sizeable crew in on the game. One night last year, for example, we had seventeen guys playing Guts at Jay-Z's Manhattan nightclub, 40/40. Jay and his partner in the club, Juan; NBA stars LeBron James and Antoine Walker and their crews; Richard Santulli, founder of the private jet company NetJets; Mike Kyser and Steve Stoute, "the Mayor" and marketing wiz of Def Jam respectively, were all in the game. I was the dealer, presiding over a pot that quickly got up to \$40,000 just in that first round.

As the dealer, I get to hold my cards until the end and I'm the first person to call guts. Once you call it, all the players have to turn their cards up. The best hand wins, and the losers have to match the pot. Of the five people left in that game, Juan won.

Sometimes the pot gets so big that people are afraid to keep playing and they drop out. If everyone does that you might get to walk even if you're bluffing. Nobody

shows their hand and you can put yours back in the deck without having to pay. But we never let people walk. That's why it usually costs people a minimum of \$10,000 just to play one round with us.

Wherever we are on the road, me, Jay and the rest of my crew get together for a Guts game. It's become a tradition. We all come as our different characters. Jay-Z's is "Lucky Lefty," because anyone who gets stuck sitting to the left of him loses. They call me "The Cowboy," because they know Kevin Liles is going to shoot you down. I'm not going to let you walk. I'm going to call it in every game. I say, "I'm not letting any of you feel y'all are better than me, so 'Guts'!"

Do you have the guts? Do you have the courage to stay in the game all the way and risk it all? No matter what your face looks like, no matter what's happening in your career, no matter who's in your ear telling you what you should and should not do, no matter who's saying you can't, do you have the will to keep it going? To play Guts, you have to want to win more than anything. You have to overcome your fear. That's what this game is all about.

One of my former employees, Shante Bacon, always has guts. She was just a college rep for us when she first joined Def Jam. But she'd known all her young life that she was destined to work in the music business. Even as a teenager she figured one day she'd run her own label.

When Shante was in college she was a rep for Def Jam's distribution company in Virginia. That means she promoted our label, and any new singles that were coming out, through college parties, football games, homecomings, college radio and concerts. One day in her senior year she sent us a three-hundred-page book she'd put together documenting all the work she'd done for Def Jam over the years. She included wrap-ups of events, pictures and dozens of letters of congratulations from me and Lyor on the success of her work on campus. She put it together in one slick package using everything she'd learned as a marketing major. I'd never met Shante, but I took one look at that book and said, "She's hired."

That was in November 1997, but Shante didn't graduate until May 1998. We wanted her to join Def Jam so badly that we held the job, of sales assistant, open for her by filling it with temps. She already had the winning hand.

Lose Yourself

It's not always obvious at first what we're good at or what we enjoy doing. Some of the skills that can work in the business world don't fit easily into a box. They're not on your high school curriculum. You may even think that something you do is way too much fun to be anything but a hobby.

You may not realize it, but if you love to throw a party, you could be a great event planner. If you like to look fly, you could be a stylist. If you enjoy vibing with other people, you could be a publicist. Plenty of industries need these skills.

When I was fifteen it didn't really occur to me that I could be in a rap group. I was

good in English class. I could write well. I was always composing rhymes in my spare time. My buddy Rod used to rap, so he'd come over and ask me to put together some rhymes with him, but it was just something I did for fun.

Then I heard Run DMC's hit song "Sucka MC" at a house party:

Two years ago, a friend of mine / asked me to say some MC rhymes
/ So I said this rhyme I'm about to say / The rhyme was mecca, and
it went this way. . .

I thought, "Damn, I can do this! Hell, I AM doing this." Rod was part of a rap group, Numarx, but it never occurred to him to ask me to join, and until that moment I never even thought about it. But when I heard that rhyme it all made sense. I had to do it.

True passion doesn't always hit you like a lightning bolt. Take my good friend and colleague, Julie Greenwald.

Julie always loved music, but she'd never even considered the music business as a career when she was going to college. She came from a nice, liberal Jewish family that believed in making a difference in the world. From the time she was a little girl she'd always planned to teach or work for some charity organization. The first thing she did when she graduated was sign up for a volunteer program to teach impoverished children in the Mississippi Delta. That year she became like a surrogate mother to these kids, who often had nothing to go home to.

But when her year ended, she moved to New York to be with her boyfriend. She found a job working as Lyor Cohen's assistant at Def Jam. Those two were kindred spirits. They'd spend hours together hatching brilliant and out-there ideas to promote artists. Julie discovered that she loved the business and decided to stay. She learned that by working in a company that was part of the hip-hop culture, she could find another, more lucrative way to serve the young people she cared so much about.

In taking care of Def Jam's consumers and providing a home away from home for the young artists who were signed to our label, Julie's nurturing instincts, together with a great head for marketing, would serve her well at Def Jam. Many of our artists come to us at such a young age, and are so messed up from the life in the streets they've come up from, that a strong, maternal figure is just what they need to set them straight. Julie's found her true vocation in the music industry. Today she works with me as president of Atlantic Records, a division of Warner Music Group.

Like Julie, you'll find your own will when you decide to look for it. Just ask yourself:

Am I a team player, or do I prefer to work on my own?

Am I creative, or do I like to plan and organize things?

Do I see the big picture, or do I like to execute the plan?

Do I like the camera, or am I that quiet guy getting it done behind the scenes?

If you're a detail-oriented perfectionist, or anal, like me, you might become a good chief of operations. If you're into team sports, you might make a good human resources manager, or even company president. If you're a natural-born hustler, you could be vice president of sales. In business, there's enough room for all kinds.

Step back and think about who you are and what makes you passionate. When you know who you are you'll find your fit.

By Any Means Necessary

Finding your will gives you the strength to endure whatever it takes to make it happen, even if it means sleeping on the floor of a ...

Users Review

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