

Alan Horowitz

Point A to Point B

If there's one thing that has consistently defined Al Horowitz's character throughout his life, it's his remarkable ability to stay focused. From the very outset, his gaze has been steady, and his footsteps have been straight. "I've always had something inside of me—a work ethic I think I got from my father—and it's driven me to be focused and hardworking," he says. "I've always loved the challenges of business, and of growing and building things, whether it's a startup, an existing business that needs a fresh look, or a new business within a business." Now the President of Mainstream GS, a management consulting company focused on increasing performance and sustaining success for their clients, Al has put his knack for steering steady from Point A to Point B to work for countless companies, helping them navigate to success just as he has through the years.

Mainstream Global Solutions, or Mainstream GS, was launched in 2003 as part of a holdings company called Mainstream Holdings. Founded by Joe Patten, a turnaround management specialist by trade, MainStream Holdings originally included MainStream Management, a corporate turnaround and restructuring firm launched in 1999; MainStream Consulting, a process improvement management consulting company; and MainStream Dispositions, a disposition, liquidation, and wind-down firm, were both established in 2000. It worked primarily with midmarket commercial companies and started to get some government work, so they spun off and formed Mainstream GS.

Today, Mainstream GS sets itself apart by going the extra mile. "There are a thousand companies out there who are great at increasing performance, but one of the biggest problems is how to sustain that increased performance," Al points out. "Our secret sauce is working with

organizations to go that step beyond what they find other places. Focusing on sustained high performance, we address the technical tools *and* cultural change management. We've found that doing a transformation isn't about just learning a new technique; it's about changing the way we look at things and the way we work. It's that fusion that's at the heart of what our company does."

They first put their skills to the test when the Air Force approached them for assistance with improving turnaround time for aircraft that came to their air logistics centers to be serviced. Recognizing that they were burdened by thousands of inefficient processes and procedures, Mainstream GS helped the Air Force streamline and then change some of their management approaches, making the overall procedure faster and more efficient than ever.

This strategy worked well for Mainstream GS, and business grew, but as MainStream GS helped organizations improve their processes, they found themselves wondering about the philosophy that lay underneath those processes. What was the real strategy of the organization? In environments where laundry lists are long and time is short, what are the three most important things organizations can do to keep themselves on the right track? Mainstream GS began doing more strategy deployment work for their clients. "In the military, there's something called *Commanders intent*," Al explains. "It's those top priorities he or she most needs to get done for their Command's success. A Navy Command, for instance, had 150 improvement projects going on at once, when only four of those were on the Admiral's scorecard. All that extra activity was driving inefficiency, so we had them retire many of their projects and focus resources on those four things that were most important to the organization."



Al and his team then worked with Air Force leadership to maintain that focus, ultimately leading Mainstream GS out of the wheel-and-break shop and into the realm of Command-wide strategic planning. Integral to this strategic plan was an exit strategy for Mainstream GS. “Most consulting companies want to come in and become part of the furniture of an organization, so having a sunset plan that phases us out of the equation really sets us apart,” he points out. “Essentially, we’re problem solvers. If you have a problem, we’re going to solve it, not perpetuate it to keep ourselves around. We’re about results and progress, hands down.”

Getting from Point A to Point B and driving results has always been a hallmark of Al’s approach, even from the earliest days of his childhood. He was born in 1958, the youngest of four children in a middle class family living in Washington, D.C. His mother had worked for several years while also being a homemaker, and along the way she went back to school part time and earned a Masters degree. His father, a hardworking government employee with a PhD in chemistry, was the model of drive and commitment—though he still found time to take his young son to Washington Senators baseball games. “They were horrible, but I loved the experience,” Al recalls. “I even had a baseball signed by all the players until my dog ate it.”

Al learned more about responsibility and the rush of getting rewarded for hard work when he got his first job as a paperboy. He loved the experience so much that he ran his route for five years, through junior high and high school, eventually earning enough money to buy his first car and learning about the importance of customer service in running a small enterprise. “That was one piece I kept with me,” he remembers. “Another was the experience of playing a lot of sports growing up, as competition and teamwork were things I really enjoyed.”

Al played primarily boy’s club youth and participated in the Beltway League, building his skills in baseball, basketball, and football. Montgomery County suffered from residual segregation at the time, with only one or two black students in Al’s class, but a black football coach at the Wheaton Boy’s Club, Ed Guy, held the promise of a more integrated tomorrow. “The young kids on the team didn’t see him as black or white,” Al remembers. “He was a great coach and influence,

and my first real exposure to diversity.”

Later, the public high school in Al’s neighborhood was testing out a new learning philosophy and wasn’t as oriented around athletics. Though he did join the golf team, which went on to win the Montgomery County championship, his participation in sports dwindled. Still, their impact on his life remained noteworthy. “They served to show me that winning might not be everything, but effort is,” he remarks. “And they’re a testament to self-motivation. My parents weren’t into sports—they just provided me with the tools to do what I wanted to do and accomplish success, in much the same way that Mainstream GS provides a toolbox for success to its clients today.”

More than anything else, Al’s childhood was guided by values that encouraged him to stay grounded while striving to be the best he could be. His childhood and neighborhood friends didn’t care much for material possessions, focusing more on playing hard and having fun. “We had beat up bicycles and beat up shoes,” he laughs. “We were never materialistic. We didn’t know what wealth was, so we didn’t think about it.”

The late sixties and early seventies were a time of tremendous upheaval for American culture, and the older Horowitz children got involved in the counterculture movement. Al, however, steered a steady course amidst the tumult, not missing a beat as he went through high school, work, college, and his MBA program. “I never felt the need to have that ‘go out and find yourself’ experience,” he explains. “I’ve been running since eighth grade. It’s just that side of me that’s driven to stay focused, and though all of my siblings are now established and successful, the decision making responsibility in our family still tends to fall in my court.”

As a child, Al had always wanted to become a lawyer, but once he started college at the University of Maryland, his interest in business grew with every marketing class he took. He also used college as a platform to cultivate his people, public speaking, and leadership skills, getting involved in plays and even doing some standup comedy. “I had a lot of fun,” he laughs. “It was something completely different, and not something I had planned on doing. It was a great experience because of the unknown—getting up in front of people and seeing if they were interested or if they’d throw you out!”

Upon finishing his bachelor's degree, he immediately enrolled in an MBA program at Loyola in New Orleans—the only time he ever lived outside of D.C. “I had never seen Southern hospitality before,” he marvels. “It was a great experience culturally—one that I still carry with me. And that experience of going to a small school, where students could have so much interaction with teachers, really added a new dimension to my character.”

One thing his MBA program did not teach him about, though, was sales. “I think sales is one of the most misunderstood disciplines in the world,” he avows. “Whether you're an accountant, an author, or a used car salesman, it's one of the most important skills anyone can have—and one of the hardest things to do. It's something I continue to try to get better at all the time.” Al got his sales education through various telemarketing jobs, including photography services, aluminum siding, and magazine subscriptions. “I enjoyed the challenge of sitting there with a list of 600 names you had to just tackle,” he remembers. “It was raw sales, and I loved it!”

Shortly after completing his MBA, Al returned to D.C. in May of 1983 and was hired as a junior research analyst for a Navy contractor. It was several months later that he made one of the best decisions of his life—to go out to a bar in Georgetown called Champions with his basketball league buddies. There, he spotted one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. He knew he had to meet her. Noticing he had a golf ball in his pocket, he marched up and dropped it in her drink, and fortunately, she had a sense of humor.

The two married a few years later, in 1986. “I still can't believe that that kid from Montgomery County met a beautiful girl from Arkansas, so bright and articulate and with a masters in public education,” he describes. “What are the odds of that? I did not set out to meet my wife that night. It was the luckiest night of my life. She has such great insight and intuition that have helped so much throughout my life and my business career. We now have three incredible children and couldn't be happier.”

After working his way up to a research analyst position, Al decided he wanted to get into sales and marketing, so he accepted a position with Future Enterprises, a computer training company. As the marketing manager, he developed their marketing capacity capability and

sales for five years, having the time of his life as the company enjoyed rapid growth. He ran and ran until he realized that it was time to run to the next thing—McClendon Automation, another consulting company. That company, however, didn't turn out to be the right fit for him, so he leveraged his contacts at Microsoft. Microsoft actually created a new position for him as a DoD Program Manager, running marketing and managing government contracts with systems integrators for their federal office.

“Microsoft primarily only had Word and Excel back then, doing about \$40 million of business for the entire government,” Al remembers. “After several years, I approached the guy who ran the office and said we needed to get into consulting and product support for the government.” At that time, Microsoft Consulting Services existed in the commercial world, but not in the government. The company finally said he could try it for six months if he put together a business plan, but if it didn't work, they'd shut it down.

Al started with nothing more than a few people, but the business took off. Their first purchase order was for \$10,000, and they expanded from federal to state and local government all around the country, quickly becoming one of the largest consulting and product support business within Microsoft, and one of the most profitable. Again, Al found himself having the time of his life.

In 2005, Microsoft wanted to take their practice around the world, so they named Alan WorldWide Public Sector General Manager for Services. He traveled from country to country, helping the local practices launch or grow and linking people together with best practice sharing. “I had never really understood other cultures or traveled much internationally, so it was a fantastic experience for me,” he says. “But as time passed, I realized my kids were growing up, and I wanted to be home more.” By the time Al transitioned out of that role, the WorldWide Public Sector Services was doing over \$700 million in annual revenues.

After finishing up his duties as Program Manager, Al assumed the position of Federal Marketing Manager. Then, ready for his next move, he interviewed for a U.S.-wide marketing job with Microsoft but didn't get it. “I was really disappointed about that, but I never thought of it as a failure,” he remarks. “I didn't have a lot of

pressure on me growing up as a kid that taught me to fear failure, so it wasn't a big concern of mine. And in fact, it turned out to be one of the best things that could have happened. I took that opportunity to approach Microsoft about starting a consulting business working with the U.S government. Ultimately, after 17 wonderfully exciting years, I retired from Microsoft and began searching for a different direction with a chance to learn new things."

About six months prior to retiring, Al had met Joe Patten, Chairman of MainStream Holdings. The more he learned about Mainstream GS, the more he began to realize it was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Al came on board in 2008 and realized that the company needed to broaden its scope. "We began to evolve from a singularly-focused lean consulting company to a more full-service management consultant company. We even re-defined our name," he explains. "No one even knew what the GS in Mainstream GS stood for, so we went through a discovery process of our own and came up with Global Solutions."

This meant, first of all, adding a sales and marketing focus to Mainstream GS's approach. It meant creating a pipeline and addressing the fact the company lacked a diversified portfolio. The challenge was considerable, and one that Al took six months to consider accepting, culminating in one final dinner meeting in which Sandy met Joe and let Al know her thoughts. "It was a risky move to go work for a small company after working for a giant one, having a lot at my disposal and running a huge organization," Al recalls. "But I wanted to take on the challenge, and I had done similar things before. If Mainstream GS was at Point A, and I could envision a great Point B, I wanted to take it there." With that, Alan was brought on as Senior VP of Public Sector Programs.

After a year and a half, the President retired. Mainstream Consulting was stood down, and Alan became President of Mainstream GS—a challenge he was well prepared for. "At Microsoft, people would ask what the best prerequisite was to work there," he recalls. "I would tell them that the best thing you can be is well-rested, because you're running a marathon 24 hours a day, every day that you're there. I was conditioned for hard work coming out of that experience, and it has served me well here."

Under Alan's leadership, Mainstream GS

continues to evolve today as they diversify their customer base beyond the military and into the healthcare sector. "One of the challenges of a small company is that you can't do everything, so we're trying to be intentional in a few markets, and then everything else we do is opportunistic," Al explains. "If something new comes our way and looks promising, we're going to do it." The company has diversified its portfolio, setting it up for more sustainable growth in the future when budgetary concerns in Washington stabilize.

This proactive mindset paves the road that stretches out before Al the secret stabilizer that has always allowed him to get from Point A to Point B so smoothly. That's why, in advising young people entering the working world today, he encourages them to focus on success at every step. "I think there's this burning desire to get the best job or do the best thing right away, but it's not about where you start; it's where you end up," he points out. "If you come in as a junior research analyst like I did, be the best junior research analyst you can be. Build a great track record during the time you're there, and even if it's not your dream job, that's okay. You're running a really long race, so pace yourself to ensure future success."

Integral to this preparatory approach to life, as well, is lifelong learning. Whether he's listening to business books on tape while exercising in the morning, investing in his children's education, or simply being a good listener, Al's effectiveness is built upon a belief in the process of learning new ideas, incorporating them into one's life, and being better each day because of it. "Be brief, be bright, be gone," he says, echoing an integral saying he's picked up over the years. "That's what getting from Point A to Point B is all about."

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*About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in*

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