

Ten outstanding business quotes

Ian Marcousé explains how these quotes can be applied to business

1 'The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing'

Attributed to: Walt Disney

Meaning: thinking and planning are important, but real entrepreneurship is based on action and therefore financial risk.

Implications: a written business plan can help to make a start-up profitable, but it can also be a crutch – encouraging too much thinking and not enough action. With new businesses, it is important to try things out, then adopt what generates profit. The business must be real, not a paper exercise.

2 'If you can't feed a team with two pizzas, it's too large'

Attributed to: Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon

Meaning: beware of having too wide a span of control. Being the leader of a team of six is great, but 10–12 may be too many.

Implications: getting the right organisational structure will be hard during a time of rapid expansion. As more staff are hired, spans of control widen until a decision is made to introduce a new layer of hierarchy. Then more managers are taken on and spans of control can shrink back.

3 'Only the paranoid survive'

Attributed to: Andrew Grove, founder of microchip colossus Intel

Meaning: if you think your market position is secure, then your complacency will allow rivals to find a way to attack you successfully. You always need to look over your shoulder.

Implications: to keep ahead of the pack, you need to keep innovating. This may involve cannibalising your existing products – i.e. launching a new product that will eat away at the sales of your own existing product, bringing its life cycle to an end. If you do not innovate, a rival will have the opportunity to break into your market.

4 'This time, it's different'

Attributed to: every trader during a boom ('bull') market

Meaning: traders and analysts are rationalising excessive rises in asset prices (shares or houses) by suggesting that the underlying cause is unlike anything that has happened before. So the boom will not bust.

Implications: beware, this is when people lose their life savings or even their family home. All booms end in some kind of bust. This time will not be any different. So, when asset prices are booming, do not borrow too much in the pursuit of a super-large house.

5 'Too early to say'

Attributed to: Zhou Enlai, former Premier of China

Meaning: in the 1980s, when asked his views on the French Revolution (1789), Zhou Enlai said 'too early to say'. It was a joke, but with huge implications about the short and long term.

Implications: business exams sometimes ask you to evaluate a problem or situation, perhaps demanding that you make a recommendation. When drawing conclusions, you might reflect on Zhou Enlai's epithet and suggest that it is too early to say what the best course of action would be – it might be better to wait.

6 'It is not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change'

Attributed to: Charles Darwin, writing about evolution in the nineteenth century

Meaning: that the ability to adapt to changing circumstances is the key to long-term survival.

Implications: that the key to successful leadership is to build flexibility into the organisational hierarchy and culture. People should be hired and promoted because they have the positive mindset to see change as offering opportunities as well as – or rather than – threats. If a period of stability allows staff to get set in their ways, it may be very hard to persuade them to adapt when a change finally comes.

7 'You miss 100% of the shots you don't take'

Attributed to: Wayne Gretzky, legendary ice hockey player

Meaning: every shot risks embarrassment but sitting back risks getting nowhere. It is hard to imagine now how brave Apple was to launch its first iPod, then iPhone. Good shot.

Implications: businesses need a culture of enterprise and risk-taking in which it is understood that executives are praised – and perhaps promoted – for bold launches even if they fail. After all, the failure may be due to unforeseeable factors such as the USA's tariffs or a highly publicised accident. Businesses need to take risks – so shooting at the company's goal is to be encouraged.

8 'The first one gets the oyster, the second gets the shell'

Attributed to: Andrew Carnegie

Meaning: that 'first-mover advantage' should never be underestimated.

Implications: that managers need to see time as a key business resource – every bit as important as human or financial resources. In early 2025 the Chinese battery maker CATL announced breakthroughs in battery design, making it possible to charge electric vehicles far more quickly (from zero to 80% charge in 15 minutes). But which carmaker will be the first to get superfast charging into their cars – boosting their image and their sales? Speedy engineering design and manufacture would mean getting the oyster.

9 'There is only one boss. The customer'

Attributed to: Sam Walton, founder of Walmart, the world's biggest retailer

Meaning: that staff must not be inward-looking, with concern only for how their boss sees them. Customers are the most important stakeholders – not bosses.

Implications: that the organisation must see every action and decision through the customers' eyes. Over a 25-year period, both Marks & Spencer and, later, John Lewis started taking their customers' loyalty for granted. In 2025 Marks & Spencer's profit is still lower than it was 20 years ago. It has taken its management a very long time to take Sam Walton's epigram into account.

10 'Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life'

Attributed to: Confucius, ancient Chinese philosopher

Meaning: that you should do all you can to find – and get qualified for – a job you will love. And that recruitment professionals should take their jobs hugely seriously.

Implications: in a perfect world, people would bounce out of bed on a Monday morning, eager to get to work. Actors or musicians may feel that way, when they have a role or performance they are excited about. Professor Frederick Herzberg wrote about 'job enrichment' – seeing enriched jobs as a morally desirable objective for a business – and as a potential motivator to staff.

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