



TEL EPISODE #057:

Smartcuts with Shane Snow

Show Notes: <http://www.theelpodcast.com/tel-057-smartcuts-shane-snow/>

Welcome to The Entrepreneurs Library, the only book-centric podcast that reviews all the top-selling business books and shares author's perspective, firsthand. This is your resource to finding the next great book that will enable you to grow personally and professionally. Welcome your host, Wade Danielson.

WADE: Thank you for joining us on The EL. Today we have Shane Snow, author of *Smartcuts: How Hackers, Innovators, and Icons Accelerate Success*. Welcome, Shane, and thank you for joining us on The Entrepreneur's Library.

SHANE: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

WADE: Will you take just a moment to introduce yourself and tell us just a little bit about you personally?

SHANE: Sure. My name's Shane Snow. I grew up in Idaho, of all places, and I live in New York City now. I first studied Computer Science and became a web entrepreneur, and then I moved over to journalism. I moved to New York to become a journalist with a dream of writing for Wired magazine and writing about tech. Kind of got inspired to start my own tech start-up and so now I'm kind of a combination of both. I write about technology and businesses and I run a technology business as well.

WADE: Great, thank you for sharing that. Now let's jump right into your book, *Smartcuts*, which was just made available for purchase September 9, 2014. And Shane we're going to move quickly, but here are some of the top questions our listeners/readers would love to get answered. And the first one is, what was the inspiration behind writing *Smartcuts*?

SHANE: I was fascinated by people and businesses that seemed to beat expectations. You know, you hear how it should take a long time to gain experience and to grow a company, and yet, at least in the tech space, there are

people that just shatter those ideas. And so, as an entrepreneur myself, I was curious how they did it. So my inspiration was my own intellectual curiosity into how the people who bring the 10,000 hour average down into becoming world class or becoming a great business. I was curious what they did and I was looking for patterns.

WADE: Excellent. And what makes your book different, because there's a couple out there on productivity hacking and different things like that, but what makes your book different from others regarding the same topic?

SHANE: What I focus on is speed. Not just success. There's lots of books that will tell you how to be successful, but I'm focusing on the patterns that make for breakthroughs throughout history, so it's less of a how-to and less of a kind of it's just up to circumstance, the other end of the spectrum or you know, or be yourself or learn to smile. It's kind of in the sweet spot between those two where I show through. I do essentially a regression analysis of top performers, world class performers across industries, throughout history, and then I dig into academic research about why what they did, despite being counter-intuitive actually made them more successful than following conventional advice.

WADE: And how would you want the reader to engage with your book? Is this a book they should jump in and jump out, grabbing content as they need, or is it one they should really read from front to back?

SHANE: It's - I would recommend reading it from front to back. It moves quickly, which is a nice feedback that people have given me. You'll be able to read it in a few hours. I would recommend doing that, but at the end of the book, in the epilogue, I list out the nine sort of patterns that I go through in each chapter, and they kind of build on each other. But I list out the nine patterns and give a case-study of how one person used all of them to achieve an incredible dream, and so I would suggest getting through the book and then looking into those patterns and mapping whatever challenges you're working on, coming back to those and seeing which ones fit your situation, how you could use the lateral thinking or the hacker thinking that I talk about in the book to solve your problems.

WADE: Alright Shane, now that you've given us the background behind your book, what we're looking to do is I'm looking to really hand over the mic and let you give our listeners really a great explanation of what your book is all about. This might be an entrepreneur that's on their way home right now, or they're out walking their dog or what have you, but they have the next little bit to listen to see if your book is really the next book that's going to help them move forward personally and professionally. So will you take your time, and really unveil your book to us?

SHANE: Sure. So I start the book with a story of how when I was in undergrad, my roommate beat the world record for Super Mario Brothers. And the standing world record at the time was something like 30 minutes, and he beat it in 6 minutes and videotaped it and it was this kind of great, nerdy moment that I witnessed, and the way he beat it was, if you've grown up playing Super Mario Brothers, was by using the warp pipes, which are the little secret exits that are just buried throughout the game.

So I start the book off with this story, and kind of with the question of how do we find these kind of secret exits or secret ways to shorten our path to success in real life. How can we use warp pipes, so to speak, to do what we're doing faster? And I look at how, since Rockefeller, it took him 25 years to make a billion dollars, but it took the ebay guys 3 years to make a billion dollars. And yes there's been some inflation, but there's been a lot of technology and a lot of advances in communication that have made it faster and easier for smart people to find alternate routes to success, and to find great success, whether it's financially or in self-fulfillment, or in building great products faster than you could ten, twenty, a hundred years ago. And so I ask the question, how do they move so fast? Real life doesn't have warp pipes like in a game of Mario. How do the best and the brightest innovators and icons in history happen to beat the system, or beat the games that they're playing? And so I divide the book into three main sections of how this happens, and it's based on hundreds of interviews with incredible people of our day and then tons of academic research into what I call myths of success. So there's the common advice that you get growing up about various things that have to do with success and then I look at do these map to the great successes of our time and of days past, and I go through from heart surgeons to



revolutionaries in Cuba, to U.S. Presidents to tech entrepreneurs to media companies to small businesses and so forth.

So the three sections of *Smartcuts*, the three main ways that these kind of hacker thinkers, kind of the good hackers, accelerate their success, I divide it into three categories: Shorten, Leverage, and Soar. Shortening is about what psychologists call lateral thinking, which is really the kind of thinking that a computer hacker uses. Essentially lateral thinking is when you're given a problem or a challenge, and instead of attacking it head-on, you attack it sideways.

So if you read Life Hack or any of these websites that tell you how to be more productive, those are all, that MacGyver thinking, that's kind of lateral thinking. So anyway, I give some examples of sort of puzzles where lateral thinking is the solution. But then I go through - first of all, we humans are built to think rationally and logically, at least we think. We think a certain way. Lateral thinking is about thinking the way you wouldn't think, which presents a little bit of a quandary. The chicken and egg of how do you learn to think the way that you wouldn't think. And whether it's nature or nurture that causes some people to think differently than others, whether it was nature or nurture that created Steve Jobs doesn't matter, because you see people throughout history that changed the way they are to think laterally.

So what I explore are some of these myths of success about how long it should take to get to the top. For example, United States Presidents. When you look at the data of U.S. Presidents, you see something peculiar that the best ranked presidents in history have the most unconventional career paths, and they actually have less time paying dues in Congress than the presidents who are worse than them. And the opposite's actually true. The presidents that have spent the most time, like 30, 40 years in Congress, paying their dues, working their way up the ladder, kind of following that Great American Success advice, on average those guys tend to be the worst presidents. And so there's something wrong with this advice. And so I look at the advice that we're given, that if you want to be successful, you need to put your head down and work hard and pay your dues and wait for luck to strike.



Well it turns out that the most successful people in the country, the presidents of the United States, who follow that advice, actually do a pretty bad job. Versus the ones who don't, sometimes they do a bad job, but sometimes they do an incredible job. And so I look at what makes the difference between someone who doesn't follow the dues advice who succeeds and someone who doesn't. So that's the first chapter is getting into that. And the thing that maps to for an entrepreneur or for someone building their career, is this idea that the world kind of puts these roadblocks in front of us, these arbitrary measures of merit that years of experience working within a company at a certain job title or either working with other companies, say you're a business to business company, who you've worked with and how long.

We use that as a proxy for whether or not you are good enough, or whether or not you have skills. Well it turns out that not just presidents, but CEO's and salespeople and artists and inventors, there's very little correlation between how much time you've spent paying dues and how good you are at something, especially when you look at the people at the very top. So in that chapter I explore what it is that those people do.

And kind of move on through the other two chapters of the shorten section to talk about two other myths of success and the nuances with them. One is about mentorship, so we're told "It's not what you know, it's who you know" that helps you accelerate your success, and you see from Socrates to Star Wars to again Steve Jobs, these people who do incredible things in history tend to have a mentor that kind of takes them under their wing. This Mr. Miyagi character that teaches them and trains them, and that this accelerates their success. And this seems to be true, but it's also, there's a nuance when you look at the academic research about mentorship.

The research shows that actually half if not most of the time, mentorship does not help the mentee at all. So what's the difference? And I ask that question through the story of Jimmy Fallon, who is now the Tonight Show host. Jimmy was one of the youngest people in comedy to get on Saturday Night Live. He was this unknown kid from upstate New York, he knew no one, so it wasn't about who he knew in this case. He was talented, yes, but he was young, he was green, and he

made a whole lot of people really jealous when he got to Saturday Night Live, and he didn't do it because he was lucky. He did it because he earned it through a very clever strategy that's a twist on how do you engage with mentors, how do you get the value of mentorship when you don't have a mentor and when you don't have access. And this chapter is particularly important for entrepreneurs who are often starting from the ground floor that want to learn from master teachers, but they want to do it the right way. They wish that Bill Gates could mentor them, but that's not going to happen. But there's proven research on how you can leverage that idea to accelerate your success and grow a business.

And then finally, the third part of that section is about the myth of the "fail fast, fail often" that you hear about in start-up circles. The Lean Start-Up is a great book, great movement about how small experiments will help you build a business faster. And that advice is true to some degree, but what happens when you look at, again the fastest movers in history, you see that they don't fail fast and they don't fail often. And when you look at the research on failure from Harvard University, from the start-up institute called Start-Up Compass, what you learn is actually kind of depressing that people who fail in their business are not more likely to succeed in a second business than people who have never started a business.

So basically your second shot, you're on the same ground as someone on their first shot. You're not in worse shape, but you're not in better shape, which kind of puts a little cold water on this idea that failing makes you better. And I explore heart surgeons, for example, that learn new surgeries. And the ones who fail, they don't get better, but the ones who watch their colleagues fail actually get better at a significant rate. So you can apply this lesson and others that I dig into through that chapter to how can you make the idea of failure and feedback actually work for your business rather than failure just kind of putting you back at square one.

And the problem with starting a second business being just as likely to fail as your first business that failed is because there's so many variables that go into the success of a business that what you learn in the first one hardly maps to the second one. The things you learn about how to do payroll are not going to be the things that sink your business the second time, unless you're doing the exact



same business over again, which in a lot of cases the market has moved by the time you get there. So that's one of my favorite chapters for entrepreneurs.

The other two sections of the book, leverage is about how do you take the effort that you're doing - one of the things that I learned in researching for this book is that it's not easy, despite what we wish, the Four-Hour Work Week was one of my favorite books, but the thing that people overlook about the Four-Hour Work Week is that it takes a lot of work to set that up. And actually the author, Tim Ferriss, is one of the hardest working people in business and one of the hardest working authors. That book is about how do you set up processes that can work for you, but it's a lot of work in the background. So leverage is my exploration of how people who have done great things in their businesses and in history and in some cases revolution, they work just as hard as everyone else, but they work the smart way, by finding ways to amplify their work. So rather than digging a ditch for eight hours just to be seen, "Hey, I'm working, I'm here, I'm spending the hours." Rather than equating that to success, figuring out ways to dig the ditch two times or three times or ten times as long in the same amount of time, which is the way the world gets changed. It's not when you do less work, but when you amplify your work so that you can do more and accomplish more. So in these chapters I talk about how platforms, technologies can help accelerate your learning through kind of a smart way of going about them. I talk about how kids should learn calculators earlier than they learn times tables by hand because the ones who do actually get better at the fundamentals of math faster than the ones who start from the basics. So I explore that. I explore the idea of first-mover advantage and the myths around that, and how the analogy of catching waves in a surfing competition maps to pattern recognition for business owners and how they can spot opportunities and markets. And then I also talk about something dear to my heart, which is called Super Connectors, which are people and businesses and groups that can unlock the trust of large groups of people and help amplify your message when you're trying to market yourself or market your cause. And I tell that story through the history of pirate radio in the 1950's. So the 3rd section of the book, if I'm not rambling on too long, is about - I call it Soar. It's about swinging big and playing at a professional level. So here I talk about how there's kind of this common myth of luck that kind of wait for luck to strike. There's actually this great debate in business, a kind of does luck exist in business

or is it all about setting yourself up for opportunities? I think in some cases yes, but in some cases, yeah, you're lucky if you're not born - you know, you're lucky if you're born in an opportunity where you can build something for yourself or you're lucky if you're not born with some degenerative disease that makes it so that you can't live past your third birthday. So there's some luck in life, but in business there are, people who are superlative successes tend to set themselves up to engineer what looks like luck, but more importantly, when luck happens, they're able to harness that and use that as momentum to build bigger and better things. So the momentum chapter I talk about YouTube stars. I pit one-hit wonders against YouTube stars who've managed to leverage their viral hit into building big, incredible businesses. The main woman of this chapter is a woman named Michelle Fawn, who's in all these YouTube advertisements right now. She has millions of followers. She leveraged her viral YouTube video to build a subscription-based start-up that has hundreds of thousands of paid subscribers to release a makeup line with Loreal and to build a production company. She's on her way to becoming the next Elizabeth Arden or Martha Stewart, and it's because she was able to harness momentum in a world class way. And then the final two chapters, I talk about radical simplicity, how world class products, world class businesses, and world class thinkers, manage to, through very clever means, simplify what's going on in their markets and in their companies to focus on the things that will get them much more bang for their buck. And then finally, the capstone chapter before the epilogue that ties it all together is about 10x thinking, which is about this concept that is kind of the common debate among goal-setting of should you set realistic goals or should you set goals that make you really stretch but maybe you won't hit them - you know the cliché is shoot for the moon and even if you miss you'll hit the stars. So is that true? Does making a goal that you know you probably can't hit, does that accelerate your success? Or does setting realistic goals that can kind of give you that boost of confidence and then setting bigger and better realistic goals, does that accelerate your success? Well it turns out that the shooting the moon concept has a lot of merit to it, both academically and through historical examples, so I go through the history of SpaceX, how Elon Musk, who's one of the, some might say luckiest people in the world, but others might say smartest people, who's build 4 billion dollar businesses in a row, how he managed to do what dozens of billionaires before him couldn't, which is build a private space company that made it to orbit. He's

this quintessential example of 10x thinking. Rather than trying to make something 10 percent better, he works and he talks about doing things 10 times better, which the idea of asking yourself "How can I do this 10 times better?" forces you to do the thing that I talked about in the very beginning of the chapter, which is lateral thinking. It forces you to question all of the assumptions that you've ever had. It forces you to question all of the rules of your industry, and even of what you've built in the past, and when you break those down, Elon Musk calls it getting to first principles, you are able to get to what actually matters that you can then amplify and turn into something that gets you ten times bigger. There's also something there to this, that I don't want to ruin it too much, because this chapter is really fun, but there's something about 10x thinking that gets you the kind of support you need to where you can actually accomplish it, which is counter-intuitive. The thing that I say is it's easier to start a revolution than a successful lemonade stand. And that's because, not because a revolution takes less work than a lemonade stand, but people care violently about the outcome of a revolution one way or the other. They care about what happens. People don't care about what happens to your lemonade stand, that's why your parents have to kind of slip people money to buy lemonade from you. The principle for entrepreneurs is this - it's that it can be easier to build a huge business with a massive goal and a massive story than it is to build a small business. And it can be easier to take one aspect of your business and multiply it by ten times than it is to multiply it by just ten percent, or a hundred and ten percent. And part of this that's exciting is - and academic research actually backs this up - that students, when they compete in different forms, intellectually, and in other ways, in these psychological experiments, they show that students who are competing against a lot of people tend to actually perform worse than those same students when they're competing against a few people. And it's not intentional, it's actually psychological. We do this subconsciously when we're going after something where there's more competition, we actually don't perform as well. We don't push ourselves as hard as when we're in a very small pool and this is why going after low-hanging fruit can be dangerous for a small business owner or an entrepreneur, is because there's many more people going after the easy wins than the really lofty wins. So when you go after the lofty wins, all of this research shows that you push yourself harder. You force yourself to come up with more ingenious, more clever, more hacker-like ways to accomplish the goal than if

you're going after something smaller. And there's the added benefit of you have a big vision and a big story, the kinds of people that you need to hire, that you need to raise capital, that you need to get public opinion on your side, tend to flock towards those things that are on the edge of crazy, but world-changing. So that's the gist of the journey that I go through and *Smartcuts*. Everything is about my curiosity about how these people did it, and kind of the counter-intuitive ways that the best of the best accelerate their success versus people who are simply successful by following the conventional wisdom.

WADE: Shane that's one of the best reviews we've had yet, and I say that because it's brought up about 50 questions. It's made me, anything that makes me think, I appreciate. And when someone goes out there and maybe challenges different theories or the status quo, my ears always perk up because I'm always, I guess always looking to better my game, and not ten thousand hours later. So this was huge.

SHANE: Well, thank you.

WADE: Absolutely. And it leads perfectly into our next question, which I think is almost a rude questions in a certain sense, but that's if the reader could only get one thing out of everything you just said, you just talked about unbelievable, amazing stuff and multiple different things that intrigued me, but if they could only get one thing out of your entire book, what would you want that to be?

SHANE: Well obviously there's a lot in there. I think the one message that I want to get across is that any of us can do more than we're doing and we can do it faster than we think. Part of my reason for writing this is I know people who either want to build businesses, or have dreams, or want to go into some area that they just think is too unrealistic to do because they think it will take too long, what I'm trying to show is that that's not necessarily true. That we can do more than we're doing, we can do it faster than we think we can by thinking about things smarter. And I hope that I built a framework around that. But that's the principle that I want to leave people with.

WADE: Perfect. And do you have a favorite quote from your book? Either one that you wrote that you personally love or one that you wrote that resonates well with your audience. I know sometimes an author will write something and their audience kind of tells them what was good about it. Do you have one of those?

SHANE: So I'm waiting to see what the - Amazon does this great thing, the most highlighted passages on kindle so you can kind of see what people are highlighting. I've been waiting to look at what people have been saying, but people have certainly tweeted some passages. I think for me, my favorite is the quote, rather than quote myself, I quote one of my heroes at the very beginning of the book, and that's Dr. Seuss. He says, in one of his books, "You have brains in your head, you have feet in your shoes, you can steer yourself any direction you choose." And I love that quote because it gets at kind of the core message that if you have a brain in your head and if you have feet to move, you can work smarter and harder and you can do the implausible and the impossible and it's up to you.

WADE: Excellent. That was an excellent quote, I appreciate that. And this next one I think is very relevant because I think your book is going to create a lot of different paradigm shifts for people and maybe change the way that they think. And again I think a lot of entrepreneurs are always looking for a book that does that. So what's a book that you personally can recommend? And it doesn't have to be on hacking, it doesn't have to be on entrepreneurship, but really any book that you read that created a huge impact in your life.

SHANE: That book for me is the Autobiography of Ben Franklin. It's an oldie, but a goodie. Every time I pick it up, I realize just how brilliant this guy was and how way ahead of his time he was. For me, it's particularly relevant because he was both a business person, an inventor, and a journalist. And those are kind of all of my passions. But you'd be surprised - I don't know, have you read his autobiography?

WADE: I have not. I've heard Henry Ford and his are the best autobiographies to pick up, and I have not.

SHANE: I have not checked out Henry Ford's, I'll do his next. I love biographies and autobiographies from incredible people. I actually have a link on my site that I put together of the books that inspired me to think the way that I think, and Autobiography of Ben Franklin is number one, but it's shanesnow.com/booklist. And that kind of has my, some of them are less obscure, and some of them are more obscure, but that has my list of books that changed my perception, the ones that I come back to over and over again.

WADE: Perfect, and we're going to reference that actually. We will put that on our show know so they can access to that. And actually I'm glad that you mentioned that because that leads into kind of the final part and that's Shane, before we depart, can you really recommend the best way for our audience to get more information on both you and your book, *Smartcuts*, and then also if there are some additional resources, if you have some different blogs or LinkedIn, please mention how these guys can get more information on you.

SHANE: So the main hub is my website, it's just my name: shanesnow.com. From there you can get to the book, shanesnow.com/smartcuts. And all of my links are there, to my LinkedIn, and to my company, Contently, which is contently.com. We do a lot of publishing for businesses specifically in the content and marketing space, which again is a combination of the things that I love, journalism and business. But you can find everything there just from my main website so it won't complicate it.

WADE: Perfect, well Shane, thank you so much for coming on and really, like I said, this was an excellent review, and I have no doubt. I already bought the book, so I won't say that I'm going to buy it again, but I've already bought it, and I will definitely be reading this to see how I can create paradigm shifts within my mind and move my businesses forward.

SHANE: I'm thrilled to hear that, thank you Wade. This has been very fun.

WADE: Thanks again for listening in today. If you would like to get your hands on *Smartcuts* or any of the other resources mentioned by Shane, just look at the



show notes at TheELPodcast.com.

Looking for your next book idea? Head over to TheELPodcast.com, where Wade shares his amazing resource, “The Top 10 Business Books Recommended by Over 500 Entrepreneurs,” with you for free. That’s TheELPodcast.com. Till the next time, keep it on the EL.

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