



## Gunn's Golden Rules: Life's Little Lessons for Making It Work

By Tim Gunn

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On the runway of life, Tim Gunn is the perfect life coach.

You've watched him mentor talented designers on the hit television show *Project Runway*. Now the inimitable Tim Gunn shares his personal secrets for "making it work"—in your career, relationships, and life. Filled with delightfully dishy stories of fashion's greatest divas, behind-the-scenes glimpses of *Runway*'s biggest drama queens, and never-before-revealed insights into Tim's private life, *Gunn's Golden Rules* is like no other how-to book you've ever read.

In the world according to Tim, there are no shortcuts to success. Hard work, creativity, and skill are just the beginning. By following eighteen tried-and-true principles, you can apply Tim's rules to anything you set your mind to. You'll learn why Tim frowns on displays of bad behavior, like the vitriolic outburst by Martha Stewart's daughter about her mother's name-brand merchandise. You'll discover the downfalls of divadom as he describes *Vogue*'s André Leon Talley being hand-fed grapes and Anna Wintour being carried downstairs by her bodyguards. And you'll get Tim's view on the backstabbing by one designer on *Project Runway* and how it brilliantly backfired.

Then there are his down-to-earth guidelines for making life better—for yourself and others—in small and large ways, especially in an age that favors comfort over politeness, ease over style. Texting at the dinner table? Wearing shorts to the theater? Not in Tim's book. Living a well-mannered life of integrity and character is hard work, he admits, but the rewards are many: being a good friend, being glamorous and attractive, and being a success—much like Tim himself!

He is never one to mince words. But Tim Gunn is always warm, witty, wise, and

wonderfully supportive— just the mentor you need to design a happy, creative, and fulfilling life that will never go out of style.

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## RULE 1

### Make It Work!

AS A LITTLE KID, when confronted with a difficult situation, I would run and hide somewhere in our Washington, D.C., house. I wanted to escape from the world. School, sports, church, birthday parties—anything social terrified me. All I wanted to do was hole up until the event had passed and I could go back to reading alone in my room.

Unfortunately, I couldn't stay hidden for very long, because the house wasn't that big and eventually my mother figured out my favorite hiding places. But usually it would be long enough to scare the living daylights out of her, which for me was not an unhappy side effect.

As my mother caught on to each new scheme, I got more creative. I think it was maybe the third or fourth time I hid, I actually ran away outside and found a good secluded spot in the yard. I was thrilled when I heard her inside tearing the house apart. Finally, I had really succeeded in terrorizing her. I could have stayed out in that yard forever.

Well, unfortunately for my escapist fantasies, we had a basset hound, Brandy. My mother sent Brandy out to find me, and she did so immediately.

This made me more determined. I thought: *I need to get smarter about this. I need to run away with Brandy.*

That didn't work, either, because my parents would yell for me and Brandy would bark back.

Then it became a challenge to run away with her *and* to keep my hand over her mouth.

The whole project got more and more complicated until, ultimately, I decided it was less trouble just to stay home and be miserable.

In that moment, the seeds of “make it work!” were born. Running away from my problems didn't help. I had to face up to whatever it was that I didn't want to deal with—my homework, an angry parent, a fight with a friend—rather than just trying to put it off until it went away. Until you address them, I have since learned, such problems never truly vanish.

I had to make the best of the bad situation. What I found was that if I did that, the situation would rapidly become less bad, whereas if I hid from it or tried to make it go away, I would get more and more anxious and the situation would get worse and worse. I learned very early the wisdom of making it—whatever *it* was—work.

The phrase “make it work!” came later, but it didn't originate on *Project Runway*. I began using it in my classroom when I was a design teacher at Parsons, the celebrated design college in Manhattan where I worked for twenty-four years. I found it to be an extremely useful mantra when my students were in trouble.

One such example came during a later phase of my academic career. I was teaching Concept Development to seniors. This was a six-hour class that met once a week for the entire academic year—two fifteen-week semesters. It was a long time to work on a single project, and students learned a lot by having to go deep into their own unique concepts.

The year began with the crystallization of each student's thesis: five to seven head-to-toe looks that represented their point of view as a designer. (It was Joan Kaner, the celebrated style maven and former vice

president of Neiman Marcus, who once said to me, "I can tell everything that I need to know about a designer from five looks." I think about that all the time.)

Those looks were executed in muslin (an unbleached cotton fabric used for prototyping) in a corresponding course that was appropriately called Studio Methods. I would visit that class on a regular basis, especially during fittings, which happened every two weeks.

On the topic of fittings, I forbade my students from designing for themselves or using themselves as fit models for their collection. Why? Because when you wear your own designs, you lose objectivity. It's important that each designer maintain a well-honed ability to critically analyze his or her own work. If you're only ever designing for your own body, you'd better be prepared to have a clientele of one.

I like the *Project Runway* Season 7 designer Ping Wu, who famously used herself as a mannequin, as a person even though she's exhausting to be around. She has so much personality. When I told her at the end of Episode 3, "The workroom won't be the same without you," I meant it! I had to talk Jesse LeNoir off a ledge during their team challenge. He's a lovely guy and quite talented. He recognized many of the problems the judges saw, but he couldn't convince Ping to fix them.

When we had the auditions, I found her work compelling but her pieces were all hand knits. I said, "How do you translate this to *Project Runway*? Would you do sewn knits? They won't have the same Möbius-strip quality."

In some ways I think she was handicapped by being a hand-knit designer, and by using herself as a dress form. As you may remember, in Episode 2, the model's rear end was hanging out of her skirt. It was vulgar. Ping's practice of using herself as a model clouded her objectivity. I think that's a big part of why she made it only to Episode 3.

One instance in which "make it work!" came in particularly handy was during the spring semester of 2002. One of my students, Emma, was seriously struggling with the silhouette and proportions of the items that made up the looks in her collection. We had three fit models before us, and frankly, the collection was a hot mess.

I was struggling, too, in my efforts to get Emma to see solutions. What exactly was it that was so wrong? Even I couldn't describe it. The only word that came to mind was *everything*. She was frustrated to the point of tears when she declared that she was going to throw everything away and begin again from scratch.

"You are not starting over," I responded. "Besides, even if I agreed that you should, you've put twenty-five weeks into this collection, and it will be presented to the thesis jury in a month. It will be impossible to present anything of quality in that short amount of time." (This was before *Project Runway*, which would recalibrate my thinking about time!)

"Then what am I going to do?" Emma asked, looking at me helplessly.

"You don't have time to reconceive your designs, to shop for new fabric, or to make new muslins," I replied. "You're going to diagnose the issues with your collection and offer up a prescription for how to fix it. You don't need to start from scratch! What's at the core of this is working. The problems have to do with fit and proportion. Do you need to create new patterns? No! You need to take these existing pieces and retool them. You're going to make it work!"

And she did. Emma's collection was a success, and she learned so much from seeing it through.

If you look at the process of creating a work of art or a design as a journey of one hundred steps, steps one through ninety-five are relatively easy. It's the last five that are hard. How do you achieve closure? How do you finish it? That's the hard part.

MAKING IT WORK MEANS finding a solution to a dilemma, whether it's a senior-year thesis collection, a difficult boss, or a flat tire. When my students made it work, they reached a new level of understanding about their abilities to successfully problem solve, and that gave them additional resources when moving forward to the next task at hand. When we figure a way out of a tricky situation in our own lives, we learn something and gain confidence in ourselves. Making it work is empowering.

On *Project Runway*, the phrase serves as a constant reminder of the seriousness of our deadlines and of the finite limitations of each designer's material resources; in other words, when we return from shopping at Mood, that's it. Whatever they purchased is what they have to execute the challenge. If they discover that they're without some critical ingredient, then they're stuck, and it's "make-it-work" time.

There's a big difference between my relationship with my students and my relationship with the *Project Runway* designers. When my students were in a jam, I could tell them what to do to get out of it. By decree, I cannot tell the *Project Runway* designers what to do, nor can I assist them in any way other than through words. I learned this the hard way.

During Season 1, Austin Scarlett was having difficulty threading one of the sewing machines. In my then state of naïveté, I sat down at the machine to help. After all the years I've spent around designers, I can thread a sewing machine with my eyes closed.

Within seconds, one of the producers called me out of the sewing room.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "You can't do that."

"It's just a sewing machine," I said. "It will take me one minute to fix."

"But if you do that for Austin, then all of the other designers will expect you to do it for them," she said. "And if you don't, then it may be perceived that Austin had an unfair advantage."

I hadn't thought of that. She was right. I had to let go and watch the designers struggle. It took a little while, but eventually I got used to this new role as a hands-off mentor.

But I still enjoy being a hands-on instructor whenever I get the chance. I love how fresh young minds are, and I love watching them grow to take in new information. It's so satisfying to see them come out the other end of the school year more sophisticated and closer to knowing what they need to know in order to accomplish their goals.

Truth be told, I never dreamed that I would become a career educator. In fact, it's ironic, because growing up I hated school. And I do mean *hated*.

Don't misunderstand me: I loved learning. As a child, I always ha...

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