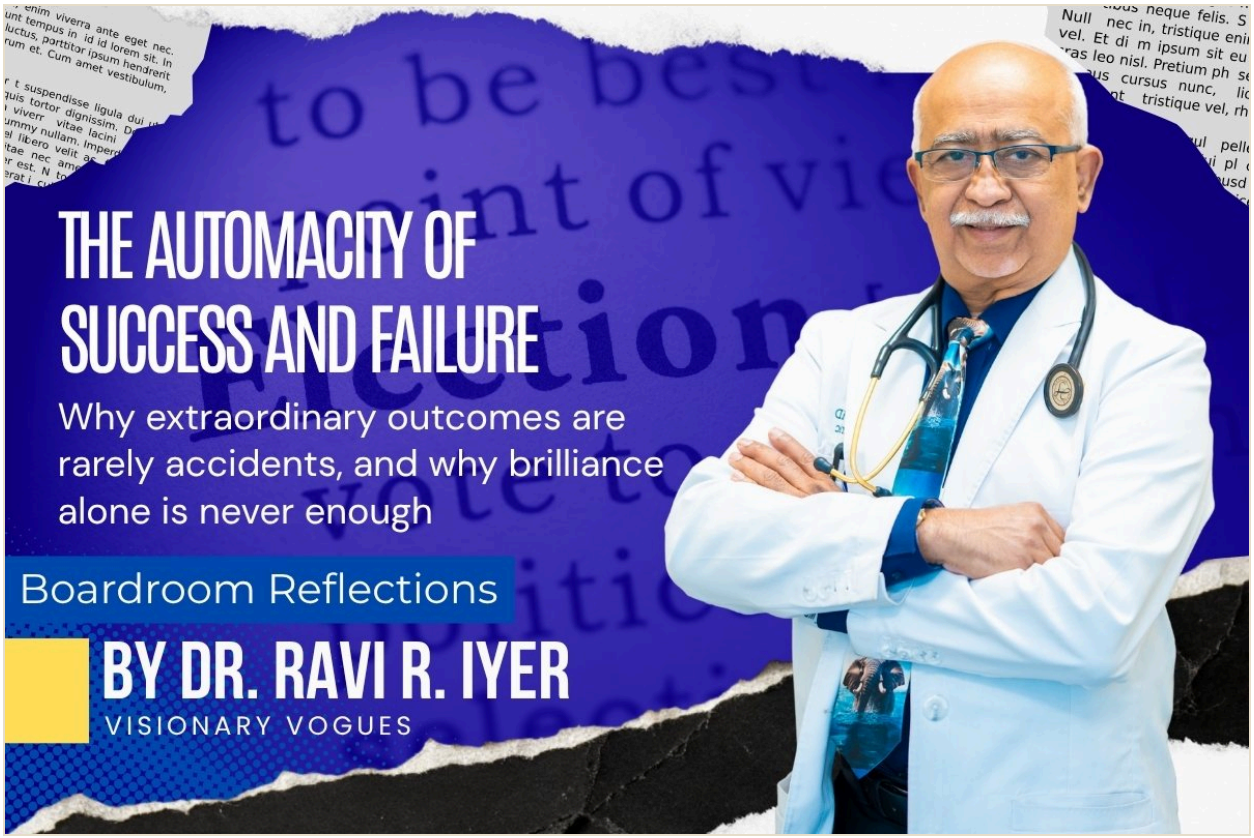
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ELECTION AMERICA 2026 · PART 1

The Automacity of Success and Failure

Why extraordinary outcomes are rarely accidents, and why brilliance alone is never enough.

By **Ravi R. Iyer, MD**



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- A Boeing 787 Dreamliner weighs hundreds of thousands of
- pounds.

Almost every major component from which it is assembled, considered separately, is incapable of flight. The engines, wings, fuselage, landing gear, computers, hydraulic systems, fuel pumps, control surfaces, sensors, cables, bolts, rivets and carbon-fiber structures are all individually incapable of flight. Scatter them across an

aircraft hangar, and you have an extraordinarily expensive collection of flightless objects. And yet assemble those same objects in precisely the right relationship, add energy, direction and control, and something astonishing happens.

- The enormous machine races down a runway, rotates gracefully
- upward and climbs into the sky. Once you understand
- aerodynamics, the miracle becomes almost obvious.

Of course it flies.

- That, I believe, is one of the least appreciated truths about
- extraordinary success. We tend to explain remarkable
- The brilliant founder. The visionary CEO. The creative genius. The
- charismatic leader. The person who supposedly saw what
- nobody else could see.

Certainly, intelligence matters. Creativity matters enormously. Vision matters. Courage matters. But I have met enough exceptionally intelligent people to know that intelligence does not reliably produce exceptional outcomes. I have met brilliant people whose lives remain perpetually stalled.

Creative people surrounded by unfinished projects. Visionaries incapable of execution. Hardworking people who repeatedly exhaust themselves without moving appreciably forward.

And, conversely, I have watched certain entrepreneurs create one successful enterprise after another. That observation raises an interesting question:

What if success is not primarily a characteristic of the individual?

- What if success is an emergent property of the system the
- individual lives and moves within?

I have come to think of this phenomenon as Automacity.

Not automaticity, the ability to perform an action automatically through repetition.

Automacity.

The deliberate, or sometimes entirely instinctive, construction of multiple independent components into a mutually reinforcing system in which the desired outcome becomes increasingly probable, increasingly self-propelling and, eventually, almost obvious in hindsight.

The Entrepreneur as Systems Architect

- Look carefully at extraordinarily successful entrepreneurs, and
- you will often discover something more interesting than
- brilliance.

They possess an almost instinctual ability to assemble things.

- People. Capital. Timing. Technology. Narrative. Distribution.
- Reputation. Relationships. Incentives. Culture. Processes.
- Persistence.
- None of these components alone guarantees success. Just as

possessing a magnificent jet engine does not give you an airplane. But the entrepreneur sees relationships between components that other people perceive as unrelated.

A technologist sees software. A financier sees capital. A marketer sees customers. An engineer sees a product. A salesperson sees distribution. A leader sees people. The systems entrepreneur asks a different question:

What happens when I put all of these together in exactly the right configuration? That is where creativity becomes something much more powerful than ideation. It becomes architecture. And architecture changes probability.

The Difference Between an Idea and an Engine

We dramatically overvalue ideas. Ideas are plentiful. What is scarce is the ability to create an ecosystem in which an idea can survive contact with reality. A wonderful product without distribution fails. Distribution without a compelling product

Success therefore does not reside within any one component. It exists in the relationships between the components.

This distinction is profound.

Because once we understand it, leadership stops being merely the pursuit of excellence in individual parts. It becomes the pursuit of synergy between parts.

The Dreamliner does not fly because Boeing found one component capable of overcoming gravity. It flies because thousands of components participate in a system that collectively produces lift.

Success works much the same way.

When 1 + 1 Stops Equaling 2

True synergy is not addition. It is multiplication.

Put an exceptional person into an exceptional system and something disproportionate can happen. Give that person access to capital, credibility, distribution, and a powerful network, and their capability changes again. Add technological leverage and the system accelerates. Add a compelling narrative and people begin carrying the idea for you. Add customer enthusiasm and customers become distributors. Add reputation and yesterday's accomplishments begin opening tomorrow's doors.

> Eventually something remarkable occurs.
> Success begins producing the conditions for more success.

Reputation attracts talent. Talent improves products. Better products attract customers. Customers produce revenue. Revenue funds innovation. Innovation strengthens reputation. Reputation attracts partnerships. Partnerships expand distribution. Distribution creates scale.

Scale creates resources. Resources create optionality. And optionality makes possible the next breakthrough.

> The system has crossed an invisible threshold.
> It has acquired momentum.
> This is the Automacity of Success.

- From the outside, people often call what follows luck. From
- inside the system, something quite different has happened.

The architecture has begun doing work.

The Cruel Symmetry

Unfortunately, the principle is perfectly indifferent to whether the outcome is desirable. Failure has Automacity too.

A mediocre product creates dissatisfied customers. Dissatisfied customers weaken reputation. Weak reputation makes customer acquisition more expensive. Higher acquisition costs reduce margins. Lower margins force cost cutting. Cost cutting degrades service. Poor service creates more dissatisfied customers. The organization begins consuming the very resources required to repair itself.

- Once again, no single component necessarily caused the
- collapse. The relationships between components did. Failure
- became systemic.

This explains why organizations can reach a point where extraordinarily hardworking people appear incapable of reversing decline. They are trying to repair components while remaining trapped inside an architecture that continuously reproduces the problem. They hire a better salesperson. Change the advertising agency. Replace the CEO. Launch another product. Cut another expense. Hold another retreat.

But if the underlying system remains unchanged, the same outcomes frequently reappear wearing different clothes. The airplane has not failed because its pilots lack motivation. The wings are simply attached incorrectly.

But even this explanation does not go deep enough. Because beneath the architecture of success and failure lies something more fundamental. Something largely invisible.

Context.

The Invisible Architecture Beneath the Architecture

- Before we construct systems, we construct reality. Or, more
- accurately, we inherit a construction of reality and spend much
- of our lives mistaking it for reality itself.

We call it context.

Context is not merely circumstance. It is not simply whether you were born wealthy or poor, educated or uneducated, connected or isolated. Context is the largely invisible framework through which circumstances acquire meaning.

It determines what you notice. What you ignore. What appears possible. What appears ridiculous. What you interpret as opportunity. What you interpret as threat. What you believe people are capable of. What you believe you are capable of. And, ultimately, which futures your mind is even capable of imagining.

This is where the Automacity of Success and Failure becomes far more interesting. Because before an entrepreneur assembles people, capital, technology, distribution and narrative into a successful system, something has already happened upstream.

They saw those components as connectable.

Someone else, standing in exactly the same room, looking at exactly the same facts, may not. That difference is frequently attributed to intelligence. I am no longer convinced that intelligence adequately explains it.

Often the difference is context.

Before You Can Build What Does Not Exist, You Must Be Able to See What Does Not Exist.

Every transformative enterprise exists twice. First, as a possibility inside someone's contextual world. Only later as an object in the physical world.

- The entrepreneur therefore does something peculiar. They see
- something that does not exist. But that statement deserves
- closer examination.

Because how do you see something that does not exist? You cannot see it with your eyes. You see it because your existing context permits disparate facts to assemble themselves into a possibility.

- Where one person sees a problem, another sees a market.
- Where one sees an industry dominated by immovable
- incumbents, another sees complacency waiting to be disrupted.

Where one sees an employee with an unusual background, another sees precisely the missing capability the organization needs. Where one sees failure, another sees information. Where one sees rejection, another sees iteration. Where one sees scarcity, another sees an invitation to invent.

The external facts may be identical. The world being experienced is not.

Context changes what becomes visible.

- And what becomes visible changes what becomes possible.
- What becomes possible changes action. Action creates
- outcomes. Outcomes reinforce context. And suddenly we
- discover something remarkable:

Context itself can become an Automacity machine.

The Automaton Inside the Entrepreneur

Here lies an uncomfortable paradox.

We admire successful entrepreneurs for seeing the world differently. Yet many of them do not know why they see it differently. They may be spectacularly effective while remaining largely unconscious of the contextual machinery producing their effectiveness.

- They simply say: "That's obvious."
- "Why wouldn't you do it that way?"
- "I knew there was an opportunity."
- "I never considered failure an option."
- But obvious to whom?

The opportunity that appears self-evident to one person can remain completely invisible to thousands of equally intelligent people. The habitual entrepreneur and the habitual failure may therefore have more in common than either realizes.

Both can be automatons of their own context.

One repeatedly generates conditions that produce expansion. The other repeatedly generates conditions that produce contraction. One interprets uncertainty as possibility. Another interprets uncertainty as danger. One experiences a setback as data. Another experiences it as confirmation. One recruits people more capable than themselves. Another feels threatened by them.

- One asks, "How could this be done?"
- Another asks, "Why won't this work?"
- And both may sincerely believe they are merely responding
- rationally to reality.

They are not. They are responding to reality as rendered by their context. And beneath the multitude of contexts through which a human being moves, I believe there often lies something even more fundamental, a kind of protean master context.

- I call it a person's Winning Formula. And when the same
- underlying architecture repeatedly produces contraction,
- dysfunction, or defeat, it becomes their Losing Formula.

The Winning Formula and the Losing Formula

The important point is that these are not simply habits. They are not strategies. They are not personality traits. They are not even merely beliefs. A Winning, or Losing, Formula is the foundational context from which a human being organizes their experience of the world and then proceeds forth into it.

It is protean because it can assume a thousand different forms while remaining fundamentally the same. It can appear in business as ambition. In marriage as control. In leadership as independence. In conflict as defensiveness. In creativity as perfectionism. In adversity as resilience. In success as confidence. In failure as withdrawal.

The manifestations change. The underlying Formula does not. And because the Formula precedes conscious interpretation, the individual usually does not experience it as a Formula at all. They experience it as reality.

This distinction is crucial. The habitual winner rarely awakens each morning and consciously applies a Winning Formula. The habitual loser does not deliberately choose a Losing Formula.

Both simply look at the world and respond to what appears to be there.

- But what appears to be there has already been filtered.
- Rendered. Organized. Given meaning.

The Formula has done its work before conscious thought even enters the room.

- One person encounters resistance and sees a puzzle. Another
- sees rejection. One encounters an extraordinarily talented
- colleague and sees leverage. Another sees competition.

One loses a major customer and thinks, What is this teaching us?

Another thinks, Here we go again.

- One encounters uncertainty and moves toward it. Another
- encounters the same uncertainty and retreats.
- Neither necessarily experiences themselves as choosing an
- interpretation. The interpretation arrives disguised as reality. That
- is the extraordinary power of the Formula.

When the Winning Formula Begins to Lose

This also explains one of the great paradoxes of success.

- Every Winning Formula contains within it the possibility of
- becoming a Losing Formula.
- The entrepreneur who has succeeded repeatedly begins
- accumulating evidence that their way of seeing the world works.
- And, of course, it does. Until it doesn't.

The confidence that allowed someone to ignore conventional wisdom can become an inability to listen.

The independence that allowed them to build when nobody believed in them can become an inability to trust others.

The perfectionism that created an extraordinary first product can become the bottleneck preventing an organization from scaling.

The relentless drive that carried a company through its fragile beginnings can eventually destroy the people required to take it to maturity.

The willingness to bet everything when there was nothing to lose can become recklessness when thousands of employees now depend upon the enterprise.

- Nothing fundamental appears to have changed within the

person.

That is precisely the problem.

The world changed. The organization changed. The stakes changed.

The Formula did not.

And because yesterday's success provided overwhelming evidence for the validity of the Formula, success itself can make the Formula increasingly invisible.

The entrepreneur stops thinking: This is how I see the world.

And begins believing: This is how the world is.

At that moment, a Winning Formula can quietly begin manufacturing failure.

The Formula Beneath Automacity

This takes us one level deeper into Automacity.

Earlier, we described the loop as: Context → Perception → Possibility → Architecture → Action → Outcome → Reinforcement.

But perhaps even that begins too far downstream. The deeper sequence may be:

Winning/Losing Formula → Context → Perception → Possibility → Architecture → Action → Outcome → Reinforcement → Formula.

Now the circularity becomes apparent.

The Formula generates the context. Context determines perception. Perception determines which possibilities become visible. Those possibilities determine which systems we construct. Those systems generate actions. Actions generate outcomes. And outcomes return as evidence validating the Formula that began the process.

> *See? I knew it.*

The winner says it. The loser says it too. And both may be correct, because both have unknowingly constructed systems capable of producing evidence for what they already believed to be true. That is Automacity at its deepest level.

We do not merely build companies. We build worlds capable of confirming the contexts from which we built them.

Success Becomes Obvious Only Afterwards

- There is another curious characteristic of Automacity. It is much
- easier to see retrospectively. After the aircraft rises from the
- runway, its flight seems inevitable.

Of course those wings generate lift. Of course those engines create thrust. Of course the control surfaces stabilize the aircraft.

- But someone first had to imagine the entire configuration
- before the aircraft ever left the ground. And before they could
- imagine that configuration, they had to inhabit a context in
- which human flight itself was possible.

That is the part history conveniently forgets. Once something exists, we rapidly lose our ability to remember how impossible it once appeared. The impossible becomes difficult. The difficult becomes achievable. The achievable becomes ordinary. And the ordinary eventually becomes obvious.

This is why hindsight conceals context.

We look backward at successful systems and say: "Of course."

- Of course people would want computers in their homes. Of
- course we would carry computers in our pockets. Of course
- But there was a moment before every “of course” when the
- prevailing context said something quite different. Great
- entrepreneurs build backward from an outcome that does not
- yet exist.

They ask: What would have to be true for this to work?

What capabilities would have to coexist? Which people would need to participate? What resources would need to be available? What must the customer believe? Where must distribution come from? What friction must disappear? What must reinforce what? But the rarest among them eventually ask one additional question:

What am I assuming must be true, and what becomes possible if that assumption isn't true at all?

- That is a different order of thinking. Because now the
- entrepreneur is no longer merely designing the aircraft. They are
- examining the assumptions that define flight.

The Vanishing Few

And here we encounter an even more interesting distinction. There are many extraordinarily successful people who remain complete automatons of their Winning Formula. Their Formula happens to work spectacularly well within the environment in which they operate.

- They may become wealthy. Powerful. Celebrated.
- Transformational. And remain almost entirely unconscious of the

machinery underneath their success.

But there is another category of person.

They are extraordinarily rare. These are people who eventually become capable of observing not merely the world, but the context through which they are observing the world.

The ordinary person sees circumstances. The talented entrepreneur sees possibilities within circumstances. The exceptional systems entrepreneur sees relationships among possibilities.

But the vanishing few can step outside even that and ask:

What is it about the context from which I am looking that makes these possibilities visible, or invisible, to me?

And deeper still: What Formula created that context?

Now something extraordinary becomes possible. The Formula itself becomes available for examination. And once the Formula becomes visible, it can potentially be challenged, expanded and reconstructed. This may be one of the highest forms of human agency.

Because until then, we are all, to some degree, automatons. We believe we are choosing freely while choosing largely from the possibilities our context permits us to see. We congratulate ourselves for our successes. We condemn ourselves for our failures.

Yet beneath both may lie assumptions about ourselves, other people and the world that we have never consciously examined.

The deepest entrepreneurial question therefore may not be: What should I build? Nor even: What system would make success inevitable? It may be: From what context am I constructing the system in the first place? And finally: What Formula created that context?

Creativity Is Still the Spark

None of this diminishes creativity. Quite the opposite.

It elevates creativity from the production of clever ideas to the design of extraordinary systems, and ultimately to the ability to reconsider the context from which those systems emerge.

The highest form of entrepreneurial creativity may therefore not be inventing a product. It may not even be designing a company. It may be the ability to see a configuration that does not yet exist because you are capable of seeing beyond the context that tells everyone else it cannot exist.

The genius is not merely in the components. The genius is in the configuration. But beneath the configuration lies context. And beneath context lies the Formula. Perhaps the rarest genius of all is the ability to see that.

Look at the Runway

When an enterprise is struggling, therefore, perhaps we should resist asking first: Who is failing?

Instead ask: What is the system currently designed to produce? Then go one level deeper: What context produced that system? And finally: What Formula produced that context?

- Because every functioning system is producing something.
- Sometimes it produces excellence. Sometimes mediocrity.
- Sometimes growth. Sometimes exhaustion. Sometimes
- innovation. Sometimes bureaucracy. Sometimes trust.
- Sometimes fear. Sometimes success. Sometimes failure.

And remarkably often, the outcome we call surprising is exactly what the architecture was quietly designed to create.

Which brings us back to that enormous aircraft sitting at the end of a runway. Thousands of flightless components. Hundreds of thousands of pounds resisting gravity. Nothing about any individual piece suggests that this object belongs in the sky.

- Then the engines spool. Thrust builds. Air accelerates across
- precisely designed wings. Pressure changes. Lift emerges. The
- nose rises. And suddenly an enormous machine weighing
- 300,000 pounds leaves the earth.

Not because gravity disappeared. Not because one component performed a miracle. But because someone created a system in which thousands of individually insufficient things, acting together, produced an outcome none could produce alone. Yet even that is not the whole story.

Before someone could build the machine, someone had to inhabit a context in which a machine heavier than air belonged in the sky. And somewhere beneath that context was an even deeper Formula, one capable of looking at gravity not merely as an immutable constraint, but as a force whose relationship with other forces might be understood sufficiently to transcend its apparent limitation.

That may be the deepest lesson of Automacity.

Extraordinary entrepreneurs are not simply people with extraordinary ideas. They are architects of relationships. They assemble talent, ideas, capital, timing, technology, reputation, execution, culture and purpose until each strengthens the others.

But the rarest among them eventually discover something even more consequential: The first system they must learn to see is the one through which they are doing the seeing.

Because Formula creates context. Context creates possibility. Possibility creates architecture. Architecture creates outcomes. And outcomes reinforce the Formula until the entire process begins to appear inevitable.

Success can do this. Failure can do it just as efficiently.

Most of us remain passengers inside that machinery, convinced that what we see is simply the way the world is. Some learn how to build the machine. Fewer learn to see the context from which the machine was conceived. And a vanishing few descend one level deeper and discover the protean Formula beneath it all.

At that moment, something extraordinary happens.

- The architect finally discovers the architecture that built the
- architect.

And perhaps that is the point at which Automacity ceases to be destiny, and becomes choice.

Next in the series — Part 2 (October 25): The Anatomy of a Loser examines what happens when a winning formula becomes a governing liability.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ravi R. Iyer, MD , is a physician-scientist, entrepreneur, author, and 5x TEDx speaker who has spent four decades exploring a deceptively simple question: What makes human beings, and the organizations they create, perform at their best? A Harvard-trained physician, corporate strategist, and the founder of multiple healthcare and performance ventures, he is the creator of Neuroalignment, a framework for building high-performance organizations around the realities of human cognitive diversity. His work sits at the intersection of biology, leadership, technology, and human behavior. Boardroom Reflections is where those worlds meet.

Election 2026 Reflections is a three-part series of independent commentary examining political leadership, institutional stewardship, and the challenges confronting American democracy.

The articles reflect the author's analysis and opinions and are intended to encourage critical thinking and constructive public discourse. They should not be interpreted as predictions of election results, voter behavior, public sentiment, or audience engagement. Any references to potential election outcomes are hypothetical and illustrative, not forecasts or endorsements.

The series focuses on what leadership must accomplish, regardless of electoral outcomes.

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