

Jack Power – Vice-Captain of School 2026

Keynote Speech 2026

In 1519, a Spanish commander named Hernán Cortés landed on the coast of Mexico with a small Spanish force. They were a long way from home, heavily outnumbered, in an unknown land, and about to take on one of the most powerful empires in the world. His men knew it. Some were on the brink of mutiny; all felt the odds stacked against them. So, what did Cortés do? He ordered his men to destroy their ships. Destroy any chance of retreat. Destroy any reason to hold back. Now they had no choice but to fight, and not just to fight, but to win.

Good morning, Mr Featherston, Mr Angus, Dr Swann, staff and boys.

Burn the ships.

The famous actions of Hernan Cortes on the shores of Mexico went on to become a saying we still use today. This same military tactic has come up across history. Legends said Alexander the great told his men to burn their ships upon arriving in Persia, as they would either return in Persian ships or die fighting. Sun Tzu famously wrote in his book ‘the art of war’: “when your army has crossed the border, you should burn your boats and bridges”.

So why does this idea keep coming up? What is it about burning the ships that makes entire armies find the willpower to fight, massively outnumbered?

The obvious answer is desperation. No way home, so you try harder. But I don't think that's it. Because sometimes the will to win just isn't enough. Trying harder is something everyone in this room can already do. What Cortés changed wasn't how hard his men were trying. It was something about how their minds worked once the exit was gone.

We've all felt it before. It happened to me 10 days ago. I was doing my trial English exam right here in the hall, timer ticking and an essay to finish with only an hour left. I had no choice but to write, and to continue writing until I finished that essay. Suddenly, the excuses stopped, the arguing with myself whether to start was over. There was nothing but me and the need to write that essay. So, I did. I got it done. Because I had to.

Then there's the other side. In English class a few weeks earlier, I had an essay to write, seventy-minutes to write it. The period went by; I took four different breaks and ended up writing just barely an intro and a body paragraph. We've all done it. I'm guessing most of you here today have a story like that too.

Same person. Same essay. So, what changed?

The exit disappeared. In that exam there was no later. The excuses stopped and all my effort went into the work, and not into whether I should do it now or later. I didn't become a better writer in a week, nor did I become more disciplined. All that changed was I no longer had an exit. And the same is true for all of you. When the exit is gone, your mind stops spending energy on the excuses it could make, and puts all of it into getting the work done.

Cortés's men weren't braver or tougher than anyone else. They were ordinary people who pushed on because their only exit was removed. Because with no exit they had nowhere to go but forward.

So, here's the real question: where are your exits?

These exits are hard to see. They hide in plain sight, looking like sensible backup plans. Sometimes it's your phone: "just one quick notification" in the middle of a study session. Sometimes it's the voice in the back of your head saying you don't really care what you get on the test. You've written the excuse before you've even started, so failing can't hurt. And sometimes it's simply "I'll start on Monday." Delay disguised as a plan.

The problem is that none of these feels like giving up. You're not quitting, you're just giving yourself a fallback for when you fail. But a fallback does something quietly: it means if you fail you've already got an excuse ready. Now that you've got an excuse you start trying a little less, because failing doesn't feel like it costs you anything.

Psychologists have a name for something like this. Self-handicapping.

Now does this mean I am telling you to go out and recklessly chase your dreams with nothing in place if you fail? No, because in reality it isn't practical to simply burn every backup plan that you have. Things happen, we fail, make mistakes and stuff up from time to time. Having a fallback isn't a bad thing, but plan B should never come at the cost of plan A.

So next time there's something you have to get done, think about the exits you've still got open. Every one of them feels harmless. But every one of them is a little bit of effort you're not putting in, a little bit you're holding back. It's not the backup plan that has to go; it's the excuse that comes with it. Take that away and watch just how differently you work.

We all like to say we can get it done. We love to tell ourselves we're sure it'll happen.

Cortés and his men removed their exit on that beach. They had no choice but to win.

It's time to remove yours.

If you are so sure, burn the ships.

Thank you.