

Learning To Lead

50 Lessons You Won't Learn In School

Ian Mathews

About Ian Mathews

Since 2001, I have hired, promoted and coached several hundred executives, managers, and supervisors. I worked for two decades as an executive with two different Fortune 500 companies.

I led businesses selling products as diverse as power generation equipment, new construction homes, financing and software.

- As one of the company's youngest executives, I led an international sales team for General Electric when the company had the largest market cap in the world.
- I led a \$4,000,000,000 profit center with 700+ employees for NVR, America's most profitable home builder, where I spent 13 years.
- I was an initial investor and corporate advisor for a technology startup, CodeGuard, that sold for 15x initial investment.

I am married to an incredible girl who keeps me grounded. Together, we live in Virginia raising two cool kids who have singled-handedly contributed to my greying hair.

We travel the world when we can but spend more time on local baseball and soccer fields. I love to coach youth sports, cook a mean omelet, alternate between Motown, country and hip-hop music, and proudly root for the very sad professional sports teams from Detroit.



Introduction

How do we learn from a book?

Dale Carnegie wrote a story of a dinner party where he knew nobody except the host. Fascinated by how much people cared about themselves, he resolved to spend an entire evening asking questions of every stranger he met.

He didn't just ask questions. Carnegie responded enthusiastically, looked them in the eye, smiled and followed up with more questions. For hours, he worked the room and found that no one reciprocated. The guests were perfectly content with talking about themselves.

The next day, the host of the party called Carnegie to tell him that he was the hit of the party. Many guests made a point to talk about how fascinating a person he was, even though he never told them one thing about himself. In one short story, Carnegie made a lasting impression on me.

To this day, I still think of that story when I attend an event with few personal connections. I spent hours every year asking new hires personal questions to help them feel comfortable. It wasn't just Carnegie.

I learned about second chances from a Jack Welch story in which he blew up a plastic factory. Ford CEO, Alan Mullaly, taught me about psychological safety when he wrote about clapping for an executive who publicly admitted a severe failure. Peter Drucker taught me about delegation with a story of a subordinate who called to check up on him on a Saturday, while Drucker was doing his direct report's work!

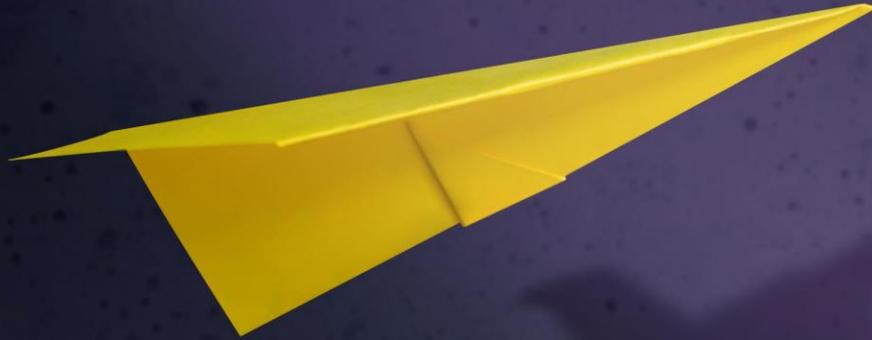
I've read 300-page business books and couldn't tell you one takeaway. So often, these tomes are filled with academia, minutia and platitudes. This book, as with all my writing, offers nothing but short stories that might stick with you for a career.

Each quirky story is meant to deliver a simple message. Often, I am the butt of the joke in the tale. The bulk of what I've learned in business derived from bone-headed mistakes. I hope to share as many as possible to save you from the same fate.

This book is not meant to be read all the way through. Each lesson stands on its own and might not have anything to do with the lesson that follows it. Read one page in the morning before work or skip around until you find one that fits a challenge you are facing.

When a book can tell a story that changes your habits, it can be magical. I hope you find a few in this collection that do the same for you.





Mindset



**There is no such
thing as a "natural."**

My neighbor has an 8-year old who loves baseball.

For five years, I've watched this kid hit baseballs off the tee in his front yard.

As soon as he could walk, he was swinging a whiffle bat. He swings that bat every day after school.

He swings all summer long. When I come home from the office, he is swinging.

Ping. Ping. Ping.

That sound is like the rooster of our neighborhood on Saturday morning. Kyle is hitting baseballs; the sun must be up.

His dad coaches but Kyle isn't waiting around until he is told to practice.

He hits baseballs into a net for hours.

1. Swing.
2. Pick up the ball.
3. Put it back on the tee.
4. Repeat.

Our little league tryouts took place this past weekend. A few hundred kids showed their stuff in front of 50 coaches.

Naturally, Kyle stood out. One coach remarked to me after seeing Kyle swing.

"Damn. That is a powerful swing."

"For sure. He's my neighbor."

"That kid is a natural."

Right. If "natural" is defined by years of daily practice, then Kyle is a "natural."

Every 8-year-old boy wants to be the best hitter on the team. But how many are willing to pay the price of admission?

Exclusive clubs are reserved for those who put in the work.

Stay in your lane.

“Everybody’s got a different circle of competence. The important thing is not how big the circle is. The important thing is staying inside the circle.”

~Warren Buffett

This gem was Buffett’s response to criticism that he missed opportunities to buy tech stocks during the dot-com bubble.

The media killed him for being too cautious and falling behind the “new methods” of evaluating companies.

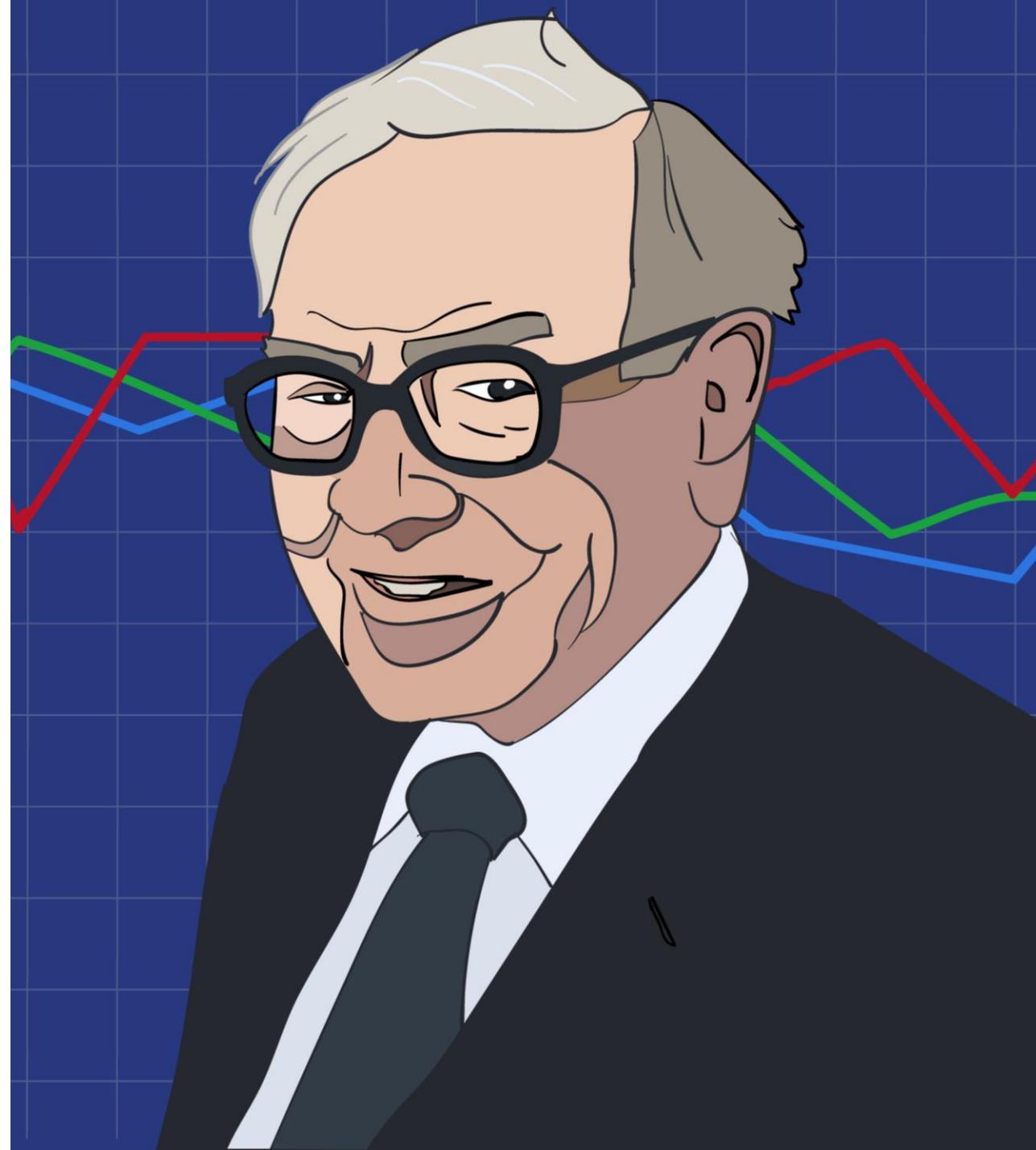
Warren had an opportunity to capitalize on easy money, but he didn’t understand the business models. Instead, he chose to invest further in businesses he understood.

It worked out well for Warren. Not so much for his detractors.

If you want to capitalize on opportunities, focus on areas that you understand deeply.

1. Buy stocks of companies in industries you are familiar with.
2. Start a business where your expertise gives you an edge.
3. Only leave your company if your background gives you an advantage in a different venture.
4. Invest in projects that amplify your company’s strengths.
5. Avoid projects that require your team to build new skillsets.
6. Pursue positions that highlight your unique skills and experience.

Ride the strengths that give you an advantage.



Fortune favors the bold.



"Fortis Fortuna Adiuvat" is loosely translated as "fortune favors the bold."

Why is a guy from Detroit dropping Latin? Good question.

"Look
If you had
One shot
Or one opportunity
To seize everything you ever wanted
In one moment
Would you capture it
Or just let it slip?"
~Eminem

That felt better. People mistake bold moves as risky when the opposite is true.

The greater risk is inactivity. Being labeled as someone who plays it safe, hiding in the shadow of others.

What in life is worth celebrating without risk?

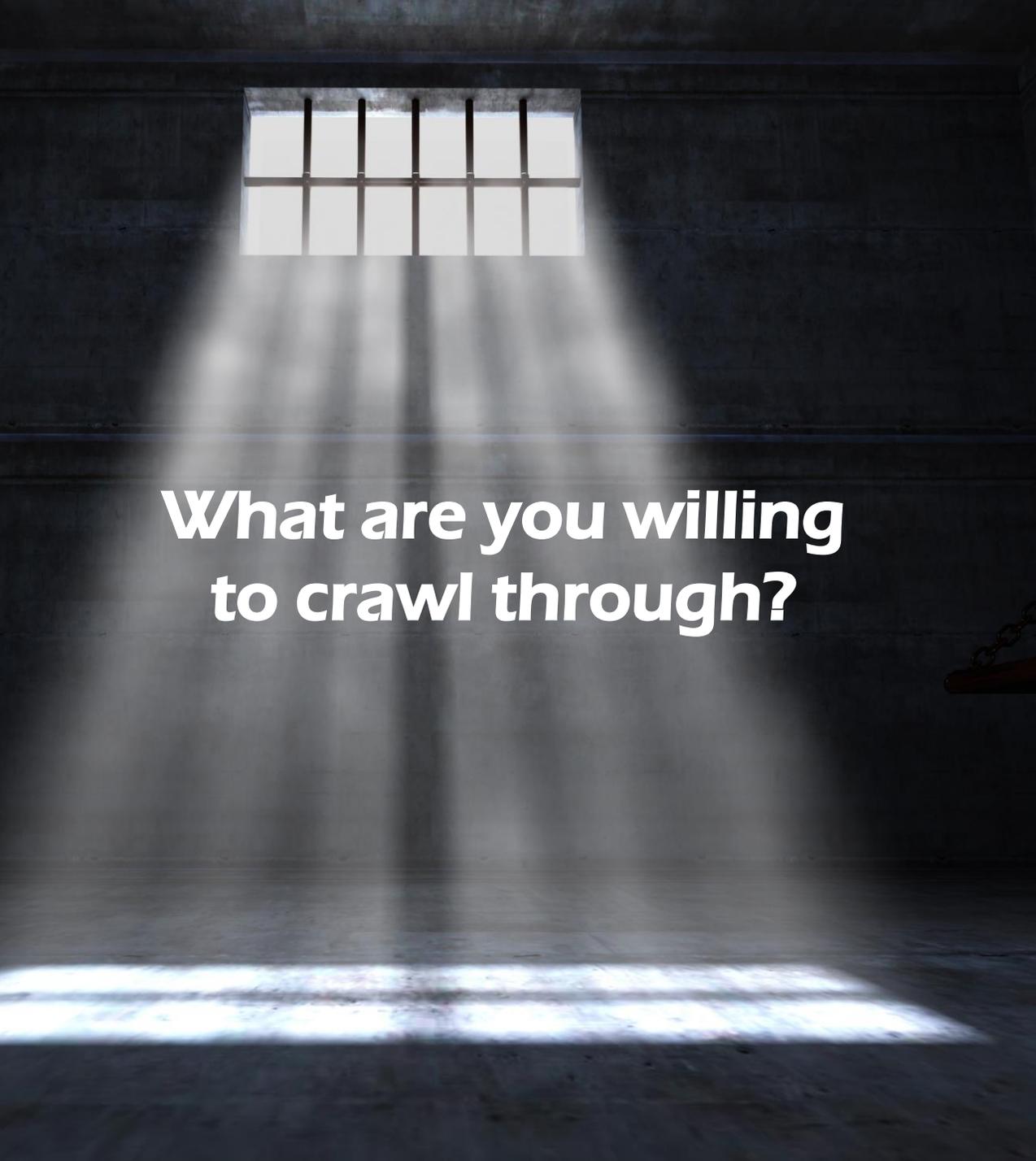
Think of any milestone that you are proud of. Trace it back far enough and it started with a risk.

- Before the championship was the tryout to make the team.
- Before the promotion was the interview.
- Before the big sale was the cold call.

No one else is paying attention to your career. You either raise your hand or get left behind.

Comfort is the enemy of success. Find opportunities to take more risk.

Fortune favors the bold.



**What are you willing
to crawl through?**

"Andy Dufresne crawled to freedom through five hundred yards of shit-smelling foulness I can't even imagine, or maybe I just don't want to."

~ "Red", The Shawshank Redemption

When I took my first management role, I jumped in my Ford Taurus and drove from Chicago to Kansas City.

I wanted to learn from a leader that I respected. Don was 35 years older than me, his team loved him, and he never rattled.

I spent a day with Don and took pages of notes. He was gracious and patient as I fired questions at him.

Before I left, he told me to forget everything I wrote down but one thing.

"If you want to be a good manager, learn how to connect with people. If you can't, nothing else matters. Buy Carnegie's CD series on influence and listen to that instead of the radio when you are stuck on the road."

I saw Don four months later. He asked how I liked the Carnegie series. I admitted that I hadn't gotten around to it.

Don smirked and said, "Everyone wants a quick fix."

Shame.

I went to Kansas City for hacks to shortcut Don's path to success. When he gave me leadership advice that involved work, I passed.

Carnegie became my background music for the next three years.

Everyone wants to escape from Shawshank, but few are willing to crawl through shit.

"Never retire or put my mike on the shelf
The baddest rapper in the history of rap itself"
~LL Cool J

LL Cool J wrote the lyrics for "I'm Bad" long before he made it.

When "I'm Bad" was released, LL Cool J had only one album which reached #47 on the billboard. His best song, "I Can't Live Without My Radio," peaked at #15 on the R&B charts.

"I'm the pinnacle that means I reign supreme
And I'm notorious I'll crush you like a jellybean"

LL Cool J was an opening act for Run DMC when he wrote that; a fringe rap star, a rookie.

"Sparrin' MC's and I'm a never get whipped
When I retire, I'll get worshiped like an old battleship"

"I'm Bad" would become his first Hot 100 song. You can feel LL Cool J willing himself to success in the lyrics.

"Kamikaze, take a look at what I've done
Used to rock in my basement now I'm number one"

He would not have a #1 hit until his collaboration with Jennifer Lopez, 15 years later.

Your mindset matters.

- Tell yourself your startup will have massive success.
- Tell yourself you are the best salesperson in your company.
- Tell yourself you deserve the promotion.

Think you're bad.



**Will yourself to
greatness.**



The only certain path to failure is inaction.

"Life is not always a matter of holding good cards, but sometimes, playing a poor hand well."
~Jack London

Following the attacks of 9/11, several customers canceled orders that I was counting on to make my quota.

My paranoia spiked after watching the news all weekend. No customer would ever purchase again.

I came in on Monday dejected.

My manager was sympathetic the previous week, but his tone changed that morning.

He saw my body language and called me into his office. His words had the effect of a doctor slapping a hysterical patient.

"This office is filled with frightened engineers. Their billable hours are disappearing, and they are watching you. If you are dejected, what hope can they have? Your leadership matters right now."

I snapped out of my funk and got on the phone. Some customers were pausing as expected, but not all.

One customer decided to take a manufacturing outage, using the lull to perform overdue maintenance.

"Do you know anyone who services power equipment?"

"Uh, we do."

By Wednesday, our engineers were at his plant and they billed through the rest of the month.

Even in terrible markets, people buy.

Whether you think you can sell in a down market or think you can't, you are correct.

The New England Patriots are much bigger losers than the Detroit Lions.

This is not an opinion. It is an unassailable truth, backed by hard evidence.

Super Bowls Lost: Patriots: 5, Lions: 0

Playoff Games Lost: Patriots: 21, Lions: 13

That is clear, objective proof that the Patriots are bigger losers than my beloved Lions.

If this "hot take" seems obnoxious, flip the example to your career.

How many people are content with not playing meaningful games, just to avoid losing?

Of course, I would rather root for a team that reached 11 Super Bowls than my Lions, who have reached zero.

Better to play on a big stage and lose than never to play at all, right Buffalo?

Take chances, raise your hand, apply for an open position, build a company, publish your writing, leave a dead-end job, attack a new market, take a risk, be uncomfortable.

Life isn't about avoiding losses, but most people make career decisions based on this criteria.

Play more meaningful games. You'll take some losses but there is no better way to start winning.





**Without
struggle,
there is
nothing to
celebrate**

"I was happy, and I knew that I was happy. We sense happiness with difficulty while experiencing it. Only when it has passed, and we look back do we suddenly comprehend, sometimes with astonishment, how happy we have been."

~Zorba the Greek

Most of my favorite stories, anecdotes and lessons took place during three distinct periods:

- 1. The dot-com bubble and recession**
- 2. The aftermath of 9/11 attacks**
- 3. The credit crisis from 2007 to 2009**

My favorite moments in sports and school also took place after defeats. Specifically, I remember my response to adversity.

I have little to say about the bull markets. I remember those years as a giant pain in the ass. I was busy, tired and constantly looking for more people.

Teams don't need to be creative when the wind is at their back. They just hope to keep up.

It is difficult to stand out when the economy is on fire. Everyone looks like a star. But when the wind turns, stars separate from the pack.

It is difficult to see in the moment, but you look back at your worst years as those of incredible personal growth and creativity.

You will likely look back fondly on your team and how you overcame great odds. You laugh at the seemingly ridiculous lengths you went to overcome.

Embrace the struggle.

In my first summer internship, I did what most interns do.

Jack squat.

I worked in the mechanical engineering department of an automotive supplier in Detroit. Engineers drafted in pencil on large drafting boards.

I pretended to be busy and counted the minutes until happy hour. We wore short-sleeve shirts and ties. The only sound was typing and the hum of the HVAC unit.

Everyone was miserable.

I sat next to an engineer who had over 20 years with the company. He hated every minute and wanted to be an artist.

He doodled during his lunch break and he was talented. When he was younger, he took art classes and aspired to do something with it.

Two decades slipped away and his dream just vanished. One day, the company reduced staff and he didn't make the cut.

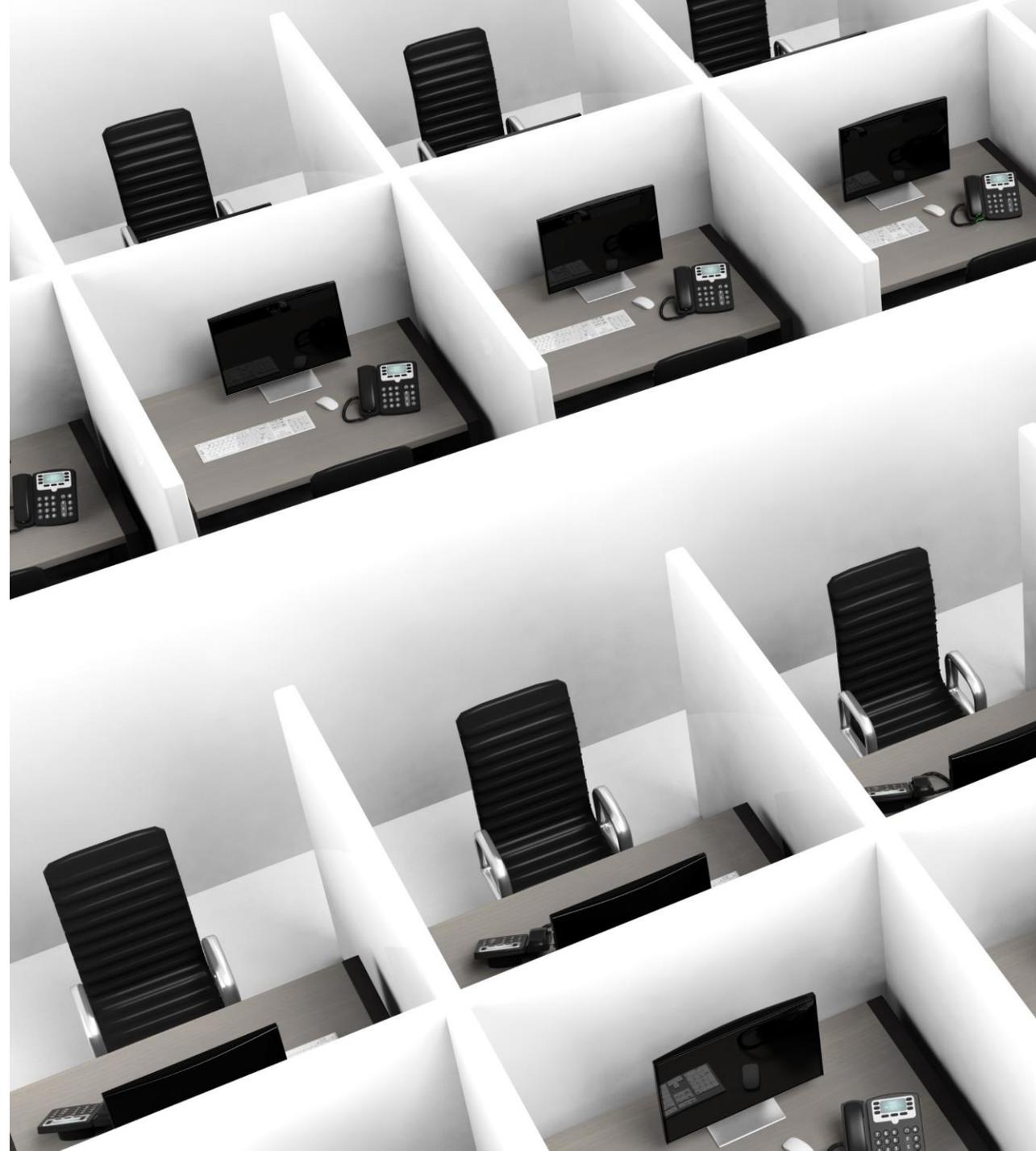
I walked outside with him after he packed up. I didn't know what to say so I encouraged him to "follow his dream and be an artist."

He looked at me like the dumb kid I was, "Are you nuts? I have a mortgage."

I said goodbye and that was the last time I talked with him. He found a similar job, doing more work that he hated.

That moment had a lasting impact on me. You can still fail at something you don't want.

The longer you wait, the less likely you will ever try.





Move on to the next play

Why was Stan considered "The man?"

Late in a game against the Chicago Cubs in 1954, Stan Musial ripped a sure double down the right-field line to break a scoreless tie.

The first base umpire called it foul and later admitted to missing the call. Musial's St. Louis Cardinals teammates went crazy and several stormed the field.

The shortstop quickly got himself tossed out of the game by the umpire, followed by the manager and several other Cardinals.

Musial calmly approached the home plate umpire, Augie Donatelli, to see what the fuss was about.

"What happened Augie? Didn't count, huh?"

"Lee called it foul," replied Donatelli with some regret in his voice.

"Well, there's nothing you can do about that."

Musial waved his teammates off the field, stepped back into the box and promptly smacked another double to almost the same spot.

Stan Musial is considered one of the greatest baseball players in history with 3,630 career hits (4th all-time).

Musial was gifted but his mindset is what separated him from everyone else. He knew there was no sense dwelling on a bad break. Focus on the next at-bat.

The next time life throws a bad break at you, pause, reflect and respond with, "Well, there's nothing you can do about that."

Forget what could have been and focus on what is in your control.



Compare yourself against one standard

Who said it better, 50 Cent or Aeschylus?

"And you should love it way more than you hate it
Oh, you mad? I thought that you'd be happy I made it
I'm that cat by the bar toastin' to the good life
Moved out the hood, now you tryin' to pull me back, right?"
~50 Cent (radio edit)

"It is in the character of very few men to honor without envy a
friend who has prospered."
~Aeschylus (papyrus scroll edit)

Regardless of your success, someone is likely doing better.

It is human nature to envy. It is also irrational.

In the same song, 50 Cent writes about his envy of 2Pac.

"In the hood then the ladies saying '50 you hot'
They like me, I want them to love me like they love 'Pac"

Comparing ourselves with others is a losing game.

A better mindset is to admit that you admire someone's success.
Envy is a form of admiration, whether you admit it or not.

Rather than comparing yourself with others, compare yourself to
where you were one, five or ten years ago.

Are you becoming a better version of yourself?

Becoming a better you is more achievable than chasing millions
of others. Your success will unsettle others. Leadership is about
accepting their envy for what it is.

They don't hate you, they admire you.

"And if they hate, then let 'em hate, and watch the money pile up"

My daughter landed the lead role in "Piggy Can Fly."

It was a big moment. The Mathews family had arrived.

Then the enormity of the moment hit her, "What if I screw up in front of everyone, daddy?"

Not everyone is built for the pressure of playing Piggy in a first-grade play. This is a role that requires an elite acting range.

I asked her how she could build her confidence.

"Practice my lines?"

Bingo.

Public speaking has been a regular part of my job for twenty years. When I am nervous, it means that I haven't prepared enough.

If I put in the work and rehearse, I don't feel anxiety.

When someone tells me they are anxious about delivering a speech or presentation, my advice is simple.

Rehearse it ten more times from start to finish.

The same is true for a sales rep worrying about an important customer presentation. If you are nervous, do more research on the customer.

Anxiety is a powerful tool. It is your body's way of telling you that you are not ready.

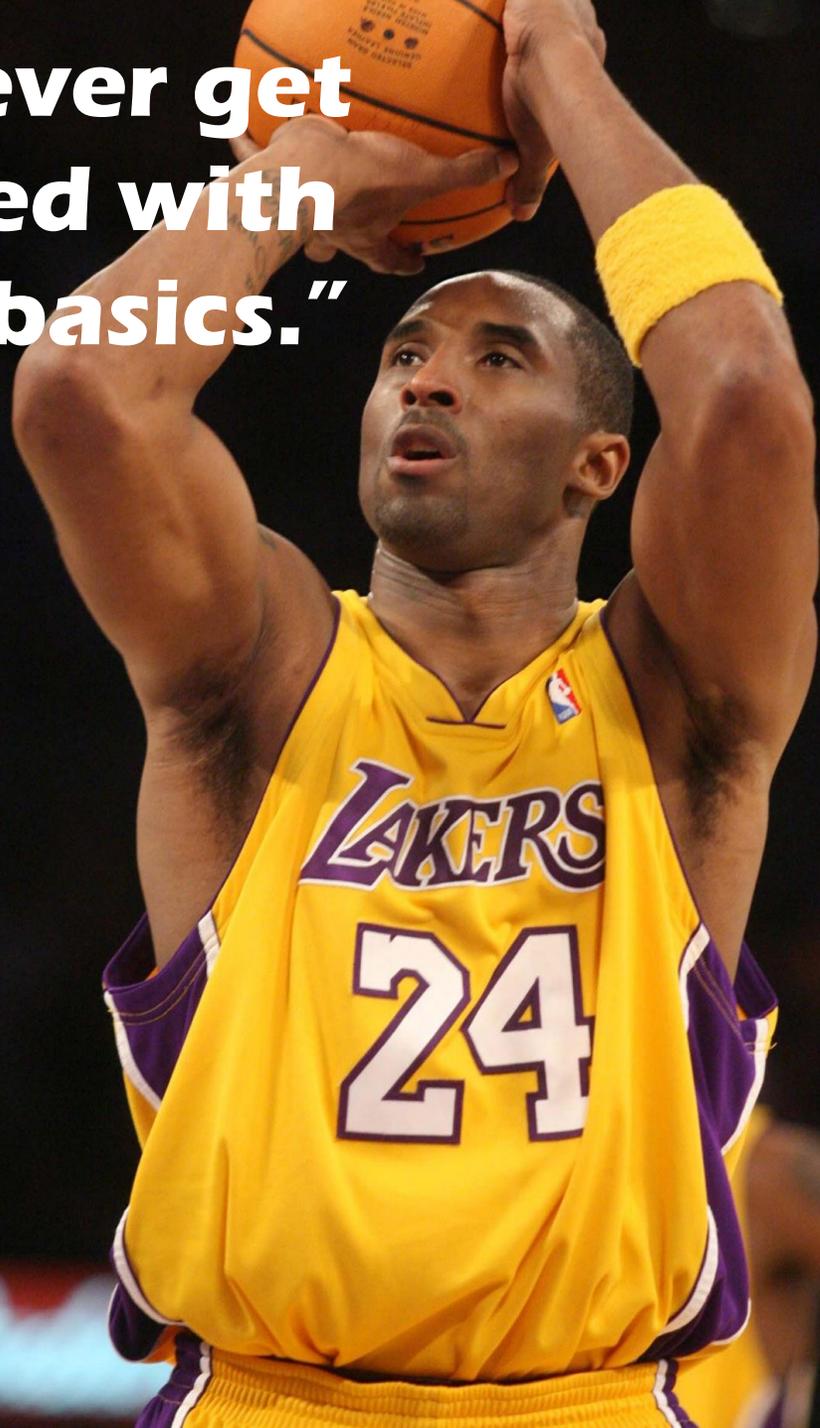
My daughter practiced with me every night for two weeks until she knew her lines (and mine). She killed it and learned another small lesson about hard work and success.

Confidence and anxiety are functions of preparation.

Anxiety is a function of preparation



“I never get bored with the basics.”



Alan Stein tells an incredible story about Kobe Bryant.

Stein watched one of Kobe's private workouts. For two hours, Bryant went through a basic routine.

Stein was surprised to see Kobe practicing drills that youth basketball players work on; jab steps, pivots, footwork, basic dribbling.

After the workout, Stein told Kobe that he hadn't expected the best player in the world to practice such a basic routine. Kobe responded with, "Why do you think I am the best player in the world?"

I coach a little league team and we practice indoors in the winter. It is challenging to simulate baseball inside. We focus on basic reps.

- Hit off the tee 100 times.
- Catchers block the same ball 50 times.
- Infielders look in the same backhand 50 times.

It is monotonous. The temptation as a coach is to create more exotic drills.

But there is no point in attempting next-level techniques until the kids can master the basics.

The basics are what make elite performers special.

- Before you study sales closing techniques, get better at building rapport and opening.
- If you are not skilled at hiring, coaching and developing people, don't progress to strategy training.
- Before you read a new business book, re-read your favorite.

Master the basics.

Pull-ups: 0
Push-ups: 0
Sit-ups: 4
Football Attitude: Aggressive

That is my assessment from a University of Michigan youth football camp I attended when I was 10 years old. I'm not sure how many push-ups the other kids did, but it is safe to assume Bo Schembechler didn't earmark me for a scholarship.

Little league tryouts can be a crucible. Boys field, hit and pitch for four hours while coaches take detailed notes.

For a 9-year old, it is intimidating. All eyes are on you. Some kids will be good enough to play up against older competition. Others will be asked to play down.

I see it as an opportunity.

Showing up is a test of resilience. They have the option of quitting and avoiding the stress of a tryout. Every kid will grow from the experience.

Those who are disappointed have choices.

1. Complain that the tryout wasn't fair.
2. Assume that this isn't their sport.
3. Own it and decide to work harder.

Sounds a lot like what we face as adults, doesn't it?

At some point, everyone's ambition hits a wall. We attempt something and come up short. Do we complain and cast blame, or do we double our efforts?

This difference in mindset determines how many personal goals we reach in life.

Keep showing up.





Teammates



**Do the job before
you have the title**

What is the point of conducting a panel interview of internal candidates when a leadership position opens?

What can people tell you in sixty minutes that they have not demonstrated eight hours per day for months or years?

If you are direct with your team about what it takes to get the next promotion, it should be obvious to the team who is getting the next big job.

You want results – that's a given. But you also need someone with emotional intelligence and a willingness to act as an amazing teammate.

Before you promote your next leader, ask these questions of the existing team:

- 1. Who do you go to for help when managers are busy?**
- 2. Who is your most helpful teammate?**
- 3. If you were to assign a new employee to a teammate for training, who would it be?**
- 4. If you were out of the office for an extended period, who would you choose to cover for you?**
- 5. Which teammate do you respect the most?**

Probe after each answer. Follow up with "Why?" and dig for examples.

Forget interviews and tests. Your next leader is likely doing the job without the title today.

Ignore what they say, watch what they do.

"How do I survive if my company is cutting jobs?"

In 2008, I had the unpleasant task of consolidating four offices and reducing total staff by 50%.

This was our third round of reductions and it was awful. I notified the managers who would survive the cuts first.

The future looked bleak in 2008. With the economy collapsing, I made no promises about the future.

I told my managers that the street fight we had been in for two years was about to get uglier. We were walking down a dark alley and they were the people I wanted by my side.

I let that group of managers choose who they wanted to keep, asking that they consider the same criteria that I did.

- 1. Assume the nastiest economy of your life with desperate competitors making your life miserable. Which people help your office survive?**
- 2. Only value tenure if that experience will make your office stronger than keeping those with less tenure.**

They kept some employees with hardly any tenure and said goodbye to some people with 10+ years with the company. We kept the best possible team and thrived as a result.

To remain solvent, businesses need to make gut-wrenching decisions. Companies that survive this downturn will place a premium on production.

If a team is to be smaller, it must become stronger.



**Be someone your
company needs in
a street fight**



I asked my first-grade daughter who would get a Valentine's card if she could only give three.

"Mae Ruth, Josephine . . . wait, why only three?"

"It's just a question. Can you pick three?"

"I want to give more."

"How many?"

She rattled off names and only stopped after what sounded like every kid in the class, "I don't want to tell someone they can't have one."

She told me that it isn't difficult to make a Valentine. You only draw a heart and write your name.

Certain things in life are exclusive. Kids see enough of this by second grade.

- The talent show doesn't accept everyone who auditions.
- Only so many kids make the travel soccer team.
- Not every kid makes it into advanced math.

Some things are better when inclusive. Being nice is one of those things. Like Valentine's cards, the golden rule doesn't require much work.

- Appreciate someone on your team when they least expect it.
- Help a teammate when no one is looking.
- Compliment and thank a customer for choosing your company.

The extra effort is minimal to be inclusive, especially when compared to the return.

Be helpful, be nice, be inclusive.

Desire

maximize income

be a great teammate

Outcome

lame teammate

maximize income

Putting Others First Is A Winning Strategy

"I want to maximize my earnings potential."

Top earners add the most value to the organization. Their presence makes the team stronger, whereas selfish people weaken the team.

If you seek wealth, focus on being a great teammate. In the long run, companies reward those who generate returns and it is impossible to do that on your own.

Leadership starts with putting your team first.

Short-term Strategy:

- Please management
- Focus on results over everything else
- Take more than you give

Long-term Strategy:

- Please customers
- Focus on team outcomes
- Give more than you take



What is your say/do ratio?

Nothing supports or destroys your personal brand like an ability to hit deadlines.

Companies are judged on delivering promised results vs. a committed timeline.

How do you feel about the restaurant who promises delivery within 25 minutes, and shows up 90 minutes later?

Even in extraordinary times, you are likely annoyed.

That feeling is experienced by your peers and managers when you miss a deadline. There are few labels considered more valuable than "accountable."

Imagine a job reference call where a former boss says, "She is one of the most accountable people I ever worked with." What is left to say?

Most accountable people are not just organized machines. They excel at something else.

- 1. Accountable people negotiate terms before they commit.**
- 2. They don't say yes to every request.**
- 3. They understand their workload and help others understand their priorities.**
- 4. They delegate less important tasks to fit tasks with higher returns.**

It is possible to have a say/do ratio of 100% if you negotiate the "say." Better to ask for an extension than commit and miss.

"Boys, Elvis has left the building."

That was Don Mattingly's response when a young Jim Leyritz stormed out of the NY Yankees dugout after Buck Showalter pinch-hit for him.

Leyritz rubbed teammates and management the wrong way all season with his brash approach. The Yankees captain had enough.

Everyone in the dugout cracked up, but Mattingly wasn't finished. He followed Leyritz into the locker room and demanded that he get back in the dugout with his teammates.

"Who the f@\$k are you?"

Leyritz appeared shortly after with his tail tucked between his legs.

Another time, Mattingly showed a different kind of leadership. Several teammates were hazing a struggling Bernie Williams in his rookie season. One veteran called him "Bernice" and Mattingly had to be pulled off him.

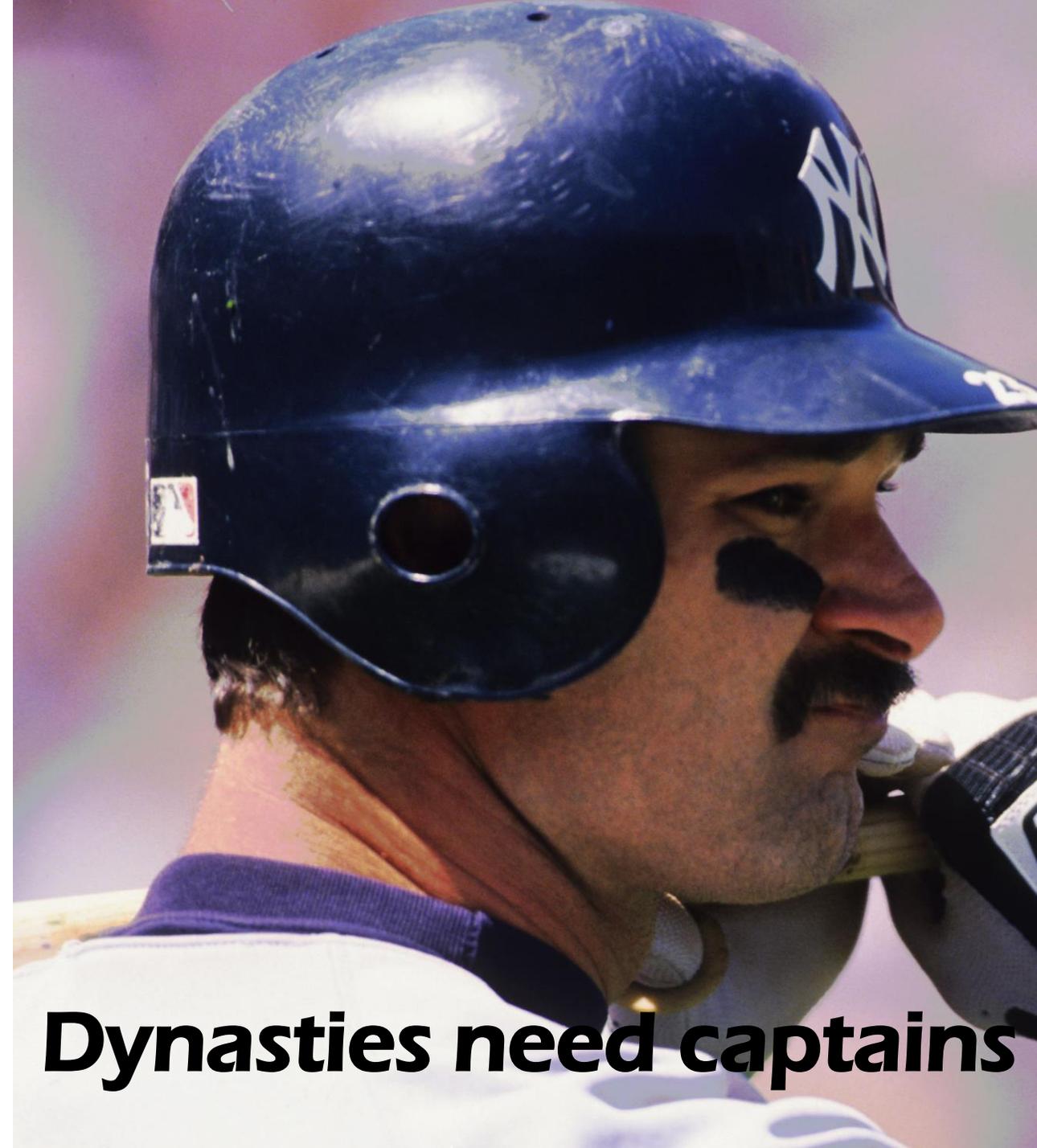
"This guy is going to be a part of some good baseball here. Let's make it easier instead of harder."

Captains are every bit as important to a team as the manager. A handful of top performers shape the informal personality of any team.

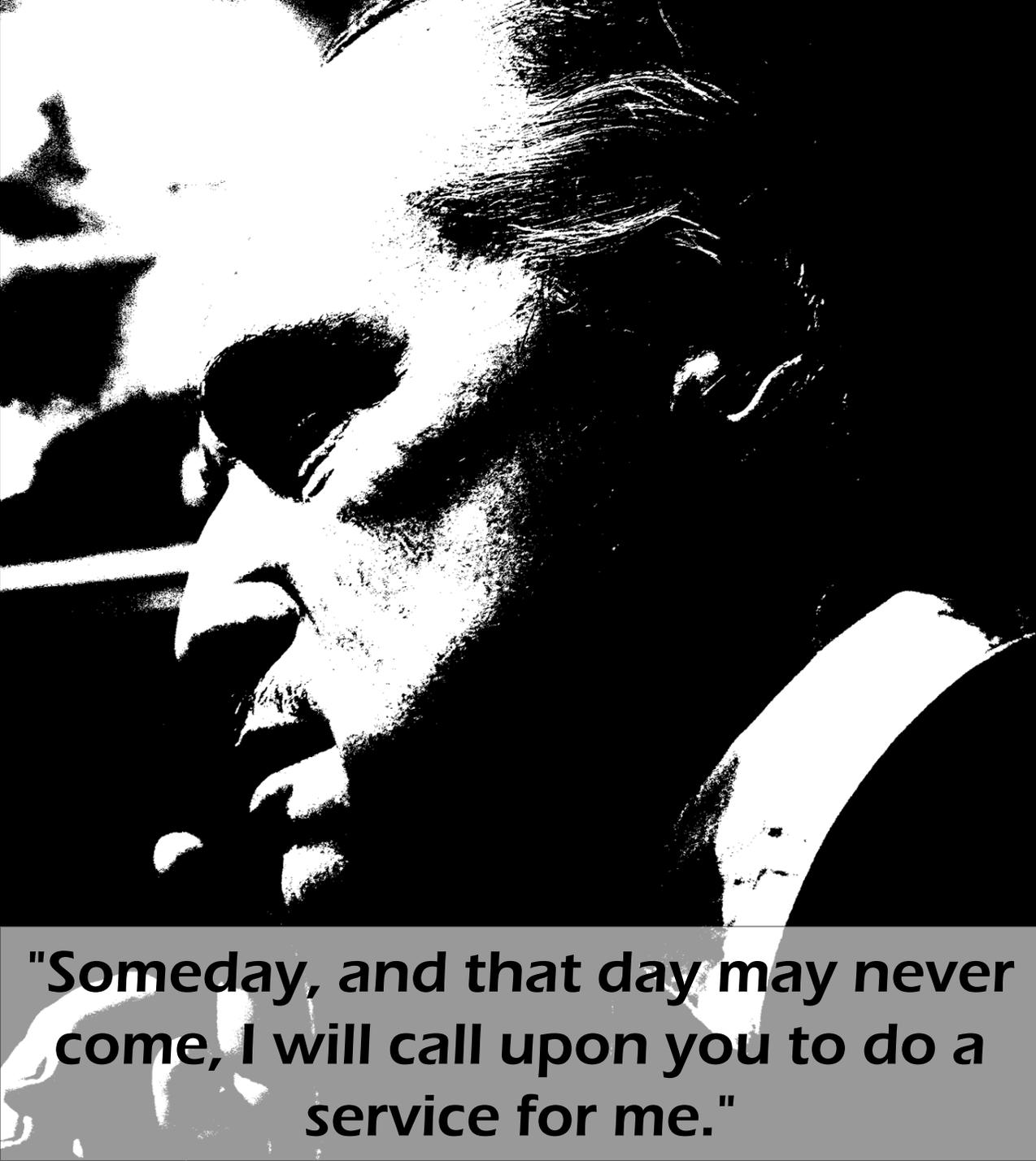
If your best players are bad apples, you have no chance of building something special.

When your best players are also your hardest working and most vocal leaders, give them a voice and anything else they need to stay.

Invest in your captains.



Dynasties need captains



The Godfather knew how to build a network.

Give first, receive later.

Misguided people attend conferences and events, hoping to collect as many business cards as possible.

For what? Who wants to do business with you because they met you at a networking event?

A manager's job is to be useful. A manager with a strong network is more useful to their team than one who solves every problem individually.

Networks are built one favor at a time.

Strong connections are built by being helpful when someone needs you. The Godfather was helpful with caveats, but it is more effective just to be helpful.

Give without expectation.

20% of most teams generate 50% of the results. These extraordinary performers accomplish more by leveraging an "unfair share of company resources."

Their "invisible team" is quietly doing small favors for them behind the scenes. These helpers might handle a task that isn't in their job description or move a priority to the top of the list.

This isn't luck or coincidence. That network was once on the receiving end of small favors from the top performer.

The number of people who fight for you is directly related to how many people you fought for.

"Someday, and that day may never come, I will call upon you to do a service for me."



**Don't shy
away from
dirty work.**

"Why the hell am I scraping a sticker off of this toilet?"

A small business owner told me about his rock-bottom moment as an entrepreneur.

Two years after leaving a high-paying executive role with a big company, he was mired in the muck of a startup.

Staging a home for sale, he noticed this his crew neglected to pull a sticker from the toilet. Two years earlier, his staff would catch a detail like this. On this day, the sticker was his responsibility.

Founders wear every hat, especially early in the cycle.

- Bezos boxed products.**
- Gates wrote code.**
- Buffett did all the trading.**
- Run DMC wrote, produced and marketed.**

Ten years later, his business will generate \$10M in revenue.

He credits his success to the early years when he was forced to do everything.

He could train every person on his team because he did their job before he hired them. He is empathetic because he knows the obstacles they face. He is also tough to bullshit for the same reason.

When he was the only employee, he was the director of operations, sales, marketing, finance and technology.

Today, he doesn't have time to scrape a toilet sticker, but he knows where to look.

Understand your team's work but be humble enough to let them do it.



How to get promoted

- 1. Get results. If you plan to lead your peers, it helps to bring a decent resume.**
- 2. Be vocal and positive in meetings.**
- 3. Volunteer ideas that are working for you. Stop hoarding best practices.**
- 4. Make your manager's team stronger.**
- 5. Offer feedback if you see unintended consequences of a poorly designed process or policy.**
- 6. If you're going to complain, do it in private. No one likes being criticized in public, including your manager.**
- 7. Be helpful, always. Don't turn people away when they ask for help. Great teammates sacrifice to help their team.**
- 8. Become the first person that your peers go to when they are stuck.**
- 9. Volunteer to train every new hire. Make new employees feel welcome. Onboarding a new hire is perfect training for prospective managers.**
- 10. Behave like a leader before you have the title.**

My favorite managers:

- 1. Made me laugh every time we talked (well, almost every time).**
- 2. Got out of my way on stuff I was good at.**
- 3. Told me the result they wanted and let me figure out how to reach it.**
- 4. Let me make decisions that might lose the company money.**
- 5. Knew when to agitate me (i.e. piss me off).**
- 6. Gave me more to do when I was busy, forcing me to delegate.**
- 7. Were good role models in their personal lives.**
- 8. Fought for me when I wasn't in the room.**
- 9. Gave me credit for wins and took responsibility for my losses.**
- 10. Were not offended when I told them that their idea was shit.**





Persuasion

Learn to hunt

In a drought, are you taking the lion or the water buffalo?

A sustained period without rain is nature's way of resetting the ecosystem. African wildlife separates into winners and losers when the rain stops.

Animals that rely on vegetation quickly run out of dry grass. Hippos, buffalos, and warthogs crowd around shrinking watering holes.

They keep showing up to the same spots that worked when water was abundant. Those animals who relied on abundance are the first to go.

Predators dominate in a world of less. They lick their chops as prey becomes weaker and less capable of fending off their attacks.

Early in a drought, lions and wild dogs get fat. These animals are accustomed to working for food, rather than grazing off an ample supply.

Eventually, predators must out-battle their peers for a dwindling supply of food and only the fittest of each species will survive.

Some businesses are built on grazing while others have a hunting culture. In a recession, companies with a predator's DNA tend to outlast those requiring an ample supply of rain.

Predators will be in high demand in the coming months. If companies cannot develop their own, they will pay top dollar to acquire great hunters. It happens in every recession.

Teach yourself how to hunt.



Mice are not rewarded



A friend of mine is starting a consumer product business.

His product is unique, requires design engineering and he barely has a working prototype.

Many founders strive for a perfect product before marketing their idea. They tinker, tweak and hide their idea until it matches an ideal vision.

This owner took a different approach. He leveraged his network to convince an executive at Home Depot to meet with him. And he killed it.

Now he has the confidence that a massive retailer is interested in his product. Sharing his idea was a win/win approach. The upside is obvious.

But if the executive didn't like his product, he could learn valuable market feedback and begin the process of iteration.

Too many people wait to get "picked."

Startups spend money on websites and internet ads hoping to draw attention to their product. Employees mistakenly think their work should stand alone. If they do a good job, someone will reward them with more money or a big promotion.

It doesn't work that way. Mice are not rewarded. Waiting gives power to the system. It lets you place the blame on someone else.

If you are not chosen, it is the system's fault, not yours. While you play the victim, others take your prize.

Those who ask are rewarded. Stop waiting to be chosen.

Play offense, ready or not.

"Many of the truths that we cling to depend on our point of view." ~Yoda

I planned to add some lighting in my yard. I scheduled an appointment with a lighting company as the novel corona virus shutdown was starting.

I met with a sales rep and we walked my property, keeping six feet from each other and making a few awkward jokes.

The price was what I expected, and I liked his proposal for installation. I hoped they might have availability to do the project over the weekend.

All he needed to do was ask me when his installers could begin work.

Instead, he talked about how business had slowed down. He was certain that his owner would "cut us a great deal."

He kept going. I learned that they are typically busy in the spring but with all the cancellations, they have "excess capacity."

I felt for him. His life was nothing but nervous customers and disappearing business.

But that was not my life. I have plenty to worry about, but the market for exterior lighting is not one of them.

The more he talked, the more I questioned my timing. If everyone was canceling, maybe I should too.

A few targeted questions and an assumptive close would have resulted in a deposit check. Instead, he talked his way out of a sale.

Be careful not to impose your point of view on customers.



My truths are not yours.



**Seek first to
understand,
then be
understood.**

Two sales reps knocked on my office door.

Normal people hate to be interrupted by a salesperson. I love it.

They mumbled through an introduction and I gathered that they were selling for a mobile company. Without asking me anything, they led with how their service can save money.

Unless you are selling cookies door-to-door, don't lead with features. It is assumptive and involves guessing. I decided to be difficult and offered a cheeky response.

"I'm not interested in saving money. I'm rich."

Blank stares. A feature is only relevant if it matches a need.

"OK, um, our network has 99.9% reliability, which is typically ..."

"Fellas, I can't remember the last time my phone dropped a call."

One scrambled to pull a pamphlet from his binder. Sigh. Our company, our product, our service. They didn't ask one question about me.

Door-to-door selling is tough, and their odds were low from the start. But what if they led by stating the obvious?

"I bet you regret that you opened this door."

This would make me laugh and put a label on the uncomfortable truth of their job.

Follow that with questions about my business and the role mobile plays, and I might be more receptive.

Seek first to understand, then be understood.

Trust Your Gut

"I got an idea
That I wanna share
You don't like it, so what, I don't care"
~Rob Base

When I was a new manager, I told a peer that I was hosting an annual meeting for my region.

Our team had earned some public recognition after a great year.

"Do NOT do that. Bill is not a fan of meetings like that."

Bill was the founder of our company. He was a demanding boss and notoriously cheap.

As tough as he was, I knew Bill would see the value if I could get him to attend. So I put a deposit on a room and ordered trophies.

Three weeks before the meeting, I walked into Bill's office and asked if he would be our keynote speaker. Before he could object, I told him what an honor it would be for front-line employees to hear from the President.

"You're having a meeting?"

"Yes, and we would love it if you would stay and hand out trophies when we announce the winners."

Bill agreed without objection. How could he not, being the honored guest? He had a blast and spoke at every annual meeting until he retired.

You can't succeed by waiting for approval of every idea.

Trust your gut and accept the consequences.

"Who they attractin' with that line, 'What's your name, what's your sign?'

Soon as he buy that wine, I just creep up from behind
And ask you what your interests are, who you be with
Things to make you smile, what numbers to dial"

~The Notorious B.I.G.

Could it be that young Biggie Smalls secretly read Carnegie books in his mom's Brooklyn apartment?

"Be a good listener, encourage others to talk about themselves and speak in terms of the other person's interests."

~Dale Carnegie

Both men say the same thing, though Biggie does it with a better bass line. To build a relationship, take a sincere interest in the other person.

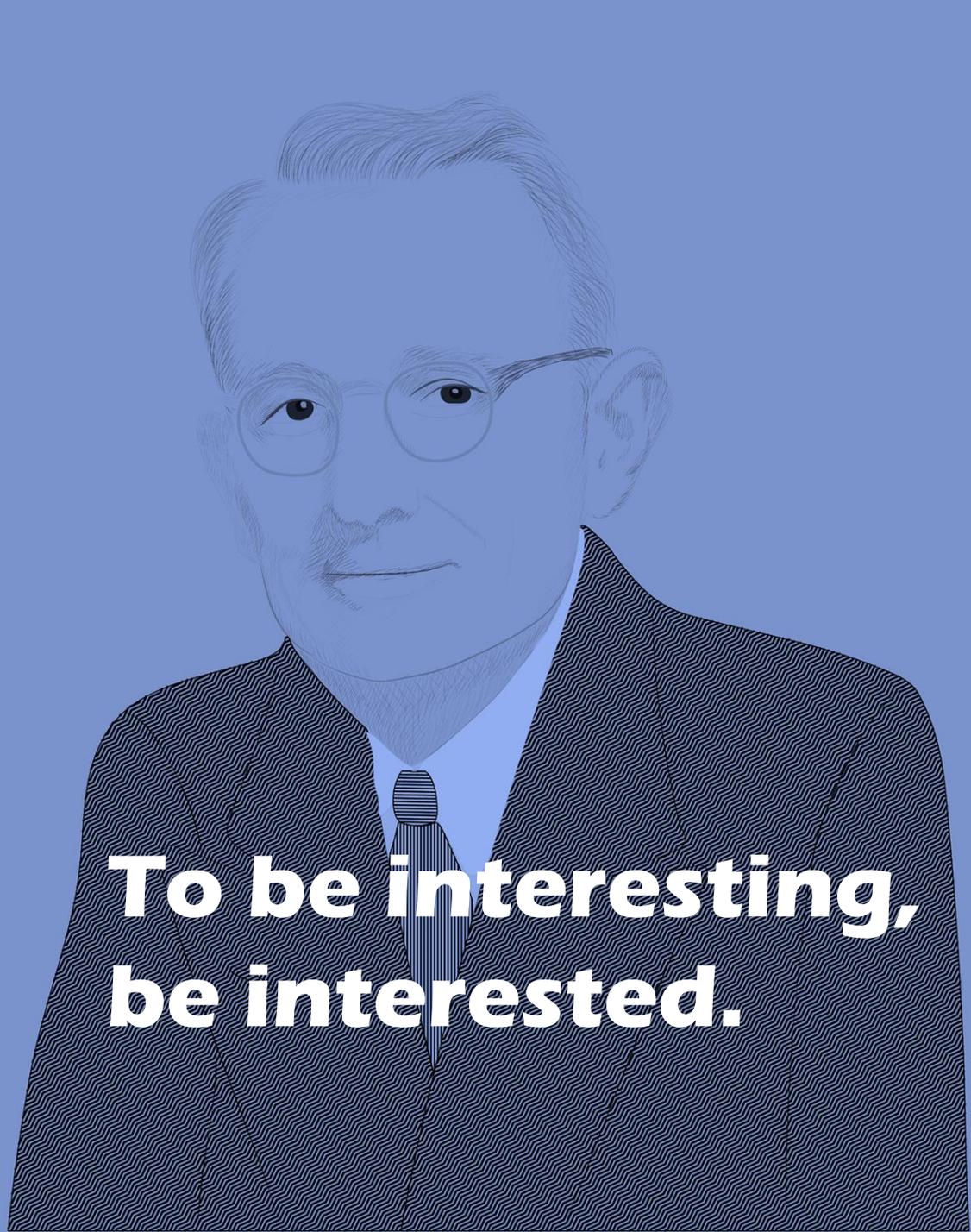
If you work in management, make it about your team. Everyone works for different reasons. One size does not fit all when it comes to leading people.

If you desire a strong network, first take time to help people reach their goals. This is the only way to make them care about yours.

Each person on your team is driven by different motivation. Understand what brings each person to the office every day. Then help them get what they want.

If you sell for a living, understand that prospects only care about their issues. Listen with intent, seek to understand what they want and solve their problems.

Influence like Dale and Biggie.



**To be interesting,
be interested.**



Luck favors the visible

Have you ever tried to get caught on the Jumbotron at a hockey game?

You have a 1 in 35,000 chance of doing nothing and getting lucky. Camera operators look for interesting people who rouse the crowd. The odds improve when you put yourself out there.

Wearing a costume is excellent. Homemade signs are effective. Taking your shirt off is a crowd-pleaser, especially in a town like Chicago.

Nothing beats dancing.

You can't just dance once and expect the camera to spot you. You must get after it every single time a song from "Jock Jams" plays.

The more you dance, the better your odds. Soon, cameras will start looking for you, and your "luck" will change.

Success in business is no different.

Raise your hand. Jump on every project, even when you're not paid to do so. Present at the meeting. Offer to mentor the new hire. Bring a new idea to your boss every week.

Make it difficult not to promote and pay you more. Be seen, be on the radar of management. Don't assume your work speaks for itself.

If you run a startup, don't hope someone finds you. Be visible, show up, make noise, dance. Keep your shirt on.

Luck favors those who are visible.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

~Lao Tzu

**"She's dressed in yellow, she says 'Hello,
come sit next to me you fine fellow.'**

You run over there without a second to lose

And what comes next hey bust a move."

~Young MC

I stumbled into a career day hosted by GE while on campus as a senior at Purdue University. I assumed that I was not qualified to work at GE for several reasons.

1. I did not have an electrical background.

2. My GPA was average.

I saw a full room of eager kids, all dressed in suits.

I wore shorts, a t-shirt, and a baseball hat. I had a resume in my backpack, so I figured I had nothing to lose.

I waited in line at a table advertising a sales leadership program.

Hesitant to discuss my perceived weaknesses, I asked questions to keep the subject off me.

- "What does it take to be a great salesperson for GE?"

- "What do your new sales reps struggle with?"

- "How did you get into sales?"

The more I asked, the more I learned. The recruiter described attributes that I had, and I used that intel to share a few stories. Then I closed.

"So what do you think? Can I interview tomorrow?"

I walked into that room for practice. I left with an interview.

Take that step.

Bust a move





Your First Sales Will Be Incomplete Products

Cap'n Crunch sits on my Mount Rushmore of breakfast cereals.

The idea for Cap'n Crunch came from market research in the 60s that children preferred crunchy foods versus soggy foods.

Quaker hired an advertising firm to create a brand and mascot for a crunchy, sweet cereal yet to be created.

Once Cap'n Crunch was conceived, Quaker hired the animation studio that created Rocky and Bullwinkle, and the voice actor for Yogi Bear.

Only after the first cartoon commercial was finished did Quaker create the cereal, which became the 9th best-selling cereal within two years.

This is not unusual for a startup.

When a business is in concept mode, ideas need to be tested, marketed and prototyped. The first sales of your product/service will be incomplete versions of your vision.

Great marketing is about selling an incomplete product because the features are less important than solving a problem.

Homebuilders often sell out of a model home. If the price and location are right, a beautiful model will generate sales.

But what if you are tasked with selling from a trailer before the model is built? The process doesn't change.

They visited you because the status quo isn't working. Solve the problems they are currently facing.

Sell the crunch, not the cereal.



**Leading
People**

Your perspective matters less than their perspective.



"I'm stressed out, dad."

Stressed out? You're nine years old, kid.

I am careful not to dismiss this comment from my son. I don't remind him that I do all the worrying for him; that if anyone should be stressed, it is me.

I don't tell him how much easier his life is than when I was his age. If I respond dismissively, he will stop sharing anything with me.

I consider that his perception is what matters, not mine. Then I ask questions.

- "Why are you stressed, buddy?"
- "What is the worst that will happen?"
- "Do you feel unprepared?"

He might be stressed about a math test, or maybe an upcoming little league game. My job is to help him label that fear, not bury it. When we articulate fear, it holds less sway over us.

I can help him see that he is in control. His score on the math test is not some force that will randomly happen to him. His grade reflects his preparedness. He controls the outcome by studying hard.

Leading people in a business is not much different. Become a manager who:

1. People trust and share openly with you.
2. Listens without judgment.
3. Helps people see that they are in control.

Don't wait for the exit interview to learn about what is troubling your team.

Be someone they can talk to today.

Anyone can lead with the wind at their back.

I talked with the CEO of a successful restaurant business shortly after lockdowns were ordered due to the novel corona virus.

The prior week, he attended a new restaurant opening. He did 40 of those openings in the last decade. He gives a speech, cuts a ribbon and the new staff cheers. People gather around to take pictures with him.

As the founder, he's a bit of a celebrity. He can do a restaurant opening in his sleep. That's the easy part.

Last night, he was preparing to make some tough decisions that were unfathomable just one week ago. His business never faced anything like that.

We talked at length about the importance of leadership at a time when a team is frightened. This was a moment his people would remember.

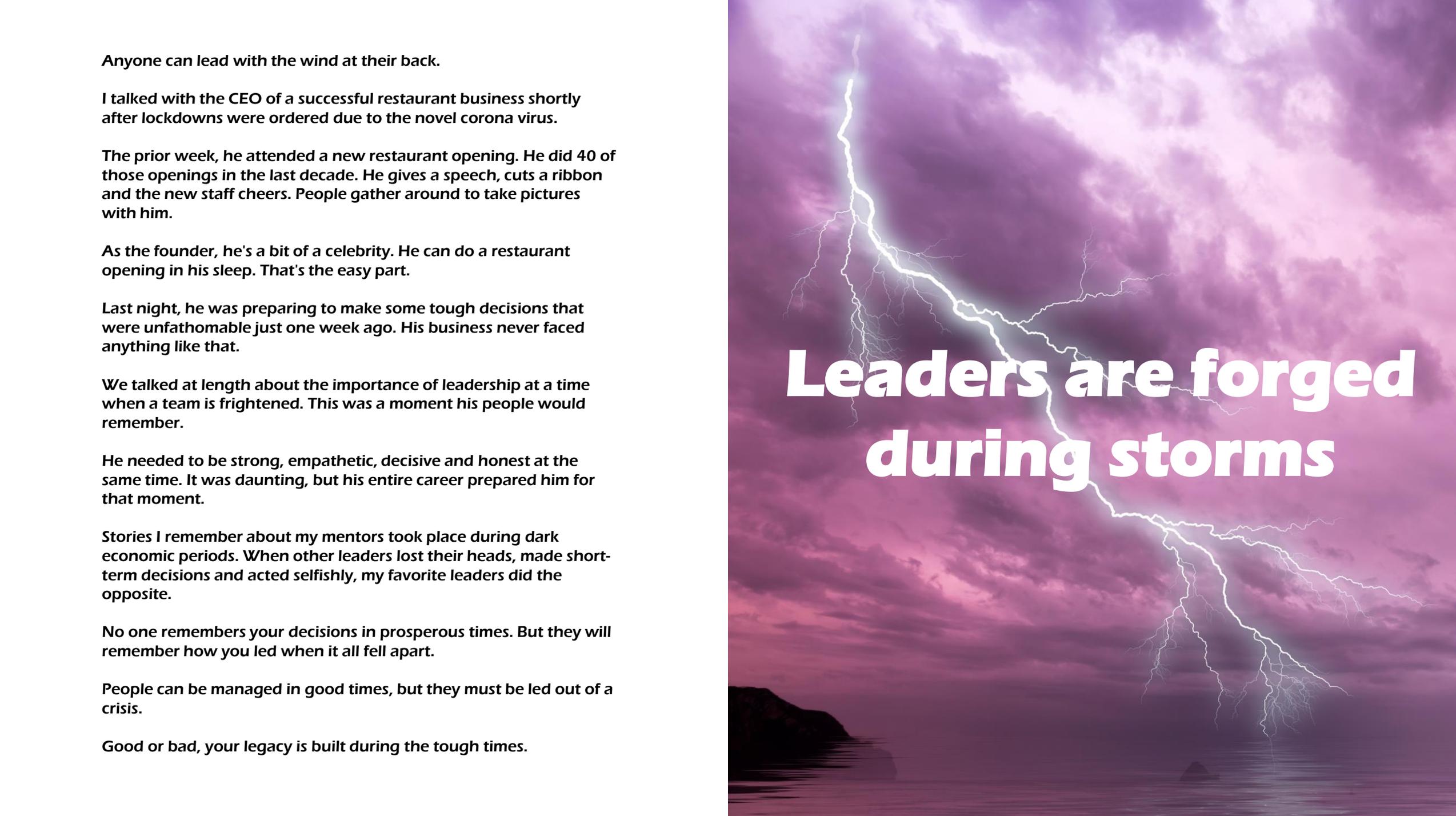
He needed to be strong, empathetic, decisive and honest at the same time. It was daunting, but his entire career prepared him for that moment.

Stories I remember about my mentors took place during dark economic periods. When other leaders lost their heads, made short-term decisions and acted selfishly, my favorite leaders did the opposite.

No one remembers your decisions in prosperous times. But they will remember how you led when it all fell apart.

People can be managed in good times, but they must be led out of a crisis.

Good or bad, your legacy is built during the tough times.



**Leaders are forged
during storms**

**No offense,
but I'm
about to
offend you.**

If I lead with, "No offense," what do you expect to hear next?

In my experience, this leads to something like, "Have you gained weight, or are those supposed to be skinny jeans?"

When we hear "no offense," we prepare to be offended. The same can be said when someone ends praise with the word "but."

I have a terrible habit of doing this with my kids.

"Great job in math and science on this report card, but what's up with that Spanish grade?"

The "but" wipes out any positive feelings from the praise.

A more effective approach is asking my kids how they were able to achieve good grades in math and science.

When they verbalize their approach, it becomes something they are proud of. I can ask how they can do more of what is working, maybe in Spanish too.

This approach lets them own the areas that need improvement. It gives them control. Even kids don't like to be told what to do.

The same applies to management.

Highlight the good, ask questions to understand what is working, and help people realize that improvement comes from doing more of what they are good at.

No "buts" about it.

Darth Vader is a fascinating character.

He is single-minded and believes in total victory. Vader's leadership involves no compromise or negotiation.

The empire rules everything or nothing. Winning equates only to complete annihilation of all resistance.

Great villains are selfish.

- Gordon Gecko
- Dean Wormer
- White Goodman

Heroes are different. They understand the need for personal sacrifice. They put the greater good ahead of themselves.

Heroes are selfless.

- George Bailey
- Elsa
- Tommy Callahan

Heroes go through near-complete transformations, which is why Darth Vader is so compelling. By sacrificing for Luke Skywalker, he wins us over.

Villains rule by fear, while a hero rules by love.

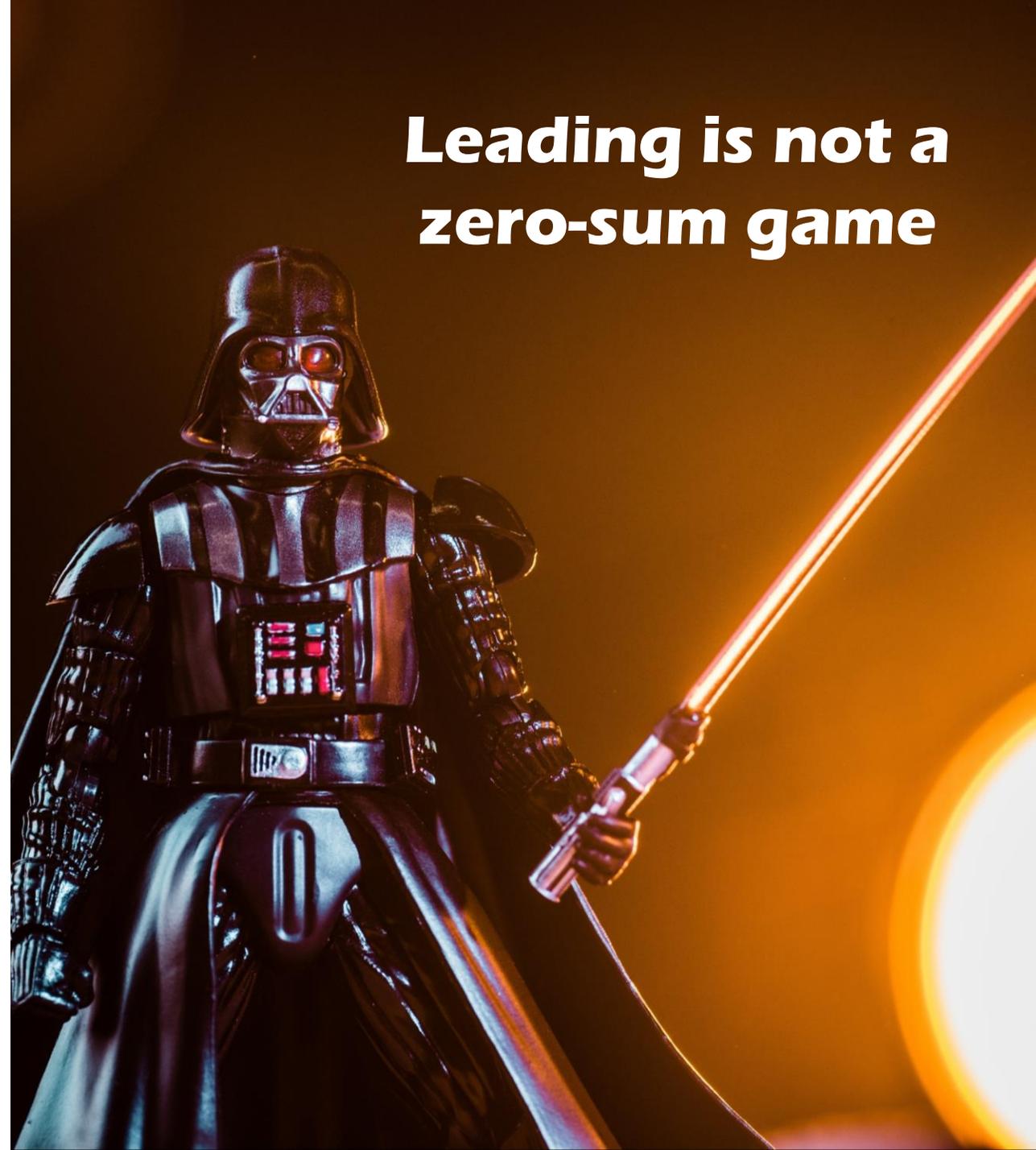
Most great managers go through a similar transformation. New managers lead by directives. There is one way of doing things. They want victory achieved in a specific way and expect compliance. This is "My Way" type of management.

These managers are perceived as villains by their direct reports and suffer the same fate as movie villains. Successful managers give more than they take. They sacrifice control for better outcomes. They adapt.

Great managers make it less about themselves and more about their team.

Would you want to work for Darth Vader?

Leading is not a zero-sum game





You get what you pay for

Would you pay \$10 for a bar of soap?

I received a "Bourbon Vanilla" bar of soap as a gift and it lasted two glorious months.

Compare that with my standby Irish Spring, which lasts two weeks and only comes in "Old Guy's Aftershave" scent.

Getting out of the shower smelling like a cross between a "Jack and Coke" and a Wendy's frosty is hard to beat.

Companies often create salary bands by position and foolishly stick to "the range."

Exceptional people outgrow this range and managers say something like, "My hands are tied." That person leaves and is replaced with someone who will accept the range.

But that new hire will only accept the lower pay because their skill and experience can't demand more.

By saving a relatively small amount, the company trades a highly productive asset for something considerably less. The trade-off makes no sense.

Ranges are helpful for 80% of the talent in a company. But, for the 20% of people that drive 50% of the results, a business needs to be flexible and pay up for the return.

If you have a \$10 bar of soap, don't expect to pay Irish Spring prices for it.

You get what you pay for.

How can you tell if people are working hard?

There are two schools of thought.

1. Schedule more status meetings, use software that tracks every move, monitor progress over increasingly smaller periods of time.
2. Agree on specific deliverables and time frames. If they get done on time, your people are working hard.

The first path keeps you busy as a manager. The second path keeps your team productive.

During the novel corona virus lock-down, I talked to my neighbor from a safe distance of six feet. He endured a day filled with 14 scheduled calls and check-ins.

On a normal office day, he had 2-3 meetings. What changed? Without employees in line of sight and everyone working from home, managers felt uncomfortable with a loss of control.

So, they ramped up oversight. They checked status and directed traffic. The focus shifted to how people were working, not what they were producing.

This is not unusual. I didn't talk to anyone who wasn't spending more time on scheduled calls during the pandemic scare.

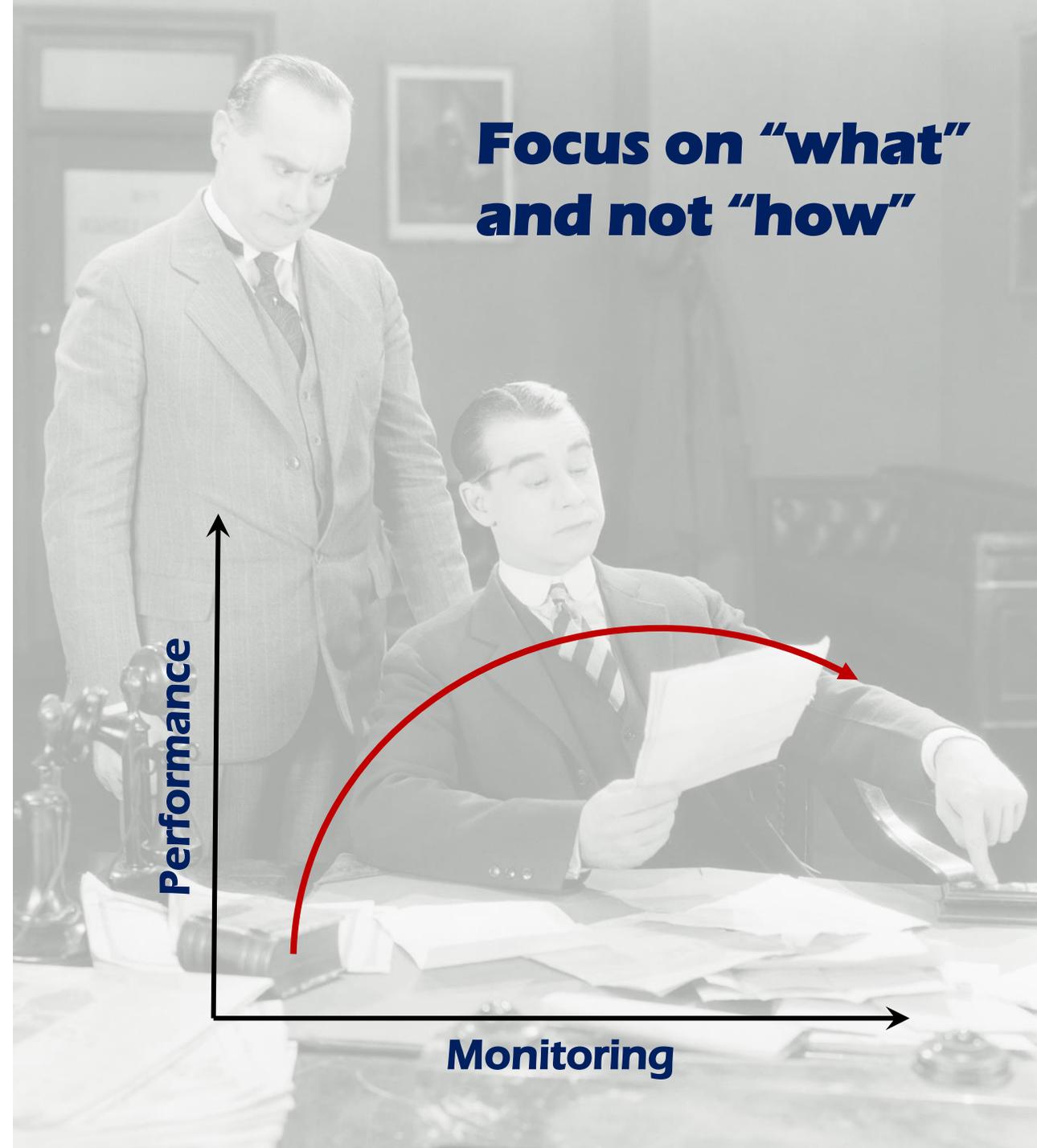
It is easy to feel a loss of control when you can't see everyone you work with. Remember that your job is to get results, not to monitor how results get done.

More monitoring does not always equate to better outcomes.

**Focus on “what”
and not “how”**

Performance

Monitoring





Nothing limits your career like trying to “do it yourself”

Is it easier to do it yourself?

During the credit crisis, our President (my manager) reviewed every marginal loan approval. The process started with managers pitching each loan to us over the phone.

It started terribly. Managers weren't prepared and they got crushed.

After each call, our President glared at me until I snuck out of his office. I would call the office, dig in for facts and take another run at convincing my boss.

I added a step to the process. The office needed to convince me, and I would personally approach the President.

This was more effective at first. I knew my boss well and understood the questions he would ask. There was only one problem.

We had hundreds of loans to get through.

Soon enough, this was the only thing I did. I was working beneath my pay grade and running out of hours in a day.

I was forced to give the process back to my managers and accept a lower success rate. Initially, we lost some deals as managers learned how to approach my boss.

But they learned from their mistakes and grew to be just as effective. The benefits were twofold:

1. I recovered 40 hours per week to focus on helping my team.
2. My team developed confidence and new skills.

"Easier to do it myself" is flawed thinking.

Focus On What You Can Control

I worked for a builder during the credit crisis. After one painful round of lay-offs, I gathered our managers.

Fear was palpable in 2008, and we were at ground zero. Mortgage programs evaporated. Home prices dropped monthly.

People wanted answers that I didn't have.

- Will more people lose jobs?
- What will happen to our pay?
- Will our company survive?

Companies like Citi, GE and Chrysler were teetering on the verge of collapse. With news like that, who was I to predict the future?

I simply said, "I don't know."

I did a few things after that:

1. I shared everything I did know, including what was discussed in our corporate office. People feel more in control when they know what you know, even if it is incomplete.
2. I told them I wasn't sure if my job was safe, nor did our CEO. We did know that it wouldn't be safer by freezing in fear. I explained what I could control and helped them see what they could control.

No one knows what the rest of 2020 will bring. It is disingenuous to predict the future.

But you can help your team remain calm by communicating frequently and honestly. Focus on what is in your power.

It got scarier in 2008 but our company did not go out of business. Rather, our stock price appreciated 10X over the next decade.

"Dad, what happens after I push the button?"

Have you noticed signs at airports that prompt you for feedback on your experience?

My son thought the sign was asking what kind of day he was having. He almost hit the sad face because our vacation was ending.

I intervened and explained that he was rating the people working at the airport.

"What will happen to the workers if I hit the red button?"

"A manager will give the workers a hard time."

"So, if I push the green button, will the workers get more money?"

I explained that managers rarely respond to a positive survey because that is the expectation.

"That's not fair."

Explaining this to a child exposes the absurdity of the process. Managers grow numb to positive behavior. Once a productive pattern is established, we expect more of it.

Exceptions to the norm stick out like a sore thumb. Managers feel as if their job is to root out every deficiency.

A person might get 50 consecutive survey scores without hearing from their manager. But as soon as an outlier comes in, all hell breaks loose. It could be that an employee had a bad day or just dealt with an unreasonable customer.

If a bad result is against the trend, ignore it. And if a positive trend lasts long enough, take time to recognize your team.





People crave control more than anything.

Many wars started over freedom. As humans, we crave autonomy and control.

Control was at the heart of the coronavirus scare. Against something as pervasive as a new disease, we felt powerless.

- To stop it from spreading.
- To protect people we love, both young and old.
- To find toilet paper at a grocery store.

Seriously, toilet paper. People crave control so much that they will hoard toilet paper, bottled water, and hand sanitizer by the bucket.

Irrational? Completely. But if it helps someone feel like they are doing something proactive, I get it.

If you lead people, think about the psychology behind this scare. If humans will go to war for freedom and fill their basement with Charmin, imagine what they will do if you let them think for themselves.

People prefer accountability. Most want to be measured rather than working blindly with no sense of how they are performing.

What we don't like is being held to a standard and told exactly how to reach it. This takes away our sense of control.

Be specific in what you expect. Let your team know how you will measure success.

Then get out of their way.

Let your team achieve results in a way that makes sense to them.

If encouragement was all it took, every manager, coach and teacher would be great.

Some are better than others but saying "Great job!" doesn't require skill or talent.

I have worked for many encouraging bosses, but only a few helped me become a better version of myself.

Those managers had one thing in common. They understood when to encourage and when to agitate.

My favorite leaders knew how to agitate me.

I can say the same about coaches and teachers. The memorable ones understood how to get under my skin, especially when my effort and mindset weren't right.

Effective management puts a premium on relationships and results, while new managers tend to pick one or the other.

Focus only on relationships and people won't grow. The office will be non-confrontational and develop a passive-aggressive stench.

Focus only on results and people won't care. The office will be void of meaning, purpose and fun.

Understanding when to encourage and when to agitate is fundamental in the development of leaders.

If you want to become a better version of yourself, work for someone who isn't afraid to piss you off.



**Mentors Know When
To Piss You Off**

Company culture is deliberate.



Company cultures come and go, largely because leaders are so transient.

If enough leaders depart a company, their replacements can change the culture. The name and logo remain, but the soul of the organization feels different.

Companies invest great sums of money in crafting mission and value statements that test well with employees.

None of it matters.

Enron had a mission statement on par with the Boy Scouts of America. Enron was anything but a model corporate citizen.

If you want to build a better culture, make a list of the non-negotiable behaviors that should define your team.

Let your team help you build this list by asking, "What kind of team do we want to be?" Make this list public where everyone can see.

This is the easy part. Your actions as a manager determine the rest.

Only hire people who can demonstrate that they live their personal and professional lives abiding your team's defined behaviors.

Praise, pay and promote those on your team who embody the culture you want to build. Never miss a chance to recognize behavior that contributes to a stronger culture.

Fire those who cannot abide by your team's defined behaviors, especially those who perform at the expense of their teammates.

Company culture is deliberate.

"Fire the manager."

This is an easy solution when a team is not performing. A company feels short-term pressure to perform and decides that a new leader will be more effective than the last.

When the pitchforks come out, companies feel pressure to make a visible change. The easiest way to demonstrate action is to change management.

This placates fans (customers) and executives in the short term, but is it effective?

From 2000 to 2020, the three winningest NFL franchises had the least amount of coaching and general manager changes.

The three worst franchises changed the most.

A new manager feels pressure to act, especially when inheriting a poorly performing team. So a team that is already experiencing high anxiety is thrust into a sea of changes to process, procedure and leadership approach.

The process repeats in several years with a new manager. The right decision can be more difficult. It requires patience and coaching.

That manager might need a vote of confidence and a coach who can help them make changes to their approach, process and focus.

Fix the system or each new manager will share the fate of those who came before them. The easy fix is rarely the best one.

**The easy fix is rarely
the best one.**



A man in a blue suit is seen from behind, standing on a stage and presenting to a large, blurred audience. The text "Skip the advice" is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Skip the advice

"You should definitely lead with a joke."

I gave this terrible advice to an introverted peer who was anxious about presenting at our annual meeting.

Speaking in front of 200 people was traumatic enough before I told him to do stand-up comedy. There are hundreds of effective ways to start a presentation. I lead with a joke or a story, but that plays to my strengths.

He could have led with a thought-provoking question or a personal story that connected to the theme of this presentation. In retrospect, there were dozens of routes that would have worked better than trying to make an audience laugh.

He bombed.

Since it wasn't his idea, he blamed me. I learned a lesson about the limits of advice. A better approach is helping someone find the solution on their own.

- What has worked for you in the past?**
- Who has a style that you like?**
- What part of their approach could you emulate?**
- What are you uncomfortable with?**

This approach is time-consuming. It is easier to blurt advice than to ask questions.

If a duck asks a bear for hunting advice, the duck gains little when the bear explains how to kill a moose. The only way for the bear to help is to understand the duck's strengths and mindset.

Advice doesn't work, questions do.

Colombia has a hippo problem.

Among his many gifts to the Colombian people, Pablo Escobar smuggled in exotic animals for his private zoo.

The government confiscated all the animals except the hippos, who were left to roam. Today there are nearly 100 hippos in Colombia. And hippos poop a lot.

All that poop is fertilizing harmful bacteria, leading to illness in humans and animals. This mess started with two hippos.

The same scenario plays out when a company hires the wrong manager from outside of the company. This new manager is an invasive species who brings a set of values, behaviors, and culture learned elsewhere.

These new values multiply as new managers hire other like-minded individuals. The employees must conform or find work elsewhere.

If left alone, the culture of a company changes quickly. Talented people exit at an alarming rate, only to be replaced by more people with the same values as the new management team.

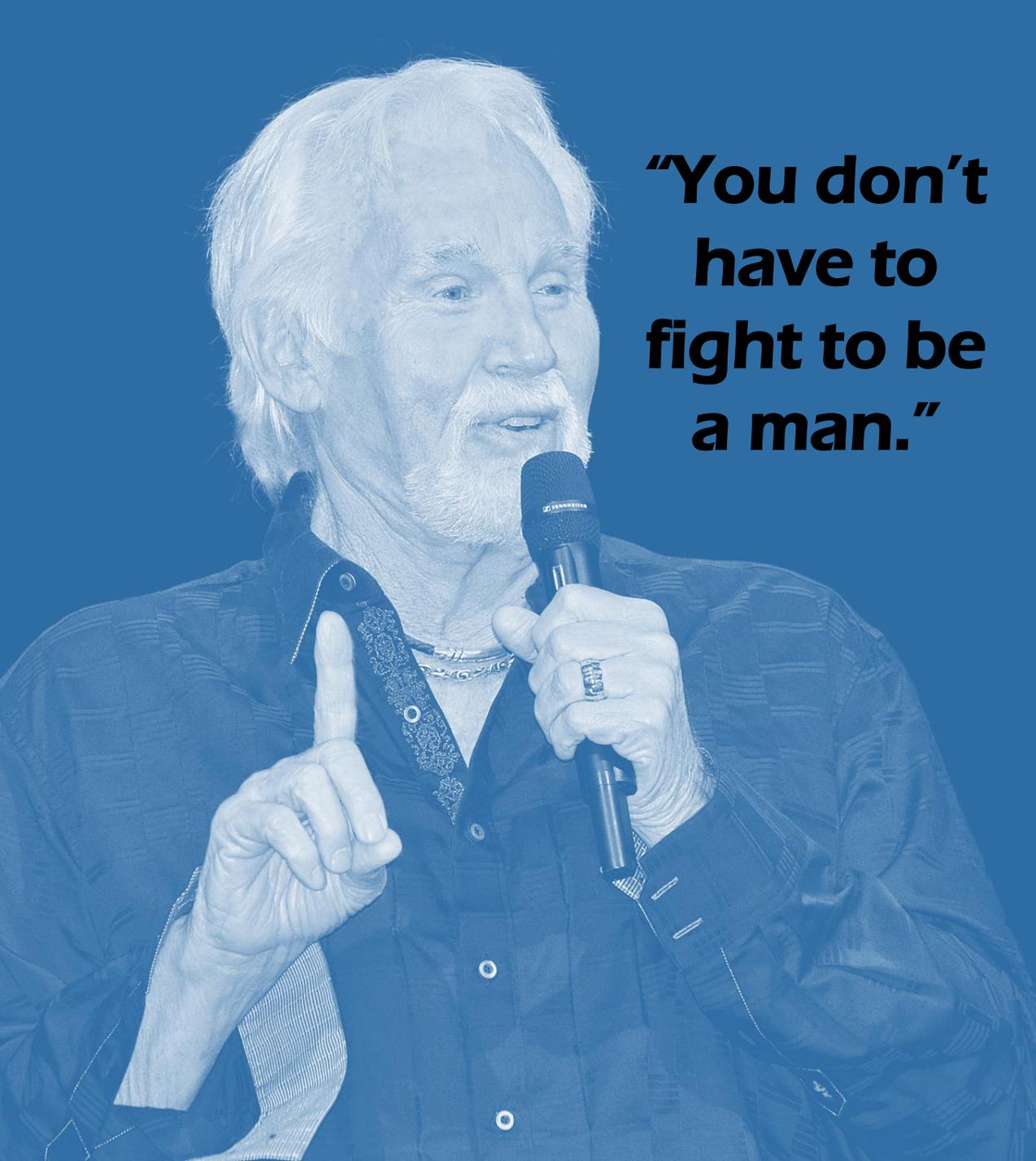
When a business promotes from within, it takes a risk that an individual contributor will struggle to grow into a leadership role. But the upside is that the business can be certain that this person understands the culture, and what is expected of people.

If you must go outside for a manager, give serious thought to culture in the interview and onboarding process.

Don't let hippo managers poop in your company's culture.

Are you a hippo manager?





**“You don’t
have to
fight to be
a man.”**

**“Promise me, son, not to do the things I’ve done
Walk away from trouble if you can”
~Kenny Rogers**

In the summer of 2007, a lender presented to our executive team of a large builder. At this point, mortgage programs were bananas. Halfway through the presentation on subprime loans, our President snapped.

“This is garbage! I’ve seen this show before. Your company is going out of business.”

The presenter awkwardly pointed out that these programs were ubiquitous.

“And that makes it right?”

With that, he left the meeting. Two days later, he stopped by my office. Over 40 years, Bill saw his share of ugly cycles.

“How much cash do you have?”

“In my wallet?”

“In your retirement account, dumbass.”

“A good bit.” [Total lie, I was 100% invested.]

“Good. This whole thing is going to crash. I sold everything.”

“ALL cash?”

“Yep.”

I ignored his warning. Twelve months later, my holdings were down 40% while Bill was flush.

Like kids ignoring the warning from mom, most of us need to touch the hot stove to get the point.

Listen closely to mentors with battle scars.

"You always own the option of having no opinion. Some things are not asking to be judged by you. Leave them alone."

~Marcus Aurelius

**Most mistakes I made in leadership had to do with "more."
I got involved in everything that came across my desk.**

1. More hours - This sent a message to my team that they needed to work the same.

2. More feedback - This conditioned people to check with me because I might want to "weigh in." I grew "busier," not more effective.

3. More involved - This sent a message that petty items were important. Getting "involved" distracted my team from focusing on something meaningful.

I learned the importance of "less" through necessity. As my responsibility grew, I could no longer meddle in everything.

When asked for an opinion, I might respond with, "I trust you'll come up with the right answer."

This sounds nicer than, "I don't have time for that nonsense."

When I felt overwhelmed as a manager, I found it helpful to create a "Stop Doing" list.

This is exactly what it sounds like. Study your calendar and ask these questions:

- 1. Is this still important?**
- 2. Am I the best person?**
- 3. Can someone else do it?**

More is not always better in management. When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.

More is likely less



Final Thought



Inspiration is everywhere, if you stop to pay attention.

I am fortunate to have worked for some incredible leaders. I am also grateful for the incompetent managers who demonstrated what not to do.

If fortune has not blessed you with great leaders to emulate, look elsewhere for mentorship. Study successful people with a career arc you would love to emulate.

Follow them, watch them closely, consume their content. If they work for your company, do everything in your power to get close to them. Soon enough, you will pick up their behaviors, mannerisms, language and habits.

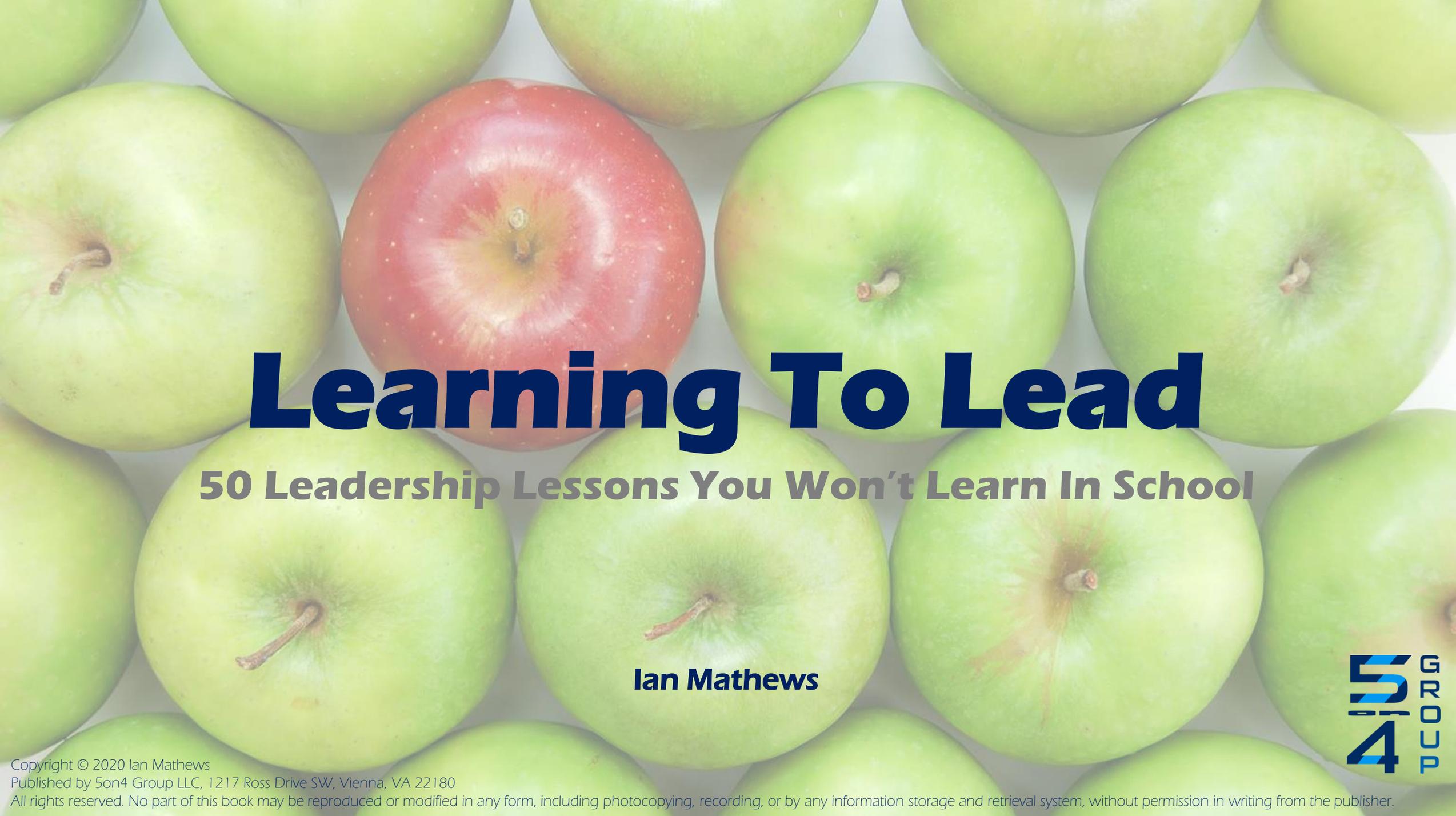
If a writer or speaker inspires you, consume more. My personal favorites were Jack Welch, Peter Drucker, Dale Carnegie and Jeffrey J. Fox. I read one book from each and knew I would read everything they wrote. Once I did this, I went back and read my favorites a 2nd or 3rd time.

As I said in the opening, a great book leaves you with an idea or two that stick throughout your career. I hope that one of the 50 lessons shared in this book do that for you.

If not, I will keep trying.

Thank you for reading my work. You can count on me as part of your growing network. Reach out any time with questions.

Ian



Learning To Lead

50 Leadership Lessons You Won't Learn In School

Ian Mathews

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