BEYOND

the

HAMMER

BRIAN GOTTLIEB

A FRESH APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP, CULTURE, AND BUILDING HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

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The best leadership book of the year, great for managers and leaders alike!

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CEO, USA SHOWERS

Brian is an extraordinary leader whose innovative thinking and boundless energy inspire awe in all who encounter him! I have witnessed his magnetic charisma and unparalleled approach as he propelled my team to look at situations through a different lens. A true trailblazer whose leadership ignites passion and drives excellence, leaving an indelible mark on all fortunate enough to be in his orbit.

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PRESIDENT, GUNDERSON HEALTH SYSTEM

I have had the privilege of witnessing the growth of Brian's various businesses and am also aware of the commitment he has made to continually learn and apply his learning to his successful companies. Part of that is how he treated, inspired, and motivated his colleagues and staff to deliver outstanding results while in a very accelerated growth period. He has much to offer in sharing his success with others!"

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Brian's leadership style creates a "North Star" for his entire team to follow, enabling them to deliver an exceptional customer experience.

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BEYOND the HAMMER

BRIAN GOTTLIEB

A FRESH APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP, CULTURE,
AND BUILDING HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

To my loving family, whose belief in me is endless, and to my wife, my soulmate and my number one cheerleader—you make me feel limitless!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story presented in the first part of this book is a fictional parable. Any resemblance to real individuals, companies, or organizations is purely coincidental, as all characters and entities portrayed are products of the author's imagination.

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INTRODUCTION

Employees who don't take ownership of their work. Friction between departments. Inconsistent results. High employee turnover. These are the top challenges confronting many businesses today, and managers bear the brunt. Rather than leading their teams, they find themselves perpetually in crisis mode, putting out daily fires. These problems won't disappear on their own and cannot be ignored. Here's why:

To tolerate inconsistency and chaos is to normalize it. If left unattended, the business's ability to execute will suffer, and so will its culture. *This is because the culture of a business is shaped by the lowest level of acceptable behavior.*

I have a friend who started a business eighteen years ago, built it into an industry leader, and is now a billionaire. I remember him telling me with passion in his voice, "Business is all about execution!" He's not alone in this thinking, as most top-performing organizations would say the same. To quote the late Mark Hurd, one of the masterminds behind Oracle, "Without execution, 'vision' is just another word for hallucination."

In the early stages of launching a business, especially when the founder is the sole employee, the company's success is directly linked to the entrepreneur's ability to execute. This dynamic shifts the moment a business starts hiring people. Suddenly, results are now connected to how teams execute, both in the leader's presence and in their absence.

For example, I started my first home services business in the back of a friend's warehouse, on a plastic folding table, with $3,000 in cash. For the first several months, execution meant doing whatever was needed to stay in business for another day. But I soon realized that for the company to really grow, I needed to build a team. My goal was to offer people more than just a

job; I wanted to create an environment where individuals were encouraged to realize their fullest potential. They also needed to learn how to perform consistently at a high level, as an aligned team.

If I wanted to build a business, I had to start by building people.

Over time, my company grew to employ more than a thousand individuals, diversifying into multiple states, business units, and product lines. Along the journey, we received accolades like the Better Business Bureau's Torch Award for Ethics, and Inc. 5000's list of fastest-growing companies. We were also named the best place to work in our state. The teams were aligned, the people grew, and the organization executed with consistency.

Twelve years later, when I eventually sold my group of companies, the businesses had annual sales in excess of $150M. Simply put, a team that consistently executes at a high level will win in any market, with any product or service, regardless of the competitive landscape.

I've spoken on this topic around the country and while leaders and managers nod their heads in agreement, the overarching unspoken feeling is that while high-level team performance is a bold aspiration, they assume they don't have the right people in their business to accomplish it. However, as we dig deeper, the truth becomes clear.

And that brings us to this book.

What are the steps to developing a high-performing organization? How do managers get out of crisis mode so they can effectively lead their team?
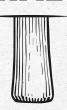
In *Beyond the Hammer*, we tackle these questions (and plenty of others) in two very intentional sections. First is a familiar picture—a fictional story of George, a business owner struggling with burnt-out employees, high turnover, and frustrated customers. Misalignment is plaguing his company. We follow George as he befriends a mentor who shares the five foundational pillars of leadership, and watch as George harnesses the power of those pillars to build a team that performs at a high level, consistently.

In the second part of the book, the narrative shifts from storytelling to strategy, with an actionable blueprint for weaving these five pillars into any business. The book's two-part format has been designed to demonstrate problems and solutions in a way that is engaging, informative, actionable, and highly inspirational. It's been built to help leaders picture themselves, not only in the problems but in the solutions, to seamlessly integrate these principles into daily operations.

Written for managers and leaders alike, *Beyond the Hammer* offers a simple, yet powerful approach to creating a team that is aligned and properly positioned to win.

PART ONE

A BUSINESS
PARABLE

CHAPTER 1

Remodeling Sucks. I say this to myself like a negative mantra as I dead-man walk up to Chuck Cregan's front door, aka the number one Nightmare Project of All Time. *Remodeling Sucks.*

I should know because I am one. A remodeler that is. I quickly chew two TUMS in anticipation of what's about to happen.

Chuck jerks open the door before I can even ring the bell. He was probably spying on his own front porch in the hopes that some innocent butterfly might land there so he could pop out and kill it. Somebody needs to create a reverse Yelp where companies can review customers and we can all avoid these kinds of clients. *Remodeling Sucks.*

"Hey Chuck." I try to sound cheerful.

Instead of answering, he turns and walks into the house, big man steps booming on the hardwood floor. "I got your text and came right over," I say weakly, talking to his back. "Whatever the problem is, I'm sure I can make it right."

Chuck is wearing a high-end black suit and large watch with a lot of bling. I'm no expert, but I bet it's all real, no cubic z's for this guy. "I'm going to a wedding," he says. We walk through the huge living room into the kitchen—the jobsite and scene of the crime.

I'm surprised to see the room is not empty. There's a man there, late fifties, wearing a formal black suit and sipping a cup of coffee. The guy has a pleasant face and big ears. "Hello there," he says.

"Hel—"

Before I can even get the whole word out, Chuck snarls, "Look at this." He points to the kitchen island. "Look. At. This."

"Yes," I say. "I see. Hmm." Stalling for time because the truth is I have no idea what he's angry about. The island's back wall is covered in beautiful green tile. Are the grout lines even? Yes. Rows straight? They are flawless.

"You're on the wrong side." His voice is full of contempt. "Do you even have a construction background?"

"I'm fully licensed," I say walking around to the other side of the island, which is finished with maple cabinetry.

Chuck points at the island's drawer closest to the window. "Do you see this?" he asks with exaggerated patience. And then I do, and yes, it's bad. It's very bad.

"Oh." I stand there staring, mortified. How did this even happen? There was a time when I really looked forward to visiting previous clients just to see them so happy in the space that we created. Those days seem like a lifetime ago. "Wow."

"Wow." He does an imitation of my voice, making it sound like a surfer dude. On one end of the island, the drawers line up flush with the edge, but on the other end, they are set back a full half inch. He flicks a finger at the drawers. I nod.

It gets worse. One side has a toe kick, while the other side does not. One end panel rests on the floor, and the other is level with the bottom of the cabinet doors. Every time he points out a mistake, he flicks his finger at it, and I nod my head. I hope the big-eared guy isn't watching.

"This whole island needs to be ripped out and done correctly," Chuck says. He's not wrong.

I gulp as I do the math. All-new cabinetry, and maybe countertop, if the stone gets damaged when we pull it. There's labor—I'd need to yank a couple of guys from a different job and fall behind there as well. What else? A plumber for the sink, electrician, and, oh, don't forget the tile. That fancy green didn't come from a big-box store. We're talking Italian artisans. We're talking tile with a name that I can't even pronounce.

I take a deep breath. "Mr. Cregan, I understand that we have a problem, but—"

"*We* don't have a problem. *You* have a problem, and I don't ever want to see the crew that did this in my home again."

Chuck's phone rings. He glances at it and lets out a harsh sort of "hmph" sound that makes me feel sorry for whoever's on the other end. "What do you have for me?" he asks curtly. A pause. "No, I won't play there. You tell them to sharpen their pencils or the whole deal goes in the trash. Here's what I'm willing to look at …" His voice trails off as he leaves the room.

So now it's just me, the big-eared man, and about thirty-five grand worth of bad kitchen island.

"I'm not sure how you're related … anyway, I want you to know how sorry I am about all of this."

He smiles warmly. "No, no, Chuck and I were friends in high school, and I'm just in town to see a buddy of ours get married." He puts out a meaty hand, and we shake. "I'm Marty Gold."

"George Warren."

Marty nods toward the island. "Tough break."

"Yep."

I sigh. "My project manager and lead carpenter both missed the problem."

"Why?" His tone is conversational, but there's real interest there, a slight intensity. "Why did they miss it?"

"I don't know." I hear the frustration in my own voice and bite it back hard. "The ball got dropped."

"Why?" he asks again. "Why did the ball get dropped?"

I look him square in the face wondering how to change the subject in a nice way, but Marty's expression is nothing but friendly, so I tell the truth. "They didn't take ownership of their work, and lately I can't seem to change

that no matter how hard I try." I pause, embarrassed by what I just admitted. "But we'll make it right, don't worry."

Marty nods thoughtfully, but before he can answer Chuck strides back in. "I have to go, but get back to me first thing tomorrow with when this will be corrected. I expect timelines and an action plan."

I feel my jaw clench. "Absolutely," I say. "We'll figure this out. I mean, I'll figure it out." I add this to my list, the list that likes to wake me up like food poisoning at 1:00 a.m. and rumbles in my mind and gut until sunrise. Pro tip: If you want to sleep through the night, don't own a remodeling company.

The sun is just starting to set as Marty and I walk down the driveway. Chuck has already sped away in his car. "The wedding is in half an hour," Marty says, but makes no move to get in his car, a sweet-looking Mercedes-AMG coupe.

I stand there too, not sure why.

"George, I can remember a time when I felt like you do now." His smile is a little self-conscious. "I own a few businesses, and one is a contracting company about four hours from here." He hands me a business card with letters engraved on heavy paper stock.

TRUE NORTH IMPROVEMENTS
MARTY GOLD, PRESIDENT

"How about you come spend a day with my team, and I'll show you around the company? Maybe I can help you out."

I glance from him to the card, and back again. "Ummm, why?" The guy doesn't seem weird, but still.

"Sometimes people just want to extend a hand. There were folks who helped me, and I like to pay it forward. I think I could give you some tools you might find useful."

"Well, if you have any tools that can fix that island, I wouldn't say no."

He laughs. "I've got far more valuable things to share than that."

For a second, I'm tempted, but there's no way I could take the time. Ever since I became owner of Warren Construction my life has felt like one of those horror movies where you invite the friendly vampire into your house, and before you know it, you're one of the undead. Drained dry. My day starts at 5:30 a.m. and ends at 11:00 p.m., and I am still constantly behind, miserable, stressed, and failing. *Remodeling Sucks.*

"I appreciate the offer, but I have too much going on here, including the island of the damned." I motion toward Chuck's house. "Thanks anyway, though."

We say goodbye, and I'm almost at my car when he calls after me. "George, regardless of what business you're in, there are only a couple of reasons why people don't take ownership of their work. The good news is you can fix it, and you need to, or it will only get worse."

His words hit me like a sucker punch, and I whirl around to face him again. "How do I fix it?"

"You've got my number, give me a buzz. Come visit True North."

I shake my head sadly. "Wish I had the time, I really do."

Marty nods and smiles. Then he makes a little saluting motion, gets in his fancy-ass car, and drives away.

CHAPTER 2

I started sweeping up jobsites for Warren Construction when I was nine years old, a little kid with a big broom. My grandpa owned the company, and most of what I know about carpentry comes from him. He was a true craftsman.

I was fourteen when my dad bought the business from Grandpa, and one of the first things he did was rebrand Warren to attract higher-end clients, which drove Grandpa crazy, but what could he say? My dad was smart and good at sales, *really* good, and revenue grew by ten times over the next five years.

I quit Warren when I left for college, and then dropped out to play music, only going back to construction a dozen years later when my marriage broke up.

"Can I please have a job?" I had asked my dad, feeling like a little kid again at thirty-two. "Whatever you need, I'll do it." The courts didn't look kindly on an underemployed bass player, and I desperately wanted joint custody of our little girl, Amelia.

"A hungry dog runs fast," my dad answered, laughing. Ha-ha. "Do you remember how to do a material takeoff?"

"Geez Dad, I hope so."

He made me a project manager and that's what I did for the next eight years, surprised by how much I liked the job. I handled budgets and vendors, scheduled subs, but also spent a lot of time wearing a nail bag. I usually worked with the same crew, and it didn't feel like I was their "boss," more like we were all friends and every now and then I'd ask them to do something. We used to prank each other or make videos of all of us singing because empty houses have great acoustics for that.

There's a saying about family-owned businesses that goes, "The first generation starts it, the second generation builds it, and the third generation breaks it." Third gen, that's me. Only 13 percent of family businesses make it down to a grandchild, and I never thought I'd be part of that small group, and honestly never wanted to. My grandfather and dad were giants, but I'm not leader material. Good at production? Yes. Awkward and unsure around people unless I know them well? Yes again. But life doesn't care about our plans. As Mike Tyson said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." For me, that punch came six months ago when my dad died of a heart attack at only sixty-one.

Boom.

My dad who connected so easily with employees, clients, and suppliers, who loved the complexity of business, was gone. In the few months since I've headed up the company, leads are down and so is close ratio and profitability. Some things are sure increasing though. Slippage, employee turnover, percentage of bad reviews, and jobs coming in overbudget are all popping up like a game of whack-a-mole.

A hungry dog runs fast, my dad had said. I am running as fast as I can, my legs frantically pumping in all directions, yet we still continue to slide backward picking up speed no matter how hard I try. These days Warren Construction feels like nothing but a blur under my churning feet.

CHAPTER 3

My daughter Amelia has five tattoos (that I know of). She also has four unpaid parking tickets, three jobs she quit in the past year, two unfinished semesters at community college, and a dad who would do almost anything to see her happy. Amelia's been interning at Warren Construction for the past six months. She works under our marketing director, but doesn't believe in marketing, directors, or corporations for that matter, so it's been hard to get her invested in the job. She's so smart and gifted, though, that I know she'll find something she likes. Amelia's twenty and has been living with me until she "figures some stuff out." I don't have the heart to tell her that I'm forty-five and haven't figured out anything.

We're at the table playing gin rummy and powering through a bunch of Chinese food. Sugar and carbs. I taught Amelia to play cards when she was a little girl, and surprisingly she still likes it even in this tech age. I pick up a seven, and glance at my phone to see if there's any word from Duncan, the project manager on the Cregan job. I'd left him a half dozen frantic texts but heard nothing. Serves me right for not checking in more during construction.

Regarding Chuck Cregan, two things are true.

Truth #1: I've worked for clients like this before. They are loud, mega-picky, and often have unrealistic expectations about what can (and can't) happen in construction. And they are almost impossible to please.

Truth #2: The crew that installed that kitchen island really screwed up and it's embarrassing. Why do jobs always go south on the toughest clients?

Part of the problem, a big part, is that our production manager quit about a month ago to go work for a competitor. Thinking about it still stings. He'd been with my dad for fifteen years and was like a big, friendly guard rail around each project, stopping by every few days to make sure mistakes like

Cregan's weren't happening. I've been doing my best to fill in, but there're just too many holes and not enough time.

"Dad, are you going to discard? You're not even paying attention."

"Sorry. There are so many problems at work right now."

"Right now?" Amelia asks. "More like always, it's the story of your life. You should get rid of that company." She helps herself to seconds, heaping lo mein on her plate until there's nothing but two sad little bites left in the carton.

"Get rid of Warren Construction? But then how would I support you while you eat all the lo mein?"

"Ha-ha." She makes a growly face at me, lip curled, dark eyebrows furrowed together.

I spear the lone piece of chicken she's left me, discard my seven, and try Duncan again.

It takes five rings, but he actually picks up this time saying, "Hey," in a vaguely surprised voice as if I haven't been blowing up his phone for hours.

"Hey." I picture him, driving maybe. Duncan looks like an elf, not the kind on the Keebler cookie box, but the tall, lean kind who's a badass with weaponry. Pale skin, long face, waist-length blond hair worn in a manly braid.

"What happened with the island on the Cregan job? It's a shit show."

"I don't know," he says. "The plans didn't have any trim out and Enrique and Cassidy just did their own thing."

I wince. When I was a project manager if a trim detail was missing, we'd call the designer and ask how it should look, because anything less is a disservice to the project and the client. But I'm smart enough not to say that. Phrases like "disservice to the project" are not going to win you any popularity contests. So instead, I say, "Chuck's really pissed. He wants us to rebuild the whole island free of charge and I don't see any flexibility there. Some clients would let us take money off and live with it, but not this one."

I stand up just to be doing something and notice how much my stomach has grown over the past few months. Stress eating. I'm no elf, that's for sure. "Duncan, didn't you notice the two sides looked different during construction? I'm trying to figure out how this happened."

Duncan says nothing.

I know this silence, know it so well that I secretly have given it a name: the Duncan Power Pause. He'll just sit there stone quiet for as long as it takes while everyone around him struggles to fill the wordless void. Sure enough, I'm the first one to break the dead air. "Can you just walk me through the project? If we can pinpoint—"

"Look, there's been a lot going on for me."

I take a deep breath. "A lot going on?"

Silence.

"Duncan?"

"Listen, I need to talk to you."

And boom, just like that he quits. One week's notice. "I was recruited," he says, but poached is more like it. I ask, and sure enough, it's Green Mountain Construction, the same company where our production manager now works. They are hungry and smart. They are good. They are growing.

"I wasn't looking," Duncan says, "they just hit me up. I know it's a bad time for you and whatnot."

I sit back down shocked. It's more than hard to find an experienced project manager … it's nearly impossible. Who would fill in for Duncan? We're already overextended, but can't afford to turn down work, not with our margins so thin.

"Hey D." I hate the desperation in my voice. "Can we talk about this? I'll give you whatever they're offering, I really need you."

He starts in on another Power Pause, and I watch the ice melt in Amelia's Diet Coke. Years pass. Finally, Duncan says, "I think I'm just going to move

on. It's not you George, it's what I need to do."

"Well, that's it then. I'll make arrangements for someone else to work on the Cregan island and keep you on for the next week."

"No worries." Duncan gets off the phone and I almost laugh. No worries? We passed "worry" a long time ago and now we're into free fall.

Right now, I have five jobs in design, seven in production, and at least a dozen somewhere in the sales process. I'm already working fifteen-hour days, and now I'll be piecemealing Duncan's projects for … a while. I can't even bring myself to put a time frame on it. What's that word for when you kill something that's dying anyway? The *coup de grâce*.

How will I deal with the mess of projects that are in the works? How will I get them finished and paid? Any more delays and I'll be strapped for cash in no time. At this moment I wish more than anything that I had someone to talk to, someone who understood and could help me find dry land.

But you do have someone. The voice inside my head is so small that I would have ignored it if I weren't so desperate. I grab a cold beer, open my laptop, and Google "Marty Gold, True North Improvements." There are a bunch of podcasts and interviews with him on culture and leadership, and True North has 4.8 stars with over 1,500 reviews. The guy has a nice website too. I click on a review site for employees and scroll through two pages of positive ratings. He seems legit.

I chug the rest of my beer and pull Marty's card out of my back pocket. It's been sweated on but the print is still crisp and clear. I dial the number.

CHAPTER 4

The call with Marty goes well. I recap the Cregan island disaster, tell him about Duncan quitting, and explain that I'm not a born leader.

"That's good," he replies, "because nobody is. It's learned, practiced, developed, and honed. And, to be clear, leadership isn't just about you either. It's about the impact you make on your team and how they perform both in your presence and in your absence."

He goes on to explain that every business has a culture and culture can be defined as the accumulation of shared values, goals, attitudes, and behaviors; when others are watching, and when nobody's looking. When people in your organization don't take ownership of their work, there's a culture problem. When people can easily be recruited away from your company, there's a culture problem.

"Fixing culture takes leadership," he says. "It will take *your* leadership."

We end the call with a plan for me to visit True North later that week—a last-ditch effort to pull myself out of this crater.

I buy myself a couple of days with Chuck Cregan when I send him a text saying that we're working on a plan. I don't mention that part of the "plan" is having to hire a new project manager. That would have gone over like a $35K kitchen island without toe kicks.

Amelia and I take the four-hour drive up to see Marty, but only one of us goes voluntarily.

"I don't want to be doing this." Her voice is quiet, but full of bite. "Corporations are part of a consumerist machine, and I don't want to spend the day pretending that greed and inequality are OK."

"I know, I'm sorry. In all fairness you didn't have to come, right?"

She lets out a bitter little laugh. "What was I supposed to do? I'm not going to stay with mom and the Jackal, you know that."

The Jackal is what she calls Alexei, my ex-wife's husband number three. I'm the one who gave him the name. Not my best parenting choice.

Amelia continues, "Plus, traveling this far to visit a guy that you barely know is super weird."

From the back seat I feel her dog Larry breathing hot and ragged on my neck. She insisted on bringing him. Larry is a big, nasty mutt who looks like a chow mixed with something else that has no business in this car. A muskrat maybe. He smells like a muskrat too. A car passes with a cheerful-looking Lab sticking its head out the window. Larry growls.

"Shh," Amelia says.

He quiets immediately. The dog always listens to her, I'll give him that.

Silence. "Hey sweetie," I say after a while. "We're only about ten miles from True North. When we get there can you please be polite to Marty Gold? I know you didn't want to go, but he's helping me with the business. Please make an effort?"

"I don't even care about that business. I only work there because you're making me."

"But you care about me, right? Can you just try?"

She shoots me a spiky glare and stares out the window.

Amelia's still not talking as I pull up in front of his two-story building. There's a large showroom on the first floor, and what I assume is workspace above it. Marty comes out right away, grinning like he's been waiting all day to see us. "Hey! Was the drive OK?"

He holds out a big hand to Amelia who gives it a half-hearted shake and a little scowl, but he's decent enough to pretend not to notice. Marty's pleasant face has just a hint of goofiness that makes him feel trustworthy. The opposite of slick.

"Do you want the fifty-cent tour?"

Amelia ignores him. "Dad, I'm going to walk Larry, he needs to get out of the car."

"I hope Larry's a dog," jokes Marty. "Bring him in. We're very pet friendly."

True North has 262 employees, or, as Marty calls them, "teammates," and although many of them are in the field, there's still a sense of activity, a pleasant hum of work being done in every office we pass. The place is busy, and the walls are filled with signs and posters. These aren't like generic, feel-good phrases from the 1990s ("There's no I in TEAM"), and these seem more specific to True North. One sign has something to do with the Ten Practices of a Manager, and another has a short paragraph about world-class service. We pop our heads into one room and see a group of people bouncing ideas off each other, while in another one there's some sort of training class going on.

We walk by a Vince Lombardi quote on one of the walls in the hallway that reads, "Individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work."

I take a picture of it with my phone.

Marty says hi to everyone by name and often stops to ask a friendly question or give encouragement. The place has a great vibe. Toward the end of the tour, Marty walks into an empty conference room. On one wall sits a framed canvas with the words, "Do Well and Do Good" painted in simple, but elegant letters.

"That is the mission of this company." He points at the sign. "You probably noticed it hanging all over the place. Do Well and Do Good. It's why we exist. The purpose of this business is to make a decent profit but do so decently. We feel it's our responsibility to make a significant positive impact on the lives of our customers, our teammates, and the communities we serve."

Amelia quickly touches the stud in her nose, a big tell that she's annoyed. "Marty, when you say, 'decent profit'—"

"Hey!" A young man, more like a kid, thin and nerdy, bounds into the conference room on long, storky legs. I could have hugged him for distracting Amelia.

"Hey!" Marty answers back. "I hear you're feeling more comfortable speaking with customers and getting projects scheduled. I really appreciate your hard work, and it's great to see you growing into this role."

"Oh yeah, it's gotten so much better!" The kid's eyes flick back and forth between all of us excitedly. "I still have a long way to go, but I'll get there. Anyway, I'm sorry to interrupt, I just wanted to thank you for giving me a chance."

Marty meets his gaze deliberately. "First of all, I believe in you, and your team believes in you. Secondly, I'd like to challenge your thinking for a sec. Is that OK?"

"Uh, sure."

"It isn't that I *gave* you a chance, you *earned* a chance. You worked hard and made this happen and I want to thank you for hanging in and committing yourself to this journey, and to the mission of the business."

The kid beams at him. "Thanks."

Marty beams back. "Remember, we all believe in you!"

The kid bounces away with a fresh burst of energy.

"You like helping people, huh?" I say to Marty.

His face reminds me of a basketball player who's about to shoot, focused, present, completely alive.

"We hired that young man because he was energetic and willing to learn. What he lacked was experience and confidence, and what he needed was training and someone to believe in him."

His eyes move enthusiastically between me and Amelia. "It's a lot like teaching a kid to ride a two-wheel bike. You don't just take the training wheels off and tell them to figure it out alone. You hold on to their seat and run

behind them as they pedal. You say, 'You got this!' and as the kid keeps peddling, you tell them, 'Look, you're doing it!' When you finally let go, you can hear your child say, 'Look Dad, I'm doing it, I'm riding a bike!'"

Marty's tone is urgent and personal, as if we aren't talking about a theoretical child at all, but an actual person, shaky on his new two-wheeler, and much beloved.

Amelia takes out her iPad and starts drawing, eyes focused on Marty. I wonder if she's sketching him. Doubtful. She usually just doodles whatever thoughts are in her head.

He continues. "You know how every house has a foundation? That's culture for us. Instead of bricks and beams, we call them pillars of leadership. And there are five big ones that transform a business. Each pillar is like a support beam, and when you implement all five? That's when you've built something that can stand up to any storm a business might face."

His voice is so energetic that it's impossible not to become excited as well. "The first pillar creates a limitless mindset for those around you. It's the idea that Belief Is Transferable."

PILLAR 1: BELIEF IS TRANSFERABLE

"Think about your kid and the bike," he continues. "He or she believed they could do it because you believed. Same goes in business. When you believe in someone, truly and deeply, you light a fire in them. You can believe someone into success."

Marty strides down the hall, his steps quick and enthusiastic as if he's particularly excited about where we're going—except he walks like that all the time.

"Belief Is Transferable," I repeat. Could I have tried that with Duncan? It didn't feel like lack of confidence was his problem. "What if the person truly can't or won't do the job?" I ask. "What if belief in themselves isn't the issue?"

Marty opens the door to a parking garage, and we are suddenly in semi-darkness. "Great question. Belief Is Transferable is just one of the pillars."

"What are the others?"

Marty's friendly laugh booms through the echoey garage. "Let's give it a little time. You just got here."

A glint of color catches my eye and I notice two motorcycles sitting near the entrance like shining birds.

"Yours?" I ask pointing.

"Yep."

We walk over to them, a vintage Harley police bike and blue Triumph Bonneville, both immaculately restored.

"Do you ride?" Marty asks.

"It's been a minute, but I still have my license." I lightly touch the Bonnie's old-school logo. "These are nice. Did you get them restored?"

"I did the work myself. I love fixing things." Marty picks up a helmet from the seat. "I usually don't have both bikes at the office, but since they're here, want to take a ride? There's a great burger place nearby where we could have lunch."

I glance over at Amelia who says she'll meet us there in my truck. Marty gives her the address and starts up the Harley, its engine booming in the enclosed garage. We both grin. "Brake's on the left," he yells, tossing me the keys to the Triumph.

And then I'm outside, flying along behind Marty, the sun warm on my back and shoulders. The Bonneville is no match for Marty's Hog, but the wind and noise and vibration of the bike make me smile. For these few minutes, I'm free. There are no texts I can answer, no angry people to appease, and no business decisions to screw up. I start thinking about Marty's words—*Belief Is Transferable*. What about lack of belief? Is that transferable too?

The whole time I was growing up, my dad's nickname for me was Dozer, and if he were here today he'd say, "What are you doing to my company, Dozer?"

It started over a small thing. When I was about ten, my grandfather got me up before sunrise one day to go fishing and I still smile remembering how he cheered when I caught a five-pound bass. It was the middle of the week, and I had to go straight from the lake to school and then to work, and my dad caught me nodding off on a jobsite at the end of the day. "Not all of us can spend the morning fishing," he said, nudging me with his foot. "Not all of us can afford to doze."

My grandfather told him to lay off, that the trip had been his idea, but it must have gotten under my dad's skin, because from that day forward I was Dozer. Sometimes he'd say it with pride as in, "If Dozer tells you there's rot behind that wall, you can bet he's right." And sometimes it was meant to be a friendly jab like, "Hey Dozer, are you going to share any of that overpriced beer?" He knew I never liked the nickname. A few of the guys who worked for my dad started called me Dozer as well, but my grandpa never used the name.

I realize now that Dozer was a transfer of negative belief. My dad never taught me to run Warren Construction, he was so caught up in running it himself, and I never asked to learn. I didn't think I could. Still don't, if I'm being honest with myself.

CHAPTER 5

Once at the burger place, I see my phone's been blowing up with texts from all four of my project managers, soon to be three. Two subs came in with high bids, one job needs a big change order, and another one has a punch list a mile long. What do I want to do about all of this?

I start to excuse myself to make a call, but Marty says, "I'd like to ask you a favor. Can you put your phone on silent for our lunch? Just give me forty-five minutes. Is that OK?"

I put the phone away. It feels like I'm ripping off my fingernails, but I do it.

The place is called Mission Burger, and we're seated on the patio with Amelia's dog, Larry. It looks like a Spanish courtyard with terra-cotta pavers, and a tiled fountain in the middle.

"I can't wait for you to try these burgers," Marty says picking up a menu. "Everything is made here from scratch, even the buns."

Amelia tells him that all she wants is a bowl of soup.

Our waiter comes over with water for Larry, who turns his back. "Welcome to the best burger place around. My name is Mike, and I'm here to serve you today." Mike seems friendly but looks a bit rough around the edges with full sleeve and neck tattoos and that slightly sunken look that people get when they've had a really hard life.

"OK," Marty says after we finish ordering. "Let's talk about Warren Construction."

I pull up the Notes app on my phone, relieved that we're finally getting down to business. "I've listed the duties of the open positions here and am hoping you can help me get the word out," I say. "But here's the thing. I've

been filling in for our production manager, who left last month, and now with Duncan leaving, too, I have no idea how we'll get the work done. Anyway, I'm struggling pretty badly." I duck my head in a half cringe, half shrug, embarrassed by how this all sounds.

Marty takes a slow sip of water, and I can see him thinking, click, click, click. "I'm wondering if we can back up just a little bit here. It sounds like he was recruited pretty quickly, which makes me wonder, why was Duncan working for you in the first place? Was he aligned with your mission and vision?"

"Umm." I suddenly feel like the kid in the back of the class who just got caught without his homework. "We don't have a mission and vision written down exactly, but I know it's something I need to do. The thing is, at this second, I'm single-focused on filling these positions. Is that OK?"

Mike brings our food over and Marty watches appreciatively as he serves it. Marty has a friendly, expectant way of looking at people, as if they're carrying a heavy bag into a building and he's just about to open the door for them. "How long have you worked here, Mike?" he asks.

"A year and a half now." Mike puts a basket of rolls on the table for Amelia. "Wait until you taste this bread."

"And Laurie hired you?" Marty asks.

"Yeah." Mike shakes his head. "I still can't believe she hired a knucklehead like me, fresh out of jail, and I didn't even have three months clean. Laurie took a chance, but that's her whole business, you know."

"She hires addicts and ex-cons?" Amelia asks, her eyes wide.

Mike laughs, not at all offended. "She hires people who want to turn their life around.

"Laurie knows how to make you feel good about coming to work, like it has meaning. If it wasn't for Laurie, I don't know where I'd be—dead maybe. She believed in me at a time when I didn't even believe in myself."

Belief Is Transferable. The words pop into my head.

Mike continues. "Laurie always says that it's not just about serving burgers here, it's also about serving others in life. The more we serve others, the more we nourish ourselves, and so for me this isn't just a job, it's a purpose." He shrugs, suddenly shy. "Anyway, do you want more iced tea?"

We eat in silence for a few minutes. My burger is amazing, and Marty watches me eat a little too closely, as if I'm a food critic and he's the owner. A thought occurs to me. "Do you have a stake in this place?"

He considers the question. "Yes, but just not how you're thinking. I gave Laurie some capital and consulting help, and that's a stake, I suppose. But my stake is also that I believe in what this place represents. Mission Burger does good and does well. It makes a decent profit, decently."

Amelia pulls out her iPad and begins drawing on it, her fingernails, painted black and chewed to the quick, moving in a blur across the screen. I crane my neck curious to see what she's up to, but she quickly moves the screen away.

"I'm glad you like the burger, but did you like the bike too?" Marty asks.

"Oh yeah!"

"Sometimes I jump on that Harley and drive around for fun on the back roads."

"That sounds great."

Marty tells me that on weekends he often takes rides through the country with no destination in mind, sometimes pulling over at a random spot to smoke a cigar. He explains how that's fine when he's alone, but what if there were twenty other people on motorcycles behind him? How would they feel? Marty puts his hands in front of his mouth like a megaphone. "Hey everyone, we're going for a ride. I have no idea where we're heading and there's no purpose to the trip, but hop in, let's go." He makes his voice normal again. "The same is true in business. When it's just us we can shoot from the hip a bit, but other people have a right to know where they're going, and why.

People need purpose and direction and for that to happen the *business* must have purpose and direction."

He looks at me deliberately, with calm, kind eyes. "Remember I told you about the Five Pillars of Leadership? The first one is Belief Is Transferable, and the second one is *Leaders Shape Culture through Purpose and Direction.*"

PILLAR 2: LEADERS SHAPE CULTURE
THROUGH PURPOSE AND DIRECTION

He repeats the words, sweeping one hand in a gesture that includes the busy patio and Mike, who is enthusiastically serving another table. "Leaders Shape Culture through Purpose and Direction. This restaurant was founded on that principle and just imagine how hard it would be for another restaurant to recruit Mike away from here.

"Now, first, let's talk about what happens when your team doesn't have purpose and direction. Do you have a problem with turnover at Warren Construction?"

My flinch must have been noticeable because he says, "Forget that question. Here's a better one: In thinking about your team, why are each of them really with your company?"

I try to answer, but my thirty-four employees represent every situation and personality you can imagine. "There's no one reason they work for me. I would say it depends on the individual."

"You know, George, one thing I've noticed a lot of the time in companies with high turnover is that purpose and direction are either missing entirely or are not clear enough to the team." He rubs his palms together as if generating heat. "Purpose and direction are communicated through your mission and vision statement, and that's what shapes your culture."

I think of the mission statements on so many company websites. Mostly they feel like slogans to attract customers instead of powerful words that

inspire and give purpose. "How do you translate the mission to the employees, so they care?"

"Aha!" Marty holds up a finger. "That's a great question, and a very large one. It's all about mindset—in other words, how your team members think. But first let's just outline our terms. A mission statement defines why an organization exists. It says, 'This is our purpose.' For example, 'Do well and do good.' But giving your team purpose alone isn't enough because as I mentioned, a team needs direction, too."

He goes on to explain that a vision statement focuses on what we want the business to look like over time. What are the goals? How do we define success? "It's a vision for the future," he says excitedly.

Amelia is still doodling away on the iPad. "What are you doing, sweetie?" I say. I don't want to be nosy, but her drawing feels disrespectful to Marty and I'm trying to listen without being distracted.

She stares up at me, her large gray eyes as flat and expressionless as if they were painted on over her real eyes. "Why do you have to watch me like Big Brother?"

"I didn't mean …" I let my voice trail off, not wanting to make her angry. "Please go on," I tell Marty.

There's a beat of awkward silence and then he says, "It's all about alignment. If people understand what success looks like, they know what to focus on, they know what to chase. A vision statement addresses the future and gives the team priorities to get to that future. Mission and vision are two of the things that create alignment throughout your organization."

"So, how do you get your team aligned around mission and vision?" I ask again. "It has to be more than just putting out two statements."

"Larry and I are aligned."

It's the first thing that Amelia's said since we got here that actually pertains to anything Marty is talking about. But instead of explaining more, she tears

off a corner of her napkin, places it on the floor in front of Larry and says, "Guard."

Immediately, the dog positions himself with the napkin between his front paws, head held at attention, and it's clear that he will rip out the throat of anyone who tries to get at that crumpled paper. He obeys Amelia unquestioningly, and not in some Clifford the Big Red Dog way, but more how a spirit animal obeys his overlord in a particularly dark video game.

"Impressive." Marty nods at her. "Where'd you get him?"

"He's a rescue, I trained him myself." Amelia bends to stroke Larry's head, and I realize with a sad little jolt that she has dyed her hair to match his, a shade of brown so nondescript that it's almost a noncolor.

"What you have with your dog is obedience," Marty tells Amelia gently. "But what you want with people is alignment. There's a big difference." He turns to me. "Let's play a game and use your Cregan project as our game board. Just work with me a minute here." He rolls up the sleeves of his shirt like he's preparing to cook a meal.

"OK."

"If the disaster on the Cregan island is the answer, what is the question? What do you need to ask?"

"How did this happen?" I say.

"Yes, good. And how did it happen?"

"The designer didn't put in any specs and no one on the project saw the problem."

"Why?"

"The two people building the island didn't check their work with each other."

Amelia is neither drawing nor petting Larry; instead her eyes are bouncing back and forth between us like she's following a ping-pong game.

"Why?" His gaze is hard on mine.

"I don't know." It's humiliating to admit.

"Are they truly invested in their work?"

"No."

"Why?"

This feels like dental surgery, but I force myself to continue. I drove here. I need help, I get that. "I don't know."

"How different would your business be if everyone on your team cared? If they had a purpose for being there other than collecting a paycheck? I'm going to ask you again: Why do people work for you?"

Once again, I picture my thirty-four employees, and mentally ask why they are with me. Be honest, George, I tell myself. The truth is that the reasons are different, and I run through them in my mind: Toni is heading toward retirement, Rosemary wants to feed her family, Jesse is ambitious and will leave when he gets a better offer, Theresa is just checking the boxes. The list goes on, and at the end of it I realize no one on my team, not one person, is there for a purpose like Mike our waiter has with his job. And why would they feel a purpose or direction for Warren Construction? I'm not even sure of it myself and I own the company.

"I hear you," I say quietly.

"I'm glad." Marty opens his palms and leaves them that way for a moment in a humble sort of position.

And it's true, I *do* hear him. But it's also true that the fires I have to put out right now take precedence. Adding mission and vision may help Warren Construction long term, but it won't replace Duncan or bring in a production manager today. And it certainly won't fix the Chuck Cregan disaster. I carefully explain that to Marty—I don't want to offend him—and end by saying, "These are great ideas for the future, but I'm dealing with emergencies right this second."

Marty listens thoughtfully and then motions to Mike for the check, adding a humorous little flourish to the gesture. "George, listen." His face is serious now. "This isn't an either/or, it's a both/and. I know it feels like the problems you're frantically trying to solve every day are separate things from your company's lack of purpose and direction. But they are all part of the same issue." He explains that Warren Construction needs a mission and vision that are woven deep into the organization, and that our lack of purpose and direction is the source of the turnover, the emergencies, the mistakes on Chuck's kitchen island, and everything else.

I nod, thanking him for the insight, but inside I feel even worse. If that's even possible. I barely have five minutes to brush my teeth; how can I find time to create a mission and vision for Warren, and then "weave it deep into the organization?" I'm not even sure what that means.

Marty's voice is gaining intensity, and I hear a tiny trace of a New York accent creep in. He's not angry; he's more like a subway commuter warning someone away from the tracks. "Let's say you were lucky enough to find the world's best production manager." He explains I would be asking them to lead a team of people who don't take ownership of their own work. If I just focus on solving the individual emergencies without building a purpose and direction, I will fix the symptom but not the problem. "I know it's hard to do two things at once, but I believe you can."

We get on the motorcycles and head back to Marty's place. The wheels in my head are spinning faster than the wheels on the bike, and I think about Warren Construction the way it was a year ago under my dad's leadership. Did the company have purpose and direction then? Everyone just did what my dad said, not in a resentful or robotic way, more because he was a strong, likable guy who knew what he was talking about. Most of the staff turnover we had came from big alpha personalities, because every decision went through my dad, and he usually wouldn't adopt a new idea unless it was his own. My dad was smart, charismatic, and a bit of a micromanager. He didn't care so much

whether people believed in themselves as long as they did what he said. And it worked. But in the end, he built a company that couldn't survive without him.

CHAPTER 6

"So that wasn't so bad, was it?" I ask Amelia.

She's in my hotel room, sprawled out on the bed next to Larry, their arms and legs intertwined like a happy couple except one of them has a lot of fur. I'm sitting at a desk in the corner.

Instead of answering, she strokes his smelly back singing, "On top of spaghetti, all covered with cheese."

Larry squirms with pleasure, his big head now right on top of my pillow.

"We should get going," I tell her. "We're due back at Marty's for another meeting."

Amelia lets out a theatrical sigh and puts the other pillow over her face.

My phone rings. It's Jesse, our sales manager and this is the third time he's called.

"Hey George." It's not a happy kind of "hey," especially from Jesse who is usually upbeat and fast talking.

"What's wrong?"

"The Spicer project canceled."

"What?" The Spicer job is a high-end addition and patio, and they already signed a design agreement. My stomach goes heavy and tight. Revenue's down and we need this project. "Why?"

He sighs. "I don't know, they were super cagey." I picture Jesse in his office, a lean, well-dressed guy with red hair and oversized retro glasses. "I tried everything to get them to tell me what happened."

"I don't understand."

"I know, right? They just kept repeating that they wanted to go in another direction but wouldn't share the reason no matter how many times I asked. I'm

thinking, 'Spit it out! Do I smell bad?'"

"I'm sure it wasn't personal," I say. Without the Spicer job, we'll probably miss our revenue goals, which means no one will get a year-end bonus. Yet another morale problem.

"Why wouldn't they explain?" Jesse asks dejectedly. "I thought we had great rapport. What could I have done wrong?"

"It's not you," I say, and mean it. Clients love Jesse. I try to think of something else encouraging to tell him, but come up empty. That happens a lot with people who report to me; I feel like they need leadership that I don't know how to give.

"It was like they lost confidence in the company overnight," Jesse says. "So weird. I should have been able to get them to tell me what's up."

Out of nowhere, Marty's first pillar pops into my head: *Belief Is Transferable*. He said that when people believe in themselves, they suddenly become more capable. "Confident team members perform better" were Marty's words.

"You can get them to tell you why," I say. "And for that matter, I bet you can get them to reconsider."

Jesse snorts. "Not a chance, Sunshine."

I try to think of what to say next, but I have no idea how to rev up anyone in sales. I'm not that guy. But we need this project so badly, need it like oxygen in an airlock and I remember how my dad used to brag about Jesse, the way he'd say, with wonder and pride, "Daaaaamnn that kid's persuasive."

"You are very persuasive." I pause. "You're smart and insanely good with people and I've seen you sell jobs that no one else can touch. The Spicers are easy compared to some other clients."

He is silent.

"Let me just ask this: What would you do if they were earlier in the buying cycle and putting up a roadblock?"

"Hmmm." He's thinking now. "I'd get them on a Zoom call with the Morgans. They had a similar project and *love* us, remember? The Morgans did that boho kitchen that bumped out to the backyard."

"Can you try to set that call up?" I close my eyes and picture my belief in Jesse. It looks like a sphere of blue light, and I mentally extend it toward him.

"I don't know."

Words are coming to me now. "You have natural authority and conviction, but never come off as pushy. I'm sure the Spicers like you and they may feel bad about canceling so late in the game. I believe in you."

"Well thanks." His voice is lively again. "I'll try, G, but don't get your hopes up."

I tell him that I won't but it's clear that his already are.

I get off the phone and look over at Amelia who's idly flipping channels on the TV. "You have the worst luck," she says. "First there's Chuck whoever with the messed-up kitchen and then these other people just dip."

A thought occurs to me, and I search "Warren Construction reviews" on my phone. Sure enough, there's a new one from Chuck Cregan and I let out a sound between a groan and a gasp. His writing is blunt, and not only describes every problem on the job in vivid detail, he also posts photos of the disastrous island, writing, "The owner, George, promised he would get this fixed, but nothing has been done. The last time I saw him he actually seemed scared. Not a great business strategy for a contractor."

Even though he just posted it yesterday, Chuck's review already has twenty-seven likes on Google.

Shame slices through me like a hot knife and I text the review to Jesse along with an awkward explanation. I called around about Chuck's island and the news wasn't good. The Italian tile he chose has been discontinued in that color, and my subs—plumber and electrician—are both tied up on big jobs. His new island is going to look different and take a long time, and the truth is I've been putting off telling him for a few days. I apologize to Jesse in the text,

and then apologize some more. My body feels souped up and jittery with adrenaline, but there is no one to fight and nowhere to fly. I wonder what Marty would think about this.

"I wish I were better at taking notes," I say. "I'm going to forget half of what Marty said."

Amelia picks up her iPad, and hands it to me silently. On the screen are a series of drawings, almost like a comic strip or graphic novel, outlining our entire conversation with Marty. That must have been what she was drawing on the screen. "I had no idea you were doing this."

"That's because you were too busy judging me," she snaps. "Marty may be part of an immoral corporate system that only cares about profits, but at least he tries."

"Amelia." I look at her there on the bed with a dog that no one else could love. She is so sure of herself and so scared at the same time. "Amelia," I repeat her name. Maybe if I'd had a mission and vision for raising her, she wouldn't be this lost. "I try, too," I finally say.

CHAPTER 7

Marty's office is a clean, welcoming space. Shelves of memorabilia line two walls—an autographed guitar, football helmet, college pennant, and a large sign that reads, "Do Well and Do Good" in the same style I saw in the conference room earlier.

We settle into a seating area, Marty on a small couch, and Amelia and I in chairs facing him. In one giant rush of words, I tell him about losing the Spicer project, Chuck's review, and my conversation with Jesse. "Sorry to talk so much," I say laughing embarrassedly. "It's just that …" I pause looking for the words. "I've never consciously tried to use a leadership principle before, you know? And it worked. I transferred my belief in Jesse from me to him." I feel a smile spread across my face, which is hard to believe given the problems facing the company, but, for the first time since my dad died, I feel an honest sense of accomplishment. "Thank you, Marty," I say. "Thank you so much."

Marty smiles back, with genuine joy on his face. "That's awesome!" He lightly pumps his fist in the air. "I'm proud, but not surprised, because I knew you had it in you. Now, do you remember why this matters? Why you want Jesse to believe he can get that project back?"

"To give him confidence," I say, and recall how much his voice had perked up by the end of the call.

Marty nods thoughtfully. "Yes, but it also goes a little deeper. Leaders drive change in how people think. The whole point of Belief Is Transferable is that when people begin to think differently about themselves, they also start to feel differently about themselves. When they feel differently, they will behave differently. Think about the Chuck Cregan project. Your business success relies on how people behave. You affect how they behave by changing how they think and feel."

Next to me, Amelia takes out her iPad and begins to draw. A moment later, she's in the zone, her corkscrew curls bouncing a little as she sketches.

"So, here's the thing about Belief Is Transferable." Marty's voice goes low and confidential. "It's not the same thing as just being a cheerleader. Do you know the difference?"

I shake my head, eager to learn more. Marty's philosophy that Belief Is Transferable feels like a consistent, intentional way to help people become better versions of themselves. No wonder he's so inspiring.

"George, can you speak Latin?"

"Umm, no."

"Me neither, by the way. So, say you had an advanced Latin test today, and I tell you, 'Don't worry, you got this. I believe in you.' Will you get a good grade?"

"No." Amelia surprises me by answering the question. "Believing in yourself only works if you've actually studied." She shrugs one shoulder with a little laugh. "I know that from experience."

"Exactly!" Marty stands up as if the chair can't contain the size of his ideas and he needs to let them spread throughout the room. His hands weave through the air and his voice is filled with infectious energy. He explains that the transfer of belief is highly effective in two scenarios: first, if a team member is expanding their skills into an area that's unfamiliar or uncomfortable. And second, if someone is putting in the work, but feels unsure of themselves. In both those cases, positive encouragement can be a real difference-maker.

There is a beat of silence and I realize that Jesse falls into Marty's second category. He's a strong salesperson who took a hit that made him doubt himself. I wonder if he will actually get the Spicer project back on board. At this point, can we even do a good job on it? A jolt of sadness goes through me because a year ago I never would have thought that way. Today Warren Construction operates like a fire engine, tearing from one flaming crisis to the next. Being so understaffed only makes things worse.

I start talking quickly, cognizant of Marty's time. "You've been so helpful; would you mind sharing any ideas you have about replacing Duncan and our production manager? I placed an ad, but what do you think of recruiters?"

"How about promoting someone on your team to production manager?" Marty asks. "As a general rule, I much prefer advancing people that are already on the team."

"Hmm." I mentally go through my project managers—Toni's retiring soon, Enrique's wife is sick, and Cassidy, well who knows what's even up with that kid. I shake my head. "None of them are a good fit."

Marty leans toward me, elbows on knees, his expression taut and focused. "Starting an outside search without giving your people a chance to apply first is a real gut punch." He pauses, gathering his thoughts. "George, what did you do with Jesse today? What is the first pillar?"

"Belief Is Transferable."

"Good! So what message are you giving the team about your belief in them? What I hear you saying is, 'Nope, sorry, you're not good enough to advance here no matter what you do.'" He explains that Belief Is Transferable works with positive, as well as negative belief and that humans have something called a Negativity Bias. This means that we are wired to experience negative stimuli more deeply and remember it better than positive messages. The pain of being told you don't measure up is more powerful and long-lasting than the joy of hearing that you did well.

It's the first time I've heard Marty so forceful, and I hold my hands up, smiling awkwardly. "But what should I do if I don't have the right person? I was 'promoted' to owner after my dad died, and let's be honest, it's a shit show."

"Oftentimes there's someone who could actually be great, and all they need is a bit of coaching."

Amelia puts down the iPad where she's been doodling furiously. "Grandpa George would have promoted someone," she says. "He would have known that

Marty is right."

The comment stings. Is it true? What would my dad have done? I have no idea but can't afford to screw up this hire. I am suddenly hit by the enormous weight of this decision and my happiness about the conversation with Jesse evaporates. "Grandpa George is gone," I say emphatically.

"I know that." Amelia gives me a truly championship-level eye roll, long and dramatic with a tiny, sarcastic head shake at the end. It's worthy of a gif.

Marty walks over to a small refrigerator and pulls out three bottles of water. "What was the pillar we chatted about over lunch? Do you remember?"

"Leaders Shape Culture through Purpose and Direction."

"Yes!" He punches the word by tossing a water bottle to Amelia and me. "Now let's talk about purpose and direction as they relate to your new hire. You're only looking outside, right? How could that affect your team culture?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you giving the individuals on your team a job? Yeah, no doubt. But how about a career path? Because people leave jobs, but they commit to career paths.

"What I see is that you have two challenges. First, you need a production manager, and second there's no one on your team who's been developed to fill that role. You don't have a strong bench. But that's a principle we can discuss on another day if you're interested."

He's right, of course, and the knowledge of yet another problem overwhelms me so much that for a moment my mind goes blank. I stare at my hands. There's a scar on my forefinger from a table saw accident when I was a teenager, and I remember having that same frozen feeling when I saw all the blood. "Don't just stare at it, Dozer, move!" my dad said. "That needs stitches."

Marty must see something on my face because his own face softens. "George, I appreciate what it took for you to come here today. I know how

hard this stuff is, and how overwhelmed you feel, but I also know that you can be a great leader. Seriously."

I thank him politely and take a long sip of water. Who would I promote? Once again, I picture the production team, mentally going through the whole department, and once again I come up empty. Is Amelia right that my grandfather would have promoted someone from inside the company? Who? I asked him once how he always knew what to do in any situation, and he looked at me confused and a little irritated. "I just listen to the voice in my head," he said, like it was obvious.

But for me as a business owner, when the voice in my head speaks at all, it's either calling me a Dozer or it's talking in what sounds like Latin.

CHAPTER 8

Chuck Cregan waves us into his house with an impatient shooing gesture. I've brought Toni, our best project manager, with me to discuss rebuilding his kitchen island and hopefully build some goodwill too while we're there.

Chuck looks Toni up and down and then beckons both of us down the hall with a hand motion that's almost, but not quite, a finger snap. "Feed her celery," he says decisively.

"Ummm, I'm not sure I—"

"The leafy part at the top. Feed that to her tonight."

I glance at Toni hesitantly. She's in her mid-sixties, tall and dignified with a neatly pressed Warren Construction shirt. He wants me to feed her celery? A weird line has been crossed.

Chuck sees our confusion and sighs, shaking his head with exaggerated patience. "I'm on the phone with my daughter." He points at the AirPod that I now see under his thick hair. "She has a rabbit."

"Oh. A rabbit, yes."

Toni makes a noise that sounds like when water goes up your nose, and I know that she's trying not to laugh. We're in the kitchen now, and Chuck sits down at a small table, his body commanding the chair to support him in perfect obedience.

"I'm having an event," he says.

I nod, trying to look like a wise contractor, but not even trusting myself to speak. What does he mean? A cardiac event? A Qualifying Event, like for your medical benefits?

"Here at the house." He pauses and then asks slowly, "Are you able to understand?"

Chuck's event is in fourteen days, a bourbon and Texas Hold'em party for his entire sales team. Seventy-five people. The island has to be done by then and though the timeline is tighter than I would like, a lot tighter, it's doable as long as absolutely nothing goes wrong. Chuck may not be my favorite client, but we did royally screw up his job, and this is the least we can do to make it right. I hold out my hand and we shake.

"Fourteen days," I say.

His smile is quick and shiny, like a switchblade.

Toni and I start laughing about the celery misunderstanding the second we get in my truck. We retell the story to each other and laugh some more. It feels good. Toni's worked for Warren Construction for twenty-nine years and across three generations, and being around her always makes me happy, but also a little homesick for easier days.

We ride in comfortable silence for a while and I let my thoughts wander. Did we do the right thing setting that timeline with Chuck? What would my dad have done? Impossible to know since he wouldn't have been in this situation to start with.

"Who do you want to put on that job?" she asks now, breaking into my thoughts.

"Good question. Part of me feels like I should get my tool belt out and do it myself, you know? I'm not saying I'm perfect, but it'll get it done right that way."

"No." Toni makes a chopping motion with her hand in the air. "You're stretched way too thin to take that on." She gives me a smile. "Focus on the big picture."

I think about Marty's pillar, Leaders Shape Culture through Purpose and Direction, and wonder how that applied to my dad and grandpa. My grandfather never had a formal mission or vision, but always used to tell me, "Do a good job and more business will come." I realize now that *do a good job*

is a purpose and *more business will come* is a direction. He was utilizing one of Marty's pillars without even knowing it. So what about my dad?

"Hey Toni," I say hesitantly. "Why do you think this company ran so well when my dad was in charge? Why did people take more ownership of their work?"

She lets out a booming laugh. "Whoa! That's a big question for the end of the day." She pauses for a second and says more seriously, "I can tell you that if you didn't do a good job, he'd kick your ass. That man knew what he wanted, and everyone tried to please him."

We're only five blocks from the office now, and I slow down to stretch out the drive. This conversation feels important and fragile and I'm afraid it won't survive the transition from truck to office. I remember how Marty explained that Larry the dog was obedient, but obedience is not the same thing as real alignment, and I tell Toni that I don't want to be that kind of leader. "Look at this company," I say. "It was totally centered around my dad, and now that he's gone no one knows what to do. We're lost. I'm lost."

Toni often has comical, larger-than-life facial expressions, and true to form, she opens her eyes wide and raises her eyebrows at me. "This is getting deep."

"I'm serious."

She doesn't respond, and I raise my eyebrows back at her, letting up on the gas completely, so we're moving at a total crawl, and maybe it's just because she wants to get out of the truck, but Toni starts talking then, and it's good to hear the perspective of someone who's been around Warren so long.

She tells me there's a leadership vacuum and everyone is wandering around waiting for what's going to fill it. They don't know what the company is going to become, she explains, and they're nervous. "Are you going to sell the business? Are you going to close it? Do you even know what you're going to do? This affects how people think, and in terms of the company, they're not sure …"

She lets her voice trail off. I finish the sentence. "And they're not sure if I can lead it."

Toni doesn't respond, but we both know the answer.

Leaders Shape Culture through Purpose and Direction, I think to myself. And one way they do that is through a clear, powerful mission like Marty's "Do well and do good." It's not going to solve my problems overnight, but it's a starting point.

After thanking Toni for her honesty, I pull into the parking lot and immediately feel the stomach ache and tight chest that happen every time I even get near the building. *It's OK,* I tell myself. *Baby steps. You're going to address the symptoms, like the Cregan project, and also solve the problem, which is lack of purpose and direction.* Toni and I go inside, and I brace myself for the people coming at me with problems and asking for answers that I don't know how to give.

CHAPTER 9

The next few days go by in a frantic blur as I try to fight the usual fires and avoid starting any new ones. In spite of Jesse's best efforts, the Spicers sign with another contractor, and I ask Rosemary, our marketing director, to write a response to Chuck's review in the hopes that we wouldn't lose any more business over it. I also hire a recruiter to find replacements for our production manager and Duncan. By Friday I'm exhausted, trying to decide if I should pick up some beers and binge-watch TV, or stay at the office to write a mission and vision statement, the way I promised myself I would. It was on my calendar as a task for this week, but I'm so burnt out I'm barely functioning.

Two paragraphs, I tell myself. Just get it done.

But at 8:00 p.m., I'm still staring at a blank screen. Everything I write feels stupid and boring, and I realize that my brain is just not up to this task. In desperation, I log on to ChatGPT and ask for a little help. People are using AI for nearly everything today, so why not this? The results are much better than what I came up with, and I gratefully turn off the computer and leave for home.

* * *

I arrive at work Monday morning and it feels like I've never been gone except it's daylight now and I'm wearing different clothes. I worked from home all weekend but still feel behind. Rosemary practically runs into my office before I can even turn on the computer.

"Hey." Her voice is soft and slightly comforting, the way you might talk to someone who just got a bad diagnosis.

"Hey. What's wrong?"

She tucks her hair behind her ears in a nervous gesture. "I want to tell you something, but you *did not* hear this from me, OK?" She pauses, hesitating, and finally says, "It may not be a big deal, but over the weekend I saw Jesse having brunch with Bernard Green."

"Bernard Green," I repeat. This is more than a big deal, it's a level-five disaster.

"Yep." Her voice is strained, eyes hard on mine. "He's the owner of—"

"I know who he is," I interrupt. Bernard owns Green Mountain Construction, the company that hired—poached is more like it—our production manager and Duncan. I picture him pumping Jesse full of high-end eggs Benedict, his brow furrowed with concern and sympathy. "You lost a big project because of a Google review? A production mistake? You deserve better than that." I feel my face go red and hot.

"Anyway, I just thought you should know," Rosemary says. "Are you going to talk to him?"

"I have no idea." A wave of emotion hits me—stress, frustration, fear—an overwhelming tsunami of feelings. I shut my eyes and rub the heels of my hands against the closed lids. "I can't lose another person," I say, "or this whole place will fall apart." Toxic little prickles of sweat are beading my face, and I glance at the clock to see if there's time to go splash water on it. No. I have a project manager meeting in one minute.

"Is there anything you want me to do?" she asks.

I let out a bitter laugh. "Can you turn back time? That would help. Can you make this company run better? Can you bring the Spicer project back? That's what I want you to do—and conjure up a production manager while you're at it."

She tightens her mouth and gives me a look that is both wounded and annoyed. Immediately I feel terrible. Rosemary cares about the company and was only trying to help.

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm just so stressed and I can't handle one more thing."

She nods, a little guarded.

The three project managers file in for the production meeting, and before they even sit down, Toni says, "We got big problems with the plumbing on the Navarro project."

Rosemary flashes me an ironic smile. "Happy Monday."

I avoid Jesse for the rest of the day, partly because I'm upset, and partly because I have no idea what to say to him. It's important not to seem scared, desperate, or flailing, but that's hard when all I want to do is lie on the floor, grab his ankles, and yell, "Don't leave." Not very manly.

Finally, at 4:00 p.m., I text Marty for some advice. The last thing I want is to overuse his help, but I really need the insight. He immediately FaceTimes me from his computer, saying, "Hey George!" as if he's been waiting all day for me to call.

Marty listens as I tell him the news from Rosemary, and I'm struck by the quality of his attention. It's like he has an internal dial that he tunes to the "listen" position, and his whole being becomes attentive and still. The only time he interrupts is to ask a few questions about the conversation with Rosemary. What did she say? What did I say? I try to keep the focus on Jesse, but Marty redirects our meeting a couple of times back to Rosemary, so I give up and decide to trust him.

"George," he finally says. "What would you say is your leadership style? How did you lead today with Rosemary?"

The question takes me aback, and I squint at his face on my phone trying to sense exactly what he's driving at, but Marty just looks back at me encouragingly.

"Well now it's kind of a mess," I tell him, "but it wasn't always that way." I think back to when I was a project manager and how proud I'd feel when people asked to be on my crew. I tell Marty that I led by example, always in there with my sleeves rolled up, I cared about the details, and tried to inspire others to care too. I prided myself on great client relationships, and loved the

way I'd feel at the end of a project when a whole family would tell me how happy they were in their homes.

"How do you lead today?" he asks gently.

I shrug, feeling self-conscious. "To be honest, I'm too busy getting dragged around by the stirrup to think about it."

"Hmmm." He taps his fingers on his desk as if playing a quick piano tune. "I want to talk about Jesse, but first I'd like to share some thoughts about your conversation with Rosemary, if you don't mind."

I nod uncertainly.

"Why do you think you lead differently today than when you were a project manager?"

"I guess I'm more stressed out and unsure of myself. I used to enjoy working with my crew, but now, trying to run the whole company, I feel like there's too many things coming at me at once. It's overwhelming."

"And do you think it's helpful to a team when the leader acts stressed out?" Marty's expression is still neutral, but his eyes are hard on mine, and he leans a little closer toward the screen.

"No."

"*Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice.*" He speaks the words slowly and with such clarity that I immediately realize that this is the third pillar.

PILLAR 3: LEADERS ARE AWARE OF THE ECHO OF THEIR VOICE

"Every team member will determine what type of day they're going to have based on what type of day the leader is having. If the leader seems stressed out and angry, well guess what? Everybody's going to be stressed out and angry. But if the leader comes across like they're steering the ship, and it's all under control, then the team is going to feel safe—especially in times of turmoil."

As Marty talks, I can almost see the extra energy he generates, as if all the molecules in his body are vibrating a little faster. He explains that when leaders are unaware of the echo of their own voices, people stop sharing concerns with them. Team members know that if they say something, the leader could get upset or go into a tailspin, so they keep their mouths shut. But by paying attention to their reaction, a leader can create an environment where team members are comfortable bringing up anything, both positive and negative.

This sounds good, but a little confusing. "Should I not express anger then?"

Marty considers the question. "You can feel angry, but don't communicate anger. You can feel stressed, but don't communicate stress. You can feel lost, but don't communicate the feeling that you're lost. I'm not saying don't feel it; I'm saying you have to know the echo of your voice. Are anger, stress, and feeling lost really the emotions you want to portray? Will those get you the right result?"

He continues decisively.

"And it's not only your voice that echoes, it's your silence too. If you don't handle a performance problem, or a conflict, or an unhappy team member, the reverberation of that is just as powerful as handling the situation badly."

An image of Duncan flashes into my head. I promoted him from a carpenter during the chaos right after my dad died, and then ignored his performance issues for months. Why? I never consciously questioned my own reaction. The truth was that Duncan didn't seem to care whether he did a good job, and that was a concept so foreign to me that I had no idea how to help him and so just passively hoped he'd get better. How can anyone not care? This is your *work*. These are your *customers*. Marty is right, my silence echoed through Duncan, to his team, and onto multiple projects—most notably Chuck Cregan's. "Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice," I say. "I get it."

Marty grins. "Good! If you lead with your emotions, people on your team will wait to see what kind of a mood you're in, so they can know what kind of day they're going to have. Depending on your mood, they might share an issue with you, or they might not. They will choose what they bring to you based on which version of you they are getting, and you end up with a dysfunctional organization where nobody can really speak the truth."

I look past my phone to the spot where Rosemary was standing this morning, and inwardly cringe with embarrassment. What echo did I create by overwhelming her with my own stress when all she was doing was trying to help?

"George." The quiet urgency in Marty's voice makes me snap my gaze back to his. "Here's a question for you: What kind of leader do you need to be in this business? And how do you make sure you're communicating consistently as that leader? I ask because that's one of the keys to turning this ship around."

Marty's phone rings, and he glances down at it. "I'm so sorry, I have to take this. Can we continue tomorrow evening?"

We end the call, and the second the screen goes black, I realize that we never discussed what I should say to Jesse who is now gone for the day. I head for home, hoping, with the weight of dread in my stomach, that Jesse will still work for me in the morning.

CHAPTER 10

About eight months ago, shortly before my dad died, one of our designers emailed him about an inappropriate comment that a carpenter had made to her. According to the designer, my dad said he would handle it. According to his calendar, he met with the carpenter. Yesterday, the designer complained that the carpenter made another comment, and she will quit unless we fire him. My dad left no documentation about any of this, and the carpenter says that they never actually met.

Marty's FaceTime call comes just as I'm reaching out to our HR consultant. What are we legally required to do? How do I handle a he-said/she-said situation? It feels overwhelming—again.

"Is this a good time?" Marty asks.

"Absolutely!" I'm actually relieved to put off thinking about who said what, even for a little while.

We jump right into the Jesse situation, and Marty suggests having an authentic conversation with him. "I would take him out to dinner, nothing too formal, and I'd ask some questions designed to—"

Amelia suddenly bursts into my office and stands there, hands on her hips. "Dad, someone took down my Facebook post!" She's wearing a vintage-styled T-shirt that says "Eat The Rich" in bright, bubble-shaped letters, not a good look for a high-end remodeler, and I try to remember if we have any clients coming to the office today.

I nod at my computer screen. "Amelia, I'm in the middle of—"

"No one knows who did it!"

I glance at Marty apologetically and hold up one finger in a "wait a sec" gesture. "It was me."

"Why?" Her scowl deepens. "I thought I was the Social Media Manager."

Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice, I think to myself. Choose your words carefully because they have reverb. I turn away from the computer screen and focus completely on her. "Thank you for asking about it, I appreciate that you care. I took the post down because there was a photo there, a stock image, right?"

She nods curtly.

"Well that photo showed an unsafe construction practice and underneath it there was a message about our company doing great work. I liked the writing, but the photo isn't good for our brand."

She tightens her lips and makes a dismissive little motion with one hand. "I'm supposed to know about construction now?"

"Of course I don't expect that. Nobody's judging you for this."

"Whatever," she mumbles and walks out the door.

The air in the room is stirred up with tension now and I turn back to Marty, feeling flutters of nervousness in my chest. "Sorry about that."

He's staring at the ceiling, lost in thought. "All good," he says still looking pensive. "What exactly was the problem with Amelia's Facebook post?"

I sigh and explain that it was a stock photo of a deck builder attaching the ledger board to the house with nails, and she had written underneath how great our construction practices are. "Meanwhile, that's a deck collapse waiting to happen."

Marty nods. "I noticed you were paying attention to the echo of your voice. How did that feel?"

I answer truthfully. "Great." What I don't say is how embarrassed I am that he witnessed Amelia's attitude.

"I'm glad. You focused on her needs and didn't show your own stress. In other words, you remembered that Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice."

I push the interaction with Amelia out of my mind and turn my attention completely back to Marty. A thought occurs to me. The tools he's shared all work independently of each other, yet the three I've learned so far can also be implemented together. A leader can use his or her voice to transfer belief to other people. This helps create the right setting for purpose and direction. When I mention this to Marty he grins, explaining that all of the tools interact with each other like that.

"A table saw and nail gun have different purposes," he says, "yet each one extends the effectiveness of the others. It's the same with these tools." He pauses for a moment, brow slightly furrowed as if trying to decide something. Finally, he asks, "I'm curious why you didn't explain to Amelia in more detail what was wrong with the Facebook post?"

I consider the question. "It just felt like not much juice for the squeeze, know what I mean? So she learns this one thing, but it's just a drop in the bucket as far as construction practices."

"What kind of business are you in George?" His tone is light, playful almost, but there's an undercurrent of seriousness that makes me want to give a serious answer.

"I help people get more happiness from their homes."

"Yes!" He raises one palm up toward the screen in a virtual high-five. "That's great. But I'm going to challenge you to widen that definition. When I first started True North, if you'd have asked me that question, I would have said, 'We are a construction company.' If you would have asked me again seven years ago, I would have said, 'We're a sales and marketing company that happens to be in home improvements.' But if you ask me today who we are, I'll have a different answer. Do you know why?"

"Why?" His excitement is contagious.

"Because *Leaders Model Their Business as a Training Organization*." That is the fourth pillar.

PILLAR 4: LEADERS MODEL THEIR BUSINESS AS A TRAINING ORGANIZATION

"A leader's true business is developing people. On a jobsite, would you watch someone put up a piece of trim the wrong way? No. You'd show them how to measure and cut. And that's what you want to do with people across the board. Because when you think about what we do, we teach marketing people how to generate leads, we teach sales reps how to sell, we teach trade professionals how to build, and we teach homeowners why they should do business with us. What we are is a training organization and that's the fourth pillar." He pauses for a moment. "Now here's another question. Is your business growing or shrinking?"

"Well, if you define those terms as—"

"Just think holistically."

"Shrinking," I say quietly.

There's a short pause and he looks at me kindly. Then he says, "Businesses need to grow to stay relevant. For that to happen the people who work there have to be developed. The bench strength has to grow. Look, if *you* don't train and develop your people, someone else will."

I picture Jesse having brunch with Bernard from Green Mountain and wonder what he offered him besides money. Opportunity?

Marty continues. "We all know there's a labor shortage in this market and companies are fighting over a tiny pool of people. That could be your life. Or do you want to become a training organization, where you're not held back by labor demands? You can develop people, processes, and a strong bench."

Leaders Model Their Business as a Training Organization. I roll the words around in my mind trying to find a spot for this idea to slide in next to the other tools. I'm not sure how it fits though. Would training have worked with Duncan? What about Amelia? "Should I have explained deck construction to Amelia just for a social post? To be honest, I'm not sure she'd care."

His answer is friendly, but decisive as he explains that we could talk about Amelia's individual situation on another day, but part of being a training organization is understanding the difference between feedback and *actionable* feedback. I gave Amelia feedback by telling her that the photo was wrong but didn't provide any clear action for her to take in the future. Actionable feedback is part of what a training organization gives to team members.

I ponder the idea. "Well, she could show me the photos first, and I could explain whether they're a good fit and why."

Marty agrees, going on to suggest that I ask her to create a group of posts and show them to me all at once, so that in addition to teaching construction practices, I'm also showing her how to be more efficient.

"That makes sense," I say, and then ask a little shyly, "but how do leaders teach the team things that they don't know themselves?"

If I asked my dad that question, he would have laughed replying, "A good leader knows his whole business, Dozer," and I peer at Marty half expecting to hear a version of that same answer.

But what he says is almost the direct opposite. "Leading a training organization means that you empower other people to teach the things that you don't know. At True North we create an environment where everyone can share a best practice whether that sharing comes from the VP of operations or a marketing assistant."

It strikes me how different this is from my dad who would tell you exactly how he wanted something done, without explaining the "why" of it, almost as if his knowledge was something to be hoarded like stolen treasure. For the first time in my life, I feel a little sad for him.

We return to the topic of Jesse, and Marty suggests four questions for me to have ready when we go to dinner. They are completely intuitive, so much so that I don't even need to write them down. We get off the phone and I sit there for a few minutes thinking about what I've learned and how to apply it.

When I was a kid, my grandfather taught me how to make jigs for woodworking. A jig is like a template that helps you handle repeated or complicated cuts in your wood so that they come out the same way every time. I've used jigs hundreds, maybe thousands, of times in my life, but it never occurred to me that not all jigs are made for wood. The tools that I am gaining now are a kind of jig for business, a template that I can lean on to help me learn the craft of leadership.

Hopefully it's not too late.

CHAPTER 11

The sports bar where I take Jesse to dinner is not chosen by accident. Two years ago, when our prior sales manager retired, my dad threw a big party for her at that same bar and announced Jesse's promotion during the gathering. The whole company was there, cheering and making toasts. Sure enough, Jesse gives a little smile when we walk in and I can see the memory playing back just behind his eyes.

Over sliders and beer, I explain I'm rolling out a new mission and vision statement and as part of my preparation I want genuine feedback on the company from people I trust. I ask Marty's four questions and do my best to give Jesse space to answer honestly. As he talks, I concentrate on quieting my own spirit enough to listen without defensiveness or judgment. The idea is just to hear him.

Marty introduced me to something called a "Stay Interview." The idea is that instead of only doing an Exit Interview, when people are on their way out the door, you can interview them while they're still with you.

Marty's Stay Interview questions are: What makes you stay with Warren Construction? What would be some reasons you might want to leave? What's the biggest frustration you have inside the organization right now? What do you expect from me as a leader?

Jesse says that the employees he talks with now feel lost. We've had too much turnover, revenue is slipping, clients are unhappy, and I seem stressed out all the time. It's not sustainable, he tells me. All we're running on at this point is past momentum.

"I get angry phone calls from customers, and I don't even know where to route them," he says. "We're understaffed in production, and you're overwhelmed so I can't put anything else on your plate."

Before we leave, I ask him to hang with the company for just a little longer. I tell him that I'm consulting with another business leader, and that things are going to change. Jesse is friendly but noncommittal, and I don't mention that I know about his brunch with Bernard. My best hope is that he holds Bernard off for a couple of weeks while watching how things go with me.

The whole thing makes me feel like I'm under a spotlight now, which is uncomfortable. I'm the guy who doesn't even like getting a present because it stresses me out that I might have the wrong look on my face when I open it. How am I going to show Jesse that I can lead this company? Losing him at this point could put us under. I force that thought out of my head like an unwanted ghost. It's just Dozer talking, I tell myself, and that's not wanted here.

* * *

My dad used to have a working lunch with the leadership team every week, where the heads of sales, production, marketing, and accounting would all gather in the conference room, and update each other on whatever was happening. We can add that weekly meeting to the list of things that have slipped.

So, it's understandable that everyone is a little edgy when I suddenly call a lunch for today. They look at me expectantly like, "Thanks for the turkey sandwich, but why are we here?" Also, I asked Toni to join us, and I can almost hear them wondering why a project manager is part of this group.

The truth is I have two reasons for the meeting. First, I want to update the team on the search for a production manager, and second, it's time to announce Warren's new mission and vision. I ended up using the ChatGPT version, and while it's not perfect, I can always make changes down the road.

I take a last bite of my sandwich, thank everyone for coming, and say, "Most of you have probably heard that Duncan is no longer with the company. Losing him on top of the other vacant positions is tough, but I'm planning an

aggressive hiring campaign for all of our open roles, especially production manager."

Rosemary mimes pressing a button like on Jeopardy. "Bzzz. Who is Toni? Our interim production manager!" She sounds pleased with herself for figuring it out.

"She sure is. I asked Toni to fill in during our search and she graciously accepted."

"Whoa!" Toni grins. "*Graciously accepted*. I don't know how gracious I am toward this one." She inclines her head at Rosemary. "She's a Giants fan and I'm from Philly. Let's just leave it at that."

Everyone laughs and it feels like a good omen. "So, let's get to the big reveal," I say. "As I mentioned, the company is now—"

Jesse interrupts me quietly. "To be fair, you aren't 'planning an aggressive hiring campaign' for a production manager, you're already searching. There's an ad up online from a recruiter." His voice is flat, face expressionless.

"Yes?"

"I'm wondering why you would do that without telling anyone? Why wouldn't you want your team to have the chance to apply first?"

Oh. Shit.

"Of course, anyone is welcome to apply!" My smile feels like a bad paint job on my face. "That's why I'm telling you now about the opportunity. I never meant to give the impression that—"

Jesse's usually pale skin starts reddening toward the color of his bright red hair. "George, as of this morning you have yet another person ready to walk out the door. Why didn't you control the message with your team?"

I feel myself start to sweat, not the honest kind that comes from a workout —this has a bitter undertone to it. *Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice,* I think to myself. I hold up one hand in a steadying gesture. "I hear that you're upset, and I'd like to talk more about this. Let's you and me—"

"It would have been so easy to tell them before the ad ran, and instead you have another mess on your hands. How could you not give anyone the opportunity to apply first?"

Rosemary jumps in, her lean, hungry face intent on his. "I agree with what you're saying, but to be honest I don't see you in that job."

"Seriously?" Jesse gives her a tight smile. "I don't want to be production manager, but there are thirty-something employees here." He takes off his glasses and squeezes the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes for a moment. "Robbie Shaw saw your ad for production manager and brought it to me. He found out about an open leadership position *from an ad*. Is that the kind of company you want? And by the way, I hope you're also wondering why another one of your people is looking at job listings."

I picture Robbie, a youngish, middle-of-the-pack designer/salesman, who's been with us for about a year. Robbie was teaching classes on design software before he started with Warren, and my gut always told me that he was spinning his wheels here until he figured out his next move.

Theresa, our accountant, is the first one to respond. She was staring quietly at the table during Jesse's outburst and now looks up at the group. "Robbie has no production experience," she says in a timid voice. "He doesn't meet the job requirements." She blinks her dark, round eyes nervously.

Jesse shakes his head with a little "pfffttt" sound. "He could be trained. The guy has an engineering degree, did you even know that?" His gaze on me feels almost physically biting. "It's more than anyone else on the production team can say."

Toni moves backward in her chair. "Whoa! You're going to go there?" Her tone is friendly, but it sounds forced. There's always been tension between our sales and production departments, and the fact that we're so short-staffed has made it worse.

An uncomfortable silence follows, and Jesse gives a little shake of his head. "Never mind, it's OK." He's got his game face back on now, professional and

distant, and while I can't tell exactly what he's thinking, if I were a betting man, I'd say it involves Bernard's offer.

In an effort to lighten the mood, I decide to move forward with the second part of the meeting. "I have another announcement that I think you'll like a lot better." I open my laptop and click on the document with Warren's new mission and vision statement.

"I've been consulting with a business owner upstate, and he talks a lot about a company having purpose and direction. That starts with a mission and vision, and so I worked one up that I'm excited about." I explain that this is a new day for us, and I'm committed to creating a more aligned and empowered team. I talk about my belief in the abilities of everyone in that room, and I thank them for hanging in while we get through these growing pains. "I don't mean revenue growth," I say. "What I'm growing here is workplace culture."

Theresa is nodding her head in short little bursts. She starts taking notes.

"This is a great step," Rosemary says. "We can use the mission statement for branding. Good job!"

I focus on the document, courtesy of ChatGPT, and open my mouth to read it out loud, but hesitate. The first sentence says, "At Warren Construction, we are dedicated to reimagining and revitalizing spaces, one project at a time."

I stare at the words silently, realizing just this moment how generic they feel. The rest of what's there is equally uninspiring. The work we do in people's homes holds real meaning for me, but this mission statement does not.

"Are you going to keep us in suspense?" Rosemary asks lightly.

"Mmmmm." I sit there feeling like a little kid who's supposed to play piano at a recital but forgets the song while on stage.

Why does Warren Construction exist? I remember having lunch with Marty at Mission Burger and how the purpose of that restaurant had actually helped transform the waiter, Mike, into a better person. Marty's mission statement worked that way too. "Do well and do good." It shaped the culture of his business.

Am I capable of fixing our culture?

The room is quiet as everyone sits there still waiting for me to start reading. Rosemary and Toni exchange quick glances, eyebrows raised.

My father was designed to run Warren Construction the way a hawk is designed to hunt. I always thought that because I was so different from him it must mean that I was created to do something else. I believed that me running his company was like that same hawk trying to survive with bad eyesight—the bird might live but would have to fly lower and look a lot longer for food.

But maybe that isn't true after all.

Maybe running this business isn't about trying to turn myself into the same kind of animal my father was, but instead it's becoming the best version of who I already am.

I remember the first pillar I learned from Marty, *Belief Is Transferable*, and how tapped in I felt when I used it with Jesse. What was I thinking by posting a position before anyone had the chance to apply? That is a transfer of negative belief.

Next came *Leaders Shape Culture through Purpose and Direction*. A mission and vision are core parts of that, yet rather than create strong words to be our North Star, I am about to push something through that's barely adequate.

Marty's other pillars matter in this moment too. *Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice*. So why would I deliver a canned mission to my team in the same top-down style my dad used? Is that going to create alignment? Is that going to empower anyone to be better?

And finally, there's *Leaders Model Their Business as a Training Organization*. The way I am going about this will teach nothing to any of us. Instead, I need to leverage my team. I need to learn and so do they.

"George?" Theresa asks softly. Her voice holds kindness and a little concern, and I'm touched by how much she still cares in spite of all of my blunders over the last six months.

I put the piece of paper down. "I'd like to do something else instead, if that's OK." Squaring my shoulders, I dive in to an idea that's forming even as I speak.

"You are all leaders in this business and each of you provides a valuable gift. Each of you is also part of shaping the culture here. For that reason, you need to also be part of defining a purpose and direction for this company, rather than having it handed to you."

I suddenly remember that Marty asks questions a lot, it's one of the tools he uses to train people, and I decide to try it here. "What do you think the primary goal should be for Warren Construction right now? In two or three words."

After a moment, Rosemary says, "Become more organized."

I nod encouragingly. "Great, thank you for that. Who else?"

"Remember we're on this journey together." Toni doesn't look at Jesse, but we all get it.

"We need consistency," Theresa says softly.

"Stronger processes." Jesse's voice is decisive.

"All of that is true," I say feeling a wave of appreciation for their honesty and effort. "Those are symptoms. The problem is that we aren't aligned as a company, and that is on me. In the past, Warren was completely dependent on my dad for success and we're all floundering now that he's gone. But I want to build a new kind of organization, and I need your help to make that happen. Becoming an aligned, empowered team means we stand behind a common purpose and direction. That's more important than marketing, sales, production, and even making money, because all of those things spring from that alignment."

I do a quick check of their faces. Toni looks pleased, Rosemary thoughtful, Theresa embarrassed, and Jesse neutral. He's so hard to read.

"I know we are all busy, but can we book some time on our calendars next week? I'd like us to work together to create new mission and vision statements for this company."

I think again about my father's intelligence and charisma, and how bad I've always felt for not inheriting those things. All this time, it never occurred to me that I have a quality of my own that may be just as valuable in the end. It's something that my father, for all of his success, seemed to resist. He was the holder and hoarder of knowledge. But I am teachable and willing to share knowledge.

* * *

The next few days are filled with the usual fires that take up the bulk of my time. The wrong-sized bathtub gets ordered, which throws off our schedule on a big project; a client insists we use his electrician brother, who promptly creates a fire hazard; and one of our lead carpenters misses work and stops answering his phone. I get worried and go by his place to make sure he's alright.

I also meet with Marty for advice on what to do about Robbie, the salesperson who was interested in becoming a production manager. He suggests I tell Robbie that I'm working on some ideas for the position and would appreciate him writing a couple of paragraphs on why he'd be a great fit and what improvements he would make if he led the production team. Marty explains that this is always a useful first step with internal candidates—plus, it will keep Robbie engaged and motivated.

Marty also suggests a couple of Mastermind groups where I could learn from my peers, and recommends some books and articles to read on my own. It all makes me feel like I'm building the plane and flying it at the same time, yet there's a new sense of excitement there, too. I still don't know how to lead Warren Construction effectively, but at least I now know what I don't know. I

block out two full mornings the following week to develop a mission and vision statement with the team.

When the day arrives, I start off by thanking them for coming and state the goal for the morning: "Through honest and respectful conversation, we're going to write our mission, and discuss what we need to change in order to make Warren Construction truly great."

Our conference room holds twenty-five people, yet it somehow feels full now with just the five of us. Maybe that's because of all the other stuff taking up space: the mixed feelings wafting off of the leadership team, and my own dark fears of screwing up this conversation for the second time.

I walk over to our whiteboard and lean against it. Marty and I came up with the concept of structuring the conversation as a series of questions and I write the first question on the board: *What kind of team do we want Warren Construction to be?*

The discussion starts off slowly, but soon the ideas are coming fast, with everyone but Jesse adding thoughts. Words like Supportive and Appreciative go on the board along with Organized, Growth- Minded, Customer-Centered, Innovative, Reliable, Fun, Loyal, Flexible, Community-Minded; the list goes on and on.

We go on defining our team awhile longer, and just when the input is winding down Toni says, "Consistent."

I pause my marker above the whiteboard. "Can you tell me a little more about that?"

"I think things would go more smoothly if there was a clear checklist for all designs before they come out of the sales department. Right now, work gets sold, but when the project gets to production—"

Jesse interrupts her. "Can we try to be a team that doesn't blame salespeople for everything?"

Although his tone isn't exactly hostile, it's not friendly either, and all momentum in the room comes to a screeching halt.

"Hey Jesse, we're all playing on the same team here and we're all having the same tough season. I didn't hear that Toni was trying to blame you."

My own voice is level and confident, which never happens when there's tension. I do a gut check and am surprised to find that I'm actually feeling OK, because instead of perceiving Jesse through my own fear and desperation, I just see someone who feels frustrated and attacked. It's a shift in perception. Jesse didn't change; what changed was my own mindset.

There's a long pause while he stares down at the table and I let the silence unspool around us. When Jesse finally speaks, his voice is quiet. "Everyone is doing their best, I get that. I didn't mean to accuse you of being some type of way." He looks at Toni, who gives him a friendly nod. And the moment is over.

"What is the purpose of Warren Construction?" I ask the group while writing on the whiteboard.

This time there isn't even a pause before the team starts throwing out ideas: creating happy clients, making a profit, transforming homes, and improving people's lives. Our exchange feels healthy, fun even, and the fact that we don't always agree only makes us work harder to sharpen and refine our thoughts.

I ask questions and challenge all of us to keep defining what we mean by each word. There's a flex in the room, a hum almost, as we work together to pull out the most valuable ideas—like when you strip the copper from a mess of wires. It's camaraderie but more, too, because you can have that just by hanging out with friends, and here we are all focused on a job together. And then I find the word for what's happening and smile so big that they give me a funny look. It's one of Marty's favorites: Alignment.

Three hours later we have a new mission statement for Warren Construction: "While we exist to transform homes, our purpose is to go beyond the hammer by transforming the lives of our customers, our teammates, and the communities we serve."

We all stare at the words, and I see pride on the faces of everyone in the room. We have a clear purpose, and it fits us.

After a few moments, Toni breaks the silence. "I really like the words 'beyond the hammer' in our mission. It's such an important reminder for everyone."

Toni goes on to explain that's it's easy to get stuck in the weeds, working in the business and not on the business. "I see 'beyond the hammer' as a metaphor, a constant reminder that if we really want to grow the capabilities of this company, we have to be intentional. We have to be committed to building people and processes."

Jesse chimes in next. He tells us a story about a mechanic he knows who's been struggling to grow his business and can't even take a vacation. "The thing is," Jesse says, "he's so busy repairing cars that he doesn't have time to do anything else. It's like he's trapped. Instead of repairing cars himself, he needs to shift his mindset and work on building a business that repairs cars."

We all begin sharing examples of business owners who are too stuck in the weeds, and we agree that regardless of industry, it's impossible to grow until leaders and managers make time to "zoom out," and go beyond the hammer.

Toni suggests that all of us block out time in our calendars each week where we work on things like people development, process improvements, and documenting best practices. We need to actively go beyond the hammer.

I imagine myself cupping Warren Construction in my hands like an ember and blowing on it slowly and steadily until the mission statement finally comes true and our customers and team members are bathed in its warmth. This sense of alignment will no doubt fade a little as the high of what we accomplished wears off, but it won't go away as long as I keep feeding it.

Purpose and direction, I think to myself, and remind the team that we still need to craft our vision statement. I'd like us to work on that together in the coming days. They nod enthusiastically and we set the date to get started.

I take a sip of my lukewarm coffee, close my eyes, and am suddenly hit with a wave of gratitude. I have a team that cares. I have a team that believes in this business. I have a team that's starting to believe in me.

CHAPTER 12

I follow Marty's suggestion and ask Robbie to write two paragraphs on what he would do as production manager, and his ideas are focused 100 percent on process improvement. We talk for a while and I realize that he has the personality of a production manager superhero—calm, detailed, linear, and a problem solver. He's also an all-around great guy. Robbie's lack of construction experience makes him an unusual hire, but my own background is very strong in that area, which will help compensate. I begin to believe this just may actually work.

Toni and I start him on a ninety-day trial period as interim production manager. Marty advised me that if I had hired from the outside, the new person would get the actual title because otherwise who would come work for us? But, when bringing someone up from within the ranks, I can use the term "interim" and give them the opportunity to earn the title.

It's Tuesday, and we're getting a quick bite after spending all morning visiting current jobsites. Robbie has his iPad in one hand, and a slice of pizza in the other. "Can you look at this spreadsheet?" he asks. "My question is why are supervisory costs allocated this way in column D?"

"One sec." I turned off my phone while we talked with clients, and now want intel on whatever's going on at the office. There are three missed calls from Chuck Cregan, and four from Rosemary. My stomach tightens.

Pushing my lunch away, I call Chuck back immediately, but there's no answer. Rosemary picks up right away though. "Did you see it?" Her voice is laced with stress.

"See what?"

"Oh, you're in for a treat," she says facetiously. She explains that the tile installer was an hour late at the Cregan job, and Chuck called Toni, me, and the project manager, getting increasingly annoyed when none of us picked up. Finally, he started dialing random team members whose numbers were on our website to try to get someone to help.

"That's not good," I say.

"Just wait. I'm still setting up the story."

Rosemary explains that Chuck finally did reach someone and recorded the conversation. The person was on speaker phone, so he probably used his computer to make the file, and then posted the recording on Facebook as an example of terrible customer service.

The news hits me like a poison dart and all of my energy and optimism of recent days starts to hiss out from the hole it makes. Who could he have talked with? Our designer/salespeople are great with clients. Theresa? She's shy, but no one would ever call her "terrible."

"Which team member did he speak with?" I ask, fighting to keep the strain out of my voice. Robbie looks up from his lunch, eyebrows raised.

Instead of answering directly, Rosemary says, "He tagged us on the post so it's real easy to find."

Lunch forgotten, I place my phone on the table, and open Facebook. As with his review of us, Chuck must have paid to boost the post because there are already 436 reactions, and a slew of comments. My breath feels tight and ragged in my chest as I press "Play."

The recording starts in the middle of a sentence: "—can't help you, I'm here in my cubicle, how should I know where anyone is?" The woman's voice is young, hostile, and unmistakably Amelia's.

I slump in my chair, eyes fixed on the phone to avoid looking at Robbie who, thankfully, seems to want to avoid looking at me as well.

"Can. You. Please. Ask. Around." Chuck addresses Amelia as if she were a beetle, and not the shiny blue kind, but the kind that crawls out from a pile of steaming dung.

"Who would I ask? Anyway, it's not like they have AirTags."

Chuck explains with exaggerated condescension that this is an emergency. The tile contractor hasn't shown up and he's hosting a Major Event for seventy-five people in *three days*. How can he do that with a nonfunctional island? Does Amelia understand that he spent $200K on a new kitchen? Does she realize that Chuck's money pays her salary?

Amelia lets out a noise that can only be described as a snort. "Thank you for that important piece of information. I'll put in the notes that you're having a 'Remodeling Emergency' and it's causing you trauma."

I wince and Robbie's eyes go so wide he looks like a cartoon character.

"You know you're going to be fired for this," Chuck tells her.

I can almost hear Amelia's eye roll. "As if. My dad would never fire me, but even if he did, I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees."

Chuck's laugh is surprisingly authentic, and not unkind. "You'll grow out of that," he says and hangs up the phone.

Robbie and I sit there for a moment taking in what's happened. We need to build a strategy for damage control, but I don't even know where to begin. Looking at the Facebook post again, I notice a lot of laughing emojis, with the majority of comments calling out both of them as jerks. Some even support Amelia. But that's not much of a silver lining because she now represents our brand in the minds of hundreds of people and the shame of it crawls on my skin like a live thing.

Is it normal to be embarrassed by your own daughter? Emotions are churning inside of me—anger, betrayal, anxiety, helplessness—and I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. Splashing water on my face, I think about Jesse. A few days ago, he'd casually mentioned that things at Warren were getting better and thanked me for the effort. I'd taken it to mean that he was sticking

around, at least a while longer, but now? What if Chuck did something else to damage the business? I stare in the bathroom mirror and see a Dozer staring back at me. I shake my head hard to clear the image, walk back to the table, and tell Robbie that we need to cut the jobsite visits short for today.

* * *

Back at Warren, I go straight to Rosemary's office. She's a fan of owls and has pictures and little statues of them all over the place. Some look badass, while others are more cartoony, but when you're in there, the overall effect is that you're being watched by a bunch of birds. I usually enjoy teasing her about it, but not today.

"Rosie, I'm going to ask you something and I need an honest answer."

She nods hesitantly.

"Aside from what happened today, what do you think of Amelia's performance?"

"Ugh. That's so awkward." She fans her face with one hand although it's not hot in here. "She's a great kid, but …" She trails off with a sigh. "I don't know."

"Don't hold back because she's my daughter, OK? I need your honest assessment."

Rosemary explains that on the one hand Amelia has a huge heart, and when she's invested in a project, she's fantastic. On the other hand, her work is often sloppy and late, and she gets defensive when you give her any feedback. "I've wanted to come to you for months, but kept putting it off," Rosemary says. "She is the boss's daughter after all." She smiles wryly at me and then turns serious. "What are you going to do?"

I suddenly remember when Amelia was first born, and the doctor placed this tiny human being in my arms, this perfect, fragile little girl, all wrapped like a burrito and sleeping peacefully. I still recall the overwhelming sense of

responsibility I felt in that moment. This innocent baby needed me, and all I wanted to do was protect her from the slightest harm. That feeling has never completely left, even though if I'm not careful that "baby" will take down what's left of my business.

Looking at it objectively, she should probably be let go, yet I don't think I can bring myself to fire her. As a leader, I've grown a great deal in a short time, but right now I feel truly lost. I pull out my phone to call Marty before the owls are even out of sight.

*   *   *

It turns out that Marty's in the city for a few days, and rather than give me advice over the phone, he suggests we meet at a nearby park that afternoon. We buy a couple of drinks from a hot dog stand and find a spot high up in some bleachers above a baseball field.

Just being outside makes my knotted-up stomach feel a little better. It's a beautiful day, and all around us the park makes park sounds—kids play T-ball below us, a squirrel chatters, and in the distance there's the gentle rush of cars going by.

"OK," Marty says. "Let's put what Amelia did inside its own box for a minute." He outlines a box with his hands. "Let's look at the larger issues around that phone call and then we can come back to it."

I nod and take a long sip of iced tea, waiting for whatever question is coming because Marty always asks questions.

"What do you think is the difference between a leader and a manager?"

"A leader is …" I know the answer, just never quite put it into words. "A leader thinks about big picture and a manager is in the weeds."

"Good." Marty gives a short nod. He then explains that leaders drive change while managers navigate the day-to-day complexities inside the business and ensure that systems and processes are being followed. A leader

and a manager are often the same person, and that individual needs to be able to wear one hat or the other depending on what they're trying to accomplish.

"Got it." This is useful, interesting information and I wish Amelia was here to hear it. She'd probably start doodling pictures of different hats and the image makes me miss her. Then I remember that Amelia is why I'm sitting here in the first place.
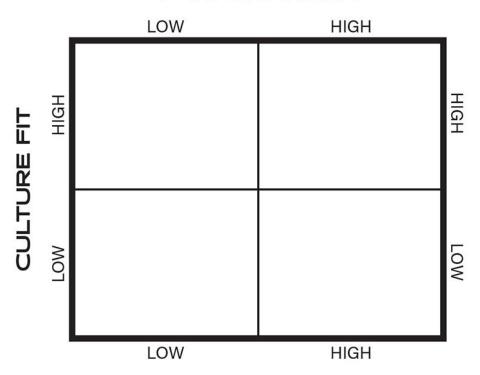
Marty continues. "But let me ask you this: Does anyone on your team have guidelines on how to be a manager?"

"Guidelines? No." I'm in uncharted territory here, and it occurs to me that's always how it is with him: we talk, and he pushes the outer edges of my comfort zone.

Marty takes a pen out of his pocket and asks for the napkin from my ice tea. Careful not to rip it, he draws a square and then splits it into four equal quadrants.

"This here is why managers get bogged down," he says and adds arrows to the outside of the box with the words "Performance" and "Culture" written next to them. He then labels the quadrants.

PERFORMANCE

	LOW	HIGH
HIGH		
LOW		

CULTURE FIT — HIGH (top right) / LOW (bottom right)

LOW   HIGH
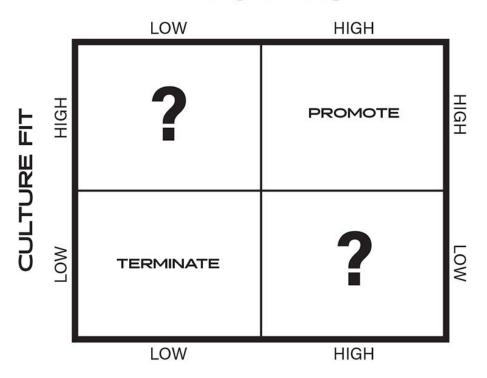
Marty talks through the matrix explaining that one side is culture fit and the other side is performance. In any business, if there's a low culture fit/low performer (lower left box) it's best to give them the opportunity to be successful somewhere else. A high performer/high culture fit (top right box) would be someone to promote.

"But those two boxes are not where managers spend most of their time," he says. "Where do you think that is?"

I lean forward a little and point at the other two boxes. "Here and here."

"Yes!" Marty draws question marks on both.

PERFORMANCE

	LOW	HIGH
HIGH	?	PROMOTE
LOW	TERMINATE	?

CULTURE FIT

"What do we do with a high culture fit/low performer? That's the person that everyone loves but they are not good at actually driving performance. Or what do you do with the low culture/high performer? This team member is really productive but blows up your meetings."

He lowers his voice as if sharing a secret. "Allowing a team member to stay indefinitely in those boxes will hurt your organization."

Marty talks more about the foursquare, warming more and more to the topic. He has a solid, attractive face, the Honda CR-V of faces, dependable but not flashy, yet when he talks, that Honda somehow becomes a high-performance sports car, and you can't help but listen.

He goes on to say that the goal for managers is to coach team members out of those two boxes and they do that by using a mixture of tools.

"What tools?" I ask.

"*Managers Need a Checklist*." Marty speaks slowly and gives weight to each word. "That is the fifth pillar."

PILLAR 5: MANAGERS NEED A CHECKLIST

I turn the words over in my head, "Managers Need a Checklist." It's less philosophical than the other pillars, and more action-oriented. I'm intrigued. "What kind of checklist?"

"Good question. You're modeling your business as a training organization, right? To do that, and to really grow the company, you have to understand the role of the manager in general and give all managers the proper practices."

"Proper practices. Is that the checklist?"

Marty pulls out his phone, opens the Notes section, and hands it to me. On the screen is the following:

THE TEN PRACTICES OF TOP-PERFORMING MANAGERS

1. Is an effective coach and mentor
2. Leads with a team vision statement
3. Practices empowerment
4. Communicates effectively
5. Is KPI focused and accountable
6. Discusses performance and career development
7. Keeps a learning mindset
8. Collaborates with other business units
9. Embraces continual process improvement
10. Praises performance publicly

The list looks great, yet I'm not sure how to implement some of the items on it. Marty explains that he has some material that goes over the individual practices in more depth, and that he's also willing to talk me through how they work. Even with my limited understanding of the list, I can see that these practices could have prevented the situation with Amelia from going as far as it did. The realization makes me sad.

"Anyway, the whole reason why managers need a checklist is so they can move people up and out of those two boxes," he explains. "There are tools to do that and they include the company's mission and vision statements, key performance indicators (KPIs), performance reviews, and more."

I think about Amelia as objectively as I can using this system and, from what I can tell, she's low culture fit/low performance. That means she should be fired. But the dad in me can't fathom that. I explain this all to Marty and ask what he thinks I should do.

Marty doesn't even hesitate. "Amelia is Rosemary's direct report, right?"

"Yes."

"Then, I believe it should be Rosemary's choice."

"Hmmm." I squint at him, surprised.

"George, if you start making decisions for your managers because of your child, what does that say about your culture?"

"So, I give her absolute freedom on how to handle this?"

"Not only freedom but also your full support. It actually ties into *Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice*. If you override Rosemary, the message that you're sending is 'I veto my managers for my own personal reasons,' and that's not the message you want to give out."

I recall a few weeks ago, when Marty advised me to reach out to my team before posting the ad for production manager, and I paid the price for not listening to him. Not a mistake I'll make twice. I try to imagine what Rosemary will do about my daughter's unacceptable rudeness. The thought of her firing Amelia fills me with sorrow and dread. It will become one more failure for her, one more addition to the huge chip on her shoulder, one more reason for my daughter to feel bad about herself. But the thought of keeping her doesn't make me feel any better.

Marty had said to me once that company culture is defined by the lowest level of acceptable behavior in the organization. If I tolerate a team member

who sarcastically mocks a client, what does that say about the culture at Warren Construction? I glance down at Marty's foursquare and realize that I'm in a box of my own. It's called Dad Who Cares/Leader Who Cares, and the two measurements are in direct conflict. I don't see a way out.

CHAPTER 13

At first Rosemary is hesitant to make the choice regarding Amelia. She explains that when my dad ran the company, her job was to carry out his decisions rather than make any on her own, and that's how she's used to operating. When I tell her that I trust her to do what's right for the business, she looks away, touched.

We talk it through for a long time, bouncing ideas back and forth. I tell her about Marty's five pillars, share a copy of his checklist, and suggest that she start making notes on what the items might mean to her. I then ask how she feels about using our mission statement as one of the benchmarks to coach people.

Rosemary answers in a musing tone, talking through the mission more to herself than to me. "While we exist to transform homes, our purpose is to make an impact beyond the hammer by transforming the lives of our customers, our teammates, and the communities we serve." She pauses. "Amelia didn't transform Chuck's life, that's for sure."

I agree, pleased that she took to the idea so easily and already knows the mission statement by heart. We talk for another thirty minutes and when a decision regarding Amelia is finally reached, it feels right to both of us. I realize that empowering Rosemary in this way made her take the choice even more seriously, as if I'd asked her to hold a fragile and exquisitely carved spear.

On my way out the door, I feel good enough to joke a little. I point to an empty, four-inch area on her desk and say, "Hey, there's a spot here without an owl. Clearly you need to do something about that."

Rosemary makes a face of mock indignation. "This ten-by-ten office contains five owls, which is only one owl per twenty square feet, so you have no right to give me a hard time."

I stroke my chin like I'm thinking. "Anyone who has to calculate their owls by the foot deserves a hard time."

"Get out of here," she says. "I have a checklist to work on."

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Amelia stalks into my office holding a piece of paper between two fingers like the tail of a rat. Her face is bright red, jaw clenched with anger.

"Rosemary suspended me for thirty days!" she says. "Are you behind this?"

I motion for her to take a seat. "I'm aware of it, yes, but Rosemary is your manager and so the decision was hers. As your dad, I want to protect you, but as the leader of this business I have to support Rosemary's decision. And in this case, I agree with it."

She launches into all the reasons we are being unfair, and I listen carefully, surprised by my own sense of calm. Normally, I'm anxious to appease her, or fix things, or somehow make up for the fact that her parents had a terrible divorce, but right now all I feel is love for my daughter and sadness that she's struggling.

"What did Rosemary tell you exactly?" I ask hoping to redirect her thoughts.

"We listened to the recording of the call, and she asked me if I thought the way I handled it was 'aligned with the mission of this company.'" She waves the sheet of paper in front of her, and I see that our mission is typed on it. "And I mean yeah, I was out of line, I get it. But that Chuck Cregan is such an ass, and I lost my temper a little. Rosemary said I need to take time to think about if I can commit to this mission and if not then I need to get another job. And I also have to write Chuck an apology."

I look into Amelia's pale, gray eyes. They are so light it's like all she has is a coat of primer, and she's still waiting for her real color to show up. "I believe in

you," I say, "but I can't allow our customers to be treated this way. If you're going to work here, the fundamental requirement is that you're aligned with our mission. If that doesn't feel right in your heart, then I will help you find your path in any way I can, but that path won't be here."

She shakes her head stubbornly. "But that's not fair. Chuck was every bit as rude as I was."

"But Chuck isn't part of our team. How did you feel when you listened to yourself on the recording?"

"Angry," she says. And then after a pause, hesitantly adds, "Stupid. Embarrassed."

Suddenly her eyes fill with tears and a second later they spill over onto her cheeks. My heart wrenches in my chest. Amelia's MO is to get angry, and I can't recall seeing her cry since middle school. "You're putting your business in front of your own daughter," she says, voice choked.

I lean forward across my desk and take her small, sweaty hands in mine.

"I would lay my life down for you," I tell her. "But I will not allow anyone to treat customers that way because it flies in the face of why our business exists. It has nothing to do with how much I love you. If I were to override Rosemary and let this go by I would not be a good leader or a good father."

Amelia's hands are still in mine, and I can feel her ring digging into my palm. The deep-red ruby in an antique setting had been a gift for her mother during our engagement, and I remember the hatred in my ex-wife's eyes as she hurled it at me one day when I had come to pick up Amelia. I can still see Amelia's shocked, stricken eight-year-old face. She had insisted on wearing it ever since, the band resized twice to fit her growing hand. Every time I look at that ring, I regret the way we hurt her, and my own guilt has made me always appease rather than empower.

"You have a gift," I tell her. "Your voice is powerful. It carries and has an impact. You can use that voice for positive change or for negativity. I know it's hard, but I believe in you so much."

I tell her once again how much I love her and then say that she has an hour to send Chuck an apology and leave the building.

"Don't you want to read it?" she asks in a small voice.

I shake my head. Normally I might ask to review something like that, but not this time. I tell her that I want her to think about our mission when she writes it, and that I'm trusting her to listen for the echo of her own voice.

CHAPTER 14

The Cregan job is finished, and I go to Chuck's house for a final walkthrough of the whole project. I rest one hand on the island—which actually looks great —and apologize on behalf of the company and Amelia. I tell him that creating happy clients is important to me and the memories he'll form with friends and family in this gathering place are what give meaning to my work.

"We let you down, but I hope over time that your enjoyment of this new space outweighs the pain that it took to get here."

The words come from my heart, and Chuck nods thoughtfully. Then he says that he doesn't hold a grudge because his own daughter has "interpersonal challenges similar to Amelia's" and I try not to wince.

Back at the office, I buy lunch for the crew that worked on Chuck's island. "We did it!" I cheer and thank them all. Then I do the Sailor's Hornpipe that my grandfather taught me, and I don't even care that I'm a terrible dancer, and it's more like the Sailor's Kazoo. Everyone laughs, and we toast with our cans of Coke.

Over the next few weeks, I share Marty's five pillars with the whole management team and work on department vision statements with each of them individually. We also go through the checklist for managers and the performance/culture foursquare. Each manager develops the specifics of their checklist—for example, choosing the right KPIs for their department—and then we refine together.

I also take a suggestion from Marty and begin meeting with my management team for a fifteen-minute huddle every morning to share our goals for that day. Even though it's just a quick check-in, I notice after the very first week that the team already feels more cohesive. Jesse's frustration is

replaced by enthusiasm while Robbie seems to double his knowledge every twenty-four hours.

At home, I purposely don't talk with Amelia about her job or even share news of the company. I want to give her the space to think. While she does seem quieter, it's not in a sulky way, and I notice that the piece of paper with our mission stays open on her dresser rather than going in the trash. She also starts a comic strip about a dog just like Larry except he lives in a dystopian world and has superpowers. The series is a cross between Mad Max and Paw Patrol, and it's totally great. I open my mouth to suggest she take classes, maybe write a graphic novel, but have the sense to stop myself before I try to design her entire career and just add pressure.

One day I come in to find Amelia watching a video about a home improvement company that gives free bathroom remodels to deserving veterans with mobility issues. The program is called Baths for the Brave and a bunch of other contractors have joined. "This makes a difference for people," she says pointing at the screen. "You should be part of some charity thing."

"Do well and do good," I reply, quoting the mission of True North.

I brace myself for the expected eye roll, but instead Amelia answers in a quiet voice. "I'm trying. Just like you Dad."

CHAPTER 15

"George!" The way Marty says my name is so friendly that I wish I could record it for my ring tone. He's just walked into my office after picking up lunch for us both, and we go into the conference room to eat. It's hard to believe that I've known him for a full year, and even harder to believe how much has changed over that time.

The last twelve months have had their share of ups and downs. There were plenty of times when I got stressed out and forgot to stay aware of the echo of my voice, or fixed things myself rather than model the business as a training organization. But when that happens, I always go back to the five pillars.

Pillar 1: Belief Is Transferable

Pillar 2: Leaders Shape Culture through Purpose and Direction

Pillar 3: Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice

Pillar 4: Leaders Model Their Business as a Training Organization

Pillar 5: Managers Need a Checklist

Those leadership pillars, along with the business best practices I've learned in my mastermind group, keep us all moving in the right direction. And then there's Marty. He comes into town every few months, and never fails to spend time with me, often including the whole team as well.

I don't remember ever feeling so good about Warren Construction, even when my dad ran the company and we grew at least 18 percent every year, often more. I felt good then too, but this is different. Under my dad, there was an adrenaline rush when we'd land a big project or finish a tough job, but adrenaline burns hot and high like kindling, and this feeling is more of a low, clean, even flame. It's the nourishment of protein instead of sugar.

Over lunch, Marty and I discuss a few new questions that have come up—Robbie brought on a carpenter who has become high performance/low culture fit, and Theresa's asked the company to cover her tuition as she finishes a CPA program. There's also a homeowner who wants to work with us, but their project is so large that I'm not sure we're ready to tackle it.

"And how's Amelia?" Marty askes after we go through the various issues.

"She's great," I answer truthfully. "In fact, let me call her; I know she'll want to say hello."

Amelia comes in a minute later and greets Marty warmly. He asks about her classes—"Marketing and graphic design, right?"—and she launches into an energetic story about being able to use her work for Warren as a school project. "I didn't even know cause marketing was a thing," she tells him.

I remember the end of that thirty-day suspension period many months ago now, when she told us that she wanted to come back. Amelia started off with an apology, owned her bad behavior, and thanked us for the opportunity to try again. She then quoted Warren's mission statement to us and said, "Over the last month, I kept thinking about the part that talks about going 'beyond the hammer' and 'improving the communities we serve' and realized that I want to do that. There are contractors who work with all kinds of charities, and some of them are huge, I looked it up, so, if there's a part of the job where I can make a difference, I would be happy if you would take me back."
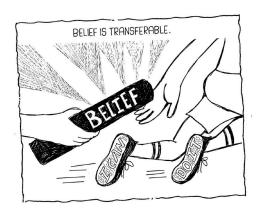
In response, Rosemary asked Amelia to come up with a few ideas for how Warren could help the community and bring the list to her by the end of the week. "They don't have to be perfect," she said. "Or even good. They just have to show your thought process." She also cautioned Amelia that "improving the communities we serve" was only one part of the mission and she needed to embrace all of it if she was going to succeed in her role. There are aspects of the job that you still won't like, she said, and clients who may not agree with your values.

Amelia nodded and said she understood, and while no one does a complete one-eighty in thirty days, I knew from experience that the first step toward change is committing to a new mindset, and Amelia's open, eager expression told me that she had taken that step.

That same expression is on her face now as she continues to talk with Marty. She brings insight and detail into her description of our initiatives and frequently mentions how much Rosemary is mentoring her. I smile with pride at her graciousness.
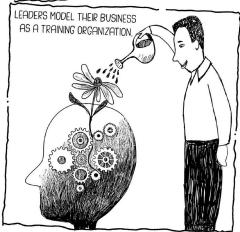
"There's one more thing," Amelia tells him, suddenly a little shy. "I have a present for you." She hands him a manila folder with some papers inside, and, when Marty opens it, I see that she has created some illustrations, including one for each of the five pillars, bringing her own sense of fun and originality to each drawing.

"This is so great!" Marty grins. "They're going to get framed and go right up in our conference room. Your first art exhibit!" He gives her a high-five and spreads the drawings out for me to see.

BELIEF IS TRANSFERABLE.

LEADERS SHAPE CULTURE THROUGH PURPOSE AND DIRECTION.

YOU WANT YOUR PETS OBEDIENT
BUT YOU WANT YOUR TEAM ALIGNED.

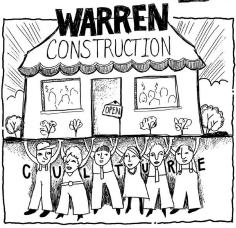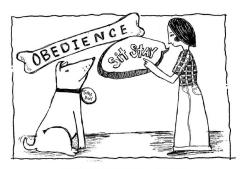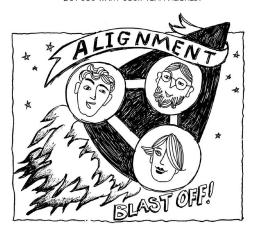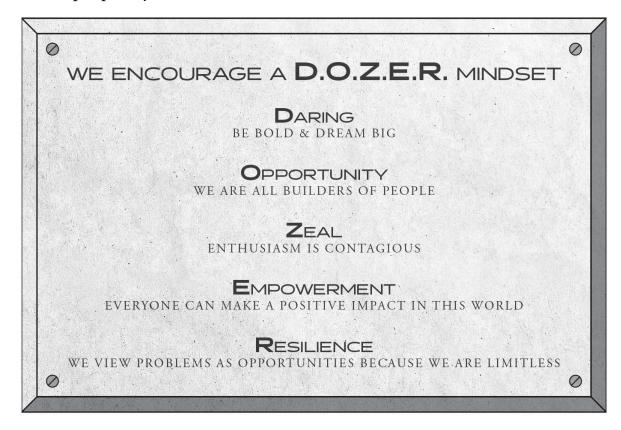Marty stays for a while after Amelia leaves and we talk about a young man he's begun to help get started as a professional trainer. "He's very talented, but has no idea how to launch a business, so we worked out a trade. He helps me build one kind of muscle, and I help him build another." Same old Marty, I think, leaning into the crackle of his energy as he tells me more about this entrepreneur's particular challenges. Marty doesn't just model his business as a training organization, he models his life that way.

When it's time for Marty to go, I insist on walking him to his car. On our way out, he notices a plaque hanging on the wall. "What's this?"

I explain to Marty how my dad thought it was funny to call me Dozer, but the nickname might as well have been "Loser," because it made me feel the same way. I tell him that transforming Dozer from a hurtful memory into a positive statement is a reminder to never allow negative words from others limit or define us.

"Over the past months, and through the process of redefining the business, I realized I also need to redefine myself." I motion to the plaque. "So I've reframed the meaning of DOZER into something that can lift people up, instead of tearing them down. After all, I'm still a builder, but today, I'm a different kind of builder, I'm a builder of people."

The plaque says:

WE ENCOURAGE A **D.O.Z.E.R.** MINDSET

DARING
BE BOLD & DREAM BIG

OPPORTUNITY
WE ARE ALL BUILDERS OF PEOPLE

ZEAL
ENTHUSIASM IS CONTAGIOUS

EMPOWERMENT
EVERYONE CAN MAKE A POSITIVE IMPACT IN THIS WORLD

RESILIENCE
WE VIEW PROBLEMS AS OPPORTUNITIES BECAUSE WE ARE LIMITLESS

Marty pats the plaque with a smile and a nod of approval. I can't help but smile too.

I walk him outside to his car, and give him a hug, along with heartfelt thanks for everything he's done for me. Marty looks a little misty and I do too.

"See you in a few months," he says. "And by then, you'll be showing me how to lead a company."

"Oh, I suspect you still have a few more tools in that belt." I laugh.

Marty laughs too. Then he gets in his fancy-ass car and drives away.

As we reach the completion of our journey with George, it's now time to turn our focus to your journey as a leader. The next section provides actionable steps for implementing each pillar in your business. We'll also delve into each of the Ten Practices of Top-Performing Managers, giving you and your team a new way of thinking and a road map toward alignment.

How people think affects how they feel. How people feel determines how they act. How a team acts defines what a business becomes. With the right tools, a leader can change the mindset of everyone on their team, and in doing so, have a profound impact on the overall health of the organization—and the lives of the people that surround it.

It all starts by developing the right mindset.

Aligning a business culture around a new set of beliefs and behaviors (the five pillars) can be transformational to the health and performance of an organization. The following section gives you an actionable playbook for plugging the five pillars into your business, ensuring everyone on your team is in sync around a shared strategy, a meaningful purpose, and a clear vision on how to win.

As a leader, you have a unique opportunity to help others reach their potential. With the aid of the rest of this book, you'll have the tools to make it happen.

PART TWO

THE FIVE PILLARS

BELIEF IS TRANSFERABLE

We established in the business parable that belief is transferable, but now you might be thinking, "How do I implement that with my team? Am I supposed to just tell them they're great and that I believe in them?"

The answer is Yes and No. But first I want to touch on belief in general.

THE POWER OF BELIEF

There are hundreds of studies illustrating how belief changes performance, but here's one of my favorites: In 2011, a group of researchers looked at the way stress affects health and mortality. What they found was amazing. The study participants who reported high levels of stress were more likely to die prematurely, but only if another factor was true as well. That factor is belief. The people who were stressed and *also believed* that stress affects health were 43 percent more likely to die prematurely than those who were stressed but not did not hold that same belief.[1]

Think about the implications of that statement: *Stress won't kill you unless you believe it will.* That is because belief is one of the most powerful energies in the universe. A positive belief about yourself will inspire a limitless mindset. A

negative belief can be lethal. As leaders, we can, and we must, help others recognize their potential and encourage them to journey toward it.

FIVE WAYS TO ACTIVATE BELIEF

The idea that Belief Is Transferable is easy to understand, but not always so easy to implement. Here are five things to keep in mind when helping a team member who is experiencing FUD (Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt).

1. REMEMBER THAT NEGATIVE VOICES ARE LOUDER THAN POSITIVE ONES

Humans are wired to hear criticism louder than they hear praise. This is known as positive-negative asymmetry. For whatever reason, we remember harsh words more clearly, and for much longer, than words of encouragement. Have you ever been speaking in front of a group, or brainstorming in a meeting, and everything felt great until that one person had to make a negative comment? Suddenly you can't get their words out of your mind and that single piece of feedback becomes the most powerful memory of the meeting.

Unfortunately, negative belief is every bit as transferable—maybe even more so—as positive belief. This is especially meaningful because it underscores Pillar #3: Leaders Are Aware of the Echo of Their Voice. It's very easy for a leader to transfer negative belief without even realizing it, yet that same person's words of encouragement have a softer echo that fades more quickly. Leaders can help overcome this by transferring positive belief to their team frequently, consistently, and authentically.

2. MAKE YOUR BELIEF EVIDENCE-BASED

If you tell someone, "Hey, I believe in you," but don't expand on the reasons why, the praise can sound empty. The goal is to break through their FUD, and that's hard to do if they think that your words lack substance.

You can try using a concept that I call Belief-Because. It's a simple, yet highly effective, formula for producing evidence-based belief. Imagine for a moment you have someone named Stephanie on your team and she's getting ready to take on a new role in the business. Instead of saying, "Stephanie, you'll do a great job in this new role, I believe in you," try adding "because." "Stephanie, you'll do a great job in this new role. I believe in you *because* I know how dedicated and committed you are, and I've seen how you've always tackled new challenges in the past!" The "because" provides substance and evidence. The "because" overcomes FUD.

3. REMEMBER TO READ THE ROOM

Some people are comfortable speaking up to a leader or manager to say, "Hey, I'm scared that I can't do this." But for many, instead of verbalizing their self-doubt, they (understandably) default to silence. Who wants to admit to their manager they're feeling anxious or insecure? Knowing that, try watching your team members for signs of FUD rather than waiting for them to tell you about it. FUD can make people unusually quiet or apologize a lot. Some will get defensive or avoid tasks that feel overwhelming to them. If you see that behavior in a team member, it might be a perfect moment to transfer belief. You can start by asking how they're doing, listening closely, and respond with words of encouragement.

In addition to watching for signs, there are some conditions inside a business that commonly bring on FUD, and it's a good idea to be ready to help team members during these scenarios. For example, you've just brought on a new sales rep, they're going through rigorous training, and are required to memorize a script word for word. They may feel intimidated. It's a lot to take in, there's homework, and they don't always get it on the first try. The same is true when someone gets promoted into a new role or is learning a new skill.

Change can cause stress in almost anyone, yet the good news is that the whispers of FUD that live in people's heads can truly be drowned out by a

leader's louder voice of positivity.

4. BELIEF IS TRANSFERABLE GOES BEYOND TITLE AND POSITION

Every organization has team members who transfer belief, whether it's positive or negative, and whether they realize they are doing it or not. In a healthy workplace, colleagues cheer each other on. They don't simply believe in themselves, they actively believe in each other.

So how do we make positivity happen? One way is to remember that Leaders Shape Culture through Purpose and Direction.

When individuals are not aligned around a shared team purpose, it's easy for negativity and interpersonal conflicts to creep in. On the other hand, when team members have a shared purpose and direction, they will feel good about their role and will want peers to feel good as well. That positivity becomes an energy loop that inspires belief in the company and stronger individual performance.

5. TRY TO FRAME FEEDBACK USING A CENTER AND A SPHERE
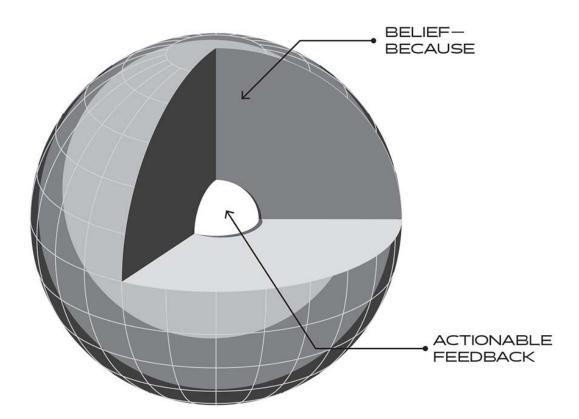
Giving helpful feedback to team members is a big topic that I'll get into later when we discuss Pillar #5: Managers Need a Checklist. Here, I just want to touch on a single idea: coaching up. When you need to have a conversation with someone regarding underperformance in a certain area, it's important to transfer belief to them as well. Remember that our positive-negative asymmetry means that feedback—even when it's constructive—can overpower words of praise.

Knowing that, try using a concept that I call the Center and the Sphere. The idea is to raise awareness of areas for improvement so that an individual feels inspired and empowered to grow. When there are performance gaps that need to be addressed, and our intent is not to terminate the team member,

then we must actively coach up. We coach people because we believe in them, and for that reason we want them to know three things:

1. Why we believe in them (belief-because)
2. What they need to work on (actionable feedback)
3. Why we're confident that they can successfully incorporate the feedback we just provided

Numbers 1 and 3 are the Sphere. Number 2 is the Center. In other words, the Sphere is why you believe that person can improve, and the Center is the need for improvement (see the graphic).

Many people shut down the moment they hear critical feedback about their performance, and so the Center has the potential to create FUD. The Sphere neutralizes FUD and ensures a more receptive listener. When giving feedback, it's helpful to start with the Sphere, move to the Center, and then transition back out to the Sphere again. How frequently you work back and

forth between Sphere and Center is dependent on you and the response you're getting from the team member. There is no strict, linear order to how the information is conveyed.

Here's an example of how it flows.

- *Sphere:* "TJ, I appreciate your hard work and dedication. I know you are trying because I've seen the improvements you've made with [fill in the blank]."
- *Center:* "Where I'd like to see you focus is on [insert area of improvement/opportunity] by starting to [insert actionable feedback]."
- *Sphere:* "I know you're capable of making improvements in this area, I have every bit of confidence in you, and I believe in you!"

It's best practice to confirm that the person you are speaking with understands and agrees with the area for improvement as well as the action plan you've crafted.

When you surround the Center (improvements that are needed) with the Sphere (belief) the team member will feel appreciated and be significantly more receptive to the feedback. In addition, because you communicated your belief in them, their motivation for success will include their desire to not disappoint themselves, or you as their leader.

The idea that Belief Is Transferable is powerful and should be practiced daily until it becomes a habit. Used alongside the other four pillars it will expand the potential of every individual in your organization, and the business itself.

LEADERS SHAPE CULTURE THROUGH PURPOSE AND DIRECTION

I'm going to share with you some actionable insights that will help you create a more aligned team. But before we talk about how to use your mission to shape culture, let's define what culture is.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

One simple explanation of company culture reads, "the attitudes and behaviors of employees within an organization."[2] I think that's a good definition. Every workplace has a culture; it's unavoidable. When leaders choose to positively shape the attitudes and behaviors of team members, it gives the business meaning and direction. This has a powerful effect on performance.

You can usually tell a lot about a company's culture by looking at how that organization hires, promotes, and compensates people. What do the leaders deem as important? What value do they put on certain behaviors? How do they reward team members? What steps do they take if someone is not aligned with the mission?

That last question is a biggie. What steps do you take if someone isn't aligned with your organization's mission? As we saw in George's story, company culture is shaped by the lowest level of acceptable behavior in an organization. This plays out with the disastrous kitchen island mistake and Amelia's treatment of a client. George needed to learn not only to celebrate the people who believed in his mission but also to take action with team members who weren't aligned to it. (More on that later.)

MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS

As Marty explains to George, a mission statement defines why a business exists today, and a vision statement looks to the future.

A vision statement should answer the following questions:

1. *What does the business aspire to become?* What mindset and what behaviors do you want your team to have? How do you want to take care of customers? Employees? Your community?
2. *How do you win?* Winning is defined by the business reaching its aspirational goals.

I've helped quite a few businesses figure this part out, how a company wins. Sometimes, the easiest way is first identifying what it means to lose. By making a list of how you lose, the opposite is how you win.

For example, a business might lose if it has unhappy customers, or fails to adapt to changing times. In this case, part of your vision statement could read, "We win by consistently delighting our customers and always challenging ourselves to innovate." Yes, that will raise questions, and those questions are good and healthy. They help focus a business at the deepest possible level. Items for discussion might be:

- What does it mean to delight a customer?
- How do we measure it?

- • What does innovation mean?
- How do we challenge ourselves to stay ahead?

WRITING YOUR VISION STATEMENT

Let's revisit Warren Construction and together try writing one part of what might be their new vision statement. To do so, let's remember their mission: "While we exist to transform homes, our purpose is to go beyond the hammer by transforming the lives of our customers, our teammates, and the communities we serve."

As you recall, the business struggled with a lack of systems and processes, and Toni wanted to put a real emphasis on training and development.
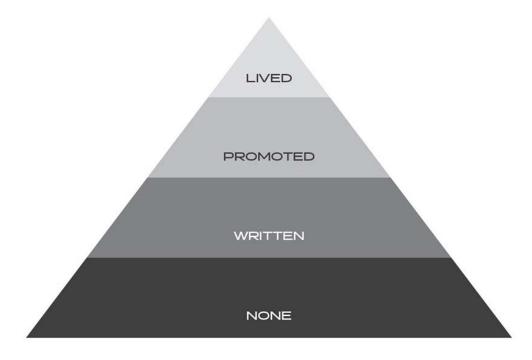
Warren Construction would want part of their vision statement to address where they were losing, and state with aspiration how the business needs to behave in order to win. With that in mind, one element of their vision statement might read, "We go beyond the hammer by providing best-in-class training for our team, ensuring every individual is given an opportunity to reach their potential."

By zooming out and looking at the business through the lens of "what we want the business to become," we're able to document the future behaviors that are valued and begin to form a plan on how to reach them.

I should note that while a mission statement is timeless, it's a good idea to revisit a vision every few years. Maybe you've already achieved what you wanted to become and it's time to challenge your business again.

IS YOUR MISSION WOVEN INTO THE BUSINESS? (A TEST)

Before getting into how organizations can weave purpose into the fabric of the company, I want to give you a little challenge. Look at the graphic below and identify where your business sits regarding mission and vision.

- Level 1: None. (No mission or vision at all.)
- Level 2: Written. (It's documented somewhere, but most people couldn't recite it.)
- Level 3: Promoted. (The statements are promoted; maybe there's a poster in the conference room, and occasional mention of the company's purpose.)
- Level 4: Lived and Rewarded. (Every team member knows the mission, and they are rewarded for living it. The business is aligned around its purpose and direction.)

Where does your business sit on the pyramid? Can you level up your mission to build a more engaged team?

This section will help leaders move into Level 4, living your mission and vision.

In a Level 4 organization, every team member sees themselves as part of a larger purpose, no matter what their job is, and that gives meaning to their role. An example of this was a program we created called Windows for a Cause. Here's how it worked. In the replacement window business, to install

new windows, we first had to remove the old ones. Normally, old windows end up in the trash. We decided to "do good" with the old windows by giving the old sashes to local artists and asking them to turn the window sashes into art pieces. Once a year, the window art pieces were put on display in a public setting and auctioned off. The money raised went to help someone in our community.

One year, the recipient was a gentleman named John Greene, a Vietnam-era veteran who's been wheelchair-bound for almost forty years. Windows for a Cause raised enough money to get John Greene a custom electric wheelchair that stood up. Mr. Greene can stand up for the first time in forty years, because windows that were headed to the trash were turned into works of art by people in his community and auctioned off to help him out.

For Windows for a Cause to exist, it required involvement from the entire business, and the customer; everyone became a coproducer in its success.

If a customer didn't buy new windows from us, we wouldn't have old windows to remove. The customer became a coproducer.

If the installation team wasn't careful removing the old windows, there wouldn't be windows to paint. The installation team became a coproducer.

If the field sales team wasn't successful selling a window project, the customer wouldn't have their old windows replaced by us. The field sales team became a coproducer.

If the inside sales team wasn't successful scheduling an appointment, the field sales team wouldn't have an opportunity to sell new windows. The inside sales team became a coproducer.

If the marketing team wasn't successful generating the inquiry for new windows, the inside sales team wouldn't have the opportunity to schedule an appointment. The marketing team became a coproducer.

If artists weren't willing to paint windows, we wouldn't have windows to display and auction. The artists became coproducers.

If the community didn't come out to support Windows for a Cause and purchase window art pieces, we wouldn't raise any money. The community became a coproducer.

Essentially, everyone had a role in helping John Greene get his custom wheelchair. The program touched everyone.

I clearly remember the time at a company holiday party where this nineteen-year-old young man introduced himself and started telling me how much he loved the company. I asked what he did in the business, and he said, "I work in the field marketing department, and I help veterans in wheelchairs stand."

Windows for a Cause became so popular that in 2018, we set a Guinness World Record for displaying 1,651 painted windows.

Connecting individuals on an authentic level to the mission of a business creates a team of people who feel not just inspired but together, limitless.

A clearly defined mission and vision that's woven deep into an organization will act like jet fuel for igniting individual and team performance.

FIVE WAYS TO SHAPE COMPANY CULTURE WITH PURPOSE AND DIRECTION

1. START WITH ONBOARDING

To explain this, let's use Marty's mission statement, "Do Well and Do Good," as an example. New team members would be exposed to those words, and the meaning behind them, on their very first day.

One way is to engage fresh hires in a conversation where you ask, "What does it mean to 'do good?'" "How do you define 'doing well?'" Once they have

shared their thoughts, the person leading the onboarding explains how the business sees those words. This sets the stage from the very beginning that the business is aligned around a mission, and this helps new team members internalize and remember the company's purpose.

You can also outline the ways that the company's mission is kept front and center in the organization.

2. CREATE AN AWARDS PROGRAM

Many businesses celebrate excellence with trophies and plaques for their top-performing people based on tangible data (sales targets, call center results, etc.). Try thinking about a recognition program that goes beyond KPIs. Include in your celebrations other categories such as mentor of the year, difference-maker of the year, coach of the year, and so on. The recipients can be chosen by managers, or through a nomination process involving all your teammates. Unlike a top sales award, nothing says you have to limit the number of recipients when publicly recognizing behaviors that reinforce your mission and vision.

3. WEAVE THE MISSION INTO YOUR CONVERSATIONS

This is key to becoming a Level 4 organization. Every single person in my businesses knew our mission statement, Do Well and Do Good, and it was common for team members to weave it into their vocabulary.

The mission was constantly reinforced by leaders and managers as well. For example, if someone finished a project ahead of schedule, or we had a strong revenue month, it was, "Congratulations! Do well and do good!"

You might wonder how that works with a longer mission statement, such as George's, which reads: "While we exist to transform homes, our purpose is to go beyond the hammer by transforming the lives of our customers, our teammates, and the communities that we serve."

In this case, you could mention portions of it to your team. For example, "Hey Rochelle, by mentoring that new hire you're actually transforming the lives of our teammates, and I appreciate that." Or "I'd like to acknowledge Justin who really went beyond the hammer by helping Mrs. Smith find their runaway puppy."

The idea is to take a small phrase from the mission statement and regularly pepper it into the conversation. Even if you're not giving out a specific reward at that moment, the references to your mission will still stick.

4. REVIEW TEAM MEMBERS ACCORDING TO THE VISION STATEMENT

We know from Pillar #5 that Managers Need a Checklist. The second item on that checklist is "Leads with a team vision statement."

You'll learn more about team vision statements when we discuss Pillar #5, but I'll provide a brief explanation here because it circles back to how leaders shape workplace culture. Often in business, the overall vision statement doesn't speak to the day-to-day tasks of frontline team members. How is someone in IT supposed to "constantly delight customers" when he or she virtually never interacts with them?

That's why each department needs its own vision statement. It acts as a North Star for the employee and is a valuable tool for a manager.

For example, when a manager is conducting a review with a member of the team, a department-specific vision statement allows the conversations to broaden. You're not only looking at their numbers and KPIs, but you're also discussing that person's behaviors and how they align with the vision statement of the team. This helps everyone stay focused on the company's purpose and direction.

5. USE CAUSE MARKETING TO DEVELOP CULTURE

Cause marketing aligns a team around serving others and helps your brand. We'll look at the branding later, but here, I want to share how it shapes workplace culture.

I believe most people have an authentic desire to help others, when given the opportunity to do so. It's inspiring to see someone make a positive impact on the lives of others. Team members feel inspired when they perceive that they are part of the greater purpose of an organization, regardless of their role. Companies with enough resources can start their own initiative, as I did with Windows for a Cause or Baths for the Brave, a national program that provides free, safer shower systems for veterans that struggle with mobility. If you don't have the bandwidth for that, try partnering with a group like Habitat for Humanity, or a local community organization.

In George's story, we saw that Amelia finally became engaged in the company when she was able to tap into her passion for the part of the mission that says, "improving the communities we serve."

A meaningful mission statement and a well-crafted vision statement serve as the beating heart of any company, embodying its core values and aspirations. They are more than mere words; they have the potential to live deeply within the souls of the people on the team, igniting a shared passion and a collective purpose. When people understand and connect with the mission, they see themselves as vital parts of something larger, inspiring them to be better. As a business leader, you're no longer giving people a job, you're giving them, well, a mission.

LEADERS ARE AWARE OF THE ECHO OF THEIR VOICE

Most of us can probably point to a time in our lives when we had a boss that was, well, a real jerk—either numb to the echo of their own voice or had little regard for how their communication style was received by the people on their team. They'd say things like,

- "Just get it done, I don't care how."
- "We don't have time for mistakes."
- "Just do your job."
- "I don't want excuses."
- "If you can't do this, I'll find someone who can."

Those statements are about as far from inspiring as one can get. The echoes of comments like that reverberate through the entire business, leaving in their wake a team that feels frustrated, undervalued, and underappreciated. And people won't put up with that forever.

In fact, recent studies have shown that as many as 60 percent of adults in the United States have left a job simply to get away from their manager.[3] That's an alarming statistic and certainly not good for the health of a business.

Managers who are out of touch with their own echo are people that companies pay to watch great talent walk out the door.

Clearly, not all echoes are as blatant as the examples above. Sometimes an echo can be a lot more subtle, but the reverb just as damaging.

- The urgent email that doesn't get answered by a manager
- The manager who's busy with their phone during a meeting instead of engaged with the team
- The performance review that never happens
- The pay raise that doesn't come without someone threatening to quit
- The disruptive team member that the manager tolerates or ignores
- The manager who wears their stress on their sleeve

We saw this last one in George's story, when he allowed his stress to alter the way he handled an important conversation with Rosemary.

As you remember, Marty explained to him, "Every team member will determine what type of day they're going to have based on what type of day the leader is having. If the leader seems stressed out and angry, well guess what? Everybody's going to be stressed out and angry. But if the leader comes across like they're steering the ship, and it's all under control, then the team is going to feel safe—especially in times of turmoil."

Marty's comment to George was spot-on. In front of the team, leaders don't get to have bad days, because leaders know their echo affects how a team thinks and feels, both positively and negatively. Leaders need to build people up.

ECHOES THAT BUILD

We've outlined several examples of echoes that tear people down. Let's get into the echoes that build them up.

THE ECHO OF STAYING PRESENT

Whether it's an informal, random conversation, or a structured performance review, staying present means you're "all in" during the moment at hand. This requires listening attentively to your team members, being genuinely interested in their comments, and remaining nonjudgmental regardless of what they are saying. This shows them that you value their input and creates deeper and more authentic human connection. Staying present also inspires your team to do the same.

THE ECHO OF BEING IMMACULATE WITH YOUR WORDS

If you make a statement as a leader, then it needs to be true, and if you're making a commitment, you need to keep it. Many people, when faced with disappointing someone, will overcommit in the moment and then not be able to deliver on that commitment. That's a loud echo, and one that makes people feel distrustful.

THE ECHO OF BODY LANGUAGE

Your physical presence is a powerful tool to show that you are interested and open to what people have to say. Are your arms crossed during meetings? Is your expression unreceptive? Do you check your phone or emails? An engaged leader is highly motivating to a team, while a distracted one can make people feel less invested in their job. In a meeting environment where new information is being shared, it's easy to want to disengage a bit once the new information is understood. However, leaders who are aware of their echo intentionally stay engaged in the meeting, not just until *they* understand the new information, but until *every last person in the room* understands it too.

THE ECHO OF CLARITY

This is something that I am conscious of within myself, especially when kicking around innovative ideas with my team. During my days as CEO running the businesses, I'd make a statement like, "We really need to bring

social media in-house instead of outsourcing it." In my mind, I'm tossing an idea out there to brainstorm with the team. But the team would hear something entirely different. They would hear, "Brian said we need to bring our social in-house. Do we promote from within, or should we look outside for this role? Let's write a job description." The team thought they needed to activate around something that was just an idea. I had to learn to adjust my communication to say, "What does everyone think about possibly bringing social media in-house?" I needed to recognize my echo and communicate with clarity.

THE ECHO OF INTENT

There are many different types of meetings: updates, brainstorming, planning, informational, coaching, and so on. Each of these is most productive when the leader makes sure that every team member knows what type of communication to expect ahead of time.

For example, let's quickly look at ways to stay aware of the echo of your voice in a decision-making meeting versus an informational one.

A decision-making meeting means that the leader drives participation. He or she needs to ask a lot of good questions and ensure that every team member is heard. Remember that when the leader makes a statement, or shares an opinion, often the team will just follow along. But we don't necessarily want agreement—we want the best and brightest ideas. Often, the key to getting there is the leader's ability to facilitate the conversation.

If a leader is holding an information-sharing meeting, it's usually because some sort of change is going to occur, and the team needs to be brought up to speed. In those cases, it's a good idea to start by identifying the problem that needs to be solved—the "why"—before explaining the "what." Change can be disruptive. Clearly communicating the "why" builds trust and creates team alignment, especially when the change weighs heavier on one department over another.

A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

On a final note, let's revisit the statistic mentioned earlier: 60 percent of US adults have left a job simply to get away from their manager.

As a business leader this presents the opportunity for a massive competitive advantage. When you have an organization where leaders and managers are aware of their echo and communicate effectively, your culture will be stronger, and your business will be better because of it. You will not only attract more top talent, but you will retain them, too, because the reverb of your echo will reveal itself in the satisfaction, productivity, and commitment of those on your team.

LEADERS MODEL THEIR BUSINESS AS A TRAINING ORGANIZATION

Most businesses train people. Someone is hired, onboarded, and shown the various duties that the job requires. But there's a difference between handing someone an employee manual and modeling your business as a training organization. A big difference. I'd like to explain what that difference means.

Training organizations don't view training as an event with a start and end date. Instead, it's a mindset. Just as with a mission statement, the value of training is woven into the fabric of the business. Everyone is part of that mindset, whether it's a thirty-year leader or an entry-level team member who started last week.

At the beginning of George's story, Marty extends an invitation for him to visit True North, and George declines saying he's too busy dealing with emergencies to take the time to learn new skills. That's like the guy who's desperately trying to cut down a tree with a dull saw, but has no time to sharpen the blade because he's too busy sawing.

Training organizations are always sharpening their blades.

ZAPPOS IS A TRAINING ORGANIZATION

Online clothing and accessories retailer Zappos started selling shoes in 1999 and quickly differentiated itself with amazing customer service. This meant making the right hires and modeling the business as a training organization. Back then, to work at Zappos, candidates needed to pass two separate interviews—one to assess their skills and one to determine if they were the right culture fit.[4]

All new hires completed four weeks of training, much of it in the call center, regardless of their position. Additionally, in 2004, the company began a process called Pipeline, with dedicated trainers, designed to grow team members from entry-level positions to roles that came with more responsibility.[5]

A sampling of courses offered by the Pipeline team:

- Four-Week New Hire Training (including answering phones)
- Zappos History
- Zappos Culture
- Science of Happiness 101
- Tribal Leadership
- One-Week Kentucky Boot Camp
- Public Speaking
- Delivering Happiness
- Intermediate-Level Competency with Microsoft Office

While the huge majority of Zappos' purchases were handled online, the company's call center still fielded thousands of calls per day. Unlike many volume businesses where high-turn call volume mattered, the Customer Loyalty Team (CLT) members were empowered to stay on the phone for as long as needed with each customer in order to take care of them. One such call reportedly lasted nine and a half hours.[6]

At Zappos, the philosophy was to succeed by inspiring team members rather than just giving them a paycheck. Customers regularly wrote emails, blogged, and even created videos about Zappos' level of service.

In 2009, the company was sold to Amazon for $1.2 billion.[7]

TRAINING ORGANIZATIONS DOCUMENT THEIR SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

Every time a team member engages with a customer, there's an opportunity for friction. Likewise, every time work is transferred from one department to another, conflict can occur. Those two areas are where training becomes especially important. As we've seen, one of the keys to Zappos' success was a massive investment in developing the customer service skills of team members.

A crucial part to becoming a training organization, no matter what industry you're in, is to document your businesses' systems and processes, especially where there's an opportunity for friction. I have a saying I like to use: "If it's not written down, it doesn't exist." With that in mind, here's an approach I've found useful: Envision a customer's journey through your company from the first touchpoint to the final interaction. How many times is someone engaging with them? What do you want those communications to look like? Each of those touchpoints is an opportunity for friction, and therefore an opportunity for training. By documenting a vision for every engagement, you will create an impactful learning tool.

The same goes for workflow from one department to another. In Warren Construction, we saw that there was friction between sales and production, a common symptom of a team that's misaligned. Often, when conflict like that pops up between departments, it's centered around unclear processes or people not understanding how their role affects the entire organization. All of this is a great opportunity to gain alignment through documentation and training.

IS TRAINING STRUCTURED OR IS IT ORGANIC?

Some organizations have a dedicated trainer where content and cadence are planned and delivered with consistency. Others prefer to empower the team to conduct their own training at the time and place of their choosing. Which is better? I think it's somewhere in the middle. If the only development someone receives is coming from a corporate trainer, it can feel somewhat hierarchical, and because the trainer doesn't work in their department, individuals might not feel all the content is relevant. On the other hand, training that only occurs at the team level can be disconnected from the overall vision and strategy of the organization.

Here's how we found balance in our approach. We had a corporate trainer (though his title was Dean of Training) and his role was teaching in a classroom setting and also ensuring that team-based training was on message, on brand, and consistent with the strategy of the business. I must admit, though, that some of the most impactful training sessions were organic. It would make me smile to hear about random acts of training taking place all over the business—whether it was an installer sharing a construction best practice during a tailgate meeting, or some windshield time between two sales road warriors while practicing their craft on their way to an appointment.

Part of our vision statement read, "We aspire to become a world-class training organization," and that meant training was part of our DNA. It was less about title and position and more about desired outcome, where everyone is both a teacher and a student.

HIRE FOR ETHER

It's hard to be a training organization if you're hiring people that aren't trainable.

When I was leading my businesses, we used the phrase "Hire for ETHER" when recruiting new team members. ETHER stands for Ethical, Trainable,

Hungry, Energetic, and Reliable. Candidates with the right balance of these qualities were the people we wanted on our team.

But how do you know if someone has ETHER when they walk in the door? The face a candidate wears during an interview can be very different from how they behave once the job actually starts. Moreover, does every position require the same amount of all the ETHER qualities? To answer those questions, let's explore a little deeper.

Say I'm a small business leader looking for a bookkeeper. Where would I want the ideal candidate to land on the "Ethical" and "Reliable" scale? That's easy, because Ethical and Reliable are important characteristics for someone in a bookkeeper role. Now how about "Hungry"? There could be a great, highly ethical, fifty-something bookkeeper who's looking for a friendly, stable job. In that case, hungry isn't quite as important. On the other hand, when hiring for a sales position, the most successful individuals are Trainable, Hungry, and Energetic.

A WILLINGNESS TO LEARN

As a training organization, it was crucial that we hired people who were open and eager to learn. Over time, we found a few methods to help identify those individuals quickly.

For example, we had certain roles that required some level of script memorization and wanted to ensure we hired individuals who were willing to commit to that task. Not everyone is comfortable with that, but for that role, those that aren't committed to script memorization don't make it.

So rather than hire someone and hope they embraced script memorization, we'd uncover their willingness as part of the interview process. We would send the applicant a two-sentence script to memorize beforehand and ask them to recite it during the interview. The point wasn't to judge whether they could perfectly recite the two sentences; I didn't care if they stumbled through it. The

point was to see whether they tried; did they put in the effort? Reason being, if someone isn't willing to memorize a two-sentence script for a job interview, it's doubtful they'd get through a scripted two-week sales training class. About 70 percent of the candidates who showed up for the interview made the effort. The remaining 30 percent weren't considered for the role.

GETTING TRAINING TO STICK

During my consulting days, when I'd conduct a sales training workshop with a room full of new reps, there would be a final exam on the content that was taught. But rather than surprising the class with an exam at the end of the training, I would provide everyone with the final exam on the very first day. While one might raise an eyebrow at this approach, it helped focus the new sales reps on the material they were going to learn and areas that were most important. When people are in a training class with a ton of new information being thrown at them, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and not know what to prioritize. Having the exam up front gave new reps the opportunity to laser focus on what was most important.

Daily quizzes also played a big part in ensuring the training was sticking. A training organization needs to measure the effectiveness of the training, in real time. For that reason, a daily quiz is as much for the trainer as it is for the person being trained. Allow me to explain.

FOR THE TRAINEE

When someone is in any type of class, momentum matters. When learning new information, it builds confidence if a person can see at the end of the day that they correctly understood what was taught. Small, early wins build confidence, create momentum, and fuel a learning mindset.

FOR THE TRAINER

I'm sure you're familiar with the saying, "If it walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck." If a trainer is administering daily quizzes and the trainees consistently score well on them, it's a sign that the training is effective. On the other hand, if most of the class is having trouble with a daily quiz, it's more of a reflection on the trainer than the trainees. This creates a great opportunity, each day, for a trainer to measure their effectiveness, and adjust their approach accordingly. The quiz trains the trainer.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE

By modeling your business as a training organization, you're not just teaching a skillset; you're igniting a culture of continuous growth and innovation. More than professional development, it's an authentic commitment to every team member's journey toward realizing their potential.

By investing in people, leaders are not only enhancing their organization's capabilities but are also empowering individuals to dream big. In such a space, growth is limitless, potential is realized, and work becomes meaningful. As a business leader your primary role is the development of those around you.

MANAGERS NEED A CHECKLIST

The first known book about management was written in 300 BCE. It was called *Arthashastra* ("The Scripture of Wealth") and was intended "for those who govern." The book covered many topics including what it takes to be a good leader and how to appoint managers. The author even provides a list of qualities that ideal managers should possess.

Since then, millions of people have weighed in on the subject, and while many of the particulars have changed, many have not. In 2008, Google began implementing manager feedback surveys and came up with its own list of ideal behaviors. Others chimed in with their ideas.

While these concepts are helpful, ultimately for managers to be effective in any business they need a clear, actionable path to follow. They need a checklist.

As you recall in our story, Marty introduced George to the Ten Practices of Top-Performing Managers.

Here they are for your review:

THE TEN PRACTICES OF TOP-PERFORMING MANAGERS

1. Is an effective coach and mentor

2. Leads with a team vision statement
3. Practices empowerment
4. Communicates effectively
5. Is KPI focused and accountable
6. Discusses performance and career development
7. Keeps a learning mindset
8. Collaborates with other business units
9. Embraces continual process improvement
10. Praises performance publicly

Before we go deeper into each practice, and how to implement it into your business, let's first understand the role of a manager in general.

THE ROLE OF THE MANAGER

People join organizations for culture and opportunity. They often quit because of a manager.

I know, it's easy to blame the manager, but let's be clear: The real issue resides higher up the org chart because when you peek behind the curtain of a company with high turnover, you'll probably find a management training program that's either substandard or nonexistent. From a training and development perspective, frontline managers often get neglected, yet their performance significantly influences the performance of the whole organization.

Managers handle key operational tasks such as hiring, promoting, training, rewarding—and when required, terminating team members. A manager's approach to these duties will either cultivate a positive, productive, and engaging team culture or lead to a demotivated, distrustful, and dysfunctional one. A manager's actions directly influence the culture of the company and the mindset of the team.

MINDSET MATTERS

Let's say that you're driving down the road and see a guy in a convertible with the top down coming up behind you. He's weaving in and out of traffic, cutting people off, and rudely passing every car he reaches. "What a jerk," you think to yourself, and decide to chew him out at the next light. But when you finally catch up to him and roll down your window, the angry words stick in your throat. The man is on his cell phone frantically telling someone that his child was hit by a car and he's trying to get to the hospital.

Instantly, your perspective changes. Instead of chewing him out, you'd probably do whatever you could to help get him to the hospital more quickly.

Think about that. It's the same guy, same car, same act of cutting you off. And yet, you'll behave differently simply because you're thinking differently.

How we think about things (our mindset) affects how we feel about things. How we think and feel impacts how we act, our behavior.
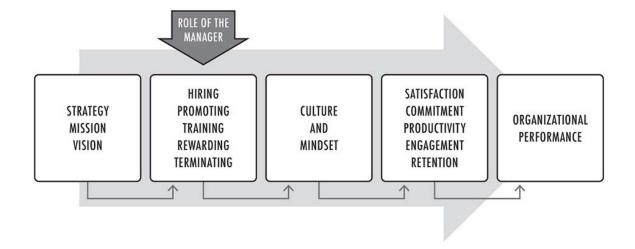
This dynamic is also true for your team. How your *team* thinks about things (*their* mindset) affects how *they* feel about things. How *they* think and feel impacts how *they* act, their behavior.

For this reason, it's crucial to ensure your managers are aware that how they approach their daily responsibilities impacts the mindset of their team and, therefore, the overall performance of the organization. Allow me to explain.

MANAGERS INFLUENCE CULTURE

The CEO, along with other top executives, shapes the culture of a business by providing clarity of purpose (mission) and business direction (vision). It's the managers, however, who are the custodians of the company's culture.

As you can see from the diagram below, how your managers navigate hiring, promoting, training, rewarding, and terminating people will affect the culture and mindset of the individuals on your team. Culture and mindset

determine the degree of employee satisfaction, commitment, productivity, engagement, and retention for those you work with. The impact will be reflected in how the business performs.

ROLE OF THE MANAGER

| STRATEGY MISSION VISION | HIRING PROMOTING TRAINING REWARDING TERMINATING | CULTURE AND MINDSET | SATISFACTION COMMITMENT PRODUCTIVITY ENGAGEMENT RETENTION | ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE |

The methodology and approach of a manager's daily responsibilities is the deciding factor in organizational performance.

For this reason, businesses need a fierce sense of urgency to ensure their managers have been trained properly, so they can effectively lead a team. After all, your culture and your results depend on it.

TWO HATS, ONE HEAD

I've spoken at organizations across the country, and I often ask the audience this question: What is the difference between a manager and a leader? One response I often hear is that a manager *tells* you what to do while a leader *shows* you what to do. Managers get a bad rap that way.

I prefer to define it differently. Managers navigate the day-to-day complexities inside a business, ensuring that systems and processes are being adhered to, while leaders drive change: change in direction, change in mindset, and change in human behavior.

It's often thought that leadership and management are carried out by two different people. Yet that's simply not the case.

Leaders and managers are usually the same person doing different things at different times. It's just a matter of which hat they put on. Sometimes one must navigate the day-to-day complexity and sometimes one needs to drive change. Sometimes it's the manager hat, and sometimes it's the leadership hat. One thing's for sure: different hats yield very different outcomes.

For managers to understand which hat to wear and when, they must embrace the ten practices we first saw in George's story. These behaviors provide the road map for effective leadership.

LEVERS OF INFLUENCE AND LEVERS OF CONTROL

Sometimes the goal is to coach, motivate, and inspire team members. I call the practices that require those skills "levers of influence." At other times, it's about managing systems and processes. Those practices I refer to as "levers of control."

LEVERS OF INFLUENCE:
MOTIVATION, INSPIRATION, INNOVATION,
COACHING = *LEADERSHIP.*

LEVERS OF CONTROL:
PLANNING, ORGANIZING, STAFFING,
DIRECTING = *MANAGEMENT.*

To show how they work together synergistically, I'll share a story.

When my boys were five and six years old, I used to help coach their T-ball games. For those unfamiliar with T-ball, it's a simplified version of baseball where, instead of a pitcher, the kids swing at a ball that's sitting on a plastic stand, or tee, and run to first base. Remember, they're learning and so

sometimes they run in the wrong direction. At least once per game you can find a coach yelling, "The other way, run the other way!"

To help overcome this problem, I used both levers of influence and levers of control on a regular basis.

On the influence side, I provided constant encouragement and guidance, shouting phrases like, "Great swing!" or "You'll get it next time!" These words served as morale boosters, helping the kids feel confident and excited about playing. I also coached each kid individually on how to stand, swing, and catch.

Levers of control were equally important. As a way of helping them remember which way to run, I started each practice doing laps with the kids around the baseball diamond, all of us running together in the right direction. After a few weeks they automatically knew which way to go. It was ingrained in their muscle memory. That sense of learning through repetition is a lever of control. Other controls included rules for maintaining order and safety, the rules of the game itself, and the tall fence around the ballpark. All of these things provided an important sense of structure.

Had we only used levers of control, without blending in levers of influence, the kids would be in an environment with nothing but drills, strict rules, and a tall fence. More like a prison than a baseball game.

If we only used levers of influence, without the use of levers of control, well, picture a bunch of five-year-olds, with bats and balls, all running around on a sugar high, with no rules in place. That's about as close to anarchy as I could imagine.

In T-ball, as in management, the blend of influence and control is key. Levers of influence drive change by shaping attitudes and behaviors in a positive, nurturing way. Levers of control provide the necessary framework and boundaries within an organization, so both the business and the individual can grow together.

Influence without control can lead to chaos, while control without influence can create a rigid and uninspiring environment. The art of successful coaching, and indeed successful management, lives in finding the right balance between these two very different levers.

We saw this in action with George and his daughter Amelia. Amelia had gone out of bounds in the way she treated Chuck Cregan, and that behavior needed to be curbed with a lever of control. She was suspended and asked to reflect on whether she was a good fit for Warren Construction. And when she came up with the idea to work on philanthropic endeavors for the company, she was encouraged to do some research and present a few concepts—a lever of influence.

The best managers are adept at understanding which lever to use, and when. Now, let's look at how those levers operate inside of the Ten Practices of Top-Performing Managers.

PRACTICE 1: IS AN EFFECTIVE COACH AND MENTOR (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE)

At some point in their career, every business leader has promoted the wrong person into management. I know I have.

But consider this: Most organizations would never hire someone and then put them in front of their customers without any training whatsoever. Whether they're salespeople, call center agents, or customer service representatives, for days, even weeks sometimes, they're taught scripts and strategies for dealing with customers. And yet when a company urgently needs a manager to run a department, they look to whoever has the most experience, and boom, that person is promoted, regardless of their communication skills, management experience, or EQ. That's because most organizations prioritize experience and expertise in the field over the ability to coach and mentor.

Don't get me wrong, experience and expertise are important, but they don't automatically make someone a good coach. This is precisely why the first practice of a top-performing manager is to be an Effective Coach and Mentor. Think of it as an umbrella, with all other practices nested underneath.

As I'm sure you know, hiring or promoting the wrong person into a manager role creates big problems. The individuals you choose to be managers should be passionate about coaching and mentoring others.

STICKY COACHING

Leadership isn't about you, it's about your team. But it certainly begins with you and the way you communicate. An important element in effective coaching is adaptive communication. People learn in different ways and if you want your coaching to *stick*, be sure you're adapting your communication style to your team members' learning style.

The natural next question is, "How do I figure out a team member's learning style?" Many organizations use tools such as the DISC profile or Predictive Index for hiring decisions, but these are also good options for coaching. They provide valuable insight into how people learn and what approach will be most effective.

There is also nothing wrong with just asking a team member, "How are you most comfortable learning?" If someone is a hands-on learner, then I might coproduce with them for a little while, work alongside them in the trenches, and demonstrate how to do things effectively.

If a team member learns by listening, I might recommend audiobooks to help their performance. If the style is visual, task or workflow charts might be a good approach.

It comes down to asking questions and really listening to the answers.

EFFECTIVE COACHES AND MENTORS PROVIDE CLARITY ON HOW PERFORMANCE IS MEASURED

Every team member deserves to know how their performance is being measured. What activities does the organization value? How are those things reported? How does it affect compensation? Clarity on what the business values allows team members to work toward a shared goal. Note that performance doesn't just pertain to KPIs, it could be about culture fit and/or alignment to the mission and vision of the company. Team members deserve clarity on both metrics and behavioral expectations.

EFFECTIVE COACHES INFLUENCE FUTURE PERFORMANCE

Top-performing managers help team members realize they can do better tomorrow than they did yesterday. Try using past performance as a reference point, and then provide actionable feedback to positively influence and impact future performance.

One thing to note: there's a massive difference between providing "feedback" and "actionable feedback." For example, telling someone "You need to do a better job" doesn't mean much because there's no clear action for the team member to take, nor is it very influential. Feedback should have a time frame and contain very specific guidance that an individual can immediately incorporate. What do you want that team member to focus on? What actions should they take to improve performance? Does the person you're coaching agree with the actions? Gaining their buy-in to take certain steps is a key process in influencing behavior. After all, there's a big difference between being right and being influential.

You'll want to gain consensus on the following four items:

1. The actionable feedback will improve performance
2. How to act on it
3. Agreement to act on it
4. The way it will be measured

Effective coaches focus on improving future performance, so team members look out the windshield, not just in the rearview mirror.

Consider the case of Amelia and George. Although she was disciplined for her past performance, that wasn't the goal of her suspension. Instead, the idea was to empower her to become an effective team member in the future, if she decided that Warren Construction was the right fit.

EFFECTIVE COACHES AND MENTORS CREATE A CULTURE OF OPPORTUNITY

When a manager is invested in the success of a direct report the message is, "You have opportunity here." We saw how devalued George's team felt when he didn't post the production manager job internally first. This investment means that a manager is committed to developing their team member's capabilities, and even though coaching takes time, they make it a priority.

Great coaches and mentors build people.

PRACTICE 2: LEADS WITH A TEAM VISION STATEMENT (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE AND CONTROL)

Just as an entire organization needs a vision statement, so does each individual department within the business. I call this a team vision statement.

While a team vision statement is different from the company's overarching vision, they should work in harmony. A team vision statement is much more specific about the choices that the team makes, the expected behaviors, and the desired mindset. This creates alignment around common goals for that part of the organization.

VISION IN ACTION

To write a team vision statement, start by defining what you want the department to become three, four, or five years from now. Be sure to outline what winning looks like and consider the behaviors that are needed from the team to make that happen. As with crafting an overall vision statement, the easiest way to arrive at what a team needs to do to win is to identify how they lose. What behaviors *don't* you want from the team? The opposite of that is typically the desired mindset, focus, and outcome.

Let's go back to Warren Construction. As we know from the story, George struggled with people not taking ownership of their work, dissatisfied customers, weak or nonexistent processes, and poor communication between departments.

To influence future behavior, and chart a new aspirational course for the team, one of the sentences in Warren's production department vision statement might read, "We aspire to become a world-class production team. We achieve this by taking ownership of our work, documenting and adhering to our processes, clear and timely communication, and ensuring every client has a wonderful remodeling experience."

A strong vision statement can be as short as two sentences. The first sentence states what the team aspires to become, and the second sentence states the actionable behaviors that are needed from the team to get there.

GETTING BUY-IN ON A TEAM VISION STATEMENT

It's also important to know that manager-leaders don't write a vision statement in a vacuum, but instead involve their team. It helps to hold a group brainstorming session on questions such as, "What do we want to accomplish?" "How do we win?" "What do we want to become?" By working with your team to write a vision statement, you'll get full buy-in on that vision, and your team members will take ownership of the results.

We saw how effective this was in the story. George fumbled around trying to create a mission and vision on his own, but was much more successful when

he involved his whole team. It changed their perception of the company in a positive way and got them to commit to what the organization wanted to accomplish.

An impactful team vision statement is equally important when onboarding new people. From day one, the expectations of behaviors are clearly defined.

PRACTICE 3: PRACTICES EMPOWERMENT (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE)

Before getting into the specifics of empowerment, I'd like to first discuss its opposite: disempowerment.

OBEDIENCE VERSUS ALIGNMENT

Earlier I mentioned the difference between a manager and a leader, but there's yet another way of approaching a team, which is to just be "the boss." The boss is all about command and control.

Is your goal to have an obedient team who does exactly what you want? Do you believe policies should drive virtually every decision on a day-to-day basis? Or do you want an aligned team where people are capable of making decisions on their own, on the spot—especially when they're interacting with customers?

As you might recall in George's story, there's a moment when Amelia's dog guards a napkin on the floor and she mentions that she and the dog are "aligned." Marty clarifies that what Amelia has with her dog is obedience. What you want with people is alignment. And there's a very big difference.

EMPOWERING THETEAM

For the past decade, five out of the top twelve most reliable cars have been Toyota brands.[8] That's a rather impressive statistic.

How did they accomplish this?

That question could take up a book all on its own, but one of the many game changers for the car manufacturer was called the Andon cord. In Japanese, "Andon" (行灯) refers to a traditional lantern made of paper stretched over a frame, which is illuminated from the inside, and can also be used as a signal.

The Andon cord (today it's a button) hangs in each station of the assembly line, and when someone pulls it, all production instantly stops. In manufacturing, stopping production is a significant action. It's expensive and disruptive. But here's the amazing part: Every Toyota team member is empowered to activate the Andon cord—more than that, they are *encouraged* to do so if they see a problem.[9]

This is because Toyota's leaders realize that while stopping the production line is a big deal, it's an even bigger deal to allow a problem to continue on the frontline. Let's say a team member is trying to screw a headlamp into a car and the screws aren't lining up. This may be a one-time issue, or it could also be a symptom of a bigger problem. So, the worker stops the line, and the team identifies the root cause, which could be many steps earlier in the manufacturing process. This approach empowers the frontline worker, since they not only stopped production, they were also involved in identifying the core problem.

Ritz Carlton is another organization that operates under that principle. Known for best-in-class hospitality, the company encourages team members to spend up to $2,000 to solve a guest's issue, without management approval. By the way, that's $2,000 per incident, not per quarter, or per year. *Per incident.* Notice how they don't "allow" team members this latitude, they "encourage" it. "Allowing" is policy based. "Encouraging" is empowerment based.

DON'T BE THE ROADBLOCK TO EMPOWERMENT

When I owned and operated my businesses, there was a time, early on, when it became clear that I had become a bottleneck. There were instances where

people couldn't do their job because they were waiting on me for answers. That is simply not a scalable business model, nor was it empowering. I needed to change my mindset.

Symbolic of this, when I remodeled my office, I got rid of my classic desk with its drawers full of files and replaced it with a solid slab tabletop without drawers. I'd come to realize that if there was a piece of paper sitting in my office, waiting for my approval, it meant there was an empowerment gap in my company. To build the business, I had to focus on building the capabilities of those on my team. The desk served as a daily reminder to constantly train, develop, and empower others to make great decisions on their own.

IT'S OK TO BE WRONG

In an unempowered business, mistakes are punished. In an empowered business, it's indecision that's frowned upon. The former is policy-centric, and the latter is customer-centric. An empowered business celebrates decision-making and uses mistakes as a training opportunity. As a result, empowered organizations create a far superior customer journey, and ultimately build a team of people that are constantly growing—both professionally and personally.

Another measure of empowerment is whether team members feel comfortable speaking up. Are they willing to share opinions and respectfully challenge the status quo? Do the people closest to the customer have a voice in the business and does their voice matter?

UPWARD REPORTING DRIVES EMPOWERMENT

How do you create an empowered team? Let's start with how numbers are reported.

In a command control structure, during team meetings, whether it's sales, manufacturing, or project updates, it's often the manager who reports the results down the chain. He or she reveals to the team how they did last week or

last month or last year. An empowerment structure approaches it differently. Even if management knows the results ahead of time, it's the team members who are given the first opportunity to report upward on the numbers and be accountable for the results. It's as if they're running their own little business inside the organization. Personal ownership of the numbers, reported upward, is a great way to build an empowered and committed team.

SEATS AND TOOLS

An empowered business is invested in making sure that the right people are in the right seats. The leaders frequently analyze whether everyone is being given the correct tools to be successful in their roles.

It's the job of the leader to make sure that if the company is trying to empower people, it's ensuring everyone's in the right role, and is trained effectively. After all, empowered employees can't make the best decisions if they haven't been properly trained. As discussed earlier, leaders model their business as a training organization.

PRACTICE 4: COMMUNICATES EFFECTIVELY (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE AND CONTROL)

*"The single biggest problem with communication
is the illusion that it has taken place."*

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Top-performing managers create an environment where effective communication can happen. One example in the Warren Construction story is when George started implementing daily huddles with his department heads. I'm a big fan of a daily huddle, starting off every morning with a ten- or fifteen-minute team meeting. Nothing formal, it can even be a group phone call if that's what works best for everyone. The huddle is the place to ask,

"What are we working on today? What challenges are you having? What do we need to think about?" Not only do huddles provide the conditions for effective team communication, they also feed a positive culture and help create alignment.

Below are a few additional insights to help leaders and managers communicate effectively.

LISTEN TO THOSE CLOSEST TO THE CUSTOMER

Communication isn't just about speaking, it's about listening, and it's especially important to listen to the team members who are closest to the customer. As businesses grow, an org chart gains more layers, and managers and leaders get further and further away from the customer … and those that serve them. As the expression goes, "A shepherd should smell like the sheep." In other words, a leader should not become too insulated from the day-to-day workings of the business.

For a manager to make informed decisions, it's imperative that someone speaks on behalf of the customer. Your frontline people, those that interact with the customer on a regular basis, need to be listened to and considered. Their voice matters. Their perspective is an important factor in decision-making. Top-performing managers intentionally give those closest to the customer not just a voice but a megaphone.

COMMUNICATION DURING TRAINING

Part of modeling your business as a training organization means developing the capabilities of everyone on your team. When teaching new content, or new processes, a manager must know what's sticking and where the communication might be vague or confusing. In a training environment, just because everyone is nodding their heads does not mean they are fully grasping the information. Effective managers and trainers ask probing questions to ensure not just the "what" is being grasped but also the "why."

Here are some examples:

1. Why do you think we have this new process?
2. How do you imagine it will improve our current process?
3. What might be the most difficult part of the new process to implement?

Great questions create a higher level of learning, a sense of inclusion, and, ultimately, a stickier training session.

RESPONDING TO TOUGH QUESTIONS

When people ask tough questions, give them straightforward, honest answers. Communicate with clarity, even if your answer isn't popular. Transparency and clarity build trust. Your effectiveness increases when people are confident that you're being straight with them.

A CULTURE OF AUTHENTICITY

Giving everyone a voice, creating morning huddles, letting people ask tough questions, and answering them honestly all show your commitment to being an effective communicator. You're creating a culture of authenticity within your business and demonstrating that everybody is important.

PRACTICE 5: IS KPI-FOCUSED AND ACCOUNTABLE TO RESULTS (A LEVER OF CONTROL)

There are many variables that influence a business's success (culture, mindset, etc.). Those areas are super important but can be hard to measure. On the other hand, metrics such as revenue, quality, and productivity are much easier to quantify. In those instances, what a business chooses to measure becomes a focus for the entire team. Almost instantly, the data that everyone focuses on improves.

KPIs are specific metrics that organizations use to evaluate the operational success of an individual, department, or the entire business. Being KPI-focused means that managers align their actions and decisions with those key metrics. It means they're setting individual and team goals based on those KPIs. They're monitoring progress and adjusting strategy as needed to improve performance. Being KPI-focused also means decisions are data-driven, so that managers can make an informed call rather than one that's based on intuition or guesswork. Good KPIs align individual and team efforts with goals for the entire organization, which helps the team prioritize tasks and the manager allocate resources effectively.

CREATING STRATEGIC KPIS

To explain the connection between KPIs and strategy, let's use an example of a hamburger stand.

Background: A.J.'s Hamburger Stand is a small but popular restaurant known for fantastic burgers. As part of his strategy, A.J. wants to grow his business over the next year while maintaining high customer satisfaction. To achieve this, he embarks on a four-part plan: Setting KPIs; Implementing and Tracking; Assessing Results; and Adjusting Where Needed. To achieve his goals, A.J. decides to track and implement the following four KPIs:

	DAILY SALES TARGET	CUSTOMER FEEDBACK SCORE	BURGER TURNOVER RATE	EMPLOYEE EFFICIENCY RATIO
SETTING KPIs	Track the total sales each day to gauge revenue generation. Target: $500 in sales per day.	Collect customer feedback through a simple rating system (1–5 stars) at the point of sale. Target: Maintain an average score of 4.5 or higher.	Measure the rate at which different burger varieties are sold in order to better understand customer preferences. Target: Each burger variety should account for at least 10 percent of daily sales.	Assess the speed and efficiency of the staff by measuring the average time it takes them to prepare and serve a burger. Target: Average serving time of under five minutes.
IMPLEMENT & TRACK KPIs	A.J. introduces a "Burger of the Week" special and a loyalty program offering discounts to repeat customers.	A.J. ensures his staff is well-trained in customer service and keeping the eating area clean. He asks for immediate feedback from customers after their meal.	A.J. reviews sales data for each burger variety, planning to adjust the menu based on customer preferences.	A.J. conducts staff training to optimize the burger preparation process and implements a new order management system for faster service.
Information is tracked daily. After a couple of months, A.J. does a deep review of the KPIs, assessing performance of each variable.				
ASSESS KPIs	Sales have increased, averaging $600 per day, surpassing the target.	The score sits at 4.3 with some negative comments about the worn and dated seating area.	Three burger varieties are less popular, making up only 5 percent of sales each.	The average serving time is down to four minutes, meeting the target efficiently.

ADJUST WHERE NEEDED

Now that he's armed with data-driven insights, A.J. is ready to make some changes. He decides to revamp his menu, update the dining area, and introduce a new specialty burger while discontinuing the least popular ones.

By using KPIs, A.J. was able to focus on specific areas like sales, customer satisfaction, product popularity, and employee performance. The data he obtained helped A.J. make informed choices, versus decisions based on intuition. The KPIs allowed him to form a new business strategy, one that will help him expand, while ensuring a high customer satisfaction rate.

MEASURING CREATES FOCUS

Tracking KPIs is helpful at every level, from total annual revenue all the way down to how many burgers one team member prepped in a day. An organization might actively review many metrics, but for an individual team member, I believe the right number of KPIs to track is somewhere between one and three. The reason being, if there are too many KPIs, none of them become important. By limiting the number, you're shining a spotlight on the most critical metrics. Along the same lines, KPIs should be available and easy to find, so that individual team members can act on them.

Giving people daily KPIs that roll up to weekly and monthly KPIs creates a performance-focused team where no one needs to wonder if they had a productive day.

GETTING BACK ON TARGET

When a business has a habit of falling short of its goals, it has to make sure that the targets are aggressive and yet also realistic. Unattainable KPIs can demotivate a team. However, if a team is missing attainable numbers, the manager should ask three specific target-based questions:

1. What are the primary reasons we're missing the target?
2. What actions will be taken to get back on target?
3. By what date will we be back on target?

I've used these three questions with my team and found them to be a highly effective tool for performance management. This requires them to

clearly articulate the problem, and empowers them to build out a strategy and time frame for improving results. Being KPI-focused and accountable creates a culture that values high-performing teams.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Let's revisit the hamburger stand. A.J. made decisions regarding plans to grow his business, which also included changing the menu and remodeling his dining area. His plan requires many moving pieces, including fresh hires, new recipes, and a physical redesign. This will cost money. We're all rooting for A.J.'s success, and, as a leader, A.J. must own the results, even if one of the decisions was incorrect. That's what personal accountability to the results is all about. It's easy for someone to own the outcome when things go well. Accountable managers own the results regardless of the outcome. They understand the connection between taking responsibility and building trust with their team. A top-performing manager holds themselves to the same standard as everyone else and does not shy away from personal accountability.

PRACTICE 6: DISCUSSES PERFORMANCE AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE AND CONTROL)

Annual performance reviews have gotten a bad rap lately, with a flurry of surveys showing that both managers and team members see them as a waste of time, especially when the yearly review is the only feedback an individual receives. In that regard, annual reviews can be more like an autopsy and less like a coaching session.

Yet team members want and need timely, actionable feedback so they can grow to their potential in their current role, or even another role they aspire to achieve. The way I see it, it's not the reviews that are the problem. The problem

is the cadence and review components used by many leaders and managers when giving feedback.
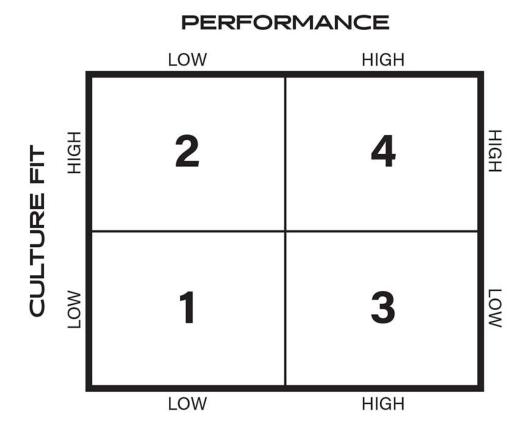
Allow me to explain.

WHERE MANAGERS GET STUCK

Let's revisit the culture-performance foursquare we saw in George's story. A manager must be in tune with where his or her team member/members fall within the foursquare, and more importantly, how to address it.

As you can see, one side of the foursquare is culture fit and the other side is performance. The four quadrants are as follows:

1. Low Culture Fit/Low Performer
2. High Culture Fit/Low Performer
3. High Performer/Low Culture Fit
4. High Performer/High Culture Fit

PERFORMANCE

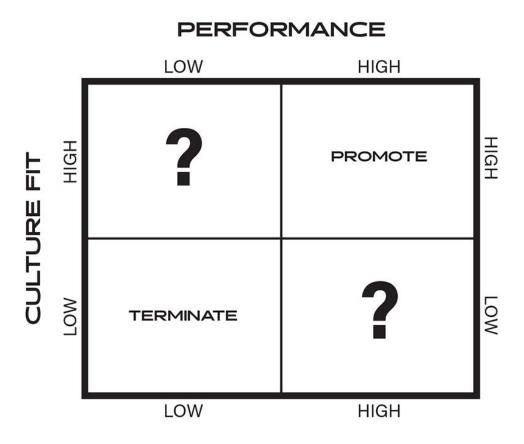|	LOW	HIGH	
HIGH	2	4	**HIGH**
LOW	1	3	**LOW**
	LOW	HIGH	

CULTURE FIT

Let's start with the easy ones.

When you have a team member who's both a Low Culture Fit and a Low Performer, I recommend giving them an opportunity to be successful somewhere else, outside of your organization.

A High Performer/High Culture Fit is easy, too. These are the people you want to retain and promote.

But neither of those boxes are where managers spend most of their time.

How do you deal with the High Culture Fit/Low Performer? This is a hard-working person with a great attitude, but they're just not performing to the level that the business needs. Think of it like having a sales rep that you love, but they can't even close a car door.

And what about the High Performer/Low Culture Fit? This individual excels at getting things done but is disruptive to the rest of the team. Some believe it's best to isolate those individuals, so that the business gets the benefit

of their performance without issues for the rest of the team. Yet I don't think isolating people is a good business practice. An organization needs alignment, and it's impossible to achieve that when a portion of the people are sequestered away from everyone else.

In my experience, ignoring or isolating the team members in those two boxes will negatively affect your culture. As I've mentioned, culture is often shaped by the lowest level of acceptable behavior inside an organization. If left unattended, those two boxes will influence the rest of the business.

This is where reviews can be a great tool.

It's important not to confuse a performance review with a one-on-one conversation. Top-performing managers have frequent one-on-ones with people on their team. They don't wait for the almighty performance review to let someone know that they're not meeting expectations.

If you set up your reviews properly, then people on your team will actually look forward to receiving them. In most cases, a performance review is empowering and builds morale. It's a special time for a team member to talk about their goals and aspirations within the organization. It's also an opportunity to document performance and suggestions for improvements.

With the understanding that various industries have different roles and priorities, and the review process can change accordingly, the following section will provide you with a framework that can be adapted to your specific business.

USE THE TEAM VISION STATEMENT

Reviews are a powerful way to keep the organization's mission and vision top of mind. As we've discussed, each department's vision statement answers the questions, "What do we aspire to become?" and "How do we win?" Those elements can also form the backbone of a review. For example, let's imagine how the vision statement for George's production department might read: "We aspire to become a world-class production team. We achieve this by taking

ownership of our work, documenting and adhering to our processes, clear and timely communication, and ensuring every client has a wonderful remodeling experience."

In a performance review, the production manager can now go beyond KPIs, and engage in conversations around behavior and alignment to the overarching vision of the team.

In addition, the following seven elements will help make a review most effective for both the manager and the team member.

THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE REVIEW

1. Encourage Personal Reflection

At one point in the Warren Construction story, it looks like a valued team member is considering leaving the company. Marty advises George to meet with him and ask some revealing questions to get at his feelings about the job and give clues as to whether he intends to remain in the position, at least a little longer.

This is called a Stay Interview. Examples of a Stay Interview would include questions like:

- What makes you want to come to work every day?
- What would make you one day want to leave?

A true Stay Interview is a great communication tool that doesn't have to be limited to a performance review setting. By identifying individuals who are unhappy with current conditions, those questions can provide actionable insights, reveal areas for improvement, and help with retention. They also show that you care about the well-being of everyone who works in the business.

You should also include a self-assessment component with questions for the team member about what they see as their strengths and growth opportunities.

Great questions establish that you're invested in their career development and personal well-being. It provides a solid basis for the rest of the review.

2. Help Team Members to Focus on Personal Goals

During a performance review, it's important to understand the goals of the individuals on your team—it could be in business, in life, or in both. Does this person see their job as just a means to support their outside goals, or are they trying to accomplish something in the company and move up? Understanding a team member's personal goals enables you to help them make the connection between individual performance and achievement of the things they want in life.

I have a friend with a business call center. When you walk through the place, you see that it's filled with vision boards hanging all over, created by the call center agents. The boards display the individual agent's goals—whether they're business, personal, or financial—and they look at them while making calls. The vision boards are there to constantly connect their "why" to each and every call they make.

3. Examine How Performance Stacks Up Against KPIs

Next, make sure the team member has a clear understanding of what each of their KPIs means.

Present their performance data and review where they have excelled or fallen short. Show appreciation for the areas where the team member has met or exceeded KPIs, and in cases where they haven't, discuss possible causes. This will lead to a more productive conversation about solutions and improvements.

In general, a team member who is responsible for developing a strategic plan has complex, intersecting goals, and some aspects of those types of roles cannot readily be broken down into KPIs at all. In those reviews, you want to evaluate progress and roadblocks more wholistically.

4. Examine How Performance Stacks Up Against the Top 15 Percent

After looking at performance against KPIs, I'm a big fan of comparing the individual's ranking against the top 15 percent in the same role. If you have a larger team, you can compare them to the top 15 percent internally, and if your organization is smaller, you can use the top 15 percent in the industry. This gives you an opportunity to either celebrate a great success or to start thinking about some stretch goals to help that person move into the top 15 percent. Setting the bar high gives the team member something to strive for.

5. Find Two or Three Opportunity Zones to Positively Impact Performance

If a team member's performance needs improvement, you should work together to identify that individual's "opportunity zones." First and foremost, you both need to agree that improvement in those zones will improve overall performance. If the team member doesn't think the opportunity zones are valid and the manager does, there's probably not going to be much effective action taken.

It's also important to limit the number of opportunity zones. As mentioned earlier, if you give somebody too many KPIs, it's hard for them to focus on any of them. The same thing applies to opportunity zones. If you lay out twenty areas that need attention, it's going to be impossible for them to prioritize. So, you only want to establish one to three opportunity zones that can really impact future performance.

6. Gain Consensus

Once the manager and the team member determine the opportunity zones, they move on to the four agreements and map out the plan.

- Agreement #1: Consensus on goals and time frame for achieving them

- Agreement #2: Consensus on how progress toward the goals will be measured
- Agreement #3: Consensus on the steps required to achieve the goals
- Agreement #4: Consensus on any outside resources needed to achieve the goals

Goal setting with an individual means that the manager might have to agree to act as well. For example, maybe the team member requires more coaching to move things forward. If so, the manager needs to commit to that. And if there is some other resource that would benefit the team member, it's the manager's responsibility to ensure it will be provided. This agreement is a two-way street.

7. Get Consensus on How the Four Agreements Will Advance the Team Member's Career

Once you've established the four agreements, the manager and team member should then look at how those agreements will place them on a path to reach the personal goals discussed in the second step. Performance reviews are all about coaching people so they can advance—in their existing job or in a future role. When done right, performance reviews are a vehicle that helps people get where they want to go and provides a road map to that destination.

COACHING CULTURE AND COACHING PERFORMANCE

Let's go back to the culture-performance foursquare. When you have a High Culture Fit and need to coach up performance, you leverage gaps in KPIs and establish short-term, attainable goals that will drive incremental performance improvement. Remember, this kind of person is a good culture fit, so there's a strong likelihood that they will be willing to try.

With the High Performer/Low Culture Fit, leverage individual behavior against the team vision statement. It's like, "Hey, you're hitting your KPIs, but

let's review our team mission and vision statements and talk about some opportunity zones where you can better align with those statements."

You coach up low performers using KPIs, and you coach up low culture fits using the mission and vision statement.

PRACTICE 7: KEEPS A LEARNING MINDSET (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE)

Before I go into what it means to keep a learning mindset, let's look at a business that did not, and paid a high price.

The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus was founded in the 1800s as "The Greatest Show on Earth." Americans came in droves to stare in wonder at the amazing elephants, clowns, and acrobats. The three-ring circus model required tremendous resources to move animals and tons of equipment around the country, but for a long time none of that mattered. The tents were packed with paying customers.

But then people became less enamored with the circus. They found it dirty, smelly, and hot in the tents. The food was no good. They took issue with the treatment of the animals and were weirded out by clowns. Ringling Bros. saw the diminished attendance, but instead of pivoting to what the new generation wanted, they doubled down on more of the same: five rings instead of three, and more elephants and tigers. In other words, rather than adapting to the needs of the market, they gave customers even more of what they *didn't* want. Not surprisingly, all that did was create even fewer customers. In 2017, Ringling Bros., a once iconic brand, closed its doors, thus ending a 146-year legacy.

Alternatively, look at Cirque du Soleil. Started in the 1980s by two former street performers, the founders knew that people love watching acrobats and trapeze artists. They also knew that there was a long list of things that people *didn't* like about the classic circus. By watching and listening to potential circus

customers, they chose to get rid of all the unpopular elements and just keep the excitement. Instead of putting on a show in a dirty tent full of miserable animals, they performed in high-end, climate-controlled venues.

Cirque du Soleil made it about the entire experience. If you've ever been to a performance, you know it's a theatrical, character-driven approach presented in a pleasant environment. And unlike the circus, where tickets were a few dollars each, Cirque du Soleil charges a premium. Cirque du Soleil had a learning mindset.

Interestingly, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus resumed touring as of fall, 2023 … but this time, without animals.

Now let's look at some of the other advantages that a learning mindset creates for a business.

A LEARNING MINDSET CREATES A COMPETITIVE EDGE

A business that wants to stay relevant embraces change. Keeping a learning mindset means that leaders have their ear to the ground and remain open to innovation as the market evolves. This allows the business to quickly adapt to new technology, products, and consumer preferences. A learning mindset creates a culture of innovation, where everyone feels comfortable sharing ideas that can drive the company forward through changing times.

A LEARNING MINDSET EMBRACES MASTERY AND STRIVES FOR EXCELLENCE

How do we not only *do* our job, but *master* it? How do we strive for excellence?

The word "strive" shares the same origin as the word "strife" or conflict. But, over the years, the meaning of "strive" has changed from friction with others to a sort of friction inside of ourselves as we work to overcome obstacles and remain committed to our goals. To strive means we're engaging in a deliberate challenge so it's normal to expect some stumbles along the way. We get to choose if the stumbles define us.

A learning mindset also means that the concept of "losing" no longer exists, if learning takes place. Success is not measured solely by the achievement of a goal but also by the resilience, growth, and knowledge garnered along the way. With the right mindset, to strive is to continually win, because even during setbacks that might superficially appear as failure, there is growth. With a learning mindset, the journey itself can be a victory.

MAY 6, 1954

Back in the early 1950s, you could have filled a stadium with doctors, professors, and pundits, asked them one question regarding human ability, and received a unanimous response: The human body was incapable of running a four-minute mile. They would justify their certainty by explaining all the reasons why the legs weren't strong enough and the lungs weren't big enough. Luckily for the rest of us, one man didn't believe them. On May 6, 1954, British athlete Roger Bannister became the first person on record to run a four-minute mile, a feat that many experts considered impossible.[10]

Today, you could fill a stadium with sports historians, and they'd all agree on something else: In achieving a four-minute mile, not only did Bannister set a record, but he also inspired a generation of runners to dream bigger and think differently. Since his death in 2018, many have shared how his legacy was breaking the mental barrier, demonstrating that many things are possible with the right mindset. Runners continue to learn from Bannister, and from each other.

As of June 2022, a total of 1,755 athletes have run the mile in under four minutes and that number continues to grow,[11] reflecting a learning mindset in training, nutrition, and running technology.

The sub-four-minute mile, once considered impossible, has become a standard benchmark for elite middle-distance runners around the world. The ripple effect of a learning mindset can change the direction of a generation.

WITH A LEARNING MINDSET, PROBLEMS BECOME OPPORTUNITIES

With a learning mindset, opportunities aren't stressful, they're exciting. Opportunities change an organization for the better and keep it moving forward. This reframed perspective is much healthier for every team member and essential for resilience and long-term success.

Three Ways to Encourage a Learning Mindset

There are several ways to encourage a learning mindset within an organization. Here are three that I've found effective.

1. Incentivize Professional Development

If you're not already doing it, consider offering to pay for team members who want to take a class or gain a certification that's relevant to your business. Internal mentoring programs can be helpful as well, whether that's an informal training or an intentional process where veteran team members help less experienced ones learn and grow. In other words, investing in the talent of your team not only builds "bench strength" in the organization but also sends a message that the company cares about every team member's personal and professional growth.

2. Exercise the Learning Muscle

Another idea that's worked for me is to sponsor a professional development book club for team members who wish to participate. We read books on leadership, sales, operational excellence, and so on. Sharing a book as a community engages the "muscle" of learning, which needs to be exercised just as the muscles of the body need conditioning to become stronger.

3. Encourage Managers to See the Business through the Lens of the Customer

A leader who strives for mastery knows that all viewpoints matter. But there are two that are key: the people closest to the customers and the customers themselves.

Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, is famous for putting the customer first. That focus is central to Amazon's company culture, so much so that when the executive team holds a meeting, there is always an empty chair set aside for the customer. It's a powerful reminder, right there in the room, to consider the most important person when making any decision.

A learning mindset means that leaders always seek the perspective of the customer and those closest to the customer.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE WITH A LEARNING MINDSET

Like many entrepreneurs I know, instead of going to college, I went straight from high school directly into business, selling pots and pans door-to-door in New York. I loved the idea that I could knock on a stranger's door and, a couple of hours later, walk out with a check in my hand. At eighteen years old, I was living the dream. Eventually, I started selling remodeling projects for a local contractor and it wasn't long before I wanted to do it on my own. I took the leap and started a home improvement company. It was just me, a plastic folding table, a few thousand dollars in cash, and a ferocious will to succeed. The business took off. I hired people, created marketing campaigns, brought on new products, and grew like crazy. When the business hit $30 million in annual revenue, I started feeling like a fish out of water. I had no idea how to run a $30 million business, or properly lead the ninety-seven people on my team.

I realized that for me to be the best leader for the business, my skillset needed to grow. I needed to learn. I heard about a three-year, part-time, executive education program at Harvard Business School with a curriculum designed for current business leaders. Even though I had a successful company, I wasn't sure they would admit me, given my educational background.

The day I received the acceptance letter, I was part excited, and part scared stiff. School was never my thing, and now I'm going to run my business while going to Harvard? Piece of cake.

The executive education program turned out to be a blast. I thoroughly enjoyed their style of teaching. Harvard Business School covers subjects like strategy, operations, marketing, sales, and leadership, and teaches using a wide variety of case studies. Think of the case study as an overview of a business situation where a pivotal decision must be made and students like me have to reach conclusions with limited information. The cases are then discussed, while the classmates are living on campus in three-week intervals with 150 other business leaders from across the globe.

I really connected with that style of teaching. It was challenging, interactive, and very engaging. Between the friends I made, and the process of facing my fear by returning to school, my time there was transformational. The lessons, put into practice, allowed me to become a more intentional leader, and gave me the confidence to replicate my business model in new markets, with the goal of taking the company, and the team, to a totally different level. And it worked.

Before I sold my group of businesses, we had a combined yearly revenue that exceeded $150 million, and a team of almost six hundred people. Not too bad for a $3K start-up.

IN REFLECTION

There are several things that need to align for a business to grow like that. I was fortunate to have a great team of people who were authentically connected to the mission and vision of the business, all sharing the pursuit of excellence. The timing was also right. The industry was rather fragmented, and we found sectors that were ripe for disruption, so we acted on it. We also made the decision to simplify our product offerings, enabling us to train, replicate, and scale much faster.

All those decisions, while crucial, would have been missed if we hadn't observed current conditions and asked two questions: What is this telling us? What is the opportunity? As important as strategy and execution are, a business must ensure it's asking the right questions along the way. And that takes one thing: a learning mindset.

NOT YET

It's easy to find ourselves in a bubble of sorts, where we become comfortable with our surroundings and instead of pushing ourselves into the unknown, we choose the routine of safety and stability. That all sounds a little boring. For me, and for my team, I choose "yet." The concept of "yet" means that just because it hasn't happened yet doesn't mean it's never going to happen. I remind others of that when they say things like, "I can't afford to retire," or "I don't know how to dance," or "My business hasn't grown." Those statements could all be true, if you want, or the sentences could be incomplete, because you just might not have done it "yet." So instead of creating self-limiting rules, try embracing a learning mindset where we all share one thing in common: we are limitless. It only takes adding one word to reframe this perspective. "I don't know how to dance, *yet*." But guess what? Because of my mindset, I'm willing to learn.

PRACTICE 8: COLLABORATES WITH OTHER BUSINESS UNITS (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE)

"Prepare your ears for *awfully* good music!"

That was the headline for the Fox Valley "Sinfonia," a fundraiser concert to support our local youth orchestra, and I was one of the cellists. Full confession, I didn't even know how to spell cellist, no less play a cello. And I wasn't the only pseudo musician that evening, but that was the point of the concert. It was a fundraiser, and the orchestra were members of the community with little

to no musical talent, who were given a few lessons, and then performed together on stage. In front of people. Lots of people.

To give credit where credit is due, some of the performers were pretty good. I was not part of that group. My chords (if you could call them that) sounded like the screech of a gray metal desk being dragged across a concrete floor. But, it was a "*Sin*fonia." We raised a lot of money, and I gained tremendous respect for professional musicians who not only play their own instruments well but also understand the value of playing seamlessly together as a symphony.

A SILOED SINFONIA OR AN ORCHESTRATED SYMPHONY?

Earlier we learned how a meaningful team vision statement can create alignment within a department. To use the analogy of a symphony, it's everyone knowing their instrument and playing well together in concert. But often, that symphony breaks down when there are multiple departments to consider.

Let's say the business has five divisions, with five different teams and five different managers. Unintentionally, the various departments might have what's known as "role conflict." To give an example, let's go back to Warren Construction and the dreaded kitchen island. You might imagine the salesperson was being paid for closing the sale. The production department might have been compensated around the accuracy or profitability of that project. We know that the kitchen island was neither accurate nor profitable. In this example, the business units had competing priorities, and the by-product becomes role conflict. For the customer, the business plays like a Sinfonia.

It's not uncommon to see different departments inside a business become silos, playing their own instruments, to their own tune, and not viewing their role as part of a symphony. And just as a symphony needs a conductor, so does a business. And that's one of the roles of a manager.

SILOS ARE THE ENEMY OF ALIGNMENT

If I were to ask one hundred companies for their top three challenges, I'm very confident that communication would be right up there. Not just at a customer level, but internally as well. Silos result in barriers to communication, which lead to inefficiencies and duplicated efforts. This is where the Law of Unintended Consequences sets in. In a siloed business, the people don't realize the impact that their decisions have on the rest of the organization. The result is a fragmented culture where teams are working against each other instead of toward common goals. A siloed company may also deliver an inconsistent customer experience because different departments might have different approaches, and this confuses and frustrates customers. When departments have competing priorities, the customer—and the company—suffers. An important role of the manager/leader is to break down those silos, so departments complement and support each other, instead of getting in each other's way.

BREAKING DOWN SILOS

A manager has to take the lead in making collaboration happen. Low-hanging fruit is simply revisiting the daily huddles. Just as team huddles are important, so are interdepartmental huddles.

Think of them as short meetings at the manager level where everybody shares what they're working on, so that the managers in each department understand various priorities and changes in process or approach. This aligns goals and objectives and creates a culture of shared purpose.

Another way to break down silos is to drive collaboration deeper into the org chart by creating projects that require cooperation between different departments. Not "make work" projects, just for the sake of collaboration, but real initiatives that will help move the company forward. This builds relationships and understanding between different departments and gives a mutual sense of purpose. Managers in one department often don't understand

the challenges in another department. By working with other managers, they begin to see how their own department can be a better partner and help make the whole business more successful.

Lastly, I believe there's real value in trading jobs for a day. When a manager has to navigate the complexities inside another business unit, they are able to see first-hand where friction is happening. They will then revisit their own department with a different level of appreciation and understanding. Some of the best process improvements come from trading jobs for a day.

When managers truly collaborate with different business units, they turn the workplace into a well-tuned orchestra. The whole business moves in harmony, creating a vibe where everyone's on the same page and feeling good about being part of something bigger. It's all about teamwork, where every note matters and adds up to a symphony that sounds amazing.

PRACTICE 9: EMBRACES CONTINUAL PROCESS IMPROVEMENT (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE AND CONTROL)

When I was a kid, my parents used to take me to Adventureland in East Farmingdale, New York. It was an amusement park with an arcade, and, as a five-year-old, I used to run to my favorite game: Whack-A-Mole. For those that haven't played it before, imagine a big wooden mallet and game board with a dozen round holes in it. You put a dime in the machine, and when a rubber mole pops its head out of one of the holes, you whack it with the mallet. That mole drops back down, and a second later a different one pops up from another hole. You whack that mole, and instantly another appears. On and on and on, the longer you play, the faster the moles get until finally you can't keep up anymore. As a five-year-old kid, I could whack those moles for hours. Adults still play the game today, just a slightly different version of it.

WHACK-A-MOLE FOR MANAGERS

Many managers begin their day well planned, and excited to start new initiatives, or finally finish up a project from several weeks ago. They arrive at their office full of energy, say "good morning" to everyone, grab a cup of coffee, sit at their desks, roll up their sleeves to begin their day, and BAM, a problem pops up that must be smashed down immediately. Time, energy, and calories are quickly redirected toward that issue, but the moment it's addressed, BAM! Then another rubber problem mole pops its head up from a different hole, and on and on and on. By the end of the day, the new initiative didn't get started, the partial project didn't get completed, and just like yesterday and last week and last month, the day was consumed by an intense game of manager Whack-A-Mole.

SYMPTOM VERSUS PROBLEM

It wouldn't be so bad if daily problems were permanently solved. Yet, unfortunately, many managers are consumed by repetitive issues that keep popping their heads up—a slightly different hole, a slightly different mole, but similar indeed. And this is the dichotomy of management: urgent problems that must be solved, and no time to work on things that can improve business processes. To get out of this Whack-A-Mole cycle of insanity, one must first realize that the problem being solved isn't really the problem, it's a symptom of a much bigger problem. Until the core issue is identified and treated, the symptoms will keep popping up. And while the root cause might seem elusive, you don't have to find it alone. Your team can help.

FINDING THE ROOT CAUSE

To get to the root cause of a symptom, let's go back to Toyota.

Sakichi Toyoda, the founder of Toyota Industries, developed a problem-solving method known as the "5 Whys"[12] that's widely used not just in Toyota but in many organizations for root cause analysis. The 5 Whys method is asking the question "Why?" five times (or more if needed) to peel away the

layers of symptoms and arrive at the true root cause of the problem. Here's the typical process:

Identify the Problem

Start with a clear and concise *statement* of the observed issue. This is crucial for focusing on the analysis.

Ask the First Why

Ask why the problem occurred. This first question should lead to an initial answer that identifies a cause, which is often a symptom of a deeper issue.

Ask Subsequent Whys

For each answer generated, repeat the question "Why?" to dig deeper into the cause. Each answer should be based on factual evidence and not speculation. The process encourages a true investigation at each level of cause and effect.

Repeat the Process

Continue asking "Why?" until the root cause of the problem is identified.

Five "Whys" isn't a hard number; it may take fewer or more questions to reach the root cause.

Identify Countermeasures

Once the root cause is identified, the next step is to develop countermeasures or corrective actions to prevent the problem from recurring.

Going through this process with the team is critical for its success. The effectiveness of the 5 Whys method relies on the knowledge and persistence of the people involved and their ability to distinguish between symptoms and root causes. It is a simple and highly effective tool for fostering critical thinking and problem-solving within an organization and promoting a culture that's dedicated to continuous improvement.

To see the 5 Whys in action, let's go back to Chuck Cregan's kitchen island and clearly state the problem.

A toe kick was missing on one side and the end panels were of different sizes.

- Why? The plans didn't cover that detail.
- Why? The plans often lack important details for the installation crews.
- Why? Nobody consistently reviews the plans to ensure all the proper details are included.
- Why? Plan review isn't a KPI that exists in the business today.

Countermeasure: Create a formal preconstruction plan review process and assign KPIs that focus on accuracy, ensuring the proper details are identified before construction begins.

It's about asking enough whys, about digging deep enough to get to the root cause so problems aren't repeated.

SEPARATING PEOPLE FROM PROCESSES

Another key to embracing continual process improvement is separating people from processes. When you're trying to find a problem inside of your business, it's easy for people to feel defensive, and you might hear a lot of, "Hey, it wasn't my fault, it was [so and so's]." But it's not about finding fault with any one individual, it's about having a process that works, to prevent problems and mistakes.

To accomplish this, a manager needs to create an environment where individuals aren't defensive. In order to create an open conversation that seeks to make the organization flow better, a manager should carefully frame the 5 Why process. Start by reassuring the team that, "We have the right people; this is about a process problem. So, as a team, let's figure out where our process is broken." Shifting one's focus from people to process creates a culture where everyone can participate in the solution.

THE CULTURE FACTOR

Involving the team in a continuous process improvement is not just beneficial for the business; it also impacts culture. When people are encouraged to identify inefficiencies and participate in solving the problem, they become co-owners of the journey toward excellence. This deepens a sense of belonging and purpose, as everyone can see the impact of their contribution. And while Whack-A-Mole is still a fun game, let's leave it for the five-year-olds to play.

PRACTICE 10: PRAISES PERFORMANCE PUBLICLY (A LEVER OF INFLUENCE)

When team members go above and beyond in any given area, it's always a good idea to celebrate them. When that praise is given in front of the team or shared with other managers, the benefit is even more significant. The shout-out could mention exceeding KPIs; supporting other team members; productivity; demonstrating alignment with the team or company vision; or any other behaviors you wish to recognize.

Yet while individual performance should be praised publicly, it's best to offer constructive feedback privately. Any criticism, even if the tone is helpful, is much more likely to be met with defensiveness when presented in front of others. After all, who wants to be corrected in front of their colleagues?

Public praise is a strong lever of influence. The behaviors described in your mission and vision statements, as well as the numbers with which to hold people accountable, are all levers of control. But rewarding people publicly is a lever of influence. It makes others want to be rewarded, too, and that encourages success-building behaviors such as collaboration, mentoring, decisiveness, and going above and beyond what is required in a job.

ADULTS LIKE STICKERS TOO

In one of my businesses, we had a highly effective way of recognizing our installers for a job well done. At each weekly tailgate meeting, we'd reward deserving team members by handing out red star stickers and bags of beef jerky. The stars were for the door of their company vehicles, and the jerky? Well, everyone wants jerky!

We'd recognize things like attendance, safety, and quality. But what really made it special was when the reward was for doing something outside the normal scope of work to help a customer. We might say, "Hey Frankie, thanks for changing the battery on Mrs. Jones's smoke detector, here's a star for you and some beef jerky!" The team would cheer, and everyone felt great. You can imagine how it encouraged others to find ways that they, too, could make a difference for our customers, and for each other.

It was also great to say to a customer, "The team member who's coming to your home is a twenty-star installer. You're going to love working with them!" The installers took real pride in those stars, and it helped with retention because if someone was thinking about leaving the organization, they weren't just exiting the company, they were leaving behind their star-filled company vehicle.

Public praise and rewards don't need to be anything formal or expensive to be effective. Let's face it, the cost of a bag of beef jerky and a red sticker is rather insignificant. But the benefit for the installer is monumental. People want more than a paycheck. They want to feel valued and appreciated in the workplace. Recognition in front of others is a powerful tool that helps build and maintain an aligned and highly energetic workplace culture.

FINAL WORDS

My wife and I spend winters in Scottsdale, Arizona. When people hear Scottsdale, there's usually one question that follows, "Do you play golf?" I don't. Well, I do, but I'm horrible at it. Horrible might even be an understatement.

The truth is I don't practice. I'll play once every couple of years and spend most of my time on the course trying to find lost balls. I'm the guy you don't want on your team. (I think there are teams in golf.) I take full responsibility for my lack of golf ability, because by not practicing I've made a choice to remain terrible at the game. The opposite is also true.

To quote Aristotle, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." This concept goes far beyond the game of golf. You might know people who are really good at being negative, like it's their default. They can find something wrong in even the most joyous moments. They practice negativity, and over time become excellent at it. You also might know people who are positive, even in difficult times. Their optimism is almost infectious. These individuals are consistently uplifting because that's what they practice.

As a leader, you get to choose what to practice, and what you want to perfect. In doing so, you're also modeling the way for those around you. The five pillars, when practiced, can transform the culture of a business, and the mindset of a team.

In this newly transformed business culture, people are no longer put in a box where their contribution isn't valued or appreciated. Instead, team members can thrive in an environment filled with meaning and purpose, surrounded by others who believe in them. And in that world, everyone becomes limitless!

And so, if you happen to make your way to Scottsdale some winter, I would love to hear the story of how you became limitless, and what impact the five pillars had on your business. Maybe we'll play some golf, or better yet, let's just grab a cup of coffee.

MUCH LOVE,
BG

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A special thank you to my writing partner, editor, and dear friend, Erika Mosse. Your dedication and insight have been instrumental in shaping *Beyond the Hammer*. Erika, you helped bring our characters to life with such vibrancy, ensuring the story was captivating and meaningful. Your ability to help distill complex ideas into clear, actionable insights is simply wonderful!

Your relentless work ethic, passion for this project, and constant encouragement to delve deeper have been invaluable. This book is as much a reflection of your commitment as it is of the ideas and pillars within it. Thank you for being an integral part of this journey.

Forever grateful.

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