CHRISTOPHER DUNCAN

**2ND EDITION**

Fully Revised

# Unite
## the
# Tribes

Lead your company into
a prosperous future

## Leadership Skills for
## Technology Managers

# UNITE THE TRIBES

## LEADERSHIP SKILLS FOR TECHNOLOGY MANAGERS

## SECOND EDITION

### Christopher Duncan

Apress™

***Unite the Tribes: Leadership Skills for Technology Managers***

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# About the Author

**Christopher Duncan** is a creative creature whose work includes writing, speaking, consulting, music, video, and the occasional encounter with technology.

In previous lifetimes, he made a living playing guitar in smoky bars of dubious integrity and also paid the bills as a software developer in cubicle city. A reformed serial entrepreneur, he also ran a sales and marketing company and, like any good techie, bears the battle scars of several dot-com adventures.

He can be reached at `www.ChristopherDuncan.com`.

# Introduction

Imagine taking your car into the shop for a tune-up. The mechanic unscrews the gas cap and holds onto it while he pushes your vehicle out of the way and rolls in a new one to take its place. He screws the gas cap back on, hands you the keys, and tells you that your tune-up is complete. That's what happened when I sat down to work on the second edition of Unite the Tribes.

When I wrote the first edition, I was speaking to two audiences, workers and managers, trying to bring them together for the common good. The concepts were universal in nature and applied to any industry where people tried to make a profit. After another decade in the world of technology, however, I realized that the group I really wanted to help was much more specific.

Those of us in the tech sector are in the business of building the future. We're also more in need of adult supervision than just about any industry on the planet. When the time came for a new version of this book, I realized there were many new things that I wanted to say. The more I tried to edit and tweak existing chapters, the clearer it became that what I really needed was a blank page. So, I unscrewed the gas cap, pushed the old car off the nearest cliff, and went to work. This is an entirely new book, built on the concepts set forth in the previous edition.

It's an incredibly cool time to be in the shiny-objects business. Our world is connected as never before, and technology empowers us at every level of our lives. And yet, I watch businesses make the same old mistakes over and over again.

Most of them have to do with leadership, or the subsequent lack thereof.

A company is nothing more than a collection of people with a fancy logo. From that perspective, it's surprising that the very last thing to be considered in the calculations of most tech companies is human nature. If you had a behind-the-scenes view of the businesses that failed, you'd find that it's rarely a bad product that killed them. More often, it's internal strife and dysfunction that grind things to a halt.

Techies also seem to think that their cool idea is all that really matters. Because of this, they're often decimated by the competition when they finally bring their product to market. Like it or not, business is war. The idealistic tend to ignore this because it sounds distressing. They soon learn, however, that ignorance is more unpleasant still.

Humans are tribal by nature. We instinctively gather in groups based on common interests. Not long after that, the tribes start fighting with each other as they compete for territory and resources. Internally, that can tear an enterprise apart.

In the marketplace, your company is also a tribe of sorts, an empire in the making that competes with other enterprises for money and turf. Some survive the battle better than others.

Because tribes are comprised of people, you have a very powerful tool to shape the outcome. Each and every person on the planet is motivated exclusively by self-interest. Once you realize that, you have everything you need to control the situation and point things in the right direction.

Of course, these aren't the things the average techie likes to think about. We obsess over bits and bytes, because that's what we're comfortable with. Even leaders in tech companies have a tendency to dismiss people skills as unimportant. However, left unattended, humans are complex and

troublesome. Fortunately, they're also the key to a company's success.

People have been building empires for as long as they've been able to swing sticks at each other. Throughout the course of human history, great leaders have successfully employed the same principles over and over again. A modern-day business is no less an empire, and these concepts work just as well today as they did in the days of ancient armies.

I'm going to take you on a little road trip. We'll make a few historical stops along the way, occasionally resting in the shade of the nearest pyramid and doing our best to stay clear of stampeding horsemen. In our travels, we'll spend a little time looking in on the leaders who shaped the world in those historical moments and see how they motivated people to accomplish tremendous things.

Most of our time, however, we'll spend in the present, considering the many facets of the people you encounter in pursuit of your goals and how you can bring out the best in them. As we do, you'll see that we have a great deal in common with our sword-swinging friends.

Humans haven't really changed all that much over the years. We're driven by a predictable self-interest: the desire to build a better life for ourselves and our families.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with that. In fact, to be a successful leader, you need to help your people accomplish exactly that. Your goal is to bring them together in the service of a strong and prosperous empire. Your company will benefit, as will your people. Once you understand the fundamentals of human nature, it's really not that hard to unite the tribes.

# CHAPTER

1

# The Myth of Absolute Power

The world is shaped by leaders. This is just as true for business as it is for the fate of nations. The products, services, and entertainment that we enjoy in our daily lives existed first in the minds of women and men who knew how to transform an idea into tangible reality. Some were dreamers, others hard-nosed and practical, but in each case they understood what it takes to achieve success. Even in a democracy, without strong leadership you'll soon find your organization in complete chaos. As you might imagine, that's not the most effective of states.

We tend to glorify our champions, and because of this they're the ones who get the credit for the accomplishments of the entire enterprise. However, whether you're at the top of the food chain or just managing a part of the overall organization, it's important to understand that there is no such thing as absolute power. Even in the world of nations and dictators, those who appear to possess unfettered control have it only because other powerful groups have agreed to back them up.

Armies follow leaders by choice, not mandate. In an argument between a civilian and a soldier, the guy with the tank usually wins. The implications for building an empire are clear. You're only as effective as the people who support you, so you'd better understand how to bring them together. Dry cleaners have a hard time removing tread marks from that fancy suit you're wearing.

> No leader has unfettered power or control in government or business. There is always a strong faction or factions backing the leader. Without them, you're nothing.

# Business Is War

Armies and tanks are not an accidental metaphor for the organizations behind businesses. There have been countless philosophies on how best to run a company, but there's a reason successful leaders so often reach for military strategy as inspiration. Business is a competition for territory and resources. You'll find that the dictionary offers a very similar description for warfare.

Make no mistake: War is a horrific and destructive occurrence, and the world would be a much nicer place if it didn't exist. Nonetheless, regardless of how we feel about the outcome of a given conflict, it's also the cradle of creation. New empires and eras of civilization are often born at the tip of a sword.

As any veteran who now works in the civilian arena will tell you, the consequences of mistakes in the business world are far less severe than mistakes in war. However, while there's no physical violence at play, it would be a mistake to assume that the stakes are not high. World economies can tumble as the result of poor decisions in the private sector and affect millions of lives. When things go wrong, people often face difficulties of the most primal nature, including not having enough to eat, the lack of proper medical care, and sometimes even the loss of home and hearth.

Such considerations may seem far removed from your daily existence—at least until you find yourself without a job because your company went out of business or was taken over.

There are many reasons this could happen, of course. Perhaps the economy took a dip, and restrained spending provided less revenue than the company needed to stay afloat. It might be the result of a gamble on a new product or service that landed in the marketplace with a loud thud. As often as not, it could be that you were outmaneuvered and outgunned at every turn by competitors who were simply better at the game than you were. Regardless of the specifics, if your organization finds itself among the deceased, it's for one reason and one reason only: it failed to compete in an environment that doesn't suffer fools.

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The business environment is a rough neighborhood. If your organization is weak in any regard, the strong will have you for lunch.

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If you're running the show, I can assure you that none of your people will care why you had to close your doors. Their only concern will be with finding another source of income, preferably one with better leaders. From a management perspective, the fault is yours. Even if your people underperformed, it was your failure to show them a better way. The buck still stops with you. None of this matters, of course. You, your company, and your people have just become casualties of the conflict. It's a very common tale.

The world is a highly competitive place and business is no exception. No matter what industry you're in, other companies want your market share, your revenue, and your best people. They will fight you for it, employing everything from brute force to eloquent deception. If you let them, they will steal every customer you have, strip your company for parts, and leave you propped up on cinderblocks waiting for the junkyard to

claim your now-worthless carcass. It's a tough planet out there. You're going to need more than a towel.

Many people are uncomfortable with the notion of business as the practice of bloodless warfare. I admire their character, if not their common sense. I'd love it if I could just wear a flower in my hair, sing a happy little song, and allow good things to happen. But that's just not the way the world works. Companies are nothing more than a collection of people, and the human race has no shortage of greed, ambition, and aggression. If you think that ceases to exist once we put on our work clothes, you're in for disappointment.

A business merely amplifies the collective attributes of its employees, from the top all the way down. Much is made of corporate culture these days and for good reason. As a leader, you set the tone for the people you manage. You'll draw certain personality types and repel others. Ultimately, your organization will reflect the most predominant characteristics of your people. Other companies are no different in this regard, and not all of them are nice. The natural world is full of predators. To think that business is otherwise is to be completely vulnerable.

Consequently, some of the best advice you can find will often come from the annals of history, through the experiences of the greater and lesser military leaders. It requires you to translate the information into strategic insights relevant to your own endeavors, but that's not difficult to do once you're used to it. Fortunately, you don't have to become a military historian in order to lead your people in the most effective manner. You'll find that the principles that have worked over and over again throughout the ages are in essence a collection of straightforward, commonsense considerations.

In many cases, the deciding factor in which of two companies succeeds while the other goes out of business comes down to leaders and their ability to think strategically. This might sound

obvious to you, but there are a great many people in positions of authority who spend their time doing anything but that. Perhaps they're more interested in the products or services from a technical point of view, or they came up through marketing and thus see the world through that lens.

No matter what the reason, the result is always certain. Leaders who don't understand the art of strategy in an environment of conflict will drive their companies right off the edge of the cliff. If you're in charge, your job is to operate effectively based on how things are rather than how you wish they were. Only then do you have a strong chance for survival.

# Within and Without

If you thought it was hard enough dealing with the complexities and interactions of the marketplace, you're just going to love managing people. The human race may not have the most perplexing and contradictory collection of qualities in the universe, but you're going to need a high-powered telescope to find better examples.

To begin with, people can be illogical to extremes. This is no small challenge to the person who tries to run her company with nothing more than intelligence. From a purely logical point of view, if everyone does excellent work and the company becomes more profitable, then there's more money and benefits to spread around.

Many leaders believe that everyone should just follow instructions and give their very best. You don't need to hire a gypsy fortune-teller to see how this style of management is going to turn out. And yet, highly intelligent businesspeople are shocked on a regular basis to find that their people behave in ways that are contrary to commonsense even when it works to their disadvantage. The truth of the matter is that you'd

probably be better off having someone who can read a crystal ball when it comes to dealing with those pesky and unpredictable creatures who populate your workforce.

In addition to their lack of pointed ears, you'll find that the standard-issue human comes with another opportunity for misadventure. We each have what, for lack of better terms, I'll call physical, mental, and emotional bodies. The fact that we often don't follow the most logical path doesn't mean we're stupid. It indicates that the mental is taking a back seat to the emotional. We have good days and bad. Our mood is affected by our family and friends, by the degree to which our wants and needs are being fulfilled, and even by what we had for breakfast today.

Our feelings don't disappear when we get out of the car and walk into our places of business each day. Even if they did, you can be sure that all those pesky humans we encounter in the workplace environment would generate a few of their own. Consequently, when our own emotional state comes into contact with the behavior of others, the results can be either harmonious or a complete disaster. All of which happens when we're supposed to be doing our job, of course. There is no intelligent discourse in the world that will affect a person's emotional state. To attempt to do so would be, well, illogical.

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Don't expect people to act logically. Except for Spock, emotions rule the day for most of the people you work with. And even Vulcans have their moments.

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Of course, these are just a couple of examples of the types of complexity you'll find in those well-dressed mammals sitting in Conference Room A, and they're only the tip of the iceberg. Another attribute that's more likely to derail your objectives than the person who had a fight with his best friend the night

before is ambition. There are a great many people who have no drive whatsoever, a point sure to frustrate the more motivated among us. However, that's nothing compared to the mischief and mayhem caused by those who try to manipulate the world to get what they want.

If fairness, we all go in to work each day because we want something. For some, it's little more than money and benefits. Others want to climb the corporate ladder to achieve status and power. There are countless other shiny objects as well. The lucky ones in life find a career doing something they're passionate about. What they do on the job is actually fun for them, and they'll maneuver situations in order to have the most possible enjoyment and avoid the things they don't care much about. On the other hand, a lot of people would be lost without the social aspect of their jobs. It's the interaction with their workmates that brings them the most satisfaction, and they'll resist any change that might disrupt that environment.

When you add up all of the things that make us unpredictable and occasionally volatile, it's a wonder anything gets done at all. Frequently, it doesn't. The larger your company or department, the greater the potential for conflict among your people. A leader must play many roles. In addition to being chief strategist in charge of getting things done, you're also a very highly paid babysitter. You have to manage the moods, ambitions, and emotions of all your people as they bounce off of each other in a game of never-ending interpersonal pinball. Coat those shiny steel balls with gunpowder and you've got a pretty good idea of what can happen if you don't keep things under control.

In fact, many companies have failed not because the competition ate them for lunch but rather because they simply imploded under the weight of their own dysfunction. If your people are too busy bickering among themselves to realize that there's an iceberg ahead, it's a pretty safe bet that all those

swimming lessons you took as a child are about to pay off. If you happened to have the foresight to invest in shark repellant, that'll come in handy as well.

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Companies with lots of internal bickering and infighting invariably miss the iceberg ten feet off the bow. That tends to be a little hard on the paint job.

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Imagine what life would have been like if you were a soldier back in ancient times, a member of one of those wild-eyed barbarian tribes that constantly raided their more civilized counterparts. You would have known that sooner or later the Roman Legion was going to show up at your doorstep. It was just a matter of when.

The more successful armies were prepared for that eventuality. They had defenses at the ready and a well-trained force capable of fighting off any invader. Now consider what would have happened if on the day the Romans showed up, your people were all engaged in a drunken brawl, fighting and bashing each other over the head with anything that wasn't nailed down. It wouldn't have ended well for you.

It's no different with your company as it enters into the marketplace. Your competition is coming for you and chances are good they're prepared. If your business is in complete disarray because your people are too busy fighting among themselves, now would be a great time to update that resume.

## True Power

To drive this point home, it's important to remember that no matter how much authority you wield, you don't do the all of

the work. Even if you possessed each and every skill in the company, there's simply not enough of you to go around. Your people are the ones who keep the trains running on time. They're the ones who make it all happen. Simply put, without them you're nothing.

As we saw earlier, armies may follow a leader, but they follow the leader of choice. The day that person is no longer getting it done, a new leader will emerge. The fate of his predecessor varies with the culture. Your business enterprise operates on the same principles. You do not hold the power. It resides in your people.

This is further amplified when they begin to congregate, as people naturally do, in larger groups. Whether they're organized by skills, as illustrated by your org chart, or by the common interests and desires that drive office politics everywhere, they are a force to contend with.

It gets even more fun when these groups interact, more often than not because of their desire for a common patch of territory or resources. The end result looks much less like the leader of the free world and more like the feudal barons of medieval Europe. Leaders emerge in the business environment just as they do in other situations, often resembling petty warlords seeking to expand their turf. Unchecked, their tribes will clash frequently and often dramatically, causing no small amount of chaos and destruction in the process.

Meanwhile, from your perch high atop a hill, you can see both the continuing conflict and the threat of competitors new and old on the horizon. This is probably a good time to point out that the laws of physics are alive and well, even if they're not always convenient. The amount of work your groups are capable of producing is going to fall into a fairly definable range. That effort can be directed internally, externally, or to a combination of both. It is, however, finite.

No matter how often someone encourages us to give 150 percent, from the engine room you can hear Scotty calling up that 100 is all there is. Whether it's all directed internally or it's sliced up 50/50 between power struggles and productive results, there's only so much energy to go around. You can't expect your group to give 100 percent to the goals of the company when 75 percent of their energy is already allocated to petty turf wars. You'll have exactly one-quarter of your capacity available to fight off the invaders. This is a zero sum game.

While you may acknowledge that the true power lies with your people, your position of authority is not ceremonial. You actually possess the ability to exert tremendous influence on the situation and thus drive its outcome. This power comes in the form of leadership.

At a glance, leadership seems to be about leading, with you striking out on a path and others following. In fact, it's a highly complex set of responsibilities that include not just strategy but also motivational and organizational skills along with many others that we'll be considering shortly. One talent that is particularly relevant to our current discussion is persuasion.

People do not follow authority. They obey it. In terms of the quality of work that you get from them, these are two very different things. If you want to truly understand absolute power, think of yourself as a lightning rod in search of a thunderstorm. To be your most effective, you must inspire your people and persuade them to channel all of their power in the direction you're pointing.

When you're successful at this, you bring the force of the entire organization to bear on whatever objective you're contemplating. For those who have seen *Star Wars*, it's no different than the emperor shooting bolts of lightning from his fingertips. This power is awesome but it didn't emanate from him. He merely channeled the Force and directed it. Of course,

it's probably good to mention in passing that if you don't use your power for good, it's likely that you'll meet an unpleasant demise. It's not enough to say, "don't be evil." You have to actually live it.

# The Good of the Company

A common mistake made by both well-educated and highly capable leaders is operating on the assumption that people are willing to work for the good of the whole. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's true that we often come together in a shared effort for a common goal. However, what you're seeing isn't a collection of idealistic people working for the benefit of a corporation. They're doing it because it serves their personal interests.

In order to become an effective leader, the single most important concept to grasp is the fact that nobody gives a rat's rear end about your company. This is true, without exception, from the minimum wage employees to the highest paid executives. Each and every person in your organization is driven completely by self-interest. If they further the goals of the enterprise in the process, that's just a bonus.

You're doubtless already thinking of some pure and idealistic soul you can offer up as an example to disprove this notion. However, even the most group-conscious, tree-hugging, save-the-whales hippie conforms to this principle. In fact, so does every person who has ever existed on the planet, from Attila the Hun to Mother Teresa.

While it's easy to see how a greedy barbarian might be engaging in unbridled self-interest, you might ask how this can possibly apply to a revered and much loved social worker. Simply put, in both cases they're doing what makes them feel good. So does everyone in your company.

You have people who are passionate about creating the product itself. They're motivated by their love for their art. Salespeople are driven by money and ego. Top executives seek wealth and power. You can apply the same logic to each and every person you employ.

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Write this sentence out and tape it to your computer monitor: "People are motivated by self-interest. Period."

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Does this mean that everyone is completely apathetic to the fortunes of your financials? Of course not. However, their motive isn't some abstract love for the good of your organization. It's driven by what success for the business means to them personally based on their own desires.

If you try to motivate your workforce to adopt an altruistic attitude of hard work and sacrifice, as opposed to merely highlighting what's in it for the individual when he succeeds, you'll be in good company. The world is full of shallow, meaningless mission statements and executives who naively expect people to embrace them as if they were religious dogma.

Lest you think that I'm opposed to higher principles, I happen to like trees, whales, and hippies. I'd love to see a world of peace and harmony where everyone gets along and all work together to create beautiful experiences. Though you might think otherwise given my unvarnished description of it, I happen to like the human race. Unfortunately, I also understand it. Such a utopia might well include trees and whales, but there would be a conspicuous absence of people, hippie or otherwise. If you want a perfect world, you have to remove the imperfections. That means people are the first to go.

Does this mean there is no good in the world, or at least within the four walls of your business? It would be foolish to believe such a thing, particularly since I happen to know a great many people of excellent character. I suspect that you do as well. Nonetheless, the only way your plans will succeed is if they're built on a firm and solid foundation. Wishful thinking is not a platform for success. You have to see the world as it truly is if you're going to be effective in your efforts. Since people are the power under the hood of each and every company in business today, understanding human nature, or at least human motivation, is an excellent place to start.

# Understanding Expectations

In fact, if you're really looking to get the very best out of your people, you'll find that self-interest is not your enemy but rather your most powerful ally. Once you've dispensed with the notion that people should care about the business because, well, you know, it's the right thing to do, you're positioned to embrace a more effective strategy.

It's really not that difficult to do if you're willing to observe what's truly there rather than what you'd like to see. Most of the blindness that leaders face is self-inflicted. Either they're totally brainwashed and thus shouldn't be driving the train in the first place or they prefer to avoid uncomfortable truths.

Part of this can be accomplished by shifting your perspective. Whether you came up the hard way or went to a nice school and landed a cushy job right off the bat, you need to be able to think at multiple levels. The guy in the warehouse who's sweating his tail off and is intimately familiar with sore muscles does not live the same life as you. What's his reality? What sorts of things does he care about? Do you really know? If not, how can you possibly serve him as an effective leader?

The office workers grinding through monotonous paperwork all day long have their own set of priorities but probably share some with those who do physical labor. The creative class, such as that of a techie, artist, writer, or product designer, may have strikingly different things that are important to them. From middle management to salespeople and through all points leading up to the executive suite, you're going to find different classes of people. They all share some of the same characteristics, as we all have basic human needs. Beyond that, however, is a kaleidoscope of priorities, hopes, dreams, and desires.

Knowing what your people care about is the key to the golden city. You're not going to be able to make each and every person's dream come true. In fact, the astute observer will discover that a great many of them don't really know what they want in the first place. If asked, they'll usually say money, but if they won the lottery tomorrow, it's likely that they'd still feel unfulfilled in the same areas. That said, if you have a strong sense of the things that matter to different groups, you'll know how to translate your goals for the company into benefits that they'll actually care about, rodents and their posteriors notwithstanding.

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When you know what your people care about, you have the key to their motivation. That allows you to capture both their hearts and minds.

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Much of this comes down to managing expectations. Although an expectation is a stronger emotion than a desire, because you're effectively demanding that the former materialize, we can generalize a bit and say that the people you hired expect certain things of their job. One of the greatest causes for worker dissatisfaction and the spiraling lack of productivity that

inevitably follows is the feeling that management doesn't know what employees want and wouldn't care even if they did.

Whether it's the soul-crushing oppression of working in a harsh factory environment or the more subtle but equally disillusioning life of the average corporate employee, people simply don't give their best when they feel that no one cares about them. I've done my time working the production line for minimum wage, and I know that in such a place the supervisor would fire you for voicing your discontent. At the very least, you'd be ridiculed for thinking that anyone in upper management would care about your sorry little hide. I've also spent time in cubicle city and seen similar forms of disdain for those who do the work there. Not surprisingly, these companies were not operating at peak capacity.

If you know your people and understand the things they truly care about, you're in a position to shine. Even though you can't solve everyone's problems, if your guidance is seen as consistently addressing the satisfaction of your people whenever possible, even those you didn't help are much more likely to cut you a break. We follow most enthusiastically those who look after us.

Expectations flow both ways, of course, and that includes your own. If you're not basing your plan on what others can realistically achieve, you're setting everyone up for failure, including yourself.

Don't expect those whom you lead to operate at the same level as you, or to even exhibit your degree of dedication and talent. People have a wide range of capabilities and motivation. The trick is to match the task with the human resources who can best accomplish it, allocating no more horsepower than a little prudence and headroom dictate.

If you have an engineer capable of designing rocket engines, she can probably do a good job of sweeping the floor as well.

However, that would be a pretty inefficient use of her talent. If you need someone to wire a complex computer network in your office, and you give the task to an intern who just started studying infrastructure this year, you're going to have a disheartened intern and a very precarious communications subsystem. In every organization, there is a need for those both great and small. Success comes from a proper marriage of task and talent.

It's important to remember that evaluations run both ways. Most people have a long list of expectations when it comes to your organization. Paychecks and holidays are just the tip of the iceberg. When you understand what truly fulfills your people and can help them acquire it, they'll walk through fire for you.

# The Art of Stopping Conflict

A friend of mine has trained for many years in the traditional martial arts. I benefit a great deal from the stories he tells, as they broaden my own perspective. There is a Japanese word, *budo*, that's very applicable to the business world. It's often translated into English as "the way of the warrior." However, he refers to it as the way of stopping conflict.

The kanji, or Japanese symbol, for the word looks like two ancient, bladed pole arms coming into contact. What others see as a battle in progress, my friend translates as a conflict that was stopped before it ever started. Of course, the subtle complexities of Japanese culture are far beyond my comprehension. Like so many other things, this symbol has layer after layer of meaning. Nonetheless, it's not difficult to apply it to the world of leadership and commerce.

As a leader, you're responsible for bringing your people together, coordinating their efforts, and creating a stronger and

more profitable company as a result. Unfortunately, the minute you step out into the marketplace, there's conflict. That same customer that you want is also being courted by countless competitors. Going after a new market? So are a lot of other companies. Trying to build the best team in the industry? Similar businesses will steal your talent and bleed you dry if they can.

You can dive back into your building and close the door behind you, but you'll find little escape. Outside your office walls is the continuing clamor of groups large and small as they struggle with each other for territory and resources. You can even try to find solace in the company of other managers only to find that the atmosphere is dominated by the back room political maneuverings of the ambitious and upwardly mobile.

You are surrounded by conflict and competition. Wishful thinking won't make it go away. Ignoring it will only present to others something they perceive as a weakness. It will encourage the aggressive to press more fully. You can throw your weight around both as a company and as an individual in a clumsy, brute-force attempt to control the environment if you like. You'll only succeed in creating a massive backlash, pouring gasoline on the flames.

To achieve great things in the warlike culture of the business world, you need a strategy. What may come as a surprise to you is the fact that often the most effective defense isn't swinging back at your opponent but rather being smart enough to avoid the conflict in the first place. Fighting is destructive. There are more productive ways to use your resources.

This won't prevent your competitors from coming after you. They will do so over and over again until one of you is no longer around. Such is the nature of things. Even so, sometimes the best way to avoid the destructiveness of conflict is to see it coming and be somewhere else before it arrives.

Internally, the art of stopping conflict is crucial to the success of your company. I think we can all agree that if you're busy trying to kill each other when the barbarians show up, you're not going to present a very effective defense. In fact, you can think of this art in another way that will make even more sense to you: when you remove the conflict between people, what you've often done is unify them.

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Rather than attempting to win the conflict of the day, work to avoid it altogether. You and your company will get much more productive work done. You'll also have fewer bruises.

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This is the very reason that history remembers the Roman Legion. Unlike many armies of its day, its soldiers didn't go into battle with the mentality of individual warriors. They were an extremely cohesive, unified group with unprecedented discipline and focus. When they hit your walls, you didn't hear a lot of individual taps. You heard one very loud thump.

Genghis Khan applied this principle as well. Before his rise to power, the Mongols were one of the best metaphors for modern-day corporations that the world has ever produced. The landscape was littered with countless individual tribes, constantly at war with each other and never getting anywhere as a whole. When he stopped the tribal struggles and brought them together under a single banner, they built the largest land empire the human race has ever known.

## Summary

If you have a dream that you want to bring to life, you need power. You need to have the ability to channel it through your

very being and fire small bolts of lightning through your fingertips, whether the purpose is to drive away threats to your business or spot weld the framework of a new children's hospital. You also need to become adept at strategic thinking, to be able to see the dangers and opportunities that lie ahead, and to build an organization that is swift and mobile. You must be capable of taking on any new task and applying the full force of your capabilities to it.

Fortunately, you already have everything you require. If you're willing to put in the work to become a great visionary and master tactician, all the electricity you will ever need is standing right in front of you. Your power lies in your people. They'll be easy to spot. They're usually the ones squabbling with each other in the hallways instead of getting something productive done.

They're not battling each other because they enjoy it. It's only a way of life because they don't know of another. What they really want is success, and they're all wondering when you're going to lead them there. To be sure, people are complicated, so the task is never easy. Nonetheless, if you're grounded in reality and understand the hearts and minds of those you seek to lead, they'll give you their power willingly. All you have to do is unite the tribes.

# Building the Future

More than all the politicians and social activists combined, no one is better positioned to change the world than those who work in the tech sector. From massive companies that dominate the Internet to the handful of techies working out of someone's living room to create the next big thing, technology companies shape the very fabric of our lives.

PCs have given the common man unbridled creative power by offering the ability to create movies, music, books, and more. This was a privilege once reserved for the gatekeepers, those huge corporations with big pockets who could afford millions of dollars in infrastructure. Neil Armstrong walked on the surface of the moon powered by little more than the late 1960s equivalent of a pocket calculator. Today, cell phones and pads of every size provide global connectivity and processing power that would have scared the pants off of the Apollo Mission Control Center. Fly me to the moon? I'm sure there's an app for that.

The first wave of social media has become ubiquitous in the lives of modern society, from huge Web sites dedicated to sharing far more than most of us probably want to know to mobile apps designed to ping our friends just a few characters at a time. Just a few short decades ago, making a long-distance domestic phone call was something that only important or rich people did. International calls were rarer still.

Today, you can have a futuristic two-way video conversation with someone on the other side of the planet, whether at your desk or on the road, with your phone or pad.

It's challenging to maintain our sense of awe in the face of the rapidly advancing future. We quickly come to accept each new advance as normal. In fact, we've reached a point of saturation in many areas with the lull in innovation that always accompanies it.

Pundits everywhere are quick to announce the death of the desktop PC in light of the ever-increasing adoption of mobile devices. The truth of the matter is that they're both designed to do different things. PCs are made for creating content; mobile devices are made for consumption. The PC isn't dead; it's merely reached the saturation point. Most households have at least one desktop or laptop computer. Mobile technology, however, still has unexplored headroom. Ultimately, the adoption of each form of technology will continue based on the needs of the individual. If you're not creating content, you probably don't need a PC. If you are, you may well have both that and a mobile counterpart. Either way, owning these devices isn't new and trendy. It's commonplace. Everybody has one.

In a similar fashion, Web sites and mobile apps dedicated to social media have also hit a plateau. There are now dominant players in place in every category. Newer players are generally either piggybacking off the services of larger sites or offering a minor variation on what a market leader is already doing.

Anytime you write about technology, it's with the understanding that your words have a shelf life that can be measured with an egg timer. Consequently, the specific scenarios of which I just spoke will, with any luck, soon be very much behind the times.

What won't become dated is the larger cycle. We explore, we advance, we find a cool new way to do things, and for a brief moment in time, everything leaps forward to the next level. There's a gold rush mentality, just as the one we experienced when the world at large became aware of the Internet. With countless resources and inspired souls all diving into the same pool, it's not long before all the water gets splashed out. Then, after a lull of indeterminate time, someone comes along and fills the pool back up. Hopefully after everyone's climbed out.

Fortunes were made, and many more lost, in what's now known as the dot-com bubble. However, after it all fell apart, things leveled off and we found ourselves one notch up on the technological totem pole. It was a time of great opportunity and the risk that always accompanies it. When the excitement was over, there were still chances to do cool things on the Web, but there was a lull before anything new took hold.

The growth of social networking was another such ramp, as was the introduction of smart phones that transformed the little piece of plastic in our pockets from a voice communication device into a portable computer. There are new companies showing up every day, but we are once again in one of those lulls where we are getting variations on a theme rather than anything that changes the game and takes us up another level. Of one thing you can be sure, however. The game changers are coming, just as they always have. Will you be creating one of them?

# We Need Leaders

The world needs innovators. We need your brilliance, your inspiration, your vision. Our products could be rock stars. Our service could be the stuff of legends. Our organizations could

carve a path into the future, leaving a blazing trail of wondrous achievements in their wake. But that won't happen easily.

Whether it's the overpowering inertia of the status quo that accompanies a lull or the fierce and frenzied competition of a new era in technology, these occurrences show that having a good idea is not enough. It never has been. To force your way to the top and drag society, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the light of a new technology takes a special kind of leadership.

Whether you come from a technical, artistic, manufacturing, or any other professional background, it's not enough to be competent at your craft. Even the best financial and organizational skills are useless without a key ingredient: If you want to succeed in bringing your ideas to life and live long enough to tell the tale, what you need more than anything else is street smarts.

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Book smarts and professional credentials aren't enough to play at the top levels of business. You also need street smarts.

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I'm not talking about the kind of awareness that will keep you from being mugged in a dark alley, although that's certainly handy to have. "Street smarts" is just a catchy phrase that describes the skill of someone who understands how the world really works. Life is a complicated affair and the world of business is no exception. Technology professionals, no matter how adept they are at their craft, are not immune to this reality.

Leaders exist at many levels and in a variety of environments. When you work for a huge international corporation that dominates an area of tech, people and resources tend to be

broken up into groups that are organized in a hierarchical manner. Whether you're a vice president in charge of a major division or the manager of a small group of people, you're still a leader. It might surprise you to know that no matter how big the difference in salary and prestige, these two levels of leadership operate on the exact-same principles. Only the scale is different.

Due in no small part to the empowerment of technology and its way of leveling at least part of the playing field, we have a wealth of start-up companies, ranging from venture capitalist–backed MBAs to a bleary-eyed programmer working nights and weekends to bring his vision to life. At some point in the process, both will have to move beyond the initial stages and begin the arduous climb to the top of their market. To succeed, they will have to successfully apply the same principles as their large corporate cousins.

When Steve Jobs died, there was a surge in the ongoing debate regarding charismatic leadership. Many feel that it's a negative and are more comfortable with steady, conservative management. It's not hard to see the sense in that. Working under such dynamic leaders is often an all-or-nothing roll of the dice, with worse odds than you get at a Vegas table. On the other hand, conservative leadership by definition will never push the envelope or take a chance on the bold and game-changing initiative.

The problem with any such debate is the fundamental premise that one type of leadership is right and the other wrong. They're both right. They're both wrong. Having a wild-eyed lunatic at the helm, no matter how charming, is going to get everybody killed. At the same time, stick to the tried-and-true methods and you'll simply wear a deeper rut into the path of the ordinary and unremarkable. Furthermore, charismatic leaders are born, not created. The odds of your company

stumbling into one, for better or ill, are odds that are once again best left to your local casino.

Leadership is about people and nothing else. There are strategies, tactics, and the occasional iceberg on the horizon, but these are not abstract matters. They are all considerations that require action from humans, be they individuals or groups. We respect authority when we must but we don't follow it. We follow leaders.

# The Lowest Common Denominator

Unfortunately, many who would lead have limited vision and even less understanding of the human race. The world is moving faster than ever before, advances zipping past our ears like the swiftest of arrows, and yet a great many things remain the same. At a time when technology gives us massive power to innovate and achieve, large corporations cling desperately to outdated business models and continue to operate with the equivalent of chisels and stone tablets.

Organizations capable of delivering trendsetting products of peerless quality instead plod along on their treadmills in a tightly choreographed dance with the lowest common denominator. The end result of such an exercise is the same as it has always been—mediocrity. This is death by committee, the mindless march of bureaucrats toward lackluster products and the apathetic customer service that is sure to follow.

In fairness, there are people working in a variety of technologies who grind their teeth at the very thought of such a dreary, soulless existence. Stand by the water cooler long enough and you'll hear them speak at length about the shortcomings of the company and how things should instead

be done. These are usually the firebrands who haven't been in the business long enough for the weight of reality to wear them down.

Sometimes they get frustrated and quit, only to find themselves at the water cooler of yet another uninspiring job. Occasionally, however, they try to make a difference. If you've ever thrown yourself full force into a brick wall, you'll have a good understanding of how they tend to fare. Resistance to change is common enough in the human race, but the average corporation exhibits it in epic proportions.

Of course, inadvisable encounters with immovable objects aren't limited to the halls of the major companies. It occurs in a different way at almost every tech start-up that comes along. With no bureaucratic structure in place among the half dozen people working out of your garage, you might think you're immune to these dangers. If all you do is stay in your nice, comfy automotive shed, you will be. However, in order to bring your new idea to the world, sooner or later you're going to have to step out into the wild and rushing river of business and commerce.

If you left your job at a major corporation to start your own company in order to escape the mind-numbing inertia of the status quo, you're in for little better in the world of entrepreneurs. The high stakes of the global marketplace raise the risk averse to exalted positions. Coupled with the political impossibility of getting two companies with competing agendas to agree on any sort of standard, the business world is more intransigent than even the most conservative company. If you want to change the world, you're in for a shock. The world doesn't want to change.

Does this mean you should give up, pack it in, and learn how to herd goats? Unless you're particularly gifted with omnivorous mammals, it's probably not your best bet. Additionally, it's not necessary. While it's true that the world thinks it's doing just

fine with things as they are, that's how it's always felt. You'll have to wade through molasses and occasionally scale walls that seem insurmountable, but you can in fact make a difference.

We didn't know we needed the telephone, and you can be sure that the Pony Express was resistant to the idea. People who made a living selling horses had similar feelings when those loud, smelly, horseless carriages became popular. Even so, leaders such as Alexander Graham Bell and Henry Ford weren't deterred and they took us kicking, screaming, and whinnying into the future. You can do the same, as long as you have a realistic understanding of what you're up against and plan accordingly.

# The Change Business

Ask anyone running a tech company about the nature of their business and you'll hear them wax poetic about being a leader in hardware, software, or networking. If it's a marketing person you're speaking with, they'll probably even make up a few new words or phrases in the attempt to show how different and innovative they are. In fact, they're both dead wrong.

You're not in the technology business. You're in the change business. The moment you wrap your mind around that concept, you'll immediately have a better understanding of the difficulties you face and how to overcome them.

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You're not in the technology business. You're in the change business.

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No matter what your product or service, you're attempting to shake things up. If you're an internal leader trying to improve your organization, that's change. If you're further up the ladder and focused on improving revenue or profitability, you're looking for change since what you're currently doing hasn't generated those improvements. If you're an entrepreneur with a better version of what's already out there, you're changing the marketplace by adding a new competitor. If you have a truly unique idea that's different than anything that's been seen before, you're attempting to change the way we do things. In fact, if you're not trying to change things, go back to the navigator's shack. We don't need you on the bridge.

Why is it so important for you to alter your perspective? After all, at the end of the day, you're still trying to sell hardware, software, services, or some other tangible value to a group of people willing to pay for it. The key lies in a word that's currently very trendy among tech entrepreneurs. Change is *disruptive*.

That sounds exciting and makes you feel like you're doing something special and important that shakes up the world. In fact, that's exactly what you're doing, and that's the problem. Disruptions are uncomfortable to those on the business end of the experience. If you have any familiarity with the *Star Trek* franchise, you probably know that the Romulan weapon of choice is a laser pistol known as a disruptor. Whether it's your personal collection of atoms or merely the fabric of your everyday existence, being disrupted is no fun.

The plain and simple truth of the matter is that people don't like change, no matter how often you tell them that it's for the better. In fact, telling people how good your change will be for them is often a red flag to those who have been around the block a time or two. It's a sure indication that things are about to go bad very fast. There's a reason we think of the phrase "I'm from the government and I'm here to help" as a joke.

If you're looking for the reason for this aversion and have time for a college psychology class or two, you can dig into the matter as deeply as you like. Simply put, some people are just plain lazy. Some are afraid, some are content, and some just don't care enough about the end result to put up with the disruptions.

You might find that frustrating and even spend a few hours venting to a friend over a cappuccino or two about how stupid it all is. People shouldn't be like that. They should care about what you care about. The local coffee shop couldn't be more pleased, of course. This conversation, like human stupidity itself, has no end in sight and that's good for the sale of hot caffeinated beverages to agitated, unrealistic leaders.

At least in the world of competing interests, it's more understandable. If you're bringing a product to market that threatens the revenue of another company, you'd be foolish to expect them to welcome you with open arms. They're more likely to meet you with a barrage of lawsuits or, at the very least, a spirited marketing campaign telling all the world why you're inferior to them. Be that as it may, it's just another example of a world who likes things just the way they are, thank you very much. Your brilliant new ideas aren't needed here. Move along. Move along.

If you think the key to success is delivering better technology or cooler apps, you're going to fail. Yes, it's important to sell a quality product, but that will get you nowhere if you don't understand the battle you're really fighting. Your company will go out of business and you'll end up paving over tons of unsold merchandise that you buried somewhere in the desert.

# Life Fights Back

Another illusion that's the death of many an otherwise-brilliant tech company is the assumption that the world will welcome a great idea with open arms. It's actually very common for leaders and techies alike to become huge fans of their own ideas to an almost cultlike extreme. It's bright. It's shiny. Everyone will love it, and since there's never been anything quite like it before, it will have no competition. Retailers will offer their shelves as quickly as customers open their wallets, and the world will be a beautiful place.

None of this takes into account a very fundamental principle that will let the air out of your utopian bubble with a very expressive noise. Earth is an extremely competitive environment and humanity is no exception. No matter where you go, countless people are competing for the same square foot of territory. Even before the Internet could broadcast the GPS coordinates to half the planet in less time than it takes for hot air to escape from a balloon, there were very few uncontested patches of real estate in the civilized world.

When you step out into the rough-and-tumble arena of business, the first thing you're going to discover is that it's very, very crowded. Simply put, there is no room. At best, you'll get elbowed to the back of the line. Worst-case scenarios involve you doing your best Persian rug imitation while the masses rush from point A to point B with little regard for the wear and tear on the fabric.

No matter what your idea, life fights back. No one is going to step aside to let you pass. If you think there's never been anything like your product before and assume you have no competitors, you're thinking one level too low. From a broader perspective, you'll realize that there are only so many disposable dollars to go around. Even if you don't pose a direct threat to other businesses, at minimum you're going to deplete the amount of free cash that could flow in their direction. Additionally, while people are making a fuss about your fancy

new technology, others are being ignored. As you can imagine, people aren't wild about being ignored.

Of course, unless you're truly delusional, you probably don't believe that you have a once-in-a-lifetime idea that the world has never seen before. Technology, as with art, tends to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, each iteration building on what came before. After all, that thin and sexy little phone you have in your pocket would look pretty preposterous with vacuum tubes sticking out of it. We needed the transistor and ultimately the microprocessor before you could hold this delicate piece of technology in your hand. It didn't come out of nowhere.

Because of this, it's very likely that the turf you're eyeing is already protected by others. Even if you find yourself in one of those windows in our technological evolution where a major paradigm shift is taking place, that nice, open clearing isn't nearly as safe as it looks from a distance. Upon closer inspection, you'll find that there are laser dots from half a dozen sniper rifles littering the landscape as others seek to stake out the same territory that you yourself covet.

Does this mean there's no hope, no room to grow, no place for the brave and innovative entrepreneur? Of course not. It merely indicates the difficulties that are involved in trying to carve out a bit of real estate for your very own. Throughout human history, countless wars have been fought for conquest and possession of territory. It's a reality as old as humanity itself and it exists on many levels, from metaphor to murder. While life in the tech sector rarely sees physical conflict, the violent competition and conflict of the business world are just as dangerous to your company.

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When you spot a desirable piece of real estate, be it physical or virtual, you can be sure that a dozen other

people are drooling over it at the same time.

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Perhaps you find that explanation a bit melodramatic, and I'm certainly not above waving my arms from time to time in order to make a point. However, while people live on, make no mistake, companies die. Sometimes their demise is due to nothing more dramatic than bad products or abject stupidity. More often, an interesting technology and the corporation that tried to bring it to life both disappear as a direct result of competitors using every trick in the book to get rid of them.

Remember, business is war. You don't have to like it but if you want to survive the experience, you'd better understand the nature of the neighborhood you're in. War is a violent competition for territory and resources. So is business. Your direct competitors don't want you here. Your indirect competitors don't want you here. Come to think of it, no one wants you here. You can bet that if you pose even the slightest threat to their territory or revenue they're going to do whatever it takes to get rid of you. If you're unprepared, this will not be a pleasant experience.

Nobody likes change, and you're in the change business. If you want to introduce something new, you're going to shake up the status quo and others will resist. On the other hand, if you keep your head down, do nothing that threatens the business of others, and hope that by making no waves you'll escape confrontation, you'll find no respite. This will be interpreted as weakness, causing others to attack.

If it sounds like you're in for a scuffle no matter what you do, you're starting to get the idea. It's a crowded marketplace. Everyone's trying to make a buck, and that's hard enough without you around. If you want a street corner of your own, you'd better be prepared to defend it or it will soon become someone else's street corner.

I mentioned that understanding the concept of business as war was a key to your success, and yet all I've done is talk about rough neighborhoods and bad consequences. These dark alleys claim many new entrepreneurs and even old hands who don't understand the rules. The trick to surviving is no different than it's ever been. Understand the nature of trouble, learn to see it coming, and be somewhere else before it gets there. If you understand the nature of conflict, you'll learn to sleep with one eye open and conduct yourself in a prudent manner, whether your initiatives are gentle or bold. It won't guarantee you success or safety, but it will vastly increase your odds.

I've had people tell me from time to time that this concept is just a little too warrior for them. That's something I can certainly understand. Not all creatures are fierce, and I'm glad that's the case. If comparing entrepreneurial adventures to the horrible nature of violent human conflict offends your sensibilities, I think that says some nice things about your character. However, if you go out into the real world without understanding the true nature of things, prepare to be trampled. Not everyone is a good guy, and most people couldn't possibly care less about your sensibilities. They'll run over you like a tank and never look back.

That said, it's important to know that you can be a good person and enjoy tremendous success in your endeavors. In fact, I heartily recommend that approach, as there are no actions without consequences. Treat people badly and sooner or later bad things will come back to you. Nonetheless, you'd better know how the world works or you'll lead your people to disaster.

If you thought leadership was difficult to begin with, it gets even harder when you understand the conflict and obstacles that meet you at every turn. If you're excited about bringing your idea to life, you have to want it bad. The world will not make way for you and danger lurks at every corner. To

succeed, you have to be smart, realistic, and highly motivated. Fortunately, these are qualities that most leaders have in abundance.

# Why Good People Fail

Even the most casual look at the tech sector will reveal a huge number of brilliant people. There are visionaries, highly advanced techies, marketing legends, and many others populating the landscape. The sheer number of advanced university degrees and years of experience are impressive in their own right. To be sure, there are smart people in any industry, but we're geeks. We're smart for a living.

Not only that, there are few people in technology who don't share the soul of the artist no matter how practical the application they're cooking up. Our industry isn't just smart. It's inspired, sharing aspects with the great masters of the European Renaissance or any other cultural high point in human history. We're more than just technically adept. We're creative creatures.

Little wonder, then, that there are so many good ideas floating around. You can't swing a dead cat in our world without knocking three brilliant notions off the table. (And you can bet that someone will use the experience to post yet another cat video.) Ours is a world of endless possibility. From that perspective, you might find it puzzling that there aren't millionaires in every cubicle. The reason for this is actually quite simple: Ideas are easy. Execution is hard.

The reality of the matter is that most people fail in their efforts to institute change. The most poignant example of this is the statistics on small business failures. The numbers will vary with the source, but they all paint the same bleak picture: There is a huge failure rate in new enterprises and tech is no exception.

How can this be? In an environment with so many smart, talented people, how could they fail so frequently? If you look at a few examples, you'll find that in many cases, individuals have actually been very successful at accomplishing their tasks. In fact, that's a common cause for failure.

People tend to be pretty passionate about their work in this business. It's also common for the creative people responsible for bringing a product to life to either start out in a position of leadership or rise to that level quickly as the company evolves.

You might think that it's great having someone at the helm who truly understands the nuts and bolts of the business, and to a certain degree that is in fact a distinct advantage. Unfortunately, programmers are interested first and foremost in developing software. Hardware engineers are obsessed with their latest project. Even at a higher level, when you gather people together to brainstorm about a new product or service that will take the world by storm, it's an addictive experience. You can stay up for days without sleep powered by nothing but espresso and a whiteboard marker.

These are the idea people, the men and women who have a great idea and are passionate about bringing it to life. The problem lies in the fact that running a business is a complex affair with many wheels to turn and levers to pull. From marketing, to accounting, to the day-to-day work of office administration, it all matters. Pull any part off of the machine and it quits running.

To make things even more exciting, remember that you're parked in the middle of a very busy intersection, competitors whizzing past you and doing their level best to blow you off the road. You have to have the instincts of a prizefighter and the strategic genius of a chess master to keep the wheels on the wagon. If you let these things slide because you're having fun in Conference Room A drawing clever things on a whiteboard, you'll discover the hard way that your brilliance in product

design matters not one bit. You just became a stationary target for your competitors. That tends to end badly.

A variation on this theme is those evangelical souls who are blinded by their own religion. You'll hear them have heated arguments about the merits of their pet methodology. In design meetings, they'll grind productivity to a halt while they discuss the how rather than the what of things. More focused on technical ideology than tangible results, they often have a difficult time accomplishing tasks. This is even more dangerous in a leader, as the next stage of this affliction is looking out at the rest of the world and proclaiming loudly that everyone else is doing it wrong.

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If your technical geniuses and leaders are arguing about *how* rather than *what*, you're in trouble.

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There's a fine line between this type of person and the inspired visionary who indeed sees a better way. The difference is that the latter is focused on results while the wild-eyed fanatic is only interested in the principles. He fails to realize that out in the real world, no one cares. We care about products we can use, services that make our lives better, companies who offer superior value and perhaps even save us a buck in the process. We couldn't possibly care less that the software was written in C++ instead of Visual Basic and we're equally unimpressed by the design methodology your team used. The only person who cares how the sausage is made is the guy standing at the grinder.

As in our previous case, a company lead by those who are blinded by their own ideals will tend to drive their enterprise right off the cliff. In a complex and competitive environment, you have to have your eyes wide open and pay attention to detail, both within and without, or you'll fail.

However, the single-most-prevalent reason for lack of success has little to do with the brilliant getting lost in their own cleverness. A company is nothing more than a collection of people and the results of their efforts. Unless you're in the business of selling rechargeable batteries to robotic, credit-card wielding dogs, your customers are also people, as are your competitors. No matter where you go or what you do, you're surrounded by the human race, and that's usually where the trouble starts.

Human nature is the constant in business. In terms of predicting success or failure, the instinctive behavior of people is the gold standard whose presence you can always count on. While we have many wonderful qualities, people are often petty, self-centered, ambitious, greedy, deceptive, and aggressive. This is, of course, a very short list of such attributes. It's also worth noting that none of us are from the planet Vulcan. If you're looking for logic, go find a pocket calculator. We are irrational, emotional, and highly unstable. You're better off juggling nitroglycerin than trying to navigate the waters of the human experience.

And yet, as a leader in business, this is precisely what you must do to succeed. At the most basic level, unrealistic expectations can take your company down faster than an earthquake. If you think that everyone will be as motivated and hardworking as you, you're basing your strategy on an unrealistic expectation and you will fail. People are motivated by a great many things. Few of them make much sense from a purely mathematical perspective.

If you're trying to sway others to your way of thinking, it might also come as a surprise that a great many of them are unaffected by the pragmatic merits of your argument. Instead, their minds are buzzing with thoughts of their own agenda, or perhaps whether or not that cute coworker in the other cubicle will have dinner with them.

It's not impossible to figure people out but neither is it easy. It can only be done by those willing to put in a serious amount of effort. More often than not, and this is particularly true in the hard-boiled geek culture of our industry, people skills are at best ignored and at worst derided as "soft skills." I'll go along with that. They're certainly softer than the crash landing your company is headed for if you don't understand human nature.

When you're trying to create change, be it within or without, you're trying to change people. You'll discover in the process that there's a very good reason for the status quo that you're so intent on destroying. A lot of people support it because it meets their personal needs and often promotes an atmosphere where they have to put forth the least amount of effort. You can't change it. You can only conquer it, either by force or offering another status quo of your own liking that they're willing to embrace.

Regardless of the trap you fall into, and there is no shortage of them, the most common reason that people in our industry fall short is a failure to address the things that are truly important to a growing company. To succeed, you have to be more than clever and creative. You have to be willing to do all those things you're uncomfortable with, from the tedious day-to-day details of running a business to the often-maddening task of understanding and managing people. Even then, you're only halfway home. With your house in order, you still have the outside world to contend with—a never-ending stream of bandits and marauding invaders intent on rustling your cattle, burning your village, and leaving you twisting in the wind. What, you thought this business was about technology?

# A Cause We Can Believe In

Technology is the result of talent and you want the best. Hiring is difficult in any industry. In the world of bits and bytes, it's a challenge of epic proportions, made all the more difficult by the fact that techies want more than good-paying work. Part scientist and part artist, with a heavy dash of idealism sprinkled in for taste, they want something they can believe in. And yet, nowhere are more people as jaded, cynical, and resistant to hype and phoniness than in the tech sector.

The people you want aren't stupid. This applies not only to their job skills but also to their sensibilities. While it's true that you can find gullible people everywhere, they're not who you want when you're building the future. In order to bring in the best talent, you need more than just a cause or an inspirational banner behind which they can rally. It has to be real.

Good people can smell a phony a mile away. Should their noses be clogged because they have a cold, you can be sure that everyone else on the Internet will point it out to them. The good news is that if you pass the test with geeks, your credibility will be high with the rest of your staffing needs.

The integrity of your vision should be foremost in your mind when bringing people together. A good salesman can sell anything, but as a leader you're more than just a pitch-man. You're responsible for the careers, and by extension the lives, of your people. If your product is unethical or simply unadulterated crap, quit. Do it today. Survive on unemployment until you can find another position or a new start-up to launch that's worthy of your people. This isn't philosophical indulgence; it's practical advice. If you want to change the world, it's important to cook with the right ingredients.

Once you can pass an authenticity check, however, you absolutely must have a cause. In the world of shiny objects, your people need something to believe in. In fact, they demand it. Sure, you can just start a business, pay wages, and hire employees. Technology companies do that all the time and

muddle through their lives, often serving as little more than clutter that we trip over on the way to greatness. That won't inspire anyone. That won't change the world, and frankly, it's not even the best path to getting rich. Remember, this is business. There's no dishonor in making money.

I spent a lot of years in the tech industry as a software developer, and my weapon of choice was Microsoft technologies. I have no ideological attachment to the company. I simply went where the work led me. In the days before Apple became a major player in the mobile industry, the opportunities in their camp were slim. For every one job writing software for Apple platforms, there were tens of thousands to be found in the Microsoft ecosystem.

The two brightest stars on the horizon at the time were Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. I admired each for very different reasons. Gates was a pragmatic businessman. He had the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time, but unlike so many others who allow opportunity to slip through their fingers, he knew what to do with it. He built an empire in the corporate world that extended into our personal lives. The computers you saw on the desks in most offices ran a Microsoft operating system. With an established beachhead, he proceeded to make most personal computers at home run on the same system.

Love him or hate him, and like most of the world I've spent plenty of time doing both, he was an outstanding leader. His products were never leading edge, but they were practical, functional, and ubiquitous. In the process, he not only pushed forward the technological empowerment of the common man by strength of sheer numbers, he provided a stable career and sometimes great riches for the people in his empire, whether employees of the company or mercenaries like myself who were just looking for a good gig.

His polar opposite was, of course, Steve Jobs. Beyond the fact that they were both excellent businessmen, they probably couldn't be less alike. Gates was a geek. Jobs was an artist. Jobs had the good fortune of having Steve Wozniak, a now-legendary geek, on his team. Beyond that, he lived in the world of visual dreams, allowing idealism to play a far-greater role in his company than Microsoft did.

In the beginning, this worked in his favor. Eventually, as we all know, he got thrown out of the company he built because however cool his product ideas were, he was getting his posterior handed to him in the marketplace by Microsoft.

All of this is well-known folklore to techies, but I mention it for a reason. One of the fundamental differences in the fortunes of Microsoft and Apple was luck. Gates was able to partner with IBM, whose entrance into the personal computing arena gave it instant credibility in the business world. He cut a deal to have his DOS operating system run on all of IBM's PCs. As I mentioned earlier, he was at the right place at the right time, and it was that stroke of luck that gave him his opening, not the technical or aesthetic merits of an extremely rudimentary operating system.

Without the implicit patronage of a global giant like IBM, Apple had an uphill battle all the way. No one held the door open for them. If they were to survive, it had to be on the merits of their product and sheer chutzpah.

However, once you step outside the culture of geeks, many people think a computer is a computer. If it can provide their basic needs, they really don't care what logo is on the front. They'll be more impressed by price, and Apple computers cost much more than the IBM PC clone. How was a product to be sold that, even though superior in many ways, was more expensive and appeared as little more than a tiny spec of sand in the vast beach of the tech world?

Jobs and his people had the answer. They created a cult religion, a small but fanatically devoted following who to this day are more loyal and passionate about the company than anything we've ever seen in our industry.

This religion existed both within and without. If you want to create devotees, it's important to start at the core and work your way out. Nowhere were there more devoted followers than on the Apple campus itself.

During the development of the Macintosh, the employees worked insane hours to create something insanely great. At one point, as a morale booster, t-shirts were printed with the slogan "90 hours a week and loving it." This wasn't just hype. Anyone who's been around for a while knows that the abuse of overtime is legendary in our world. These guys really were working ridiculous hours, putting their personal lives on hold in the process.

Normal employees don't put in that kind of effort, not even for money. If you want that level of dedication, your people have to truly believe in the cause, and Apple had one. What's yours? If it's nothing more than running a business and turning a profit, you'll get people to sign up for a paycheck and put in a good day's work but little more. If you want to put a dent in the universe, you need passion and for that you have to build a movement.

As you might imagine, this isn't easy or everyone would be doing it. As a leader, however, it's your responsibility to achieve this. If you're doing the driving, people have an expectation, and not an unreasonable one, that you know where you're going.

A cause is a set of beliefs that are in motion toward a goal. In order to come up with yours, you need to do some deep naval gazing. It's important to know what you want your people to believe in and how that should be reflected in their efforts. In

short, why would people be excited, even passionate, about embracing your idea?

If your products or services aren't exciting in and of themselves, there may be other aspects of your movement that are. Having a hard time putting your finger on it? Here's a simple exercise: You believe in it. Think of why. Then, translate the reason into something your people would care about, which was one of your motivations for taking the time to understand what they value in the first place.

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It's not enough to believe in your cause. To motivate others, you have to translate that belief into something that's meaningful to them.

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If you're honest, sincere, and can present your vision in a way that excites the passions of others, you can build a movement. You won't have to look very hard to find followers. We desperately want something we can believe in. If what you have is real, we're in. When all of your people are truly committed, it's really something to see.

# Put On a Show

It's a daunting-enough task to grapple with yourself and emerge with a truly worthy cause, strong enough to rally people to your banner. If you've accomplished that, you're entitled to sit back, take a deep breath, and enjoy the moment. However, be advised that the moment is brief.

It matters little that you have a great idea if no one knows it exists. You have to spread the word. That's marketing 101 for anyone trying to move the merchandise, which is difficult

enough as it is. Your job is infinitely harder. It's not enough to let people know that your cause exists. You have to present it in a way that rouses the spirit and compels people to join.

History is a wonderful tutor, particularly when you're capable of learning by example, even if it should require translating the concepts from another domain into your own. There's a running joke on the Internet that the longer the discussion, the greater the likelihood that Hitler will be mentioned. In our case, we'll actually put him to good use.

The Nazi's Third Reich was one of the more horrific moments in human history. I mention this first to make sure you understand that I'm not making light of the events, as they were devastating and deplorable on a scale never before seen. However, it's the extremes of their misdeeds that highlight an important consideration for anyone who wishes to create a movement.

If some twerp of an administrative clerk had had a few bad ideas and everyone ignored him, we wouldn't care. It certainly wouldn't have changed the world in such a powerful way. We know of the Nazis and their rise to power because Hitler built a huge base of fanatical followers. An excellent example of how he did this was the Nuremberg rallies. Watch some of the old footage. They're massive, spectacular, and inspirational. These guys were the scum of the earth, but make no mistake, they knew how to put on a show.

Public gatherings weren't the only tool in their arsenal, of course. There were countless other methods of propaganda, but they all offered the same core message: The Nazis are something special. Join us, and together we'll create a glorious future. Hitler's success in building a movement is the sole reason he was able to achieve massive power and cause such significant change in the world.

If you're dedicated to building something new that will be both profitable and lead the way to a better future, you're doubtless appalled that I would hold up one of the most criminal empires the world has known as an example that you should follow. Make no mistake, I'm not talking about emulating aspects of an oppressive or totalitarian regime. I'm merely pointing out the obvious. What these guys were selling was pure, unadulterated evil. The fact that they were so overwhelmingly successful tells you something about the power of putting on a show.

If Hitler could use propaganda and showmanship to so effectively sell evil, that means there's great power in these techniques. A good pitch-man can sell anything, whether the product is high quality or pure junk. As any salesman will tell you, it's also ten times as hard to sell junk. You can do it, but you end up spending significant time and effort overcoming objections about the quality of the product. Apply that same factor of ten to a product where you're not wasting time overcoming the negatives and it's ten times easier to sell.

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Use showmanship in the service of a great product or service. It's an unbeatable combination, both to enlist the aid of your people and to sell products.

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The Nazis used the power of showmanship to sell a very bad product. Just think of how much you could do with those same techniques to promote a cause that is positive and beneficial to all concerned. It's important to remember that power is amoral. The electricity in your wall socket can keep you warm during the winter. If you poke a fork into one of the slots, it can also kill you. Electricity is blameless. It's just power. What you do with it is entirely up to you. Showmanship is also power.

Now let's look at a more contemporary example on the positive side of the street, one that has the added value of relating

directly to your efforts. Steve Jobs is widely acclaimed as one of the greatest tech showmen of our time. He was not just an artist, he was a natural born pitch-man with a sense of dramatic flair and an instinct for appealing to the emotion of the crowd.

An example of this was the "Think Different" TV commercial he commissioned that opened, "Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers." I have a home filled with Microsoft technology because that's my geek heritage. In the early years, when the competition between the two companies was fierce, Apple was the enemy. However, when Steve Jobs died, I had the text of this commercial framed. It hangs on the wall as you enter my home.

The real message, of course, was little more than a marketing ploy to get people to buy their computers. Nonetheless, it was inspirational on a gut level. That's a core part of how Apple has built such a fanatical following. It told viewers, even those of us who don't belong to the one true faith, that the people who believe they can change the world are the ones who do. Your people are looking for this level of inspiration. Deliver it, and they'll follow you anywhere.

We're not all as charismatic as Steve Jobs. Many will use that as an excuse to cling to the mundane. Of course, these are not the people who build the future. If you take the time and put forth the effort, you'll discover, perhaps to your surprise, that you have a great deal more charisma than you realize.

# Summary

To the old adage that says that success is perspiration over inspiration, I will add that it is also motivation. If, as a thought exercise, you walk through the steps of building a cause and creating a movement that others will embrace, you're going to

encounter your own passion in the process. By thinking it through logically, understanding your offerings, your people, and your customers, you'll see the road that allows you to connect your passions to theirs. This is the path to building an invincible empire.

# Create an Invincible Empire

Across vast, spectacular landscapes immersed in the endless flow of time, inspirational figures have etched their names on the very surface of Earth, leaving their mark in the form of structures, stories, and societies. We've erected massive pyramids, walked on the face of the Moon, and built great and wondrous civilizations, all for the same reason. It's what our leaders inspired us to do. Leadership is power. What will you do with yours?

The modern world is overflowing with potential. Empowered as we are by scientific discovery, a small and dedicated group can accomplish remarkable things. Linked by a global information network, a large and diverse collection of people can band together to harness the effort and creativity of an international workforce. With such resources at our fingertips, each day brings new promise for innovation and success. However, what lies at the heart of this opportunity is not technology but people. Without the spark of human inspiration, a computer is little more than a cosmetically challenged paperweight.

A roomful of people, however, is not enough. At each and every level of an organization, there is a need for the visionary, the organizer, the lightning rod who can channel and focus the collective force of her people into lasting success. When guided by those who can impart effective strategy and motivation, large groups of people can work wonders. Left to its own

devices, this crowd will do little more than mill around aimlessly and bicker among themselves—unless a stray border collie happens to wander by. There's a good reason we erect statues in honor of notable personalities. Without them, nothing happens.

It's also important to realize that the wheels of achievement don't turn at a single level. While it's glamorous to watch a movie where the hero rises above a cast of thousands to save the day, reality is much more complicated. Some may push the envelope by standing on the shoulders of giants, but in most cases the ability of a leader to accomplish something spectacular is built upon the efforts of many supporting players. This vast army of collaborators doesn't work in one giant horde. Instead, it's broken down into groups and subgroups, each dedicated to an objective.

You don't have to reach heights worthy of a bronze monument in order to make a difference. Each and every level of an organization requires leadership. In fact, if you've been around long enough, you've probably already figured out that it's the collective effort of the rank and file that ultimately moves the mountain, even if the person standing at the peak is the one you see on the late-night talk shows.

# Learning from the Best

Rallying a group of people in support of a worthwhile objective is, therefore, a time-honored occupation. As with any other skill set, there's always much to learn by those who have been down the same road. Their grand successes and spectacular mistakes can serve as the ultimate tutorial.

Naturally, it's easier to follow the example of someone who worked towards the exact same goals as you. If you're looking to create a Web site that changes the world, you'll more easily

relate to the titans of technology than to someone who developed a vast and profitable business herding cows. That doesn't mean there's no value to be found outside of your domain. In fact, if you limit yourself to your own area of endeavor, you're guaranteed a very small pool of educational opportunities.

There is a wealth of information available to those who wish to improve themselves, but it comes at a cost. It requires you to do the work of extracting relevant conceptual lessons from seemingly unrelated sources. If you're willing to do that, particularly in the arena of leadership, you'll find that there are untold treasures just waiting to be discovered. You'll also be happy to know that in a highly competitive world, the majority of your peers are unable or unwilling to put forth this effort. That gives you a tangible advantage.

Whether you're in business, work for a nonprofit organization, or participate in group large or small, when you're directing others in pursuit of a common goal, you're following in the footsteps of those who came before. Your efforts, successes, and failures will be a continuation of historical figures who raised their voice to change the world. Though you may not realize it, you're building an empire. If you look at it in this way, the principles and practices that created enduring nations will work just as effectively to help you accomplish your own goals.

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Find heroes of your own who have trodden the path of leadership before you. Studying their means and methods can yield large benefits as you pursue your own dreams. At the very least, they can show you where the potholes are.

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From Alexander the Great to Genghis Kahn, most empires of conquest are the result of one person's drive and ambition. That's why it's so common for nations to diminish after their progenitor's demise. As time passed, the lands conquered by the Macedonian general declined, as did those overrun by barbarian hordes. What remains today are small patches of land occupied by those with less vision and, consequently, less territory. The armies fought the wars, but it was the great leaders of history who understood how to bring people together for a common cause and get them to give their all.

I use the example of conquest intentionally, knowing full well that it's an aggressive and violent practice that doesn't map to every leadership scenario. You may be working in your own way to make the world a better place, not to mow down your adversaries and rustle their cattle. If such is the case, it doubtless says good things about the quality of your character. Nonetheless, consider this: If a method of managing people is effective in struggles that are quite literally matters of life and death, it's a pretty good bet that it'll get results when the stakes are less dire.

Of course, there are many great accomplishments throughout human history that didn't happen on some ancient battlefield. However, when you're attempting to motivate people to achieve a goal, there is really no grander illustration of that practice than the rise and fall of nations. Countries are, after all, a collection of people organized and living in a particular manner. There are also very few societies, from small feudal villages to vast and expansive empires, that did not emerge out of conflict and struggle.

When you look at it that way, countries are an excellent metaphor for the modern organization. It's a safe bet that no matter what objectives your people are working toward, there is competition for resources. There are also people possessing greater and lesser abilities, and many will show the ever-

present penchant for politics. The specifics may be different in your case than they were for a group of people struggling to be free and have a land that they could call their own, but the fundamentals are very much the same.

The best practices of great world leaders also apply to those who are managing a small group. Organizations tend to be hierarchical in nature, and the same is true of great armies, regardless of the nature of their goals. The Romans are remembered for many things. If there is a common thread that runs through them all, it's probably excellent organizational skills. From constructing unprecedented waterways to assembling legions of highly disciplined soldiers, their work was organized in groups, each with a leader, much as it is today. Even if you're not the CEO of a large, international corporation, you still have to get your people to do what you want. Leadership is leadership. Learn from the best.

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Leadership is leadership, whether you are heading a first-world nation or five guys in a garage.

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# Management Styles

With that in mind, before we start looking at ways to achieve success in the modern world, let's take a look at a couple of well-known examples and see how well they relate to our own adventures. If we're looking at our dreams and ambitions through the lens of building an empire, it's worth mentioning that all empires are not the same. Even though life among humans presents very few absolutes, at the extremes we can consider these to lean toward good or evil. One might think that to be overly dramatic when speaking of modern

organizations were it not for a major global corporation, whose mantra, on paper at least, is to not be evil.

Anyone who was even partially awake during history class, or perhaps watches the occasional documentary on TV, knows that some nations came about through conquest and exploitation while others arose out of a more noble desire for a better life. In fairness to them both, there are few examples that didn't involve some fighting at one point or another, but it's the goals themselves that we'll consider for the moment. That's an important consideration, for when the battles are done and the last pot of boiling oil is repurposed to make fried chicken, the motives of the rulers will dictate the quality of life for the people. As we'll see, that quality of life can also have some very significant implications for the rulers as time goes on.

Heads of state provide an excellent example of the two primary kinds of management, styles that you can see in your own environment even today. One type of person is motivated by the accumulation of wealth, status, and power. It's not a novel concept and in fact may be the world's second-oldest profession. It's all about fulfilling his own desires, and to that end he'll gather as many people as he can and get them to do their bidding through whatever means they have at their disposal. That usually doesn't work out so well for those involved.

The second approach to leadership comes not from a top-down perspective but rather from one that is bottom up. There have always been those in the world who look at the plight of their people and want something better for them. They're willing to buck the status quo and fight battles against insurmountable odds not for personal glory but for the betterment of those they lead. They struggle just as hard and pay as high a price as their more self-centered counterparts but for very different reasons.

The real world is not a bedtime story where villains are vanquished and good always triumphs over evil. Many times throughout our history, the bad guy has won. The pyramids of Giza and the Great Wall of China are monuments to the power of slave labor. However, there are also plentiful examples of a more noble approach that also yielded results. The monuments and beauty of ancient Greece are more than just attractive artifacts to admire on a tour. They remind us of the birthplace of democracy.

In each example, powerful figures changed the course of history, with significant implications for those involved. Casting your vote on the issues of the day on your way to a poetry reading is a lot more fun than dragging that two-ton block of stone up the side of a monument. If you're driven to take responsibility and point the way for others to follow, it's important to consider each of these management styles and how they affect the people you would lead. With that in mind, let's take a look at the pros and cons of each approach.

# Good versus Evil

The first contestant in our little game of management ethics is the conqueror. In many ways, this is the simplest path to follow, even if it does involve more in the way of slings and arrows. When you're only interested in looking out for number one and don't really care about others, it frees you in many cases from having to worry about the consequences of your actions. If you're going to rustle the cattle, burn the village, and force everyone who survives to work at your fast food franchise (after all, you do have the cows), it really doesn't matter how they feel about the experience. You won. That's all that counts.

That's not to say that you don't have people to consider. It's difficult to burn even the smallest village without a little help from your friends, and they're going to want compensation for their efforts. The most successful conquerors were the ones who realized this and rewarded their generals lavishly. Sure, that means fewer cows for you, but there are a lot of cattle to go around. Furthermore, as long as you keep them happy, those who work for you will be more than willing to help you sack the next town, so in the long run you end up with a pretty large herd yourself.

So far, the view from the pillage-and-plunder perspective is pretty appealing. You're the boss of a lot of territory and you have lots of cows. It just doesn't get much better than that. There is, however, a downside to this. As a leader, you enjoy the support of everyone who shares in the rewards of your victories. In this case, it's the people who have the most cattle prods. Unfortunately, that's only a very small percentage of the overall population, in no small part because the average peasant can't really afford high-tech cattle management devices.

In the short term, this isn't really a problem. It turns out that cattle prods are an excellent method of keeping the local yokels in line, so whenever someone complains, your soldiers just zap them. Over time, though, the atmosphere of discontent will grow, often to epic proportions. If history is any guide, sooner or later you can expect large crowds of people to show up at your door with pitchforks and torches. Even the best cattle prod–wielding thug is going to bolt at the sight of overwhelming numbers, at which point you're pretty much on your own. As it turns out, pitchforks are an excellent method of letting the air out of local tyrants.

Of course, many people live in self-denial, convinced that whatever dire fate you describe will happen to someone else perhaps but not them. Besides, it may take years for discontent

to grow to pitchfork-wielding proportions. A revolution, however, is not the only downside to this approach. There's also quality of life to consider.

To be sure, as dictator for life you're going to have all the luxuries you desire. Even so, having a thing is not the same as being able to enjoy it. When you're constantly surrounded by unhappy—perhaps even angry—people, it's going to consume your every waking moment. There's always the next insurgency to put down, not to mention the ever-present caution lest your servants decide to spike your morning coffee with something a bit more lethal than sugar. Additionally, since the only way to keep people in line is with a cattle prod, you have to be constantly vigilant in your efforts to keep them threatened so they don't see an opening and revolt. It's exhausting.

Still, with an ego the size of Texas, you might not feel particularly threatened by the local rabble. After all, you conquered them once, so how big of a threat could they be? The people you should be more concerned with are your generals. You don't rise to a position of power in such an organization without being a little power hungry and ruthless yourself. This means that you're under constant threat by the very people who gave you power in the first place. If the day comes that enough of them think they can take you, you're toast. If you're clever, you may evade your fate for many years, but the effort and constant paranoia that it takes to do so will make you old before your time.

Now let's take a look at our next contestant, the benevolent ruler. Unlike the conqueror, there's more than one way to end up in this position. You might choose this role by standing up in the middle of the room and making a case for others to follow you. Alternatively, you could be drafted. When you've demonstrated a capacity for leadership over time and enough people believe in you, they often ask you to take the point position.

> The benevolent ruler works from the bottom up, ensuring that the people are challenged and rewarded as they work for an attractive cause.

Either way, from the very beginning your status is much different than that of a despot. Your first concern, and your highest duty, is the health and well-being of those who follow you. If you've ever raised children, you know that right off the bat your stress level just went up two notches. Unlike those who are in it for their own benefit, you measure success not by your personal rewards but rather by how much you improve the lives of others. It's easy to see why some have to be drafted before accepting such a role.

This doesn't mean that there are no perks. Status has its privileges and you'll doubtless get the corner office, even if it is an inconvenient place to store your cows. If you're successful in your efforts to elevate the lifestyle of all concerned, you'll have fame, riches, and even a few people to look after your herd.

It's still not a carefree existence. As the leader, it falls to you to make sure the people are protected from contestant number one, as he'll inevitably show up to discuss ownership of the herd. It's unlikely to be a polite conversation. In distinct contrast to your greedy counterpart, who's only interested in acquisition, you have to work twice as hard. Not only do you have to keep bad things from happening, you're also entrusted with the task of making things better. There will never be a day when you're not absorbed in one or both tasks.

As sovereign leader, whether elected or accepted, you have wealth and status. Although your luxuries might not be as lavish as those of a barbarian king, you do pretty well for yourself. And like your marauding neighbor, you have a busy

schedule and all the work that comes with your elevated position. That's not really a problem, as people don't take on leadership roles if they don't enjoy the effort to begin with.

Beyond the normal stress and concern that comes from leading the pack, how enjoyable are your days going to be and what are the long-term prospects for your empire as a benevolent leader? To begin with, you can forget about hiring a food taster. If you're looking out for your people, not only are they unlikely to poison you, it's a pretty good bet they're going to invite you over for a home-cooked meal from time to time.

That's not to say that you won't have competition in the workplace. It's impossible to have a large group of people without acquiring a few whose ambition exceeds their ethics. While you should naturally show prudence and commonsense in your dealings, you have an advantage that oppressors lack. If some dimwit is fostering discontent or plotting against you, he's going to have the entire village standing at his doorstep. Pitchforks and torches will be on prominent display. Loyalty is an interesting thing. When you demonstrate it to others, it has a tendency to be echoed back to you in the form of fierce and passionate support.

Since you won't have to waste a lot of your days fighting off rebellions, you'll be free to spend them on more constructive matters, like improving the level of prosperity for everyone. This in turn, of course, will generate ever- more-positive feelings about your reign.

Sooner or later, however, your neighbor is going to start trouble and there will be no choice but to engage in conflict or lose all you've worked for. Such is life among humans. When that day comes, you won't have to go shopping at the local Mercenaries Depot to buy cattle prods and rent thugs. That's probably just as well, for as we've learned, they bring as many problems as solutions. Instead, if the battle must be fought, you'll find that

you have a very large force of volunteers who will walk through fire for you.

When two groups clash, strength in numbers can be an advantage, but it's no guarantee you'll win the day, as the Spartans demonstrated at the Battle of Thermopylae. Technically, there were more than just the fabled 300 Spartans, but they were still massively outnumbered by a million-man army, so it makes for a good story either way. What they demonstrated was the advantage of a well-trained, highly motivated group even when faced with overwhelming odds.

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Like the Spartans at Thermopylae, a very small number of people can have a huge impact on the world.

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Like the Greeks of old, when conflict comes, you'll have the benefit of an extremely dedicated group of people. Their motivation is a direct result of your management style. Because you work for their benefit rather than just your own, they have a vested interest in the outcome. A thug drafted into a tyrant's army is much more likely to break and run when things get tough than someone defending home and hearth.

When the fighting is done and everyone goes back to their herds, you're able to once again turn your attention to improving the common good. This highlights another difference between the dictator and the benevolent leader: When you don't rule with an iron fist, people are more willing to share their ideas with you.

When you want to be the undisputed king of the hill, you're likely to shout down any idea that's not your own or take credit for it if it's worth having. As you might imagine, this doesn't generate a flood of new ideas. On the other hand, if you nurture and empower your people, showing them that you

both trust and believe in their talents, you've unleashed a creative whirlwind. No matter what problem you have to solve or goal you seek to achieve, you've just exponentially increased the odds of finding a solution because everyone who has the expertise you need will be bringing you ideas. The fact that you shine the spotlight on those who have come up with winners only encourages this more.

There are no guarantees in life no matter which path you take and it's naive to believe that if you fight the good fight you'll always win. Nonetheless, when you add it all up, there are more positives than negatives to a management style that works for your people rather than against them. There is, however, one important caveat to this statement: These benefits present themselves more prominently over time. In other words, if you're a hit-and-run artist, your choice of style might be the flip of a coin. The good guys come out ahead more consistently when you're interested in building something to last.

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Leaders who look out for their people engender a fierce loyalty. That comes in handy when the going gets tough.

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# Tribal Tendencies

On both sides of the street, we've been talking about people as a whole. The generalizations made have been both relevant and accurate, but they've also been overly simplistic. As we all know, humans have a natural tendency to break off into groups based on common interests. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. What comes next, however, is trouble.

No matter what kind of organization you're in, it's only a matter of time before these groups start fighting among themselves.

Sometimes it's a matter of competition for a particular set of resources. Other times it's a struggle for dominance. Often this discontent is driven by petty warlords who sit atop their little tribe and dream of ruling the entire kingdom, or at the very least obtaining more cows.

Even without a leader stirring up trouble, these groups will still grind against each other. One of the most prominent reasons for this is cultural clashes. For example, in the typical modern-day corporation, you'll have a department of techies who manage computers, software, and other such necessities. Another group that's a constant in any for-profit business is sales and marketing. As you might imagine, these are two departments with very different lifestyles and worldviews. Imagine yourself at a cocktail party where they happen to be in the same room. Instead of one large group, you would probably have small and isolated pockets of people that actively avoid each other. That gives you a pretty good idea of what goes on each day in the workplace.

Some of these tribes will have more influence and power in an organization than others. It won't always be the same groups. In a software-oriented business, the techies are the ones who create the product, so they'll naturally have some sway. However, a company whose products are sold to marketing professionals will have computers and software, but the salespeople may have higher status than the geeks.

Whenever there are three or more people in a room, you're likely to have politics. It's often more emotional than rational, and many times is little more than gossip about some other person or group. Other times, it's driven by ambition and the quest for wealth, power, and status. If that sounds a little familiar, it's because the same definition applied to our friendly neighborhood conqueror. It's worth nothing that few people are born at the top of the heap. More often, they rise through the ranks, sometimes on their merits; other times, not so much.

Further, where there's politics and ambition, there's going to be more than one person involved, as those seeking to rise to the top need supporters to get them there.

Regardless of the management style you adopt, tribal conflict is a constant threat. It's still just human nature but on a scale that can derail everything you've worked to accomplish. Ignore it at your peril.

# Slaves, Drones, and Freedom

Within these tribes, of course, are individuals. In our social life, we gravitate toward groups based on our interests and lifestyle. When we're a part of an organization, these classifications generally involve specific skills and talents necessary to the goals being pursued. From a strategic point of view, when you're at the top of the heap and are trying to accomplish something, the effectiveness of your tribes is a crucial matter. The quality of their performance is going to be a combination of how well they're managed, the level of individual skill, and the kind of people populating the group. As a leader, you get the kind of people that your management style attracts.

Returning to our cattle-rustling barbarian, we enter a land that's one of conquest and oppression. Most of the territories under his control were conquered people, forced to do as they were told and be quiet about it. The workers under his command would have been, by definition, slaves. They had two choices. Either they did the work assigned to them and took whatever scraps of food they were thrown or the guys with the cattle prods would show up. If they saw an opening, slaves who only work at the poke of the prod would escape at best, revolt at worst.

However, if your type of treatment is not quite enough to incite an open rebellion, you'll find that what you've created is an army of drones. Not the fancy, high-tech sort that fly around taking pictures and doing surveillance, mind you. Picture the most bored, burnt-out, apathetic bureaucrat you can imagine, stamping your official document and muttering, "Next." That's your drone. They don't lack talent. They just don't care anymore.

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Building legions of mindless, unmotivated drones is little better than creating an army of slaves. Apathy is the leading cause of death in otherwise-solid companies.

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Contrast this to those who populate the other camp. They're free and motivated because they have a vested interest in the success of the organization. Such people are known to work nights and weekends of their own volition, because they're passionate about what they're doing. If there are cattle prods involved, it's only because they're doing field testing on herd management techniques.

When you gather your tribes to achieve an objective, the results will only be as good as the population. You can push a bunch of slaves into the front line and hand them spears, but the moment they see something coming from the opposite direction, they'll be headed for the exit. If the opposing team is both highly motivated and well managed, even your best troops are going to have a hard time of it.

If you're a leader and find yourself complaining about the quality of the tribes that you lead into battle, you should go shopping for a mirror on your next lunch break. You've no one to blame but yourself.

# Lessons from the Past

Strictly speaking, you're not going to gain much ground in your next business meeting by employing the same tactics used by any of the great historical leaders. Sure, Alexander solved the problem of the Gordian knot by whipping out his sword and whacking it a couple of times. But then, he led armies into battle so it was in character. Try that stuff in the boardroom and see how long it takes security to escort you out of the building.

History serves us best through concept and metaphor. It's not unusual to hear of people talking about applying Sun Tzu's book *The Art of War* to business. This doesn't mean you win a new client by slaughtering the opposing sales force, although given the years I spent teaching sales, I suppose there's a case that could be made for it. The benefit from books of classic military strategy is derived by grasping the concept and then translating it into the context of your current situation. In a similar fashion, considering the examples of leaders both great and terrible who created vast and enduring empires can also serve us in the pursuit of our modern goals.

Among the civilizations that fire the imagination, ancient Egypt lives on through the colossal monuments it left behind. Pyramids and giant stone lions still stand in the heat of the desert sun. It's exciting to think about the Pharaohs and wealth of such an influential nation. On the other hand, those giant chunks of stone were hauled around by a lot of slave labor.

Genghis Khan led the Mongols on a trail of conquest that created the largest land empire in human history. It was an unstoppable war machine and a terror to any who saw it on the horizon. A nomadic people, they had a disdain for walled cities and built no lasting monuments. Like the Egyptians, however, they conquered a lot of people.

If you're looking for inspiration to take over the world, or at least your organization, these can be exciting tales. However, the Egypt of today is a shadow of its former self, and the Mongolian Empire has been reduced to a relatively small patch of land and a few nomadic horsemen, the occasional bit of modern civilization notwithstanding.

At least Genghis Khan died with his boots on. Others managed to let megalomania get the best of them, with grave consequences. Napoleon had an impressive career as a general and rose to great power, declaring himself emperor. Of course, that sort of thing rarely sits well with people. Not long after finding himself on the business end of the Russian winter, he was defeated at Waterloo. Ultimately, he spent the rest of his life in captivity.

Things didn't go much better for Julius Caesar. Yet another gifted military leader, he had the misfortune of finding himself nose to nose with the Roman Republic, which also took a dim view of absolute power. Despite his brilliance on the battlefield, the Ides of March found him having a close encounter of the sharp and pointy kind.

When we look back in time, these are all notable periods and leaders. Regardless of how things worked out in the end, they're momentary bursts of talent, drive, and ambition. We may not agree with the leaders' goals or how they accomplished them, but we respect the fact that for a time, they shook the world in which they lived.

Many of the great historical empires were built at the tip of a sword. However, is that really the inspiration we're looking for in our modern day lives? Exactly how long do you think a conquered people will continue to labor if you show up to work one day without a three-foot razor blade to motivate them?

Furthermore, history is replete with examples of what eventually happens in these situations. Oppress a people for

long enough and they'll spend every waking moment waiting for their chance to drop one of those big stone blocks on your head. Sure, you might say that they should concentrate on doing their job instead, but that's not terribly realistic. It's always easy to spot those who fail to take human nature into account. They're the ones who look like a pancake.

What about the other side of the coin? If the path of conquest and oppression leads to resentment and retaliation, is there an opposite effect when you treat people well? To be sure, any conversation involving humanity is destined to be an exercise in complexity and contradiction. Nonetheless, in the case of the Greeks, when given opportunity and a voice in their lives, they spent their time pushing the envelope of art, science, and civilization instead of plotting a bloody revolution.

The truth of the matter is that both styles of management produce results. If you're a take-the-money-and-run kind of person, you can employ a less-than-benevolent approach and still get the goodies. While you might say that this would constitute a winning strategy, there's one thing that it's not. You're accomplishing something, but it's not built to last. There's also a fair case that it's not the most enjoyable ride, even if it is in a gold chariot.

While there have been many brutal dictators who got away with it and managed to die as the king in spite of it all, a life of constantly looking over your shoulder and pushing back against resistance will wear you down. Leading a group of people who invite you to drink and dance with them when the workday is done sounds a lot more fun to me. Whether you're at the top of the heap or just a grunt in the trenches, accomplishments are just one part of the human experience. You spend a lot of hours working to achieve them. If that process is unpleasant, then so is a very significant portion of your life.

If you bully your way to the top of the heap by cutting salaries, eliminating benefits, and requiring mandatory unpaid overtime

so that you can get a bigger bonus, you may well succeed. Your people need money to feed their families, so they may put up with a job where the top of the food chain gets all the glory and they get all the hardships. The question you have to ask is how long this success will last.

Given a shot at a better opportunity somewhere else, poorly treated people will bail on you in a heartbeat. If enough of your talent leaves, you now have two problems. Above and beyond the obvious fact that you may have difficulty accomplishing your next set of goals, they likely will have gone to work for a competing company that now has the strength to put you out of business for good.

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Share the glory—and the rewards—or watch your best employees bolt for the door when a better opportunity comes along.

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If that scenario is too extreme for your taste, don't worry. There are plenty of lesser versions that will still end badly for you. If you're driven to lead by the quest for personal power, you'll find that the power will likely diminish over time. Is there a more productive path to be found in history? Let's take a look at the other approach to leading.

Anytime you talk about peace, it's inevitable that someone will mention Gandhi. That's appropriate given his promotion of passive resistance. And yet, he's often very much mischaracterized as someone who sat on his posterior, thought happy little thoughts, and had everything work out okay.

The truth of the matter is that he was a fighter and quite the troublemaker, at least according to his oppressors. Matters of conscience aside, however, he simply didn't have weapons or soldiers who could stand up to the British Empire. Few could.

So, he worked with the tactics he could manage, and he won. Lots of people win, but as we've learned, style counts. He was fighting for self-rule and the ability of his people to have a better life.

George Washington fought a more traditional battle against the British. There were cannons, musket balls, and more than a few bayonets. As with wars everywhere, it was an altogether-unpleasant experience. Like Gandhi, however, he was fighting not to conquer but for a cause. In the end, America got the self-rule she desired and Washington was elected president. Many accounts state that he could just as easily been declared king given his popularity, but that wasn't the government he had fought for. After leading as our first elected official, he did something remarkable. He walked away from power, handing it off to the institution that he helped create. Had he done otherwise, the empire he worked for could have turned out very differently through the precedent he set.

As examples of building an empire, whether we're working for a nonprofit cause we believe in or are trying to make a gazillion dollars on the Internet, these are inspirational ones because they generate more light than heat. Our previous group of conquerors achieved impressive results but always with a lingering cost. When you're working for something that's built to last, that lingering cost can be expensive indeed.

As much trouble as the English gave Gandhi and Washington, the English also provided us with one of our most enduring legends, one which both inspires and has practical applications. Though it's been told by many people and altered along the way, the tale of Arthur and Camelot is just as valuable to us as the historical figures we've been considering. And why not, since we're taking conceptual lessons rather than literal examples?

The context for Arthurian legend was the world of medieval Europe. This means, of course, a land populated with countless

barons and knights, each in charge of small chunks of land and constantly fighting with each other for territory and resources. In a word, tribes. It was the typical world of leaders trying to grab as much for themselves as they could, with the peasants typically getting the worst end of the deal.

The Knights of the Round Table symbolized united tribes under a noble banner dedicated to a higher standard of living. Honor, courtesy, and kindness were ideals to reach for and were adhered to even when fighting. They knew that there was always going to be yet-another barbarian invader, so it was important to uphold the ideals that bonded them together.

If you look at modern-day America, you see many parallels that have taken root in the real world. A reading of the documents from revolutionary times speaks of the thirteen states. However, in that context England and France were also states. In those days, the word state was intended to mean nation. Consequently, you had a baker's dozen of nations who were forming a collective somewhat like the modern European Union. We could have ended up very much like it has: as a group of tribes who weren't nearly as united as we thought.

The resolution of our identity crisis came in the form of the Civil War. Yes, having been raised in the South, I understand that the proper phrase down here is the "war between the states." However, as it's always been, the victor gets to name things, and in this case the concept of united tribes was the winner, as were we all. We truly became one nation, to the point that in the public consciousness today, a state is little more than lines on a map.

That's a good thing, too. Were we a loose collection of tribes, squabbling among ourselves, as tribes tend to do, our enemies would have picked us off piecemeal long ago and we simply wouldn't exist. We're strong because we're united.

We're also very prosperous, which links directly back to our earlier discussion of slaves, drones, and free people. In a land where there's opportunity, we have a vested interest in success because we're allowed to enjoy the fruits of our labors. If we were ruled by Egyptian pharaohs who told us to shut up and drag that stone up the hill, we wouldn't be nearly as hardworking as we are. We've borrowed liberally from the Greeks and Romans, taken principles from Arthurian legend, and put them into practice in the real world with highly successful results. Clearly, there are benefits to this approach for those in pursuit of success within their own organizations.

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United tribes, like the United States of America, can become both powerful and prosperous.

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# Fast Forward

Whether you're talking about the Greeks, Camelot, or America, you're going to find flaws. In fact, since an empire is a collection of people and humans tend to be a pretty screwed up lot, such imperfections are impossible to avoid. To get a better sense of this, think about your extended family and the potential for a bit of dysfunctional behavior here and there. If you think it's a mess with just a handful of relatives to deal with, imagine what it's like when you have an entire empire of them. What's important is the tone you set and the course you chart. If you're moving in the right direction, you'll create more results than resentments.

Of course, most of us today aren't trying to build a nation. We're working within our given organization to achieve our personal and professional goals. If we're fortunate, that vision is in harmony with the group we're in.

As we've taken our whirlwind tour of history, you've probably already been able to map things to your current reality. Think about the people you've worked for over the years. Recognize any historical figures? If you look back on those you respected and the places you couldn't get out of fast enough, there are probably some fairly obvious similarities to our small collection of characters.

You might also recall the general environment of groups you worked with, including where you are today. It probably doesn't take much imagination to recognize the slaves, the drones, and the motivated. It takes even less effort to do the math on the results they produce. From ancient times to modern marvels, if you think in the abstract you'll find consistent behavior in both worlds.

As a leader, you must think in practical terms. Think about the amount of time and money that's wasted as the result of disgruntled people. Most of them didn't start out that way. That's the direction their managers took them in. A common cause for this is short-term thinking, being fixated on the quick buck rather than working for long-term success. Short-term gains at the cost of the people you lead are, more often than not, long-term disasters. Creating an environment that your people can believe in, on the other hand, produces tremendous results.

This isn't just sappy idealism. In the business world, for example, it's a hard-nosed fact. Apple has almost always been an idealistic organization, due entirely to Steve Jobs, a classic charismatic leader. When the company shifted management to the more corporate style of John Sculley and ousted Jobs, that idealism waned and they had their head handed to them by Microsoft.

What's now touted as the second coming of Steve Jobs saw the introduction of the iPod, the iPhone, and the iPad; a resurgence in popularity for the Mac; and massive revenue that made

Apple one of the most valuable companies on the planet. To be sure, it created quality products that people were willing to pay for, but Apple has always been more than just that. It's as much a religion as a revenue source, and people have worked insane hours to create these products because it's something they believed in. This isn't just naive hippie idealism. It works.

Those who would lead dedicate long hours and give body and soul in service to their vision. If you're going to sacrifice that much to build something, build to last. Clearly, if you have what it takes to unite the tribes, building a noble empire is the path to a lasting success.

# Summary

Up to this point, we've been considering important but abstract notions. Understanding these concepts is the first step toward a brighter future for both you and your company. However, making this a reality requires a plan. Although they can sound exciting, simple platitudes and catchy buzzwords don't mean a thing in the real world unless there's a practical course of action to follow.

We don't live in a textbook environment where everyone follows the rules and things always go as planned. The business world is large and complicated with constant conflict and many deeply entrenched practices. Vague academic ideas are of little value. We need practical strategies.

Our industry does not speak with one voice. It is a collection of many companies with different cultures, goals, and talent. Attempting to illustrate the nuts and bolts of every situation you'll encounter in mind-numbing detail would be an exercise in futility. What you'll find instead are topics explained both conceptually and with the use of examples. Such illustrations are unlikely to mirror your exact circumstances, requiring that

you translate the lesson into your own context and apply it accordingly.

You won't master all of these techniques overnight. Many of your successes will come after much trial and error, as you discover new ways of adapting these ideas to your own unique circumstances. There is no such thing as a silver bullet, much to the delight of werewolves everywhere. It's all about continual growth and unflagging persistence. However, if you're willing to put in the work you'll find, just as the great leaders throughout history have demonstrated, that you can indeed unite the tribes and build a lasting empire.

# CHAPTER
## 4

# Vision

## Employ Long-term Thinking and Build a Long-lasting Empire

Nobody wants to look for a new job every year. Even if you're a serial entrepreneur, you don't start a new venture with the intention of going out of business. Of course, it's an inconvenient truth that businesses die on a regular basis. They also have a particularly annoying habit of killing your job in the process. Because of this, you might think that people would always be looking to the future in order to protect their interests. You might also believe in the Easter Bunny. Of the two, you have a much better chance of finding brightly colored eggs in your backyard. People are neither rational nor sensible when it comes to their day-to-day behavior.

Rather than doing their best to keep their primary source of income alive and well, most people tend to focus exclusively on the issues of the day. In the process, they're so busy putting out the fire at their feet that they don't realize the company itself is burning down. As you might imagine, when timbers are crashing down on your head, it's a little late to see if the fire extinguishers were recharged last month.

The only way you're going to make sure that the payroll account you've become so fond of is still well supplied this time next year is to make the future a priority of the present. In other words, you have to live and breathe with vision if you

want your source of income to keep on breathing. Tomorrow has a rather pesky way of showing up whether you're prepared for it or not. This means you need to have a grand scheme for long-term success and the commonsense required to integrate everyday details into the overall plan.

Fortunately, vision isn't some magical gift that only the chosen few are born with. Like many such things, you'll find that the most important aspect of this talent is simply deciding to acquire it. Once you've made it a priority to improve your long-term thinking, you'll get better with each passing day through the time-honored method of practice. You'll still need a well-credentialed gypsy and some high-quality tea leaves if you want to know how the future actually will turn out, but at the very least you'll be well prepared for it.

Whether you work in a small start-up or a huge international corporation, you've probably encountered short-term thinking on more than one occasion. It's extremely common in the business world. It's also a practice that rarely ends well.

Sometimes a decision is passed down from on high that was driven by the investors wanting to see a good profit in the upcoming quarter. Check in with that company the following year and you may well find that the quarter in question was good but the consequences of a quick fix ended up causing declining profits with no end in sight.

Middle management and departmental heads are also frequent fliers in the dicey skies of Ostrich Airlines. They're so concerned about looking good in the here and now that they stick their collective heads in the sand whenever the subject of consequences arises. You can probably guess the piloting skills of the visually impaired.

While shortsightedness is common enough in the business world at large, it reaches epic proportions in the fast-paced world of technology. In fact, many people use the rapidly

changing nature of the tech landscape as a justification for ill-considered initiatives, typically with the plea that there's no way to foretell the future and thus it's a waste of time to try. I can't predict which of the many people on the road are dimwit drivers either, but you can bet I still look both ways before crossing the street.

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> Shortsightedness is particularly apparent in the tech world. Some justify it by the speed at which the landscape changes, but the best managers are those who live in today's fast-paced world while keeping focused on a vision that will feed everyone in the tribe for years.

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The truth of the matter is that short-term thinking is typically the result of pursuing a personal agenda with little regard for the trouble it will cause down the line. Sometimes that happens because the trouble will belong to someone else. More often, however, it's just an aversion to thinking things through because the insights gained would cause more work. Either way, unless you're planning on working somewhere else very soon, the chickens will eventually come home to roost. If you've ever cleaned out a hen house, you'll understand that this is won't be a pleasant experience.

If you want to build the future, you first have to visualize it. You're never going to move forward if you're constantly entangled in a long-running series of quick fixes, each of which causes complications that require yet another hack. So, see that shining city on the hill, realize just how much work it will take to create, and then make each day a building block that gets you one step closer to completion. You do that by having a blueprint and working your way from beginning to end.

Life is a complex endeavor and business is no exception. No matter how much planning you do, there will be unexpected

adventures and more than a few problems that need immediate attention. Nonetheless, it's possible to deal with the reality of everyday details while keeping your eyes on the prize. To do otherwise is to abandon all hope for a brighter tomorrow.

# Picture the End Result in Fine Detail

Nowhere are fuzzy requirements and a vague sense of purpose more prevalent than in the tech sector. To a certain degree, it's the intangible nature of software that drives this. For those who manufacture physical products, such imprecise specifications will lead to immediate difficulties in assembly and other such nuts-and-bolts considerations. Of course, this will also result in tangible losses to the bottom line if parts and components are manufactured and then scrapped.

Software, on the other hand, is the result of someone sitting at a computer and typing. If you screw it up, you simply delete what you wrote and do it again. You still incur labor costs but the industry has become so conditioned to expect waste of this kind that it's even factored into business plans. The result is a culture that tolerates shifting specifications and turns a blind eye to the considerable losses that inevitably follow.

This casual attitude toward poorly defined projects is even more prevalent in the glamorized world of Silicon Valley start-ups and their cousins in other states primarily due to the focus on venture capital. It's a lot easier to ignore the problem when you're spending someone else's money.

Should the investors quibble about how long the product is taking, it's easy to mumble enough geek speak to convince them that they don't know what they're talking about and everything is proceeding according to industry standards. The

fact that the standard practices of the tech industry are often just slightly less than insane is rarely mentioned. Of course, there's no such thing as unlimited funding. Consequently, it's not unusual to find the highway of dreams littered with discarded vehicles.

No matter how many new companies pop up each year, the majority of the industry is populated by enterprises large and small who manage to survive their mistakes. This doesn't necessarily mean they have a better grasp of the situation— merely that their losses are less than critical. In both cases, however, one fact rings true. These losses are both unnecessary and avoidable.

I've met plenty of people in my life who consider themselves to be idea guys. They are big picture thinkers with an ego to match and often feel above the menial task of having to understand the details. Implementation, I'm told, is someone else's problem. What they fail to realize is how utterly useless an idea guy is. Anyone can brainstorm. Success comes from the person who can actually make it happen.

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Self-styled "idea" people are close to worthless in the business world. Anyone can dream. Few can make things happen. True visionaries are both dreamers and doers.

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The true visionary is indeed a big picture person. Dreaming big is part of the package. However, they go further than that. They know exactly what it is that they're looking to accomplish and can tell you in fine-grained detail. Because of this, they also have credible plans that walk you every step of the way from the beginning to the final achievement.

If you're building a rocket designed to land someone on the moon, it's not enough to draw a cylinder on a whiteboard, look

at your engineers and say, "Do that." You have to have a firm grasp of what you're attempting to accomplish, the major problem areas you'll encounter along the way, and what sort of effort you're going to need in order to achieve the goal. You don't have to be a rocket scientist. You do, however, have to realize that both science and rockets are required.

For any significant team effort, it's simply not possible to be a domain expert in each and every area. However, as a leader you have to know which expertise to obtain in the first place. There's no way you can do that if all you have is a crudely drawn cylinder on a whiteboard. You have to visualize Apollo 11 and think your way through as many complexities as your skills allow. From there, you have to work with experts you trust and encourage them to take it down to the next level.

When you've reached the other side of this task, you won't have every last detail outlined and you certainly won't have foreseen the problems that will undoubtedly crop up down the line. You will, however, see a multistage rocket departing Earth, a smaller craft orbiting the Moon, and Neil Armstrong coming down the ladder of a spindly little tinfoil lander to take one small step. That's a vision your people can actually work toward.

While you may not be working in the aerospace industry, if you hold yourself to such a standard, you can be sure that you'll see more predictable results and the profits that accompany them from your efforts. The need to visualize your results with clarity is not limited to the top of the food chain. No matter which level of the organization you lead, you're going to be much more effective at hitting the target if you know exactly what you're shooting at to begin with. In any endeavor, the ability to succeed comes only after you've clearly defined the components of success.

# Plan like You're Going to Live Forever

Tomorrow comes quickly. Forget the mission statements and bland motivational posters. If you want to make a difference in how your organization operates, you should spray paint the heading on every bathroom mirror in the building.

Another aspect of short-term thinking is the tendency to make plans that look good for a finite period of time but have known difficulties that will arise after that. You'd think people would realize how dumb this is, but in the frantic, get-it-done atmosphere of most companies, the trouble of today is usually all they think about. If you're planning on being dead by tomorrow morning, perhaps that's an understandable approach. For the rest of us, the future is relentless in its practice of turning into the present.

Today we're irritated because of a problem that's bugging us, so we do something stupid but immediate to solve it. A couple of months later, we're accosted by a problem that was a known consequence of the hack we did in the past. However, the future has suddenly become today, and now we're annoyed by this new problem. Simple math points out that we didn't reduce our problem count with the initial hack. We merely moved it to a new time slot. It may look different and require a different solution but it's still the same problem. If we'd solved it properly in the first place, it wouldn't have reappeared.

All of this would be much easier to grasp if we just had a time machine. If you know a place that offers good deals on used DeLoreans, or perhaps a low-mileage Tardis, it's definitely a purchase worth making. Imagine if you could travel into the future. Better still, let's defy a few more laws of time, space, and corporate governance and allow you to watch yourself in this future scenario. There you are, dealing with the problem

that you knew would arise when you did the short-term fix in the first place. See how silly you look explaining to people why you're wasting more time and money on a problem that you actually created yourself? If only you could go back in time and make a better decision.

People tend to forget that we're immortal. Well, perhaps not in the literal sense, but for a long-enough chunk of time to offer the same opportunities for foolishness. For good or ill, there are no actions without consequences. If you gave a little thought to your temporary immortality, you'd realize that you're the one who's going to have to clean up the mess tomorrow that you're creating today. Why not avoid it in the first place?

Yes, you're going to have immediate problems that require solutions in the here and now. However, you have a choice as to how you go about solving them. You can often save a few hours with a quick fix. However, your future self, the one looking over his shoulder with a feeling that some DeLorean-driving fool is watching him, is going to burn way more time and money dealing with the consequences than you're saving right now.

Before you take what appears to be the cheap and easy way out, grab a calculator and do the math. You're going to be around for a long time, so your costs are cumulative. You can ignore that if you like, but math and science are fairly apathetic to your ignorance. At the end of a five-year period, the numbers will sum in a very precise manner and you will have suffered significant losses. Consequently, it's important to remind yourself that you're still going to be around five years from now. The quality of your experience then will be the direct result of how you operate during this period.

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Create solutions that are just as good for tomorrow as they are today. In the long run, you'll save a lot of time—

way more than the ten minutes you'll save today by resorting to a quick fix.

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Whether you're dreaming of a brave new world or you're just trying to get the job done and build a better career for yourself, think about the grand total of your efforts, not the five minutes you're saving at the moment. Given that we don't yet have flying cars, let alone those capable of time travel, your greatest ally in the quest for long-term profitability is your own imagination. Pretend that you're immortal and live in such a way that you don't continually create problems for yourself. In doing so, you'll find that it's a much better ride overall.

# Anticipate How People Will React

No matter how lofty your goals or how well you've mapped out the journey, success is ultimately about people. Since a business is nothing more than a group of people working together to achieve a common goal, human nature is going to be both a blessing and a curse, depending on how well you understand it.

It's not uncommon to slave away for months on a plan of action only to have it derailed at the last minute because of reactions that you didn't anticipate. Regardless of how much solo work you do in preparation, ultimately your efforts will have to interact with those of others. That's usually where the fun begins. People are driven by self-interest and personal agendas. That doesn't make them evil. Like anyone else, I work, play, and have both dreams and desires. All of this constitutes self-interest and a personal agenda, and there's nothing wrong with that. The problems come when people with conflicting agendas intersect at ground zero of a project. If that

paints a picture in your mind of a large, mushroom-shaped cloud, you've got the right idea.

It's important to remember that no one gives a rat's rear end about your plan, your company, or any other such thing. People care about their own interests. As long as they find common ground, such as their need for a paycheck and the company's need for their skills, a productive working relationship can exist. That should not, however, be mistaken for someone putting aside what they care about in deference to the company's desires. That applies equally to any initiative that you're leading.

Having this knowledge isn't cause for depression. In fact, it should provide you with quite a lift in spirits; for the key to getting what you want from others is understanding what motivates them. If you're trying to lead a horse by dangling a carrot on a stick, your trusty steed is unable to tell you that he hates carrots. However, if you pay attention to his reaction when you're working your way through that pepperoni pizza, you may find that there are other more effective ways to encourage him. It's no different with people.

Once you start looking at the world through the eyes of others rather than your own, you're going to have the next best thing to a crystal ball. The halls of the corporate world are filled with schemes both subtle and obvious as people maneuver to get what they want, both individually and as a group. If you're working on a project that competes for territory or resources coveted by others, you'll have a very good idea of what to expect when your group interacts with another. By the same token, you'll find kindred spirits whose own goals could be strengthened by working together with you to meet your own.

Successfully promoting your agenda, be it a product idea, a particular technology set, a marketing plan, or any other idea, is all about gaining support from others and avoiding the slings and arrows of the competition. Having foreknowledge of what

to expect doesn't guarantee that your idea will survive and thrive, but the lack of that information is almost always a deathblow. Know the people and groups that you're dealing with and have a plan in place that deals with how they'll react. You'll avoid a lot of unnecessary bumps and bruises and you'll probably make a few new friends on the way.

# Know the Character of Your Leaders and Allies

In order to accurately predict how people or groups will react, you have to know a little something about them. At the heart of people's actions is their character. If this sounds like a moralistic consideration, to a degree it is. Ordinarily that's tricky territory, as there are a great many interpretations of right and wrong. In our case, we can sidestep those considerations being that we're interested in the more pragmatic aspects. What we really want to know is how someone will behave in a given scenario since that is what gives us strategic insights that we can use to avoid conflict and be more productive.

Whether they acknowledge it or not, each person has a moral compass. Whether it points true north or to a hidden island frequented by rogues and pirates is a separate consideration. What matters for our purposes is knowing in which direction a person will steer. Observation and history are our greatest tools in determining this. Those things are not complicated and don't require advanced psychological training. All you need to do is make note of the decisions the person makes in times both good and bad. The past is a very effective predictor of the future.

As you consider your subjects, there are a few common questions to ask yourself. Is this someone you can trust? If so,

you should also make note of whether this is constant. People can be solid as a rock when times are good but quickly throw you overboard for personal gain if things get a little rough. Rather than getting indignant and bogged down in matters of how you think they should behave, all you really need is information. If they're constant as the Northern Star, then they require little seasonal attention. If they're mercenary by nature and hard times brings that out, you'll know when to watch your back.

It's also good to know how they handle both success and failure. Some people let a little power or glory go to their head, with disastrous results for those close by. Others who are normally low-key and garner little attention truly come into their own when times get tough, exhibiting strength and levelheadedness that saves the day.

Another important consideration is the degree of loyalty a person demonstrates. Climbing the corporate ladder on the backs of those who thought she was their friend is nothing new in the business world. There are also those who would sacrifice everything to stand up for someone they believe in. If you're pushing the envelope in your career, you may occasionally generate more heat than light. At such times, it's good to know who will stand by you and who will use you as a convenient stepping-stone.

Of course, these are just a few aspects of a person's character, but they are sufficient to illustrate the concept. When dealing with groups rather than individuals, it's important to consider the most influential personalities as well as those who are in charge. They're not always the same people but both will affect the disposition of the group. From there, you should consider the tribe as a whole, thinking of it as an individual in its interaction with others. A group will develop its own distinctive personality.

Beyond just the people and groups that you come in direct contact with, you should also get a good sense of the people at the top of the food chain. Whether you're the leader of the organization or not, there are typically a number of individuals who influence the overall direction of the company. How they operate will be driven by their character. Whether you're a part of that circle or are leading at a lower level, how they steer the ship affects you personally. If there are flaws that will cause them to do foolish, unethical, or even illegal things, the ripple effect can reach all the way to your desk. It will certainly reach the payroll account.

Whether you're dealing with saints or the scum of the earth, it's important to understand their nature. It's the most dependable predictor of how they'll behave in any given situation, and that knowledge is power. It tells you who to ally yourself with to achieve your goals, who to avoid in certain situations, and even how to use the lesser qualities of the bad guys to your advantage.

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Knowing how people will act in a given situation is real power. It tells you who can help you and whom to avoid.

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# Be Completely Prepared before Unveiling Your Ideas

Whether you're working to bring a new product to market or you have an initiative that you're trying to move forward within your company, it's certain that you're going to encounter some resistance. In the free market of commerce, you're competing with others for revenue, and it's unlikely they'll let you have it without a tussle. In a similar fashion, the various tribes in your

company will be competing for territory, resources, and power. It's unlikely that your plan doesn't threaten at least one group.

In the world of nations and armies, information is a precious commodity. This is why spies make a decent living. If you know what the other guy is planning, you have a chance to preempt what he's doing, ambush him, or employ any number of other strategies to exploit his weaknesses. This applies to international intrigue, clashes of armies, and the world of business.

*Loose lips sink ships.* This sentiment was coined during World War II and the implications were pretty straightforward. If you blab indiscriminately, the wrong person might hear crucial details about the location of your ships. With that information, enemy submarines could easily put an end to them. Keeping your mouth shut doesn't guarantee that spies won't find out where they're located through other methods, but it certainly closes off one avenue of information. Whether it's a supply ship —or your plans for an innovative new product—getting torpedoed is an altogether-unpleasant event.

There's another aspect to consider as well. You're often going to need the support of others in order to achieve your goal. If you've ever been in a room with more than a couple of people, you know that everyone has an opinion about how things should be done. Meetings frequently get bogged down in arguments about whose approach is the right one rather than accomplishing anything productive.

If you have an idea and you want others to get behind it, you have to sell them on your way of doing things. This can be hard enough even when you're well prepared. If the conversation occurs before you have everything well thought out, the crowd will rip you to shreds and leave your tattered idea bleeding on the floor. It doesn't matter if it's an actual meeting or a hallway conversation. Being ill prepared in either situation can stop you before you've even started.

Watch a seasoned professional salesperson at work. No matter what she's selling, she'll have her presentation honed to a fine edge. Her logic will be impeccable and she'll have answers for each and every objection you come up with. There will not be any way for you to say No to her that she doesn't have covered. If you'd asked her about the product her first day on the job, it would have been a completely different experience. You would have filled her argument with so many holes, it would have more closely resembled a tea strainer than a sales pitch. However, you didn't meet her until she'd been at it for many years. You might as well just hand her your wallet now. The result is inevitable.

The principle is the same whether you're creating a product, promoting an idea, trying to change the way things are done, or for any other goal you have. You're going to need support and you'll have competitors to fight off. The better prepared you are, the more likely the chances for success. Fair warning is made for the school yard playground. Out here in the real world, your competitors will attack any opening they see. Keep your lips zipped, get your act together, and only let the world know that you exist when you're completely prepared to deliver overwhelming firepower.

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Have an idea for a product, initiative, or any other bold move? You'll need to sell it to others. Take a hint from seasoned professionals and be prepared. Know all the benefits of your idea and how to counter objections. That's easier to do when you know all the people you'll need to influence.

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# Give People a Reason to Care About Your Vision

As we've already touched on, nobody cares about your company. They couldn't care less about your dreams, your plans, or your initiatives. They care about themselves. While this may sound like a terrible thing to say about all those nice folks you work with, it's nothing of the sort. That's just the nature of the human species. In fact, it's pretty much the short definition of all life on Earth. I don't fault the sky for being blue, the water for being wet, or people for caring about their own lives. Neither should you. In fact, you should embrace it.

Once you start thinking from the perspective of self-interest, you'll be in a much better position to achieve your goals. You need the support and talents of others in order to bring your dreams to life. All you have to do to receive them is show people why they should care. Translate the results of getting behind your plan into a personal benefit for them and you'll have their complete and undivided attention.

Thus far, I've skipped over one class of creature. In painting people as self-interested, it would appear that I'm denying the existence of the truly idealistic. In fact, there are a great many people who join companies because they believe in what that organization is doing. This is even more prevalent in creative cultures such as the tech sector. The number goes even higher when you're talking about start-ups.

Wouldn't it be great if you could populate your company with nothing but these true believers? You might think that in so doing you wouldn't have to worry about all the problems inherent in motivating the self-interested. Not that it really matters, as it's unlikely that you're going to fill the building with starry-eyed idealists. Even if you did, however, you might find it surprising to learn that the rules of the game don't change.

Yes, there are a great many idealists in the world of tech. They will be passionate about the direction your company is going in and they will work long, hard hours. If you think that human nature doesn't come into play, however, you're in for a rude awakening. These people are among the most self-interested of all. It could be the love of a technology, the environmental impact of your product, or even the skills they stand to gain. Whatever it is, their personal self-interest is at an all-time high when discussing the subject.

In the beginning, this could be great for everyone. Sooner or later, though, it's going to become apparent to all that one of the goals for any company is profitability. Up to this point, you've had their unrestrained support for what you're doing. Now, you may find that what's best for the financial health and well-being of the company isn't directly related to saving the whales, and your staunchest supporters begin to resist your initiatives. They will be the loudest voices in the room, by the way.

Nothing changed in this scenario. All along, your success has depended on the support of others, and that backing was contingent upon their personal desires being addressed. In the case of the nonidealistic, you immediately worked through the process of mapping their participation to a result that they would value. You had to do the same thing with the idealistic in order to gain their support. It just happened to be apparent without further explanation on your part.

No matter who you're dealing with, as a leader it's your job to also be a translator. A prosperous empire has more goodies to share with the inhabitants than a poor and struggling one, so obviously there's a benefit to supporting it. That said, don't count on most people to see this. They may be experts in what they do, but that doesn't mean they're visionaries. If you want their support, you have to lay it out for them in a language that

they'll understand. It may be a little more work on your part, but it's absolutely worth it.

What if there is no tangible benefit to others? If you have a plan that benefits you and there's absolutely nothing in it for the people who do the work, go back to the drawing board. Seriously. Even if you're enough of a snake oil salesman to convince them to follow you initially, people don't stay fooled forever. Sooner or later they'll wise up and ditch you, probably at the most inconvenient moment. Pitchforks and torches are a distinct possibility.

Chances are good that if you think the previous paragraph describes your situation, you're wrong. Unless you're involved in theft, larceny, or other such illicit deeds, it's exceedingly rare for an initiative to have zero value to the participants. If you're not seeing the benefit, it's far more likely that you're just not used to doing this particular type of thought exercise. No need to worry. Like any other skill, all it takes is time and effort to become adept. You'll find that it's a very gratifying talent to possess. When you learn to reach people on this very fundamental level, you'll have more enthusiasm behind your goals than you ever imagined possible.

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Make sure the people in your tribe understand what's in it for them. You'll gain their trust, their hard work, and their loyalty.

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# Present Practical Benefits for Long-Term Goals

When you're sharing your vision with others, sometimes the benefits will be more distant than immediate. There's nothing

wrong with this. It's exactly the sort of thing that a good leader should be doing—thinking long term and building to last. However, when it comes to garnering the support of your people, that's not particularly helpful.

You typically face two problems in this scenario. Not only do people have a hard time relating to some vague benefit that's off in the distance but such initiatives are often presented as something that's done more for the company than for themselves. The larger your organization, the more disconnected people will feel from the abstract concept of a business entity. As such, it's not something they can get terribly excited about.

We've already discussed the idea that your people need something realistic and relevant to their daily lives in order to motivate them, and that applies to this problem as well. We have an added difficulty here, however, even if you were to translate the benefits into solid-gold coins. The further away a reward is, the less power it has to motivate. Additionally, the corporate world is known to be an environment that forgets tomorrow what it promised today. When the benefits are a long way down the line, it's hard for people to keep the faith. Who can blame them?

To solve these problems, you start with the same exercise as before: serving as the interpreter who can translate the vague future benefits into something people can touch and feel. This will often require you to walk them through the chain of events that starts with the good of the company and ends with it trickling down to something they actually care about. It could be as simple as bonuses or something that's less obvious, such as nicer offices or less overtime.

Once you've found a way to make your plan real to them, you're still faced with the time problem. You'll find that most plans with a future benefit will typically have incremental deliverables that lead to the ultimate goal. That's a common

and sensible management technique that also makes it easier for you to relate to your people.

Whether they exist explicitly in your plan or you have to take the time to break them down for yourself, the smaller milestones on the road to the ultimate goal are what you need to find. If you can identify them, chances are good that you can also map those deliverables to specific benefits. This is your anchor in the short term, allowing you to show at least some benefits early enough for your people to grasp.

When you can translate a benefit for the business entity into something your people will actually care about and then break it down into a timeline that makes the rewards feel within reach, you have a shot at truly motivating your people. This challenge is among the more difficult you'll face, as companies, like people, tend to think of themselves first. You may well find yourself trying to garner support for initiatives that were handed down from upper levels without considering the difficulties. Nonetheless, as a leader, the responsibility to convey this vision to your people falls to you. Nobody said this was an easy gig.

In fact, when faced with such a challenge, many companies fall back on negative reinforcement. The message is conveyed in a variety of ways, but it usually works out to the same statement: "Sit down, shut up, and do as you're told, or we'll get rid of you and hire someone who will. Be happy you still have a job." These tactics might not be as effective as you would imagine. Yes, at the tip of a sword, I'll haul that two-ton block of stone up the side of your pyramid, but you can bet your sandals that the first chance I get, I'm outta here. As a bonus, when I let go of the rope, you can probably guess where that chunk of rock is going to land. By the way, that'll be your first indication that I'm gone.

In fairness, companies often resort to the negative because they simply can't find a better way to motivate their people. If

you're looking to light up the future with your vision, you're already comfortable with the thought that you're going to have to work your tail off to do it. This is just one more area worthy of your effort. When you see the difference between slaves and the motivated, you'll realize it was all worthwhile. You also won't have to spend as much time watching for falling rocks.

# Integrate Short-Term Solutions into the Larger Effort

We spoke earlier about the dangers of short-term thinking when you're trying to build the future, and it's certainly an approach to avoid. However, when there's a fire at your feet, you still need to put it out, unless you happen to be wearing asbestos shoes. In all things, it's important to be practical and realistic. Given the breakneck speed of business in the digital age, you're guaranteed a crisis every now and then. The trick is addressing the problem at hand without putting your blinders back on and ignoring the consequences.

If you're working on long-term solutions, chances are good that you have a number of initiatives underway. When you have an immediate, short-term crisis to manage, the first place you should look for solutions is in your long-range plans. That's a bit counterintuitive until you remember that your priority is the larger efforts, not this small but pesky brushfire.

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The solution to your short-term problem may lie in your long-term plans. Reminding yourself of the overall vision helps you put things into perspective.

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The first stage of triage is looking at your broader plans and determining which bucket the crisis fall in and whether the problem arose as a part of these plans or not. From there, you need to break the larger plans down into progressively smaller chunks until they're roughly the size of the issue you're dealing with. Think of them as boxcars on a train, each connecting to the one before and reaching out to the one that comes next. This shouldn't be hard to do, as the breakdown of most planning results in incremental deliverables, each depending on the outcome of those that came before.

Now take a look at the short-term fix that you're thinking about using to put out that fire at your feet. Because you've trained yourself to consider the long-term implications of your actions, you should have a pretty good sense of what the consequences of the hack you're about to do. It's quick and it's ugly, but it gets the job done for the moment. Six months down the line, however, it's going to break something else.

By thinking only of the immediate problem, you've created another boxcar, but unfortunately it's one with incompatible connectors. You can't just reach down into your toy train set, swap it out with the one you identified from your long-range plan, and plug it all back together. The connectors don't fit. You may also have a herd of cows in one car and a herd of goats in the other. You're going to need both by the time you get to the end of your journey. Of course, along with different critters, you have different food and supplies to keep them from gnawing on the walls of the boxcars come dinnertime.

This is when you break open both of the boxes, scatter the contents on the floor, and get creative. Try not to lose track of the livestock while you're at it. Instead of a doing a quick hack and moving on, with all the trouble that tends to cause, you're going to build something brand new.

Using your team's creativity, innovation, and perhaps a good spot welder, you're going to fashion a brand new boxcar. It will

contain all the elements of the hack that solves your immediate problem. It will contain cows. It will contain goats. It will even contain an innovative new feed distribution system so that the gnawing is kept to a minimum. You will also fabricate new couplings that allow your Frankenstein boxcar to hook up to a pair of standard couplings. Your box will now fit back into your long-term plan, solving the immediate problem without derailing the procession.

It may not be the prettiest car in the train, and chances are it'll smell a little funny. However, if you take the time to break it down and put it all back together, you'll have a solution that saves the day without throwing your long-term plans into chaos. Who knows—under the right conditions you might even end up with a new breed of livestock to market in the process.

# Show How to Get There from Here

Just as you'll encounter difficulties when people can't translate your dream into practical benefits they can understand, you also have to show people that there's a clear and logical path to those long-term benefits you've been promoting. Coming up with a good idea is easy. What separates the true visionary from the impractical dreamers is the ability to translate that dream into action.

The effective leader is one who can lay out a sequence of clear and simple steps that everyone can follow. That's what gets things done in the real world. If it happens that you're not the one running the farm, you'll also appreciate the fact that this will earn you the respect of people higher and more powerful than you in the chain of command. A reputation as a practical, results-oriented leader is horsepower that your career can always use.

> People who can lay out clear, practical steps to reach point
> B from point A are rare in the business world. That makes
> it a valuable skill.

Nobody will follow you in pursuit of your vision if there isn't a clear, believable path to get there from here. People are afraid of the dark and fearful of the unknown. You can count on them to resist change with all four paws. If you can't show them a way to accomplish your goals that seems organized, well thought out, and at least reasonably safe, they'll clear the room before you get your next sentence out.

To demonstrate the validity of both your quest and the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, show people the sequence of events as you see them unfolding. They are always more comfortable with an incremental approach to things. It's easier for the average person to grasp one small step and then the next than it is to take in a huge concept all at once.

Make sure you show cause and effect so that they can see that there's no leap of faith involved. When people have been burned enough times in the corporate world, or have seen it done to others, they'll have no faith to leap with. You should be able to show how accomplishing one incremental goal sets the stage for the next step. This allows you to describe a large campaign in practical terms that everyone can be comfortable with.

This incremental approach also allows others to come up with innovative ways to solve the problems you'll encounter. Not only does this give you the benefit of the group's creativity, your people also become more enthusiastic about your vision because they feel like an important part of the success.

Understanding the path toward your vision also allows people to be prepared for the transitions and results. Good

communications make for greater cooperation, so other groups can tailor their own projects to dovetail with your own. If you take the time to understand their vision in the same way as you want your people to follow yours, it also puts you in a position to bring your initiatives into harmony with those of others, and pick up additional support as a result. Not only does this bring more power to bear on the problems at hand, the momentum in and of itself generates even more support. Everybody wants to be part of a winning team, especially when it's clear how you're getting from point A to point B.

# Win the War, Not the Battle

No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy. Regardless of how well you prepare and how brilliantly you execute, you will eventually encounter difficulties. At times, you may even lose a battle. During such times, it's important that you keep your perspective and focus on the vision itself. The moment you get caught up in tunnel vision, losing sight of everything except the task at hand, your dream is in peril.

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People who achieve great things always keep the end result in mind, especially when things are going poorly. Live to fight another day. It's hard to win a war from beyond the grave.

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Sure, it's nice to win every battle. However, what's really important is that you bring your vision to life. When it's all said and done, nobody cares about your bumps and bruises. What people will remember are your accomplishments. However, if you become obsessed with winning every engagement no matter the cost, you may find that you've won the current

battle but lost the war. At that point, all those battle scars will have been for nothing.

It's also important to maintain momentum. Not only does it keep things moving forward, it's also critical to morale. When you get caught up in the marshes and find yourself making no progress at all, your people will begin to falter and lose confidence. Remember, you're the visionary, not them. The responsibility of maintaining enthusiasm falls to you. The easiest way to do that is to keep things rolling so that they see a stream of incremental successes, even if they're small ones.

It's also worth noting that if you insist on winning every single argument, people are going to resent you at best and actively screw with you at worst. Nobody likes a pushy jerk who always has to be right. No matter what your plans, you'll end up with animosity and resistance that wouldn't have existed had you been willing to yield lesser points on a strategic basis.

By giving in on a smaller, less critical matter, you may lose a minor battle; however, by showing yourself to be reasonable and open to compromise, you'll often gain the respect and cooperation of those who previously opposed you. Of course, if you concede a point but gain an ally, did you really lose the battle?

You should also understand the relative importance of each battle long before you begin the campaign. In your earliest planning stages, you need to assess which objectives are absolutely critical to the success of your vision, which ones heavily influence the outcome, and which are clearly optional. This tells you when to hold the line and when you'll benefit more by building a reputation as someone who's reasonable and easy to work with.

# Summary

A vision begins with a dream, an inspiration rising from the hearts and minds of those who see things not only as they are but as they could be. They dare to reach for the stars. The inspired visionary, that passionate soul who can bring those dreams to life, is the one who understands that success is all about people. When you learn to see through the eyes of others, understand what they really care about, and gain the ability to translate your vision into their language, you'll bring your people together in a very powerful way.

CHAPTER
5

# Leadership

See a Better Life for Your People and Be Passionate about Making It Happen

Leaders need followers. Without them, you're just some guy standing around trying to look important. That might impress the neighbors, but it won't do much for the bottom line of your company.

As we discussed previously, there are different ways of getting people to do what you want. You can issue commands at the tip of a sword if you like, but that's not going to bring you world-class results. As mentioned, slaves tend to be sullen, grumpy people. Not only will they refuse to contribute one drop of sweat more than your threats require, they will drop a big stone block on your head the first chance they get.

If you want to build an exceptional organization, you need highly motivated people who will follow your lead and willingly walk through fire if that's what it takes to achieve your goals. You can't force that kind of participation. Threats will get you nowhere and punishment will incite open rebellion. To innovate and achieve the impossible, you need the elite. There's only one way people of that caliber are going to follow you. You have to earn it.

People merely obey authority but offer nothing more. On the other hand, they follow leaders, throwing the full weight of their support, talent, and enthusiasm behind those who inspire

them. Want to know how to get that kind of reaction from your people? It's easy. All you have to do is understand what they care about and work your tail off to see that they get it. It's really that simple.

Your company has needs. Your people have needs. The truly great leaders are the ones who can find common ground, bringing both parties together so that achievement satisfies both of their wants and desires. This is nothing new. The great empires throughout history have been built on this same fundamental principle. Gather a group of people together, enlist their support in conquering some neighboring territory, and then make sure everyone shares in the spoils afterward. That's all it takes to ensure that everyone will be up for the task when you set forth on yet another quest.

# Show How Personal Efforts Map to Tangible Rewards

Any time you ask a person to do something, in the back of your mind you should instinctively hear them reply, "What's in it for me?" They'll rarely say it out loud, but you can be sure that the question is there. Why shouldn't it be? If you're trying to get something for nothing, society has a number of fairly straightforward descriptions for you. The kindest of them is "thief"—and it's completely justified. When you take something and offer nothing in return, you can justify it with as many words as you like, but it's nothing more than stealing.

Of course, you might be quick to point out that in the workplace environment, the people who work for you are in fact getting compensated via their paycheck. Fair enough. For that salary, you get the duties agreed upon at hiring time but not one drop of sweat more. If you want them to put in extra effort and give heart, body, and soul to the cause that you're

promoting, you're going to have to offer something more enticing.

Does that seem unfair to you? It's really not. Sacrifice is for suckers. It's a great bargain for companies when they find naive enthusiasm. Such organizations do their best to convince these people to give up their personal lives so that they can slave away night and day to meet yet another ridiculous deadline. The problem with such a bargain is that few people stay naive forever. Eventually, even the most passionate worker will realize that they're doing all the work and getting little in return but hype and promises. It's a very short distance between that realization and the nearest recruiter.

Unless you want a revolving door with talent coming and going —your company losing all the domain expertise it acquired each time people leave—you need a better plan. People will go to great extremes with the proper motivation. Provided you don't bleed them dry, they'll keep it up indefinitely. The way you accomplish this is no great secret. Understand what they value and see to it that they get something they appreciate in return for that monumental effort you're asking of them. It's a simple and time-honored bargain that works just as well today as it did for ancient armies.

Even if you're the CEO of the company, you're rarely going to have unlimited funds, so lavish rewards won't always be monetary. It's important to cough up some coins when possible, or people will think that you're taking advantage of them to line your own pockets. That said, there are a great many things beyond money that the average person values.

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You don't always need to reward people with bonuses, trips to Hawaii, or the occasional bright-red Ferrari. Sometimes little things—like a day off or a gift certificate

to a local restaurant—can motivate people to go above and beyond.

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Maybe you work out a little barter with the local pizza joint to keep your staff drenched in pepperoni by helping your nontechnical pizzeria owner navigate his computers. Alternatively, you could give salaried people comp days off, and any of your people would also appreciate flexibility as to when and where they work. If you're willing to get creative, you can find any number of things that your people would value that will cost you little to nothing at all.

When I was writing air traffic control software, it started out as the typical six-month contract. I had been on the job for just a couple of months when I received three different job offers in the space of a week. All of them were for a minimum of 50 percent more money than I was making. Had I taken one of the jobs, the shop I was working for would have had no way of meeting the FAA deadline they were facing. In short, they would have been screwed. I politely declined all the offers.

It's common for contracts to extend beyond the initial duration, but of course there's no guarantee that this will be the case. A couple of days later, I told my manager what I'd done and asked if there was going to be any more work when the six months were up. He said he'd have to get back to me.

The next day, he told me that while there was no budget for more money, he could let me work a four-day week, coming in for ten hours a day Monday through Thursday. I'd already made my decision to decline the job offers, so it wasn't a negotiation. He was a good guy, and this was just his way of showing his appreciation. While I turned down the other jobs as a matter of honor, his actions gave me even more incentive to stay with the company. I worked there for five years.

Of course, if you're going to use this approach to motivate your people, there's a prerequisite. You have to actually know what they value. It's not that hard to figure out. If you take the time to get to know those who work for you, casual conversations about life and what they do for fun will be full of clues. When all else fails, ask them. If you tell your group that you want to take good care of them but simply don't have any budget to do so, they may surprise you with their own creativity. Sure, somebody's going to ask for a pony. Many of the suggestions, however, will be realistic enough to implement.

On top of that, just the fact that you asked them what they would appreciate in return is going to raise your stock with your people considerably, taking you from just another boss to someone who obviously cares about them. You can't overestimate the value of that perception.

# Build a Sense of Ownership in the Cause

There's a good reason I didn't become an accountant. Above and beyond the fact that long columns of numbers have a numbing effect on my brain, it's simply not in harmony with who I am. As it happens, harmony is a good choice of words, since at heart I am first and foremost a musician. I spent a lot of years doing it for a living. While I never became rich and famous, paying the bills doing what you love is its own reward.

I transitioned to other careers not because I was tired of living on boxed macaroni and cheese but rather because musical styles and trends are always changing. When it reached the point where I was no longer enjoying myself playing the tunes of the day, I looked for fun—and dinner—elsewhere. I got lucky. Software development had one foot in the corporate world and the other in the Wild, Wild West. Musicians and

other strange creatures of the night were tolerated. All that mattered was whether or not you could deliver the goods.

Technology offered more than just a good living doing enjoyable work, however. Like the entertainment industry, the tech sector is a creative world where many of the same rules apply. It's an environment where strange, wild-eyed geeks join forces with salespeople, and even with the occasional responsible adult, to create magic and get paid for it.

Automate a week's worth of boring labor with the click of a mouse. Have futuristic video conversations with people on the other side of the planet. Carry around a computer in your pocket that would have put Apollo 11 to shame. This is the stuff of science fiction. We're building the future and that's something to be passionate about. What are you working to accomplish? If you want people to light up the night with their brilliance, the best way to do so is to have a cause they can rally behind, something they can get excited about. Creative people aren't just open to that. We actively seek it out.

I remember a TV commercial from when I was a kid growing up in Texas that was promoting oil-drilling equipment. They put a cute young woman in a hard hat and gave her a great line: "If you don't have an oil well, get one! You'll love doing business with us." The message is the same for you. If you don't have a cause, get one.

Once you've gathered people beneath your banner, you need to bring out their best. Being passionate about your goals is a good start, but it will have its limits. To really fire them up, they have to feel like it's their cause, not yours. Sure, you get to play along, too, and even call the shots. From your people's perspective, however, it has to be their baby. That's what will make it personal, and people can do some pretty amazing things when they feel that way.

There's been a lot of discussion about the destructive nature of tribes and turf wars, but there's also a shiny side to that coin. When people gather together in groups and feel ownership in what they produce, the pride in their work skyrockets. So does the quality.

Imagine the European knights of old. A king might have held the allegiance of many land barons, each with his own collection of men at arms. Of course, any lord's army would have been brightly decorated with its own colors and insignia. There would have been great pride in their domain, their people, their knights. When the king called the army together, there would have been many such groups, each proud, each with a great collective spirit, and all of them united together under the banner of the king for a single noble cause. Tribes are not always a bad thing.

Even if you manage numerous groups, don't be afraid to let them have their own identity. In fact, you should encourage it. Find ways to let them mark their territory, to brand the work as their own so that they can take pride in it.

Maybe they'll even brand themselves. In the Harry Potter movies, students in each house wore distinctive colors and insignia, just like the knights of old. Throughout the history of software development, there have always been Easter eggs, that small bit of hidden functionality that pops up at the command of an unpublished set of keystrokes. Many times, these have been used to give credits, just like at the end of a movie, showing everyone who is involved, from the chief architect to the night watchman. These are just a couple of ideas among an endless supply. Your people are creative by definition. There's no telling what they might come up with. All that matters is that it's something they feel good about.

Another thing you can do to encourage their ownership is simplicity itself. Get out of the way. Many people in positions of authority feel like they have to tell the world who's leading the

group and thus, by implication or outright pronouncement, who's really responsible for the success. You'll get the spotlight by doing this, but there won't be much glory in it. That's because your group won't be doing anything noteworthy. They'll be too busy grousing about the jerk who takes all the credit for their work.

Want them to do something remarkable? Relinquish control of the project. Lead them, encourage them, support and protect them, but let them do what they're good at. They'll surprise you by thinking in new ways. Their solutions will be innovative and practical. They'll rock the house if you let them.

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Tell people what you want them to do, then get out of the way and let them do it. It's hard to be productive when you're tripping over micromanagers.

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While they're busy kicking down obstacles and creating magical things, you get a new job assignment. You're now the PR agency for your group, taking every opportunity you find to point the spotlight on the people who actually do the work. By stepping out of the way and letting the light shine directly on them, you'll build in your people an immense pride of ownership.

The world is full of capable tech workers. For any given job, you could find countless drones who are able to perform it adequately. There are companies in every city who employ such average people. I'd mention a person or two, but beyond the fact that it's just not polite, no one comes to mind. That's because their work is unremarkable in every way. If you want to put a dent in the universe, there has to be something more in your people, an X factor of some kind. That secret ingredient is the spirit of your tribes. When it's high, even the most

mundane task becomes a work of art. That's what will set you apart from your competitors.

# Reward Every Person Who Contributes to Success

Rock stars get groupies. Cattle get prods. That's the way things work in most companies. There's nothing wrong with giving lavish rewards to those who do great things. In fact, failure to do so will ensure that tomorrow they'll be doing great things for your competition.

The problem isn't with your stars but rather with the rank-and-file workers. No matter how exciting the tech, most companies employ a lot of people to do less-than-glamorous work. It's a team sport and some jobs are more mundane than others. Nonetheless, they all have to be done or you can't release your product.

If it's hardware, someone has to strain muscles in a sweaty warehouse to ship it. Even if it's software, someone has to answer the phones and listen to frustrated users. All of those floors have to be swept and toilets cleaned or your place will be such a dump that no one will show up for work. When the press is making a fuss about the coolness of your company, chances are good that your janitors, warehouse workers, and tech support staff will be far from the headlines.

These are just a few job descriptions, of course, but the problem is universal. If the entire company is expected to bust their bottoms to meet an objective but only a couple of people are applauded, how do you think everyone else will feel the next time you ask for extra effort? Don't be surprised to hear some creative suggestions on where you might best store that

spare broom handle. People know when they're being taken for granted and it never goes over well.

If you're thinking like a businessperson and are tempted to point out that some jobs require little more than a minimum-wage mentality, I'd be the last to disagree with you. However, when some other company is getting all the headlines and the market share to match because they're operating at a fever pitch of intensity, you might want to reconsider how much your bottom line is benefiting from your cattle-prod mentality.

Rewarding your less demanding positions when you accomplish something noteworthy may not seem like a very good bang for the buck if in fact bucks are what you're using for motivation. From a simple point of view, it's not a great investment in and of itself. What you have to factor in is the ripple effect. Enthusiasm is contagious and it crosses cultural boundaries in your company with ease.

Chances are good that you've watched a band performing on TV just you and the popcorn. Even if it's an excellent show, there's only so much adrenaline you're going to feel. Had you been standing in that crowd of people at the event itself, you would have had a much more powerful experience. When people gather in groups, there's some kind of emotional transfer that takes place. I'm sure that someone with a pocket protector could explain the science behind it, but all that matters for the moment is the fact that the proximity effect exists. As the excitement of the crowd builds, the individual is carried along for the ride. It's no different in your company.

The specifics of the rewards that you offer are the same as what we've previously discussed. Know your people and what they care about and that part will sort itself out. What's important for our current consideration is that no person is left behind. Give copper for copper-quality work and gold for the superstars, but make sure that everyone gets something.

In this case, you'll find that it's not so much what they receive that makes a difference but rather the fact that you valued their personal contribution. When you do, you'll not only have the best warehouse team on the planet, you'll experience the proximity effect as people from all departments come together to enjoy the spotlight and ramp up their enthusiasm in the process.

# Swiftly Remove Those Who Work against the Common Good

This is an unpleasant topic but necessary nonetheless. You can do everything right and treat your people like superstars and still have the whole thing come crashing down on you because of a few negative people. The math may not make much sense until you realize that anger, frustration, and bitterness are just as contagious as enthusiasm, perhaps even more so. One poison pill can kill your entire group. Consequently, it's just not something you can afford to ignore.

People go through good times and bad. During the latter, we all tend to screw up a little. Certainly if you're going through a bad period in your personal life, you're going to have a hard time being bright and cheerful at the office. Other times, a situation at work will go differently than you'd expected and you'll have a hard time masking your disappointment.

These are not the people or situations I'm talking about. In such cases, you owe it to your staff to work with them so that they can turn their attitude around. If you throw someone overboard the first time they make a mistake, you're going to have a very lonely deck. The ones who don't walk the plank will ditch you the first chance they get. Those who do stick around will be afraid to take chances. If you want loyalty from your people, you have to give it in return.

Understandable mistakes and second chances aside, however, you should know that not everyone is a nice person. For whatever reason, and there are doubtless many of them, some people are just plain negative by nature. They tear down everyone and everything they can out of sheer instinct. It may be that they're truly talented at their job but they'll still kill your company deader than a doornail as they spread their discontent throughout the ranks.

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Some people just like to tear things down. Get rid of them quickly, before their discontent infects others. You're not being mean-spirited to the departed. You're providing a positive and pleasant work environment for everyone else.

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I personally advocate giving even these people the benefit of the doubt and a good, solid second chance. You won't see me offering a third. At the point where it becomes evident that they'll never change their stripes, they have to go. It's that simple.

We have a lot of labor laws in place to prevent people from workplace abuse or other unfair treatment. That's how things should be in a civilized world and those regulations should be adhered to. That said, if someone is slowly tearing your company down, being obstructionist in their work, causing trouble, or encouraging others to do so, find legal cause and then show them the door, without hesitation.

Sometimes it's not possible to flat out fire them. There are, however, a great many ways to encourage them to come to the same conclusion as you regarding their continued employment. This can range from not giving them the perks they want in order to make their job less attractive to networking outside your company so that they get a job offer elsewhere. Preferably a competitor you'd like to inconvenience.

There are plenty of ways to get rid of those who are actively and openly destructive. Follow the law and follow your conscience, but follow them to the door. These employees are hurting both the company and your good people. You have both a professional and moral obligation to protect both.

There's also a secondary value to this. In the old days, we put the heads of those who attacked our castles on poles and scattered them like posts in a picket fence beyond the walls. For those of you who didn't study foreign culture, that's the internationally recognized sign for "Do not disturb." When someone is actively and aggressively trying to tear down your company, their swift removal signals to other malevolent spirits that you will do the same to them without giving it a second thought. It also tells your people, loud and clear, that you're serious about protecting them from all threats, both without and within.

Getting rid of people is one of the worst parts of leadership. Nonetheless, if you're serious about maintaining harmony among your tribes, you do what you have to do.

# Shield Your People So That They Can Be Brilliant

A leader's job isn't to boss people around; it's to bring out the best in his people. You're part strategist, part organizer, part cheerleader. How you look in a poodle skirt is a topic best left for another day. Of all your responsibilities, however, none are more important than your role as protector.

The corporate world is one long exercise in unnecessary distractions. Where the maze of bureaucratic nuisance leaves off, petty office politics take over. From meetings and mindless paperwork to the backroom scheming of the ethically

challenged, it's a wonder anything ever gets done. Often, it doesn't. I knew a middle manager once who felt he wasn't being productive unless he was in at least six meetings a day. If his schedule was light, he roamed the offices looking for a pickup meeting. Hallways would instantly clear at the sight of him.

When your people are trying to get something done, the constant pull away from the work at hand can be devastating to both their productivity and attitude. There's nothing quite like sitting in yet another meaningless meeting instead of getting your job done, all the while listening to management complain that your job isn't getting done.

As a leader, it's your responsibility to stand between your people and the idiotic things that chew up their time. They rarely have the authority to refuse. You do, and so you must. Think of yourself as the secret service. Your people don't take a bullet for you. You take one for them. You have to keep them safe from corporate stupidity so that they can do their job for you.

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Be a superhero. Keep your people safe from corporate stupidity so they can do their jobs without distractions.

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In order to be effective at this, you have to keep your ear to the ground and always be alert for the next looming distraction. As a part of this process, you should let your people know to keep you informed about meetings, additional tasks, interdepartmental requests, corporate paperwork, and anything else that takes them off the job. Additionally, you need to stay in the loop where rumor, gossip, and politics are involved.

The only way you can be an effective shield is to be well informed. As you build an ever-better working relationship with your staff, you'll develop a rhythm of communication that will keep you abreast of what you need to know in very short cycles. As with other efforts on your part, they'll come to appreciate what you do for them. When there are meetings they need to attend or tedious paperwork that HR requires, they'll endure it with a better spirit knowing that if you didn't filter it out, it really is necessary.

Tribal warfare can also drag your employees away from the work at hand. It's not uncommon for departments to try to avoid a job by sticking someone else with the task. In some of the more unpleasant environments, conflict between departments can extend to attacking individuals, using them as a scapegoat, or creating other such trouble. Once again, forewarned is forearmed and it's your duty to immediately get your people out of the crosshairs. Tell them you've got this one, and send them scampering back to their offices. Then do whatever you have to do to either eliminate the incident or bring the fight to you and away from your people.

When your group sees that you've got their backs, a number of positive things will happen. Without a doubt, they'll be more productive because less of their time will be wasted. However, the benefit goes much deeper than that. As you bring your groups together and build a sense of unity and esprit de corps, you'll also be generating a well-earned loyalty. Nothing intensifies that feeling like seeing someone go to bat for you. If you ever find yourself in a tight spot, look over your shoulder and don't be surprised to see each and every one of your people armed to the teeth and ready to back you up. You don't get that by issuing orders. It's something you earn by looking out for others.

# Know the Work That You Lead

Cartoonists and comedians have made a good living fueled by nothing more than clueless bosses. I suppose it should be a bit troubling that they're so prevalent as to be a common bond. Nonetheless, it's hard to find a large- or medium-sized company without a fair collection of them. I left out small businesses because stupidity of that magnitude is usually fatal when you're just starting out.

I personally believe that I could double the profitability and productivity of some fairly large and well-known tech companies if they'd just allow me to fire everyone in middle management. Sure, we'd lose a few good people in the process, but from what I've seen over the years, they constitute massive layers of bureaucracy in many companies and do little more than pass paperwork from the level below to the level above. Well, that and roam the hall looking for pickup meetings.

Simply put, if you don't have a clue about the work your group is doing, please do us all a favor and go work for the competition. Granted, in a field that is technical by definition, it's not realistic to expect managers to be experts at the bits-and-bytes level. Ignorance, however, is completely inexcusable since most of it is due to laziness or disdain for those lowly creatures who do the work. I've met a lot of managers over the years who think the ability to summarize someone else's report is sufficient value to justify their position. In the real world, all it does is get in the way of those who are actually accomplishing something.

This is not to say that there's no value in leaders or a hierarchical structure. That's why I chose the word manager: to avoid confusing bureaucrats with those possessing leadership skills. A true leader doesn't sit around massaging reports from on high but rather takes an active interest in the work at hand.

You don't have to assemble circuit boards or write code to be a good manager. Nonetheless, you should educate yourself as much as possible on your own time so that you can hold an intelligent conversation with the people you lead. If a factory manager complains about poor socket tolerances for an integrated circuit slowing down the line, you should know what she's talking about. How else can you help her solve the problem? If one of your programmers suggests using a third-party library to add new functionality more rapidly, you'd better know the pros and cons of that decision.

In addition to buying some books or watching a few videos in your continuing education, spend some time out in the real world with those who do the actual work. Very few operations go exactly by the book, usually because the book is either poorly written, inaccurate, or incomplete. More often than not, it's all of the above. Even so, the show must go on. The people who make that happen are your worker bees. They're the ones who figured out the work-arounds, deciphered the unintelligible, and found faster and more efficient ways to get things done. To the untrained eye, their patchwork of life-saving techniques might appear to be sloppy work. Spend enough time with them, however, and you'll recognize genius when you see it.

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Get out in the field and observe your people and operations in action. Things rarely go "by the book" in the real world. You'll return to your office much wiser for the experience.

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Having operational knowledge allows you to make better decisions. It also educates you on who your most valuable resources and domain experts are. When your network goes down because some vendor pushed an automatic update that

killed the switches, you may have a series of cascading failures, each more complex than the next. If you know the work your people do as well as who has expertise in which area, you're often a phone call away from the person who can save the day.

Another thing you can do to improve your knowledge is to memorize a simple and easy-to-remember phrase: "I don't know." Be completely fearless in its use and you'll reap bountiful rewards. People love to share their expertise. Once you've lowered the walls and have indicated that you have no grasp of the situation and would be grateful for enlightenment, they'll trip over each other to bring you up to speed. You'll get an education, and they'll feel good that you value what they have to say. Everyone wins.

As with many of our other considerations, you get an added bonus from all of this. If you add it up, we probably lose decades of time each year from all the hours wasted in meetings with people who don't know what they're talking about but whose fragile ego requires that they pretend otherwise. Your people will love you for being honest. You'll also gain a lot of respect from people when they see you studying to better understand their jobs and taking the time to see what they do. It increases your credibility as a leader who's not afraid to get her hands dirty. In the business world, respect is a valuable currency.

# Be One of Your People

When you spend time in the trenches with your workers, you also build relationships that aren't possible when sitting in the ivory tower. Only the insecure believe that familiarity breeds contempt. In the tech world, we have more contempt for the phony and inept. Showing that you're human is okay as long as

you demonstrate the qualities of leadership that really matter. If you have a few personality quirks, we can live with that.

Some of the greatest generals in history would be quick to agree. Mark Antony was a respected Roman commander and yet beloved by the troops because they were the ones he preferred to hang out with. Alexander the Great enjoyed great admiration for the same reason. No one would suggest that these guys were weak or ineffective leaders because they didn't distance themselves from the rank-and-file. And it's probably a good idea that they didn't, considering that both tended to carry around sharp, pointy objects.

That said, you can't just blithely wander into camp with no awareness of the situation unless you want to cause more problems than you solve. There will be times in your position when you'll have to issue orders and expect them to be carried out whether they're popular with the gang or not. This means you can never lose your command presence for the sake of being one of the guys.

To integrate successfully, you need to be cognizant of the time, place, mood, setting, and whether or not you'll need to be on duty. This actually sounds like more work than it really is. In fact, commonsense will be your most useful guide. If you can truly relax, joke around, and have a little fun with your people, or perhaps listen to some stories of what they're going through in life, you'll find that they take you as you are. You don't need to put on airs or worry about what happens when you need to be in charge again. Just be yourself.

When the time comes to make decisions, issue directives, and take charge of a situation, you can act naturally in those cases as well. If you tell your group there's an insane deadline over which you have no control and you need the job done by Monday morning, you don't have to appeal to them as a buddy. You're the boss, that's the way the situation is. There's no need to behave any differently than you would have had you not

taken the time to get to know them. It's all about exercising appropriate behavior for the given situation.

Also, don't be afraid to spend time with your people off the clock. If you have hobbies in common, there's no reason you can't enjoy them together. When a few of the guys are having a cookout and invite you over for burgers, there's nothing wrong with enjoying the experience. You can't force people to become a family through company policy or phony gestures, but time spent together that's honest and sincere will build relationships with your people the same way they do with everyone else in your life.

It's also okay to talk shop when you're at social gatherings, as long as that's what everyone feels like doing. Remember, this is a creative industry filled with passionate people. The things we get paid to do at the office are often the things we do for fun at home as well. As long as you don't try to turn a social event into work, just follow the flow of the conversation and enjoy it wherever it goes.

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Don't be afraid to hang out socially with your tribe. Done right, you'll have fun, instill camaraderie, and learn more about your people—all without losing your "command presence" back at the office.

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As you get to know people on a more personal level, you'll have a significant advantage as their leader. You'll know who's having a fight with their spouse. You'll understand that the sleepy-looking person in his cubicle isn't lazy but rather has a child who's been up three nights with a cold. You can offer a little flexibility on the upcoming weekend because someone's child is graduating college or having some other once-in-a-lifetime experience. Tighter bonds and unencumbered communication lead to better management.

This can be a pretty-intense industry. Stakes are high, pressures are constant, and deadlines are often just plain silly. The people who play together stay together. If you're sincere about it and your people accept you as one of their own, you're going to be much more effective as a group. You might even just survive the insanity, thanks to the company of kindred spirits.

# Lead the Charge Personally

It's common for the people in charge to ask us to sacrifice for the good of the company. We're told we should give up our nights, our weekends, and often our relationships for the sake of the cause. Whether or not it's worth it depends on the gig. It's a different choice for everyone. What's constant is our disdain for those who ask us to endure great inconvenience and yet zip out of the office at 4:59 for a long weekend with their spouse at the beach while we work all weekend.

Nothing inspires like someone willing to lead by example. If what you're asking of me is difficult, your words will have a lot more weight if I see you walk the walk yourself.

There are a lot of deliverables in this industry for which the average leader is ill equipped to contribute. If your team is in the midst of hardware design for a new cell phone and you have no skills in that area, you're not going to be able to speed up production by rolling up your sleeves. You have to let your engineers do the job for which they've been trained. After all, that's why you hired them.

In such cases, you can still make a symbolic contribution. Lest you scoff at the intangible nature of a symbol, I'd remind you that some of the greatest moments in history have happened when people rallied around a symbol. To be sure, what one nation calls great, the neighbor calls a disaster, particularly if it

finds on the business end of a sword. Nonetheless, in matters of culture, religion, and nations, leaders both great and terrible have brought people together to accomplish great things through the power of symbolism.

That shiny little gizmo your team is working on may not be up there with events that change the world, but these principles apply regardless of the scale. If you ask your group to pull an all-night coding adventure and you stay there 'til dawn yourself doing any menial task you can perform, people will notice. Be the one who runs the errands, who orders the pizza, who does the testing, and who writes the boring reports. Fetch the coffee and run the cables. No matter what your people are up to, there's bound to be something you can do to make a contribution.

Of course, the real benefit is not the tiny bit that you moved things forward by your presence. In fact, on occasion you may be more in the way than helpful. What you're demonstrating to your staff is that you're willing to work just as hard and sacrifice just as much as they are. You may not make a great contribution, but come dawn you'll be just as bleary eyed as the rest of the crew. That won't go unnoticed. The next time you ask for that extra bit of effort and assure your team that it's urgent, they'll take you at your word. After all, if you're giving up your weekend just like they are, it must be.

Make sure you're the first to arrive, the last to leave, and never above even the most menial task. If there's an inconvenience, be sure that no one suffers it more than you. When you need the unbridled enthusiasm of the group and as much voltage as you can generate to get the job done, be the first one to turn the music up to 11 and dance like a crazy person on the nearest desk. You can't lead from behind. Get out there on the bleeding edge of what's happening and put your heart, body, and soul into the effort. It's the surest way to guarantee that others will do the same.

# Give the Credit to Those Who Did the Work

We touched on this briefly earlier in the chapter, but let's consider it more deeply. When the work is done and the last pot of coffee empty, it's time for your team to bask in the glow of its success. This is where many managers make a crucial mistake, whether out of ignorance or complete lack of integrity. We've all known people who issue commands, let others do the work, and then take complete credit for the success. This can range from out-and-out lying about who had the brilliant idea to burying the hard work of others beneath several layers of abstraction in a report to superiors.

No matter how it's done, the effect is the same. The people who worked the hardest, whose efforts made success possible, get screwed. No raise. No promotion. Not even a mention. They're brushed under the carpet as though they never existed. It doesn't take advanced training to predict the impact on productivity and morale. Both will plummet. To add insult to injury, after killing morale, this same manager will often reprimand them for their diminished output. It's not right, it's not fair, and it's unlikely to change as long as humans come in all shapes and sizes.

Of course, that's the dark side of things and as you might expect, it doesn't have to go that way. If you're a good leader, the success of your group will be due in part to your own efforts. Your people did all the heavy lifting, to be sure, but the ability to bring out their best is the contribution of a top-notch field commander. You deserve credit for your accomplishments. And yet, you should never take it.

You can't flip every switch and pull each lever. In fact, you may not even know how. You have a team of people with that expertise and those are their jobs. Without them, nothing

happens. Your guidance, inspiration, protection, and other contributions are, no doubt, an important part of them delivering the goods. However, if your people weren't there, your efforts would mean little. This is one of those times in the life of a leader when you just bow to reality and accept the nature of things. If you want your group to continue to assault posteriors and make note of the parties involved, you need to make sure that the spotlight shines on them and them alone.

With that in mind, you should deflect even the slightest amount of glory that comes your way, deferring it instead to all those people who lived on pizza, caffeine, and stale donuts for weeks on end in order to make it happen. We both know that you were there, too, but let's just keep that between us.

Since you've taken the time to understand the work you lead and know who has talents in which area, you can take it further still, highlighting the contributions that different people made to the overall success. Like a proud parent, your public face is one of appreciation and respect for what your people did, in every way you can show it. This naturally makes your group feel good, both individually and as a unit. It may also stun them into silence. In the dog-eat-dog world of corporate ladder climbing, someone who actively avoids taking the credit so that the rank-and-file can enjoy the acclaim is a rare thing.

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Sing your tribe's praises loudly and often. Its success is all the advertising your career needs.

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Lest you think that it's all sacrifice for the greater glory of the empire, cheer up. The way you treat your people speaks volumes about your character. Their success is a clear example of your leadership skills. If you're not the one running the company and are looking for a little upward mobility in your own career, be assured that those above you see you for what

you are. It's hard to find qualified leaders who are also honest, effective, and trustworthy. If you keep making your people look good, your collective success will take care of your career. The people at the top didn't get there by being stupid or unobservant.

# Take the Blame Yourself

One of the nice things about being in the world of high tech is the ability to create nifty devices. If you need to shield your people from distractions, you don't have to settle for one of those clumsy wooden things. We're geeks. We use force fields. Since we're creating one to our own specifications, let's give it a blackout mode while we're at it. When things go south, and at some point in your career you can be sure they will, flip the blackout switch and make sure no one on the outside can see what goes on in your group.

There are countless opportunities to screw up in this business. Technology is complicated enough as it is. Factor in human nature and sleep-deprived workers, and eventually one of your people will break something in a spectacular manner. The fate of the world may not hang in the balance, but with the ensuing fuss you'd certainly be forgiven for thinking that was the case. When it all goes terribly wrong, the citizens of the corporate world inevitably refer to rule number one—establish blame.

That's not a terribly productive attitude to have in the midst of a crisis, but that won't make people behave any differently. Since we're dealing with self-interest, the greatest concern of anyone within a city block of your little fireworks display will be making sure that they don't get blamed and have their career take a hit. Most feel that the best way to prove their own innocence is by trotting out the guilty party. It doesn't matter if they're really the one at fault. Anyone stupid enough to take

the fall will do. Since your people were the ones in the room when the sparks flew, you can guess who the prime candidates will be when the unethical start shopping for sacrificial lambs.

If you don't own a bulletproof vest, now would be a great time to run down to the local armory and snag one. You need to do two things that probably will seem very stupid. First, actively block any and all communications with your group. No one gets in, no one talks to them, no one sees what they're doing. If you're in the aerospace industry and can teleport them to Mars for the weekend, do it. Just make sure they're dressed warmly. The fact that you're actively interfering with the efforts of those looking to lynch your people is going to make them very angry. Of course, that anger will be directed at you.

Next, while everyone's yelling at you, ignore them. Take two steps to the left and calmly put yourself right in front of the bullet. Find the most powerful executive in the fray, the one calling the most loudly for heads on platters, and offer yours. Hey, you're the one who thought it would be great to get into leadership. You thought there wouldn't be any adventures?

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Taking a bullet for the group is one of the most noble—and smart—things you can do. The loyalty your people feel for you will double or triple overnight.

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Depending on the severity of the crisis as well as any political gain that competing tribes might see an opening for, you may well find yourself in a highly charged atmosphere. The thing to do at this point is keep your cool and tell it like it is. The screwup was your fault and yours alone.

In World War II, the Normandy invasion was a huge undertaking with great risk. Any number of things could have

gone wrong and turned one of the greatest victories in military history into a disaster of epic proportions.

Soldiers knew that each day could be their last. General Dwight Eisenhower, who was in charge of the entire affair, had a note in his pocket the day of the invasion. It simply stated that if things went wrong, it was his fault, and his alone. There's a reason we buried him as a five-star general.

The specifics of the situation will dictate how you frame things, of course. If everyone saw your guy trip over a cable and set the building on fire, there's no point denying it. Instead, you should just point out that over his strenuous objections, you told him to kick the cable out. You made the bad call, he executed it flawlessly. That's a silly example, but it's not a difficult approach to understand. At this point, you are master of the sword. No matter what comes at your people, you parry, you deflect, you whack them over the head with the blunt end, whatever it takes. You protect your people. When it's time to fall on the sword, that's your job description, not theirs.

Eventually, the screaming and pounding of chests will subside and everything will return to business as usual. Unless you work in a particularly harsh environment, you're still going to have a job. Chances are good that the worst you'll suffer will be a few superiors yelling at you for a while. That's just a paper cut in the life of a good leader. When the smoke fades and you give your people the all-clear, they'll go back to their normal routine again, too. However, after even one of these scenarios, they'll never look at you the same again.

# Summary

Leadership is about a great many things. In one way or another, most of them come down to loyalty. That's something that runs both ways. It's also one of the most powerful forces

in any group endeavor. All things being equal, and the world is certainly filled with talented geeks, a dedicated, tightly knit group will beat the competition senseless each and every time. Dedicate yourself to building a better life for your people, and there's nothing they won't do for you.

# CHAPTER
## 6

# Organization

## Build a Structure That Allows Your People to Be Ingenious

If yours is a small company, you have a number of distinct advantages. One of them is the lack of a stifling bureaucracy or deeply entrenched processes. Unless you bring in people who are very set in their ways, you don't have to argue with someone who patiently tells you that it's always been done this or that way. You're free to make up the rules as you go along.

Unfortunately, just as kittens become cats, small businesses aspire to become big ones. It's ironic that we eagerly trade in one of our most important advantages, the flexibility of the start-up, in order to attain success. History is replete with examples of small and nimble businesses transforming into large, lumbering behemoths that couldn't turn on a dime if their lives depended on it.

A young Bill Gates deftly maneuvered his way into an enviable partnership with IBM, setting the stage for a scruffy bunch of computer geeks to become one of the most dominant software companies on the planet. Today, Microsoft struggles to stay relevant in a world increasingly drifting from the desktop PC to mobile devices and online offerings. The company is perceived by many in the industry as being old, slow, and increasingly out of touch.

It would be a mistake to think this is due to a lack of talent. There are many bright, motivated people in Redmond, but they're hamstrung by the massive bureaucracy of a large, international corporation. In short, they're victims of their company's success. With any organization of that size, there are countless levels of management and just as many processes and procedures to keep them company. A decision that would take fifteen minutes in a small tech start-up could take months of committees, meetings, and memos in the halls of the corporate world.

We all want to succeed, and for companies that often means growth. It's important to remember, however, that the organizational structures you build to avoid chaos can just as easily turn into a prison that traps your best and brightest in a tiny little box, preventing them from delivering the innovation that you so desperately need to survive. Results are more important than structure. Organize accordingly.

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Structure helps you avoid chaos. It can also turn into a prison that stifles your best thinking and drives off innovators.

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# Make It Easy for Good Ideas to Reach Decision Makers

In the early years of my life as a career musician, the record industry hadn't yet fallen on its sword. The dream of every long-haired hippie guitarist on the planet was the same. Get a record contract, the one true path to fame and fortune. I was lucky. I turned down the only contract I was offered in New York and never signed a deal with a record label. If I'd done so,

I have no doubt that I would have been dead before I was thirty. It's not hard to envision my younger self driving an expensive sports car off a cliff like Bill the Cat, a bottle of tequila in one hand and a carload of strippers to keep me company.

As it happens, my good fortune in not becoming a rock and roll star served me well in later life. The experience of chasing a record contract is an excellent metaphor for the way most corporations are organized.

If you try to give your CD of awesome, world-changing music to a record label, the best you can hope for is to get it into the hands of someone fairly low in the food chain. What transpires next is a seemingly endless stream of people passing the baton to the next higher level. At every stop, the person has the power to say No. However, they lack the authority to say Yes and offer you a deal. You have to run the gauntlet of dozens of mere mortals before you ever get the chance to be heard by that one person who can make you a star. The odds of getting that far are slightly less than winning the lottery.

Every now and then we get a superstar, that incredibly talented musician who can sell millions of records. Unfortunately, that one person who could say Yes and sign our star to the label will probably never even know the candidate exists, let alone make boatloads of cash, because some flunky on the lower decks exercised the only power they had and told her to get lost.

It's no different in any sizeable tech organization. You have no idea how much money you've lost out on because that killer idea never had a chance to be approved. Had your own golden child decided to buck the system, walk into the executive suite, and pitch you the idea directly, security would throw her out of the building before she got anywhere near you. If you even heard about the incident, you'd probably just tell your chief of security what a great job he's doing in following the rules.

If you want excellence and innovation from your best and brightest, you need to rethink the way you structure things. Technology offers countless options for communication. If you're a decision maker, you need to take advantage of this to provide a clear path to reach you. You also have to make a change in your culture so that people know it's okay to speak to all those lofty, untouchable VIPs. If you play your cards right, you'll have a chance to hear all those million-dollar ideas and take action.

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Create a clear path to reach *you,* so you can entertain innovative ideas directly. You'll be amazed at all you've been missing.

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Of course, no matter what method you use to enable this communication, from the ancient suggestion box to any number of high-tech marvels, you're exposing yourself to the floodgates. The CEO of a multigazillion dollar corporation doesn't have time to wade through a thousand extra messages a day. You have to get more creative than that.

It would be far more productive to create buckets for these ideas, using whatever tools are most appropriate for your organization, and then train your decision makers to review them on a very regular basis. Often, it won't be worth the trouble. However, how much is one killer idea worth to you? You'll also get a lot of other practical suggestions that won't make you millions but will increase your profits by degrees. If you spend four hours a month for six months, that's three business days. If you could spend three days to get your hands on great new ideas, notions that might even transform your business, would that be a profitable use of your time?

Given the task of reviewing an idea bucket once a week, most managers will instinctively delegate it. They'll have an assistant

do triage, read through all the messages, and forward along the ones that seem worthwhile. If you succumb to that temptation, you've accomplished nothing other than changing the people who filter good ideas before they get to you. Roll up your sleeves. Listen to what the unwashed masses are saying. Unless you've hired a company full of idiots, they're saying some things you really want to hear.

Naturally, any implementation of this idea will by necessity include some training and a learning curve. If you've truly made it possible for good ideas from anyone to reach you, in the beginning a lot of people will send you very inane suggestions. This means you need to train them so that they know what kind of things will be valuable. That education will be both ongoing and iterative but it will be worth it. If you want people to give you brilliant, profitable ideas, teach them how to do it.

# Resist Complexity That Brings No Tangible Benefit

Of course, the same bits and bytes that enable us to become creative in our communications are also the culprits when complexity starts to get out of hand. While it's not unique to the information age, the advent of computers and other such high-tech gear makes it extremely easy to tie yourself, and your people, in knots.

Ancient Egyptians didn't have the massive amount of tangled conversations to cope with that those of us in the modern world have to slice through. There are some very practical reasons for this. If you wanted to distribute a new set of rules and regulations, you either had to painstakingly write them out on papyrus, one copy at a time, or perform a similar exercise with a chisel and a stone tablet. Either way, it was unlikely that

you were going to overwhelm your people with a never-ending series of complex instructions. They simply took too long to create.

Here in the modern world, you can click a couple of buttons and flood the entire planet with a never-ending stream of instructions, each more complicated than the one before. If people get frustrated and annoyed, you don't even have to worry about them dropping a stone tablet on your foot. Consequently, the larger a company gets, the more forms, procedures, and meetings the average person has to wade through.

You can find a good example of where you're headed by looking at governments. I'll use America as an example though any that's been around for a while would probably do. Admittedly, our nation is built on a somewhat complex structure to begin with—the trademark checks and balances that made our emergence unique We have the executive branch, populated by professional politicians. We have the legislative branch with elected officials who come from the same place. As you might imagine, these people often have a background in law. When you add the judicial branch to the mix, you can count on a similar percentage of lawyers, if not more.

We often refer to this entire group as lawmakers. Presidents and Congress crank out laws. Judges create an ever-growing stack of case law in their interpretations. The end result is law after law after law, creating a legal system that's worse than the Minotaur's maze. With each passing year, the complexity only increases. There's a perfectly good explanation for this.

If you talk to a bricklayer, you'll find that he has an ongoing interest in building things out of bricks. That's what he was trained to do. A software developer creates software. That's what he does. Lawmakers create laws. That's what they do. If you put a roomful of lawmakers in a room and expect them to

build a brick fireplace, you're a little out of touch with reality. Bricklayers make fireplaces. Lawmakers create laws. We do what we've been trained to do.

If you hire people and put them in a position to create rules, procedures, and other such complexities, each month you'll have more and more of them. You shouldn't be surprised at the results. This is what they do. As your company grows, it will become a morass of intertwined steps, often contradictory, that are required to perform an otherwise simple task. You can't get mad at a dog for barking, and you certainly can't admonish people for doing what you hired them to do. If you want to clear a path and make it easier for your staff to be productive and innovative, you'll have to clean up this mess yourself.

Become absolutely ruthless in eliminating any and all paperwork, meetings, procedures, and every other time-sucking activity that isn't absolutely required. Take a look at each of these processes and see if you can draw a line from them to an actual monetary benefit to the company. If you can't, they go.

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Be ruthless in eliminating meetings, paperwork, and procedures that add no value. Look for a direct monetary benefit. If you can't find one, axe the time waster.

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You can also look at what they're costing you by calculating the total time involved in each. This means finding out how long the average person actually takes to comply with a particular process. Once you know the cost in hours, do the math. Take the time and multiply it by the number of people involved. Now translate that time into payroll cost, based on what each person gets paid, for the hours they've spent. This gives you a monetary value. Compare that with the benefit you're

supposed to be receiving. Is this process creating a profit or loss?

Of course, in your quest to eliminate complexity that brings no value, you're going to encounter resistance. Any set of rules, regulations, or processes ultimately represents status and power for the person in charge. It's a part of their turf. They won't give it up willingly even if everyone else in the company wants to burn it in effigy.

At this point, you have a political battle on your hands and you should approach it accordingly. If you've ever tried to take a bone away from the dog that was gnawing on it, you'll have a good idea of what you're in for. Nonetheless, you can get nipped in the ankle or you can suffer the long, slow decline of a company strangled by its own red tape.

# Eliminate Unnecessary Layers

It's fun and exciting being a part of a sexy new tech start-up. It's also the minority of cases. Most of the time, people go to work for an existing company hoping they can make a positive contribution and an even-more-positive paycheck. It's certainly possible to do both, but it's worth mentioning that no matter how many hours a bleary-eyed entrepreneur puts in, you'll usually have to work much harder in the latter case. The enemy isn't time but rather the stifling structure of management.

With that in mind, take a look at a typical org chart. It's a hierarchical approach to organization. It's not a bad approach and has been used successfully for ages. It does, however, have some glaring weaknesses when applied to real-world applications. One of them is the tendency it has to encourage layer after layer of management. In the typical organization, it's just that much more sedimentary rock that your innovation has

to bore its way through before getting to the person who can authorize it.

There's nothing inherently wrong with a hierarchy. That doesn't mean it should define your entire organization.

You have other options. A matrix, that spreadsheet-like construct with its many to many relationships, can be chaotic in some scenarios and highly effective in others. A large flat level is sometimes very powerful. Insects work in swarms. Animals can run in parallel packs. Fighter pilots work in groups that consist of pairs. You have options.

There are a great many ways to organize things, and it doesn't have to be a single course. It can be a well-thought-out buffet. We live in the future. We have countless technologies that allow management styles that were never possible when physical presence and its effect on time and space was the constraint that drove the decision-making process.

If you're in the midst of a stifling bureaucracy, you may have to bend the rules a bit in your little corner of the world. If you're a start-up, you have no excuse for not doing your own thinking. If you have an excess of layers, you're smothering your company and stopping the flow of ideas dead in its tracks. You need to eliminate any and all groupings, layers, and management that aren't absolutely essential. Every one that you get rid of creates less resistance for your people, allowing them to rise to greater levels of productivity.

Layers are often tribes of their own. There are times when you want to unite them for the greater good. Occasionally, however, the best thing for your empire is to get rid of those pesky barbarians on the border, as they do little more than get in the way at best and actively cause trouble at worst. People don't give up power easily, but that doesn't always mean a fight. As in much of what we've discussed, if they're standing

to your left and you want them standing to your right, you simply need to make the latter a more appealing place to be.

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When contemplating a reorganization, remember: People are driven by self-interest. To achieve your goal, help them see the personal benefit of going along with a new structure or role.

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You can cling to the way things have always been done, and most companies will applaud your levelheaded thinking. If you want to break out of the pack and be a force to contend with, however, you'll need the courage to think and act in bold new ways.

Personally, I'd prefer to live forever, but that's an unlikely scenario. That being the case, if I've got to go, I want to be very much alive right up the point where I'm very much dead. That sounds like a lot more fun than slowly being suffocated. It's also makes for a much more productive journey.

# Use and Publicize a Common Language

If you want to communicate effectively, you need to understand what the other person is saying. It's also rather useful for them to be able to understand you. To accomplish both, you need a common language. If you speak only German and I speak only English, about the best we can do is entertain ourselves by making shadow puppets on the wall. As you might imagine, that's not going to be a very productive day.

Your company is a collection of tribes, and at minimum they each speak their own dialect. Often, they have their own

distinct language that's just short of incomprehensible to those beyond the borders. And yet, your company's departments are supposed to work together as one seamless, integrated whole. I hope you enjoy shadow puppets.

If you're an electrical engineer, your everyday conversations will include a great deal of technical jargon. When talking to people in your department, everyone will understand exactly what you're saying and, engineers being engineers, they will doubtless explain to you in mind-numbing, jargon-filled detail exactly what's wrong with your plan. Observations on the similarities between you and lesser-evolved species of mammals will vary according to the general disposition of your group.

The animal kingdom will also be involved if you use the same technical language when speaking to someone in accounting, as you'll immediately get a deer-in-the-headlights gaze. Their response will probably involve debits, credits, and depreciation, which will mean about as much to you as your jargon-filled ramblings meant to them.

The best case would be ending the conversation with the knowledge that each party had no idea what the other was saying. What happens more often is that those involved go back to their tribe with a wildly inaccurate description of what just took place. This rarely results in anything good.

If you want to unite your tribes and build an invincible empire, they have to be able to understand one another before they can play nice. Therefore, you need to create a common language that everyone in your organization can understand. Think of it as Esperanto for business.

Naturally, it's not practical to translate each and every domain-specific word into a common dialect. Neither is it important. When your accountants get down deep in the weeds to do their numerical voodoo, it's not important for the engineers to

follow along in a blow-by-blow fashion. Your universal language needs to be mid to high level, low enough for interdepartmental conversations to be productive, high enough to avoid creating pointless busywork for everyone involved.

To gain the proper perspective, take it up to thirty thousand feet and look at the company as a whole. Make note of your major departments as well as any subdepartments distinct enough to be tribal. Then, consider what they need to know about each other to work together as a unified whole. That's the level at which you need to be to review the different dialects, understand how each tribe thinks about a concept, and come up with a term for describing it that all can use.

For example, in the software world, API is a well-known acronym. It stands for application programming interface. If you're not a programmer, it's likely that none of this means anything to you. The sales department and upper management will both greet this term with empty stares. It refers to a set of programming calls exposed by a software system that allow you to use their functionality in your own application. Instead of having to write that code yourself, you can simply call someone else's system that already has it working.

I once used a news reader application on my tablet that depended on another company's technology to manage log-ins and security. One day, I tried to bring up the reader and found that my log-in was failing. It turns out that the company providing the log-in service changed the format of their response to something unexpected that my reader application couldn't understand; hence the failure.

Now, imagine that you have to explain to your management and sales teams why your application is broken. You could say that the third-party company changed their API to deliver HTML instead of JSON, which caused an unexpected parsing error that prevented you from completing the log-in. You could also stand in the conference room and do your best imitation of

birdcalls. They'll both have about the same meaning to your audience. You have to use a common language.

An API is, in essence, a contract. The software that provides it is telling you how to call it and promising that if you follow those instructions, you'll get a very specific result. If any of that changes, they've broken the contract and all bets are off.

Contracts are a concept that both salespeople and management understand. Therefore, instead of using the term API, you can replace it with the word contract when speaking to people outside the software group. You won't change the meaning of what you're saying, and you'll be speaking in terms that they'll understand.

With that in mind, you stand up in the same conference room and explain that the company who provides this service broke their contract without warning and provided different results than promised. The violation of this contract caused your application to fail, and you're currently in discussion with them regarding amendments to the contract so that you can move forward with a solution.

There are plenty of technical tools available to make a common document available and easily accessible, from intranet Web pages to cool little translator apps on your cell phone, should you be that industrious. The important thing is to strike a practical balance between a sufficient vocabulary to overcome real-world communication problems and a minimalist approach that creates no more work than necessary. Remember, not only does someone have to create the language, everyone has to learn it, or at least know how to reference the documentation in preparation for a meeting.

Once you have global terms to ease the flow of information and ideas between your tribes, you need to invest a little time in training your people. This includes not just the language but the rationale behind the initiative and why they should care.

There should be plenty of examples and perhaps even the occasional disaster that you can use to illustrate the existing communication problems and thus the need for a common language.

As in all efforts to create change, you'll need to take it a step further to show people how this new tool will actually make their job easier and more enjoyable. The elimination of frustration is always a good starting point, since that's an inevitable result of misunderstandings.

It's also a good idea to have a few dedicated interpreters in each tribe. By nature, some will be more enthusiastic about the notion of a global language than others, and this is a good starting point in your search for translators. In addition to understanding and enthusiasm, it's good to pick people who possess a degree of diplomacy and can keep their personal agenda out of the mix.

Creating a common language may seem an odd thing for a business to do, but you're not going to get anywhere in life by avoiding the strange and occasionally bizarre. If you want to live out there on the bleeding edge where all the glory is, you need to be willing to try new things.

# Build Clear and Simple Lines of Communication

One of the casualties of our typically hierarchical, layered approach to organization is clear and effective communication. Even if you have a common language that everyone can understand, it's of little use if the message can't make it from point A to point B.

It's not for lack of a well-defined set of channels. Every company has them. For HR questions, contact this person. To

contact technical support, e-mail [TheBigBlackHole@YourCompany.com](mailto:TheBigBlackHole@YourCompany.com). For customer service, dial 1.800.Plz.Hold. No matter what you want to get done, there's an official point of contact. Unfortunately, these lines are often clogged, understaffed, or just plain apathetic about your needs.

Other times, there may be an official way for you to accomplish your goal, but it will require you to fill out forms, take multiple steps, or go through a chain of several people. Even if you have the patience to jump through all these mindless hoops, you rarely have the time.

The solution to this problem is to develop your own points of contact. People who are focused on accomplishing their objectives will instinctively find the most direct and productive means of communication.

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In a hierarchical organization, build your own channels of communication with people who actually get things done or who can take action.

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With that in mind, let's look at some ways that you can create your own direct contacts. One of the first places to look is the interpreters we created when forming a common language. It's likely that the job of translating is going to fall to someone in the rank-and-file rather than a manager. This means they're easy to reach and will also be someone with whom you can relate.

Additionally, by their status as an interpreter, you know they're interested in communication to begin with. They'll have their finger on the pulse of their own group and have a sense of what's going on in others as well. As an informed source of

information, they can point you in the direction of those who can actively address the issue at hand.

Another good place to look is similar to the Watergate-era advice: "Follow the money." In your case, follow the work. When people adhere to the official channels and something actually gets done, it's unlikely that the point of contact is the person who does the work. Contacts will typically be managers or bureaucrats who do little more than relay the need down the line to someone who's actually productive. Depending on how level-infested your environment is, you may have to follow the message through several people. Ultimately, however, it will end up in someone's lap who will take action. That's the person you want to talk to.

When creating your personal list of contacts, you're looking for more than a phone number. To really be valuable, you need to build relationships. Sometimes this will involve water cooler conversations. Other times, it's someone you'll enjoy having lunch with. You might even meet people you'll want to spend time with after business hours. Be honest and sincere, having only those kind of interactions with the people you're truly interested in. If you keep each relationship in a comfortable place rather than offering phony and insincere friendship, you'll build something that will last and be of mutual benefit.

Not everyone is a social butterfly, and you don't have to be. The first contact can be as simple as introducing yourself, mentioning the issue you're working on, and letting the person know that you believe her to be a valued resource. That will get the conversation started on the right foot. From there, just let it evolve comfortably into a solid and dependable working relationship.

One last tip. When you talk with others, be sure you're ready, willing, and able to provide the same help to them as you're seeking. Let them know that you're happy to serve as their point of contact in your neck of the woods whenever they need

some help. One-way streets may be fine for avoiding traffic jams, but in relationships they never last.

# Make Each Unit Aware of   What All Others Are Doing

Tribes are organized by interests and abilities or, in the corporate world, the ability to perform a particular type of work. The end result is a group of people who have a fairly narrow focus diverting all their attention to the specifics of their job and group to the exclusion of all else.

The head of the company, on the other hand, needs to steer the ship. Consequently, he gets reports from all department heads. He needs to know what each is doing, but it's also important for him to understand how their efforts interact and affect each other. Much like an ancient galley ship, all the oars need to be pulling in harmony with each other or the ship goes nowhere. Rowing out of sync also causes paddles to collide, which tends to be a little hard on the oars.

Of course, your departments rarely have such a global perspective, so they're constantly engaged in a tug-of-war, consciously or without realizing it. There are finite resources in any company, and each group will want as much as they can get regardless of the cost to others. Much like sibling rivalry, each group will also think that they're the center of the universe and the only effort in the company that really matters. In other words, just like people, they're driven by self-interest.

In the tech world, a great example of this discord and the consequences it causes is the relationship between the geeks and the marketing department. Each have their own distinct culture and believe that the world revolves around them. They also have absolutely zero understanding of each other, with

disastrous results. This scene plays out in all of your departments in one way or another, with the same poor consequences.

The solution starts at a personal level by making your people understand how they take a hit when the company does poorly. Struggling companies can't offer much in the way of perks, or even job security, to their people.

Once you've sold your staff on the importance of interdepartmental awareness you begin work on bringing them together. Tribes come together grudgingly and only after great effort, so don't expect everyone to magically join hands and be one big happy family. Your ambition in the beginning should simply be good communication and knowledge of what each group is doing.

This can be facilitated to a degree from a high level by periodically communicating with your company as a whole and letting them know what each group is doing, where they're succeeding, and where they could use some help. This should be done in broad brushstrokes but with enough detail to make it real to your audience.

For example, marketing is working new territory that could result in a 25 percent increase in market share. Accounting is increasing their billing and collections efficiency, resulting in better cash flow and thus more resources available for departments. In each case, it's necessary to show the importance of the group to the whole while relating the benefit of the individual to the success of the company.

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Don't be afraid to shine the spotlight on your group. Show in a companywide e-mail, for example, how your group's recent gain in efficiency or capability will benefit the entire organization.

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Interdepartmental communication can often be improved more by the rank-and-file than by managers, who tend to be driven by personal ambition and a desire to increase the power of their group. Once again, your interpreters are a great resource for keeping abreast of each department's efforts. Additionally, the direct, point-to-point contacts your people make to help them get their jobs done are yet another back-channel through which your tribes can communicate.

On the battlefield, the success of generals depends on their ability to coordinate large groups in an effective manner. Your cavalry isn't going to be terribly effective if your infantry keeps poking the horses with their spears. If you really want your company to be productive as a whole, you need to make sure your groups aren't constantly bumping into each other. The best way to accomplish this is for everyone to know where the other groups are and what they're up to.

# Maintain an Explicit Chain of Responsibility

Everybody wants to be in charge. No one wants to take the blame. We learned this as children and it's little different in the grown-up world of business. It's common to hear people talk about the chain of command, and it's usually easy to see it in place. That's because people are always willing to stand up and be counted if it means they get to boss others around. What's a bit murkier is the chain of responsibility. It's not the same thing as command.

You can't spend much time in the corporate world without seeing instances of managers who are eager to take credit for a project's success. Should things go sour, you won't see them standing up offering a sincere mea culpa. Instead, they'll be the loudest voices in the meeting while offering in great detail

the reason that the fault lies with someone else. This is particularly true when more than one tribe is involved.

It's not a difficult concept to grasp. From time to time, a crime makes the news that involves multiple agencies. Anytime you have the FBI, ATF, and state and local police all involved in a situation, you can be sure there's going to be a tussle over who's in charge. Even if there are official rules that state which agency has command in a given situation, on the ground you'll find that opinions vary. When you've got a bunch of bad guys serious enough to call in such an impressive array of law enforcement resources, it's probably obvious that this is a bad time to be arguing among yourselves.

In the highly political world of business, this situation repeats itself with distressing frequency. A project of any significance is going to involve more than one department. Within any given department, you may also have numerous tribes. When such groups come together to get something done, there's often a struggle over who's going to be in charge of the project.

Sometimes an individual will prevail. Other times, for political reasons, it will be left up to each department to be in charge of their own results, and one or more managers at a higher level may be involved in running the show. As usual, it's all fun and games until something breaks, at which point we get into the finger-pointing business.

The problem with lack of responsibility is twofold. The person trying to deflect blame is going to generate a lot of conflict and animosity through accusations and other attempts to pin the tail on the scapegoat. Meanwhile, as all this positioning is taking place, the project is in flames and no one is even looking for a fire extinguisher.

What people tend to forget is that accountability is another form of power. When it all goes wrong, the person who can stand up and claim responsibility for the failure also has a

chance to voice the second half of that sentence. They'll tell you, Yes, the failure was their fault and furthermore, here's how they're going to fix it.

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Take responsibility. It's a form of power that people respect. It also gives you an opportunity to fix the problem and take the credit you deserve.

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You can't always count on people to take the bullet. Consequently, it's your responsibility to make sure that everyone knows who's responsible for the outcome of a project in no uncertain terms. The easiest way is to define the results that you're expecting and then tie individual people to each of the results, one at a time. Make sure they know that no matter who's in charge of the project, they're in charge of the fire extinguishers.

In this business, if you don't have things going wrong from time to time, you're just not trying to accomplish anything worthwhile. Failures happen. Don't just have a plan for accomplishing a task. Have a plan for when things fall apart by making sure that there's an explicit chain of responsibility.

I'll let you in on a little secret that you can pass along to the reluctant. The guy who succeeds gets applause, but it's the guy who saves everyone from the brink of disaster who gets the standing ovation.

# Give Leaders at Every Level Power and Autonomy

While leaders tend to be the ones who like being in charge, some like it a bit too much. This can range from a reluctance to

give their people breathing room to flat-out micromanagement. This is more than just an irritation for those who endure the indignity. It's a serious throttle on the ability of your groups to deliver results.

It's important to know the work that you lead. It gives you the ability to see inside the box and have a sense of how things are going in addition to earning you the respect of those doing the work. When directing other leaders, however, there's an additional consideration. You have to be able to let go, which is often made all the more difficult by your knowledge of the inner workings.

Because you understand what's involved in a given task, you might be inclined to offer directions on how the job should be done. This isn't completely out of bounds, since you are in fact the one who's in charge. Nonetheless, it's a very bad idea.

By specifying how your people should go about their work, you're weighing them down with your personal limitations and blind spots. No matter how hard you try, you'll never know as much about what's going on in a group as the person in charge. If you do, you've hired the wrong person.

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Tell people what the task or the goal is. Don't tell them how to do it. They'll surprise you with their ingenuity, and they'll respect you all the more as someone who leads rather than micromanages.

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Long before I succumbed to the allure of the electric guitar, I spent many years as a kid playing the trumpet in various school bands and orchestras. In my senior year of high school, I finally got to play in the stage band. It was the premier gig, a small group that mirrored the instrumentation of a 1940s-era big band.

In his youth, the band director had worked as a road musician, playing songs by Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, and composers of that period. In fact, he was the leader of that band, so he personally auditioned and hired all of his musicians.

His music education had been comprehensive, so he could play every instrument in the band. Consequently, he had a standing policy. If the person auditioning couldn't outplay him by a country mile, he wouldn't get the gig. An accomplished player himself, this leader intentionally made himself the weakest member of the group. In so doing, he was assured that his act would be excellent.

If you're smart, you checked your ego at the door when hiring the leaders who report to you. Because they specialize in the area for which they were hired, by definition their expertise should go much deeper than yours. Presumably, they've also demonstrated good leadership qualities. That being the case, the best thing you can do is tell them the goals and deadlines, ask what support they need, and then make sure they know that it's their show from here on out.

Think of your leaders as you would a starship captain. While there's a chain of command in every organization, the captain of a ship is entitled to a significant amount of leeway when it comes to the daily details of managing the crew. Should that ship be named *Enterprise*, chances are good that it will spend long periods of time wandering the galaxy in areas that aren't conducive to instantaneous, blow-by-blow communications. When things happen fast and a decision has to be made on the spot, it's the captain's prerogative, a right respected by all but the most thickheaded of superiors.

By the same token, whether your favorite was the brash young man or the savvy, balding Brit, many of their leadership qualities were the same. A good captain knows when the situation requires contacting people higher up on the chain of command to obtain guidance and won't hesitate to do so.

When the people in charge have broad discretionary powers and the ability to think on their feet, you'll find that the qualities for which you hired them pay dividends time after time. Whether there are minor challenges or their project slams into a wall at Warp Nine, the person you trusted with the job is the most qualified person in the room to make that spur-of-the-moment decision or come up with creative, often-unorthodox solutions. If you try to put yourself in the middle of that situation, all you're going to do is slow down the problem-solving process while the leader explains his rationale to you. If it's time sensitive, you might even be directly responsible for the subsequent failure.

There's a reason you hired these leaders. Trust them, or fire them and hire someone you do trust. When you express faith in their ability to handle anything that comes their way, they'll dig deeper than ever before to succeed rather than let you down.

# Design Rules That Can Be Broken

It's unheard of for a company to chug away day after day and never hit a bump in the road. The market is always in flux, your competitors are nipping at your heels, and if Murphy doesn't yank the power cord out of the wall every now and then when you're not looking, he's simply not earning his pay. Planning for success is easy. Building an organization that can gracefully handle failures is much more challenging. These are also the companies most likely to succeed.

When the lights go out, it's not the leaders who issued all those rules and regulations who have to deal with the ensuing chaos. The people down in the trenches are the ones reaching for a flashlight. No matter how sensible a mandate may seem when you're writing it, the true test is how well it performs in a crisis.

Such adventures often defy prediction, or you would have avoided them in the first place. Therefore, the tighter the constraints, the more likely your people will fail to effectively solve an unexpected problem. It's difficult to grab a flashlight while wearing a straightjacket.

When you're putting together your policies and procedures, you should take a minimalist approach. There are some rules that absolutely must be followed to the letter or undesirable consequences will result. These often involve HR compliance and other legal matters as well as safety issues. These all go into your bucket of absolutes and should be conveyed to your people as such. Everything else should be approached in the same manner as the pirate's code in the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*. They're not rules. They're more like guidelines.

This doesn't imply that you have to fly the Jolly Roger over your building, although that certainly worked for Steve Jobs and the Macintosh team. Rather than a culture of lawlessness, what it implies is an atmosphere of flexibility where the most important consideration is getting the job done.

As you consider your rules, take everything that doesn't fall into the imperative category and perform both a worst-case and a most-likely-case scenario on what would happen should the rule be broken. If serious consequences result, toss it into the absolute bucket. Otherwise, it's a guideline. Your people should be trained to follow these guidelines by default, as presumably they're a well-tested path to success. However, it's important that they know that there will be no public beheadings should circumstances require them to get creative.

It's not enough to tell them that they can break the rules. You have to make sure they believe you. People who feel they'll be punished for the slightest deviations will never take risks. You need people willing to take chances. If you don't have them, you're guaranteed to suffer a series of mandatory failures

brought on by people who followed the rules even when it was clearly catastrophic to do so.

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> If people are never allowed to break the rules without getting punished, they will never, ever take a chance. Without risk taking, the organization will wither and die.

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When buying or creating your internal tech systems, you should build in as much flexibility as possible. You need to have manual work-arounds that will allow you to solve problems and accomplish tasks if Murphy reaches for the power cord. You don't want smart people to be unable to get things done because the computer won't let them.

If it makes you twitch to think of opening up your systems with overrides, work-arounds, and other flexible notions that allow your people to circumvent the system, I would offer two suggestions.

First, fire all of your people immediately and hire a completely new batch. You've obviously made some very poor choices if your level of trust is this low. The second idea is perhaps more practical. Instead of putting all that effort into locking down your procedures, pay more attention to tracking who does what. This is easy enough to do using  Web sites and other software systems, and there are manual counterparts for noncomputerized procedures. The purpose of this tracking isn't to assign blame or yell at people.

If you've provided the ability for people to use their talents, circumvent the rules, and solve problems, some will make mistakes. Others will abuse the ability, ignoring the procedures that would be the most appropriate. If you know these details, you then have the ability to train away your problems. Take each problem child, show her the difficulty her actions cause,

and then teach her the most effective way to perform the task in that particular situation. You'll maintain the flexibility you need for those days when Murphy is on the job while at the same time improving the quality of your staff.

By focusing on training rather than constraints, you'll also create an environment where no one is afraid to be creative in tackling even the most thorny issue. Over time, your people will come to know that the consequences for making a mistake involve guidance, support, and encouragement rather than a long walk off a short plank.

# Never Create a Foolproof System

It's the dream of many businesspeople to build a foolproof system. There's a financial motivation behind this, as it implies that if your way of doing business is immune to mistakes, you can hire the absolute cheapest labor on the market to perform the work. There's only one problem with this line of reasoning. If you automate and constrain your processes to the point where even a fool can do the job, you will by definition have fools working for you. That's not exactly a competitive edge.

This sort of thinking encourages hiring from the bottom of the barrel. Without a doubt, different positions require different training and degrees of expertise. No one would suggest that you need to hire someone with a master's degree to empty your trash every night. Those people don't come cheap, so you're paying a premium that isn't required for the task at hand.

On the other hand, trying to arrange your business so that you can hire minimum-wage workers will train you to think of your staff as mindless cattle. While there are simple jobs that don't require complex skill sets or lofty wages, a chain is only as strong as the weakest link. If you fill the room with nothing but

weak links, you're mandating poor performance at best. At worst, you're setting yourself up for crisis after crisis. Livestock isn't terribly graceful under pressure.

Even if you hire minimal skill sets for low wages, it's worth mentioning that many who come to work in that capacity are far from stupid, so now you have two problems. You're not only doing your level best to weed out any truly talented people, but when you fail and manage to get someone with a clue, they're not going to stick around very long. Bright people don't like being treated like a bunch of stupid cows. They'll find greener pastures, most likely in the nearby fields of your fiercest competitor.

When people think of foolproof systems to use, they most often design them for things like customer service, technical support, and other such groups. In other words, a critical point of contact for customers who are already experiencing problems is going to be a person you hired because they were cheap and possessed no specific skills. When you hire someone and tell them to click the mouse, read what's on the screen, and avoid getting creative, that's all you'll get.

Now think like a customer. Do you really care why you have some inept creature on the other end of the phone who's probably better suited for dinner than problem solving? Your foolproof system has enabled you to hire fools, and it's very likely that you've put them in some of your most visible positions.

With this approach, you're going to lose customers and money. You'll never know why. Paying customers who dealt with idiots, got disgusted, and consequently went over to the competition aren't going to call your CEO to say why they left. They'll just quietly fade back into the mist. You'll never know how many left and even if you do, you'll never know what problem to solve to keep from losing more. The only thing you'll know for

certain is that your company is bleeding cash and you can't find the leak.

There's just no substitute for a capable, motivated, and inspired human being when it's time to get the job done. This is one of those times when long-term thinking triumphs over its short-term counterpart. On paper, it looks like you're saving a lot of money on payroll each year by building a foolproof system and hiring the cheapest labor you can find. Several years down the line, when your financials look like a bone that's been chewed on by far too many dogs, the wisdom of that decision will be questionable.

# Summary

Organizational concepts should provide structural support for your people so that they can be brilliant. Don't let them evolve into a stifling or restricting prison that traps talented workers into the same poor performance day after day. Given the opportunity, most people like to succeed. It fires them up and encourages ever-greater effort. Consequently, one of your goals should be to actively eliminate the bureaucracy and complexities of the average company and clear the way for people to get things done.

Don't be afraid to break new ground. We have tools and technologies at our disposal today that were the stuff of science fiction even a mere fifty years ago. Forget about the way things have traditionally been done and get creative. Find new ways to organize for the new era in which we live.

# Mobility

Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.

The only constant in the business world is change, and it seems to happen at an ever-increasing speed as we move further into the information age. You would think that this would inspire companies to be fast, quick thinking, and maneuverable in order to keep up and stay relevant, but even in the forward-thinking world of tech, the landscape is clogged with a great many huge and lumbering corporations.

When Genghis Khan rose from the steppes of Mongolia to build the greatest land empire in human history, he built his army from nomadic horsemen. That doesn't sound terribly exciting in and of itself until you compare it to other armies of the day. While most armies had some percentage of mounted troops, the vast majority were made up of foot soldiers. The people of the steppes, on the other hand, were horsemen by nature. That meant their army was one gigantic cavalry unit. As it turns out, the Mongols did pretty well for themselves. Having a collection of highly mobile resources is a significant advantage, in business as in battle.

In an industry that seems to move at the speed of electrons, mobility is everything. The idea of a couple of guys in a garage who build something and change the world is woven into the very fabric of our identity. Long ago, small, furry mammals rose to power even though the big and scary-looking dinosaurs seemed to be invincible. The world of technology has had its

own moments of climate change, and, in a similar fashion, many companies that looked too big to fail suddenly found themselves surrounded by their small, furry counterparts. (If you think I'm kidding about the furry part, you've clearly never seen a picture of the original Microsoft employees.)

The rule of survival in our world is very clear. If you can't adapt to change, you're toast. Of course, as with all complex ecosystems, that works out just fine. After all, the competition has to have something to go with their breakfast.

# Foster a Culture of Mobility

Many people are uncomfortable with change. Sometimes, it's because they finally have their nest feathered and they don't want something screwing it up. Other times, they're just plain lazy and don't want to go to the trouble of learning something new. People also fear the unknown. However, all of these things are highly dependent upon the culture.

A medieval European villager would have hated to be forced to move all the time. They built houses, grew crops, and built a life on one specific piece of land. For the most part, this is where they were born and where they died. They did move from time to time, but it was usually because marauding invaders ran them off their land. History tells us that they were none too pleased about this sort of thing.

In contrast, a Mongol was nomadic by nature. Housing was portable and their culture was built on the back of a horse. They moved from place to place based on the seasons, available resources, and whether or not someone else was shooting arrows at them. In the days before Genghis Khan, the tribes were somewhat less than united.

Despite vastly different cultures, these two groups had something in common. Both were happy with their lifestyles.

Life inside castle walls would have been just as unpleasant to a Mongol as life on the run would have been for an English villager. If we transplanted them into modern times and handed them the tools of technology, the Mongols would surely be the happiest. At least until you asked them to wear a suit and tie.

Tech moves fast and change is a constant. You may not care for horses or barbarians, but if you want your company to survive and thrive, you'd do well to adopt the perspective of our nomadic friends. This is something you should consider at hiring time as well as in the atmosphere you cultivate in your organization. No matter what corner of the industry you work in, a change is gonna come. Depending on whether you have villagers or nomads, your people will either be happy or uncomfortable about this. Which attitude do you think will serve you better?

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Those who are most adaptable and flexible will thrive in the tech world. In this environment, nomads are much happier than farmers. They also don't get as much dirt in their keyboards.

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The best way to ensure that your staff has the most flexible attitude is to hire the right people in the first place. Tech is particularly well suited to drawing the people you need. It's fast, it's exciting, and there's always something new. You want people who love the pace, the change, the challenge. This applies not just to your geek department but to all aspects of your organization. If your accounting group is a bunch of grumpy villagers, your finances will have a hard time keeping pace with the needs of your growing business. In every interview, sell the excitement and weed out those who don't share it with you.

In managing people, you have to continually promote the spirit of mobility. This means not only adapting to change quickly but also developing selective amnesia about the way things were done in the past. If an old approach still works well today, keep it. If it's no longer relevant or keeping pace, replace it with something new and don't shed a tear.

You should work hard to change old and outdated attitudes. Make people put a dollar in the tip jar when they trot out the tired old line "This is how things have always been done" as justification for their actions. Use the money to throw a party when you encounter your next success, and make sure that all the contributors get the best seats. Mobility is a way of life. You have to sell it.

A mobile culture also extends to how you run the farm. Adopt an attitude of flexibility about what hours people work, where they work from, and what tools they use to get the job done. If you build the right team, they're going to have ideas that will make you even more adaptable. Listen to what they say and embrace every idea that seems workable. They won't all pan out, but your willingness to try the ideas will only make your people that much more creative in their solutions.

Your successes come from your people. Build a workforce that takes pride in mobility, and you'll soon find that you have all the advantages that come from an army full of cavalry.

# Be Quick on Your Feet or Be a Target

As any zebra on the African plains can tell you, lions don't attack the strong, fast, and maneuverable. They prey on the weak and the slow. This is why you'll often see zebras hanging out at the local gym after work, pumping iron, and doing

footwork drills. It's no different for your company. If you can't move quickly, you're going to be an easy target for your competitors every time the industry changes. Next time you're at the gym, ask the zebras what that feels like. They'll doubtless have some rather pointed observations about teeth marks and posteriors.

People often think that training in the martial arts is all about slugging it out with your opponent. In fact, the champions of boxing are often defined by how much punishment they can take. Those who train in other arts, however, tend to share the zebra's point of view. Rule number one is simple. Don't get hit. Who cares how many ribs you can break on the other guy if you get a couple of ribs busted yourself? Better to avoid the injury altogether, maneuver into an advantageous position, and then deliver the knockout blow. It's a lot less wear and tear on the body parts.

The holy grail of the start-up world is to come up with some clever new idea that no one has thought of before. It's better still if it suddenly redefines the entire playing field. That said, it's rare for someone to have a completely novel idea. More often, several companies are trying the same thing with varying degrees of success until a dominant player emerges. When that happens, it can be fatal for everyone else.

Once upon a time, Myspace was a popular destination on the Web. Facebook came along and made it completely irrelevant. How deeply entrenched is your company in both products and process? If a nine-hundred-pound gorilla suddenly shows up on your doorstep, you'd better be fast on your feet or bad things are going to happen.

Many companies are one-trick ponies. For instance, Twitter's claim to fame was the promotion of 140-character messages, something that fit nicely into the world of mobile phones. Like any fresh arrival in tech, it was cool because it was shiny and new. Ours is not a static world, however, and sooner or later

someone will come up with a new gizmo that will quickly relegate Twitter to the status of Myspace if they only have one chip in the game.

Are you a one-trick pony? Consider what would happen if your primary product or service suddenly fell out of favor, relegated to the status of old technology. If that's the only iron you have in the fire, you're history. One way to stay light on your feet is to constantly look to the future. This means coming up with a continual stream of new ideas and initiatives. When you see a threat to your primary source of income, you'll already be positioned to dodge the bullet and shift your resources and momentum to a new direction.

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No matter how much hype and buzz it generates at the start, a company that's a one-trick pony doesn't last very long. You must constantly be working on the next big thing or risk being left behind.

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In addition to your offerings, take a look at the way you do things and evaluate your responsiveness and flexibility. How many steps does it take you to make a change in response to market conditions, threats from a competitor, or any other major shift in your world? For every unnecessary step, you can be sure that the competition is gaining on you.

Talent is a major resource when developing high-tech products. The diversity of your team's abilities is another factor to consider when considering your responsiveness. If their skills are highly specialized, that can be a competitive advantage when things are going well. When you need to shift gears in a hurry, however, you may find that there's little else they can do. This means you're dead in the water, which is rarely a good position to find yourself in.

The adaptability of your staff is also an important consideration. If you suddenly kill a major project because of a turn of events and reassign people to something new, do their brains need to reboot or can they shake it off and dive into a new project with the same intensity and enthusiasm?

Mobility is an important set of muscles that your company needs to survive. Like any muscle, they become stronger with continual exercise. The crucial consideration isn't the effort exerted on the new project but rather the decision to make it a priority in the first place. If you want to be fast and maneuverable, get your company to the gym. The zebras are already there. So are your competitors.

# See Trouble Coming and Be Gone Before It Arrives

Military aviation has improved a lot since the early days of pilots dropping grenades out of the open cockpit of their biplanes. Modern jets come with missiles, machine guns, bombs, and a host of high-tech gadgets to hide their plane while spotting the bad guys. In the days of World War II, fighters slugged it out with machine guns, each doing their best to get on the other guy's tail and pepper him with lead.

Today, if you find yourself in a gunfight, it means you've overlooked several key opportunities. You should have taken the other guy out with a missile from miles away, long before he ever saw you. The problem with machine guns is that in order for you to be close enough to nail your opponent, you have to be close enough for him to shoot back. Naturally, that's a situation you'll want to avoid.

You'd think that being in the technology business, we'd have every possible opportunity for insight and thus never be

surprised. With that in mind, it can be a little baffling to look back over some of the more impressive flameouts of our time.

The music industry apparently never saw the Internet coming. I'm not really sure how you can miss the business equivalent of a cloud of locusts headed your way, but they did. Clinging doggedly to the way things had always been done, perhaps they felt invincible and never realized just how much trouble was on the horizon. The problems brought about by the digital duplication of songs, commercial piracy, rampant file sharing, and related issues don't have a clear and simple solution, but these guys never even tried to get out of the way. They just stood there while a plague of noisy bugs chewed the last stitch of their clothes off. How embarrassing.

At other times, the impending disaster wasn't quite as obvious but the response was baffling just the same. There was a period in the history of all things techie when no corporation would consider outfitting their people with anything but a Blackberry. Like Microsoft's dominance in the world of business computers, Blackberry had a stranglehold on the market for what was, at the time, considered high-tech cell phones.

Unfortunately for the company, one day Steve Jobs stood on a stage and offered his trademark for one last thing. It was a new kind of cell phone. Actually, it was a pocket computer that also made phone calls. There was no keyboard. In its place was a touch screen that could morph the device into a wide range of tools. The iPhone took the market by storm, and we never looked back.

It's not surprising that a company came out with something new. The curious part was the response offered by Blackberry, then known as Research in Motion. With truckloads of revenue from its dominance in the corporate world and its team of highly talented geeks, its response to the new era of smart phones was . . . none. Blackberry kept putting out the same kind of phone for quite some time. When it did manage a

touch-screen smart phone, it was too little, too late, and the company faded into irrelevance.

How many lookouts do you have in your company, and how powerful are their binoculars? It's not a question of whether or not the landscape will change to threaten you, only how long you have before it happens. If you're going to live long enough to enjoy the ride, you have to be ever vigilant, taking every threat seriously, both large and small. Remember, the dinosaurs probably didn't worry much about small, furry mammals, but we know how well that worked out.

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The music industry is living proof that very smart people can see trouble on the horizon and stare at it, frozen, until it runs them over. Make it your job to point out the change that will eliminate your company unless you act. You'll get a better reception if you also have a solution. Prophets of doom are never popular. Problem solvers are.

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Additionally, you should spend time in the gym with the zebras as they practice their footwork. It's not enough to see trouble heading your way. You have to make sure your people know how to react. I'm willing to bet Blackberry's engineers could have built something very cool and competitive, but the geeks don't get to call the shots. High-level managers do. That means it's up to you to make sure your departments always have the engine running and ready to turn on a dime and tackle whatever challenge they face. After all, if you think zebras are fast, imagine what a high-tech sports car could do.

# Be In and Out before the Enemy Knows What Hit Them

The American Revolution and our war with the British Empire is a classic example of people clinging to the way things have always been done with disastrous results. Since the advent of gunpowder, the method of warfare in Europe had evolved into a bizarre battle of attrition where two armies lined up in nice, neat, and unprotected lines and then just stood there shooting at each other.

I've had the pleasure of staring down the barrel of a loaded gun, and I can assure you the last thing on my mind was presenting a polite and inviting target. The American Indians obviously felt the same way. You wouldn't catch them standing there in the open. They hid behind rocks and trees and picked off the enemy at will. By the time the British had a line on their position, it was too late. Their opponents had already vanished.

For many years, the development cycle in tech was one of building a large, significant product and delivering it after one or two years. As fast as things change today, that creates a great deal of vulnerability. Additionally, if you're building a big product, chances are good you're going to have big competitors. If you're a gaming company, do you really want to build yet another console and enter a nose-to-nose slugfest with Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo? After years of development, you'll enter the marketplace only to discover that your competition is deeply entrenched and quite prepared for you.

Some companies take a different approach. Rather than lining up for a pitched battle, they take their games to mobile devices such as phones and pads. Consumers have a limit to the amount of hours they can play games, and a similar cap on the money they will spend. If you're going after those dollars, you're competing with everyone else, including the major gaming consoles. Rather than trading blows, these mobile gaming companies hit their competitors with smaller blows and from a variety of directions. Angry Birds made a lot more

money attacking from this angle than they would have by developing their own hardware and trying to pry users away from the major players.

Take a look at the consumers as well as the competitors in your market. Are you arrayed in fixed battle lines with well-armed opponents, trading volleys and hoping the other guy runs out of bullets, or people, first? Take the time to look for less obvious targets as well as the opportunities for quick, iterative strikes. If you can't hit 'em where they're not, you can at least nip at their heels and be gone before they kick at you.

One such target of opportunity is competitors who have large offerings with long release cycles. Instead of trying to match them with a huge, feature-laden product release of your own, consider the possibilities of breaking your products and services down into bite-sized chunks. While they're taking a year to get their next release out, you could have half a dozen product launches of smaller but attractive offerings.

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There are a great many ways in which to compete with big, lumbering giants. Whatever you do, don't go toe to toe with them. They'll club you into the ground. Instead, throw rabbit punches and take off before they can swing around in your direction.

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If you have the creativity at hand to come up with numerous different ideas, that's great. However, one way to approach the notion of fast, small skirmishes is to look at the feature set of your core offerings and break those down into discreet products that you continually pepper your competition with. Not only will you be constantly bringing out new and exciting things for your customers to enjoy, together they will fall under the conceptual umbrella of the large, monolithic products you're competing with. Consequently, those half-dozen

products can suddenly look at each other, flash a toothy grin, and with the flip of a switch, network together to transform into a larger, more powerful entity.

Don't stand toe to toe with someone and trade blows. Learn to bob and weave, deliver your strikes, and then be back out of range before anyone can touch you.

# Maintain Flexible Structures

General Patton once observed that fixed fortifications were monuments to the stupidity of man. His reasoning was that if mountains and oceans could be overcome, so could any obstacle created by humanity. This is just as true in business as it is on the fields of battle.

Tribes often take a monolithic approach to their efforts, building specialized teams wrapped in a tight control structure and protected from other tribes by the tangled bureaucratic equivalent of barbed wire. By digging in and creating a well-defined, if often complex, approach to delivering a product, they're garnering status and power with hopes for job security thrown into the mix.

It's not an unreasonable approach and would work just fine if the outside world never changed. When it inevitably does, however, what you have is a company that can't seem to get out of its own way to respond to new market conditions. If you've built your world around the Web and suddenly a new networking protocol comes into fashion, how quickly can you dig up all that barbed wire and retool for something new? The same defenses that keep the enemy out also box you in. When things get dicey, what you really need is flexibility.

When I was just out of high school and needed a job, I worked in a big factory that manufactured prescription eyeglasses. This wasn't the high-tech, scientific environment that you might

think. It was an assembly line populated by minimum-wage workers. The process of taking a prescription and turning it into a pair of glasses was a sequential one, starting with taking the raw blanks for the lenses and then walking them through various units, where they would be cut, ground, and polished. The journey continued into the area where they were cut for the frames, treated for shatter resistance, and finally assembled.

Because the factory produced tens of thousands of glasses per day, load management was a significant consideration for optimal workflow. Naturally, most of the people were trained in one specific operation and that's what they did all day. Some of us, for a variety of reasons, had the opportunity to learn different jobs.

I ended up learning every step in the entire process except for the initial task of cutting the rough curve in the lens blank. That was greasy, grimy work, and I had little interest in being stuck there. However, once the curve was cut, I could perform every other operation and place the final pair of glasses in your hands. Because factory work is monotonous and boring, and perhaps due to a personality quirk or two, I always wanted to be the best producer in whatever group I was in just to keep myself entertained.

As a result, I was part of a small collection of people who could float to anywhere we were needed. Although I always had a given job and position where I spent the bulk of my time, occasionally people in another group would call in sick or work would get backed up in another area for some reason. At such times, those of us who could perform other operations were shifted over to the problem area, reinforcing the workers in that position until the need passed and the flow was smooth again.

Because only a few of us had acquired this diversity of skills, the shift in labor wasn't enough to guarantee that the factory

would never have a bad production day. Nonetheless, having even such a small band of gypsies helped. When your volume is in the tens of thousands, a single bad day can be costly.

Imagine the advantages they would have had if the entire workforce had been trained to perform all operations instead of just one. Instead of a static structure that required each person to know one and only one job, and therefore be forced to sit there and drink coffee for several hours because production was backed up, the entire composition of the workforce could morph into a new configuration at need.

Large effort could be poured into areas where it was required, overstaffed areas could be diminished by routing people to needed areas, and the load balancing of production could be shifted in real time to always maintain the maximum possible output of the factory.

Much of the work we do in the geek world requires deep skill sets that can't realistically be transferred. The receptionist answering phones may be excellent at what she does but if you try to teach her electrical engineering, her eyes could very well glaze over. Even so, that doesn't mean you have no flexibility. If your accounting department becomes swamped because of an influx of work or just a few people calling in sick on the same day, you might be pleased to find that your receptionist has an immense talent for math and all things financial.

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Part of flexibility and mobility is cross training others to perform various essential tasks. This diversity can save your bacon when a clog forms in a particular operation and you need extra bodies to restore the flow.

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On the technical side of the street, you'll often find that your creative resources have a great interest in learning new things.

The dictates of getting a project done and then maintaining it, however, may have forced them to work with one small group of technologies year after year.

Should business conditions rapidly shift, forcing you to ramp up new products or otherwise retool your development efforts, you'll have few options beyond calling recruiters and hiring more bodies. While you'll find the specific technical talent you need, they won't have the years of experience in your industry that existing employees have. By finding opportunities to let your people cross-train, learn new skills, and explore other aspects of the company, you'll have built-in talent that can reconfigure and adapt while still retaining the domain expertise that gives you a competitive edge.

# Build a Collection of Small, Fast Units

You can have something large built for power, or you can have something small built for speed. You can rarely have both. If you can choose only one, small and fast is the way to go. As with most other considerations regarding mobility, it's all about options.

Back in the old days, when we used to swing sharp, pointy things at each other while riding around on ponies, engagements could be pretty evenly matched. Show up to the party on the back of an elephant, however, and you've got a whole new ball game.

Elephants are big, powerful creatures. You can hitch a rope to them and pull down trees. You can stomp on small houses as a tribute to your favorite Godzilla movies. There are a host of such things that horses just don't have the horsepower to accomplish. So far, so good.

However, once the battle is joined, the enemy will know exactly where your elephants are. Given that large, grey creatures aren't known for their ability to sprint, five minutes from now that position isn't going to be very different. Mounted on small and fast war ponies, your enemies can continually sweep in for an attack, run circles around your elephants, shower everyone with arrows and spears, and then quickly ride back out again before the elephants can stomp on them. Speed and mobility are an obvious tactical advantage.

But what if you have an army of horsemen and need to pull down some gates? Your trusty steed may be fast, but he doesn't have the physical strength of an elephant. That means you're out of luck, or would be if you had only one horse. However, by harnessing the efforts of several horses, you'll find that the gate comes crashing right down, at which point you can go back to running circles around the elephants.

Once again, we come back to our consideration of the traditional method of hierarchical organization. Another of the limitations of this sort of arrangement is that it tends to be static. You have the database group, the developers for program A, those for program B, the network infrastructure guys, and so on. This makes for nice, tidy boxes but doesn't lend itself to rapid response.

Consider how you might arrange your resources in order to create a more mobile and flexible workforce. In our previous example of factory workers, we touched on the idea of allowing your staff to explore new skills. Now, let's apply a similar approach at the group level.

Rather than thinking of your people as the bricks that define the structure of a particular project, what if you had small, specialized teams with the ability to rove the company like a friendly wolf pack? You could create small pockets of talent, perhaps of a specific type. Maybe they would have a collection of complementary skills, allowing them to be dropped into any

situation just as you'd drop an elite team of special forces into a tough spot.

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> Create small teams with multiple skills you can put on projects A, B, C, or D depending on which of them needs help. You'll be ready when projects stall or the market changes and you need to pivot.

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The specifics of such groups will naturally vary with the type of business you're in, the technologies involved, and the variance in projects that you have going at any given time. Nonetheless, rather than thinking in terms of a project that owns resources, if you have well-trained teams that are mobile and adaptable, you have a great deal of power that you can focus both quickly and with great precision. This gives your company a great degree of flexibility in adapting to rapidly changing market conditions.

# Have an Approach for All Seasons

A winter wardrobe and tactics will obviously be quite a bit different than your approach to desert warfare. Failure to be adequately equipped for either can be an insurmountable inconvenience, as Napoleon discovered in the midst of the Russian winter.

Life in the digital domain has its own cycles, albeit not as predictable as the four seasons our climate offers. Many of these are iterative, each building on what came before. PCs with dedicated software enjoyed a lengthy time in the sun, and while they still exist in abundance, the emergence of the World Wide Web brought a new environment that had its own characteristics. From there, we shifted to an emphasis on

smart phones and tablets, which carved out their own space with an emphasis on native applications.

With the many hardware technologies present in the market today, deciding where to put your development resources is both challenging and risky. Developers and companies who put all of their efforts into supporting the Blackberry were left in a very vulnerable position when the iPhone arrived and became the market leader.

Sure, you could stop what you were doing, retool your offerings, and support Apple products, but you would have been very late to the party. When you arrived, you may have found that others had taken over the niche that you dominated back in the Blackberry world. The season changed, and you weren't ready for it. Even if you were able to successfully play catch-up, the time your programmers spent developing your iPhone apps would have caused several quarters of severely diminished revenue.

A similar challenge was faced by companies who were dedicated to native Windows applications when the World Wide Web suddenly entered the public consciousness. Regardless of whether or not your desktop application still served its purpose, the hunger for all things Web based made you look like a dinosaur who couldn't keep up with the times.

Today, there are still many scenarios for which a PC-based application is an excellent approach. Even so, without support for the Web and mobile devices, your objects look much less shiny. If you're only good for one season, you're in trouble when seasonal changes occur.

Some companies have looked at the environment, assessed the things that the various platforms have in common, and come up with a solution for all seasons. Rather than duplicating development efforts across three conceptual architectures, they've focused on Web applications.

These programs run in a browser on your desktop and cover both the PC and Web scenarios. They can also be optimized to perform well in cell phones and tablets alike. It's an approach for all seasons.

Of course, this is just one example, and it has both advantages and drawbacks. Even so, technology is a planet with many seasons. However, unlike any well-behaved planetary body, our seasons can come out of nowhere or vanish completely. To succeed in our volatile world, it's important to keep an eye out for seasonal changes and plan accordingly. The last thing you want is a closet full of string bikinis when winter comes.

# Keep an Eye on Your Supplies

No matter how mobile you keep your endeavors, horses don't go far without water, and tanks are reasonably useless without gas. In a similar manner, people don't get paid without a well-stocked payroll account, and you're going to have a hard time creating software without computers and techies. One of the easiest ways to lose the battle, and perhaps even the war, is to neglect your supply lines. This is exactly what happened to the German army when they tried to cross the broad, snowy expanse en route to Moscow. You'd think by now people would know better than to mess with the Russian winter.

It's been said that an army lives on its stomach, and of course a modern mechanized version will guzzle gas as fast as infantrymen go through rations. Soldiers also do some of their best work when they're not busy coping with frostbite and other winter inconveniences that inadequate clothing tend to uncover. In any fashionable war, you're also going to need the basic supplies of the trade, such as bullets, bayonets, and the occasional bazooka. If you can't get the resources you have to

the location where they're needed, things are going to go badly for your army not to mention your grand plans for conquest.

The management of supplies isn't a terribly glamorous occupation for those seeking glory, but it's an absolutely critical consideration. If you don't have a good support staff to take care of the day-to-day drudgeries of keeping your people well stocked, it doesn't matter how brilliantly they perform on the front lines. The only thing more embarrassing than losing a gunfight is doing so because you ran out of bullets before the other guy.

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Make sure your people are well paid and well equipped. They should have everything they need to work on their projects, unimpeded by a lack of resources.

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Unless you specialize in tech for the defense industry or work some trade shows on the wrong side of the tracks, you're not going to be concerned about implements of destruction, be they massive or minor. Nonetheless, your company's need for dependable supply lines is no less critical for its success than for the foot soldiers who slog through the mud and marshes. In both cases, failure to take care of business can bring things to an abrupt and unpleasant end.

In the corporate world, we tend to think of staplers and paper clips when supplies come to mind. While a lack of pens will make it more difficult to write on a legal pad, they are only a small part of the picture. In the high-tech arena, your greatest currency is ideas followed closely by your ability to implement them. Before you can secure your supply chain, you first have to understand what resources you depend on.

More than a great many industries, tech relies on people. While it's true that a factory can come to a grinding halt without this

particular resource, the industrial sector has gradually automated much of the drudgery with robots and other such clever devices. However, in manufacturing and similar environments, people are often little more than commodities, needing only a basic skill set to be productive. The resources we count on in the idea business have a great many more requirements, from specific technical skills to the ability to effectively collaborate with others.

With our industry growing by leaps and bounds, demand for the best people often outstrips supply. This means that you not only have to have a solid supply of talent, you need to keep them happy so they don't leave. It's also important to know where to find more if they do.

Running a classified ad is one approach, but in today's hotly contested market you need a competitive edge. From recruiters to online resources, there are a lot of obvious tools for finding the right people, but even that puts you in the thick of the crowd. Whether it's networking, building relationships with schools, or even researching what hobbies and other personal interests your potential hires might have, you need a plan. This isn't a fire-and-forget process. It's something you should continually be exploring and improving. Your competition is gunning for your best people. Do you know how you're going to keep your talent pool well stocked?

You also need access to the tools of the trade, from computers to cloud services and the other resources necessary for your people to get the job done. If you had an unlimited amount of money, this would never be a problem. But, as we all know, there's never quite enough to go around. Do you have a backup plan for those times when a hiring spurt strains the stock of your IT equipment? What do you do when a lightning strike takes out that critical but expensive stack of gear that doesn't happen to be under warranty? We're often so busy worrying about getting the job done that we fall into patterns

of aversion until the moment that our supplies run short. At that point, of course, it's too late.

Break out your crystal ball, and try to predict what needs and crises the future will bring. While you're at it, build relationships internally with other tribes so that you can cover each other when the going gets tough. This applies to the outside world as well. For the creative soul, money is only one solution to supply problems. Networking and establishing friendships with other types of businesses pay many dividends. Options for supplies are certainly among them.

When you're grappling with larger issues and doing your best to change the world, you certainly don't want to be disrupted by inconveniences. It's a tough planet out there. Don't be the first one to run out of bullets.

# Continually Look for New Pursuits

The company with only one product is vulnerable, and the person with only one skill is easily replaced. Additionally, most humans have difficulty with monotony. No matter what the task and how much you enjoy it, if it's all you ever do and you have no variation in life, you will eventually burn out. Because of this, you should always be on the lookout for the next new adventure, both as a company and an individual.

To a certain degree, this might sound obvious to those who make a living trying to push the envelope. Naturally you're looking for the next new thing. That's what your business is all about, right? Even so, those who are most able to explore strange new worlds, seek out new life and new civilizations, and boldly go where no geek has gone before have a massive blind spot.

We often become so obsessed with our current project that it becomes our entire world. By the time the project is over, or

has died in an inconvenient flurry of photon torpedoes, the landscape around us can look very different. For the unprepared, this means walking outside to discover you're on a deserted alien planet, leaving you scratching your head and wondering how you're going to get yourself out of this predicament.

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It's the geek mindset to get completely immersed in a project. Don't get so lost in one that you fail to see the rest of the team moving on to other things. It's always embarrassing to be left behind.

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There's probably not another market out there as prone to rapid change and hairpin turns as ours. If you make your living surfing on the bleeding edge, it's important to keep your eye on what's ahead or the next sound you hear will be a very unpleasant thump as you smack headlong into a reality that you never saw coming. What's cool and hip among consumers today can instantly become an embarrassment tomorrow. If this happens and your business is built on yesterday's news, your customers are going to run away as fast as they can and pretend they never heard of you.

If you play in bands for long enough, you'll see musical trends change in this way on a regular basis. However, the cycles in that industry are typically measured in years. In the marketplace of shiny objects, there are no set patterns. In fact, companies do their very best to keep the ace hidden well up their sleeve until they're prepared to lay down the full hand.

Apple is notorious for this. It's certainly responsible for a more dented universe. Of course, if their new product release makes you suddenly obsolete, you may make a few dents of your own, probably by banging your head on the nearest solid object. Things happen fast in this business. You don't have

time to look at today. Like a master chess player, you'd better be thinking a dozen moves into the future, or by the time you get there you're going to be completely unarmed.

Get up from your desk. Get out of the office. Get away from your comfortable circle of geek associates. Step outside and visit the wide world of nontechies. You can't build the future by looking at the present or surrounding yourself with the familiar.

If you want to build the Jetsons' kitchen, don't spend time at a computer hardware store. Go to cooking classes. Take some courses on architectural design. Go to manufacturing seminars and see what the well-dressed conveyor belt is wearing these days. Tech is in your blood, a fundamental part of your DNA. You don't have to immerse yourself in it at all times. When you're brainstorming on ways to press a button and have the perfect batch of wrapped beans materialize behind a glass door, the geek stuff will come easily enough. Don't think about the technology. Focus on the burrito.

# Never Leave One of Your People Behind

While I realize that saying this means I don't get to sit at the cool kids' table, I've never been a fan of the dystopian future. I know it's trendy and seems to be the premise for just about every sci fi show out there, but I just don't get it. The way I see it, you get the future you visualize. First we see it, then we work to bring it to life. After all, that's pretty much the short description of life in a tech startup. Consequently, for the life of me I can't imagine why anyone would want to fixate on a future that sucks. Of course, I've never made a million dollars working for TV and movie studios, so what do I know?

Regardless of how sensible and justified my attitude may seem, it occasionally means that I miss out on something good. I had countless friends tell me that I should watch a show called *Firefly*. However, set in yet another dismal and depressing future, I had little interest in the exploits of a scruffy, ragtag crew of misfits and mercenaries who were just trying to make a living in an overly authoritarian 'verse. Besides, their ship is the only thing I've ever seen that makes the Millennium Falcon look good.

Eventually, however, I relented and watched the entire season. Actually, it was the only season, having been cancelled by a less-than-enlightened network. What surprised me was not that I watched it, but that over the years I came back and watched it a few more times. It had many good elements, but I truly hate buying into the whole dystopian doom thing.

One day, it finally occurred to me why I liked the show so much. With a crew of people whose individual agendas were frequently at odds with each other, I realized that nonetheless it was a show about loyalty. No matter how much a person would screw up, and regardless of the schemes he might hatch, no one ever got left behind, even when a sane person would have done so three episodes prior.

Your company is a collection of tribes that are each in constant motion seeking advantage and gain. Every tribe is populated by individuals who are operating with the same focus on personal priorities. There will rarely be a week that goes by without the urge to tap someone in the head with the nearest brick you can find to let them know they are being aggressively stupid or just stupidly opportunistic. They will test your boundaries and your patience, over and over again. Just as soon as you've patched the holes they poked in one wall, they'll be at it on another one. This is life with the human race, and it's no different in the tech sector.

Your people are also going to fall short on many occasions with the purest of intentions. Often, this will cost you dearly. There will also be times when things move quickly and they just can't keep up, leaving a trail of bad attitudes or haphazard work in their wake. This will occasionally be a situation where they can't perform at the level required, but it might also be policies, procedures, and other environmental changes that leave them disoriented and worried for their jobs.

If you're pushing the envelope, you're going to push your people. You'll ask them for extra effort, to try new things, to take chances, and to be comfortable with risk. It's hard enough doing a boring job day after day, in any industry. In our little corner of the universe, it can be intense beyond description. The last thing a person wants in such a setting is to feel alone and exposed. If they do, the natural instincts of humans and other such creatures will kick in, encouraging them to build a shell, withdraw, and try to find someplace safe. This isn't where they'll do their most brilliant work.

The motto of every elite fighting force in human history as well as the occasional ragtag smuggling ship is the same. Leave no one behind. That's not a sentiment told to ensure that your head count doesn't diminish. It builds a sense of loyalty and esprit de corps. It gives people the courage to take chances, secure in the knowledge that if they spin out trying to take a corner too fast that someone will be there to pick them up and dust them off.

The business world is a cutthroat neighborhood. Your competitors want to put you out of business. Each tribe covets the territory and resources of the other. People are either climbing the corporate ladder or hoping they don't get treated as a rung. In the midst of this conflict, you're trying to encourage your people to be quick on their feet, innovative, flexible, and bold. Loyalty is the glue that bonds them together, creating something united and powerful in the place where a

group of small individuals once stood. It also builds trust in leaders, giving them enough confidence in your decisions to go where you point without hesitation.

The single-most-effective way to gain loyalty is by first offering it. Be active in pursuit of opportunities to show both individuals and groups that, come what may, you have their backs. You may not get your own TV show, but you'll certainly be watched by the competition. In our business, that's a badge of honor.

# Summary

The fact that you're building to last doesn't mean that you have to create static, immovable structures. Turn your buildings into wagons, and buy a couple of war ponies while you're at it. Business takes place in an environment of constant maneuvering, each company plotting and scheming on ways to eliminate all the other players. The last thing you want in such an atmosphere is fixed fortifications.

A prizefighter may train so that he can take twelve rounds of body blows, but you have to ask yourself if that's really the best way to utilize your talent. Mohammad Ali was known for his ability to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. Look at your market, your products, and your people and find ways to stay light on your feet. If you do it right, at the end of the day you'll be the only one left standing.

# Competitiveness

## Promote Excellence through a Culture of Conquest

No matter what market you're in, it's a tough neighborhood. Everyone's after the same territory and resources, and they're armed to the teeth. If you want a piece of the pie, no one's going to hand you a slice. You either fight for it or go hungry.

Because of this, it's important to promote a culture in your organization that thrives on competition and achievement. From your top executives to those doing the most mundane work, passive attitudes do little for your company beyond making you a stationary target.

The most disconcerting enemy you can face in battle is one who is passionate and fired up, confident in the knowledge that they're superior to all other empires. That's the feeling you want to instill in your own people if you're going to be effective in getting your hands on that tasty bit of dessert.

# Focus on a Common Enemy

In the days before Genghis Khan rose to power, the Mongols were getting nowhere fast. A land of countless tribes, they were in a state of constant war with each other. While they may have been an annoyance to other countries in their area,

much like the neighbor who plays his stereo too loud after midnight, they were certainly no threat.

It's clear that there was great power in that region, as we all know what happened once they got their act together. Before that happened, they had the same amount of potential. However, they got nowhere as a people because all that energy was being wasted on internal bickering rather than harnessed for the greater good.

In the land that eventually became the United States of America, the same principle played out. In this case, instead of a happy ending for the locals, it was just an ending. If you want to know what happens when you spend all of your time fighting among yourselves, our country is an informative case study.

It's become politically correct to refer to the tribal people who were here before the European invasion as Native Americans, a term I find inaccurate and misleading. Regardless of the fact that there are North and South American continents, the reality of the matter is that in the modern world, American is shorthand for United-States-of-American, or some other such accurate but unwieldy phrase. Everyone knows this. Consequently, Native American implies someone who was native to the nation.

This couldn't be further from the truth. The Apache, Comanche, and countless other nations wanted absolutely nothing to do with this new country in the making, let alone being native to it. What they really wanted was for all those pesky Europeans to just go home and leave them the heck alone. Nor were they members of one united group, as the umbrella term of Native American implies. They were at constant war with one another in ways large and small, and in the end that cost them dearly.

There was an entire continent of tribes, many of whom were warrior cultures, and yet they didn't band together to attack the invaders as a unified and powerful force. Instead, they fought individually and were conquered in a piecemeal fashion. Perhaps due to technology, disease, and overwhelming numbers, the outcome was inevitable. There's no way of knowing. What's crystal clear, however, is that the Europeans faced a much weaker enemy than they would have had all tribal nations come together and fought them as one.

Throughout the corporate world, companies make this same mistake every day, with individuals and tribes constantly bickering while competitors in the marketplace work to put them out of business. If you don't want to become yet another cautionary tale, you need to bring your people together.

Nothing makes this happen like having a common enemy.

As with most tactics, this one can be used for good or ill. When Hitler was rising to power, one of the cornerstones of his strategy was using the Jews as a scapegoat for all the troubles the German people were suffering in the wake of their World War I defeat. Creating a common enemy, he rallied his people and thus began the rise of the Third Reich. The fact that the results were horrific is immaterial to the principle. It works, regardless of the moral quality of the goal.

Hollywood has given us countless examples of a more benevolent nature. Anytime the aliens attack Earth, the bickering between nations stops dead in its tracks as we band together to fight off little green men. While that may be the stuff of fiction, it doesn't take much imagination to see it as the likely reaction to such an event. There's little point in squabbling over scraps of land when the bad guys are going to wipe you all out.

> To unite the tribes in your company quickly, identify a common threat or enemy. Then watch the troops rally around the flag.

If you have a brilliant new product that has no competitors whatsoever, that advantage won't last. The moment you hit the market, you can be sure others will emulate what you're doing and go after the same dollars. Of course, it's likely that you already have competition. While that can be inconvenient, it's also good news for those looking to rev up their troops, as you have a built-in common enemy.

To harness this power, you simply need to do the same exercise we've been doing all along, connecting the dots for your people. Show them that if your competitors have their way, they'll take all your customers and put you completely out of business. Anyone with two neurons to rub together will understand this, and it doesn't take a genius to do the math from there. If your company goes out of business, it's going to take their paycheck with it. That makes it personal. This is why it's important for everybody to fight the common enemy, putting them out of business before they do the same to you.

# Harness Internal Power Struggles

Here on Planet Earth, we have a wide variety of life forms. From plants and animals to the tiniest form of microbiological organisms, we're all a bunch of folks just trying to make a living. That's no small feat, as it usually takes place in an environment with a finite amount of resources. That means there's going to be competition.

Because of this, the competitive spirit is a very natural part of the human experience at the most fundamental level. This

doesn't mean everyone on the planet has aggressive tendencies. In fact, there are a great many people who are passive by nature. In even the most willing of spirits, however, there is a line in the sand that, once crossed, will trigger a change in behavior.

Snatch someone's dinner plate from in front of them and a well-fed but passive person might endure it. It's going to be a different story with someone who hasn't eaten in a week. They won't cross the borders of their basic nature, but you can be sure there will be resistance. In the dog-eat-dog world of biological life, we must compete effectively in order to survive. This is no less true in the business world.

Just as there are those who are passive in nature, a great many people love confrontation for no other reason than the thrill of the fight. If you look around your organization, they won't be hard to spot. They're the ones who are constantly in the thick of the fight, relishing the political battles that take place every day in the average corporation. From tribal power struggles to personal ambition, these people thrive on conflict.

Given the complexity of the human race, there isn't a black-and-white distinction between the passive and the aggressive. Like other aspects of our personality, there are countless shades of grey. Nonetheless, if a person is inclined by nature to engage in power struggles and other such petty skirmishes, it's going to be trouble for your company. As in our previous examples, those who spend their time fighting among themselves are ill equipped to deal with a larger enemy.

No matter how spirited the culture, no nation is comprised entirely of warriors. The Samurai of ancient Japan were fierce and formidable, but they weren't the only social class. We think of Spartans as the legendary soldiers of Greece, but in fact, Sparta was a city-state comprised of people who held a great many other occupations. It matters little how great your warriors are if no one knows how to bake bread to feed them.

Among all the pointless strife in the average company, there's actually a great deal of opportunity. Like all other cultures, your organization will be stocked with more than the aggressive spirits. It does, however, have a warrior class, even if the people in it don't recognize themselves as such. All it takes is looking around at the ones who seem to be causing the most trouble and you can easily spot at least part of this social group.

People who love dancing are going to dance. Those who love fighting are going to fight. You're not going to change their basic nature no matter how hard you try. Consequently, your best bet is to use the confrontational people to your advantage. Some engage in conflict for the adrenaline rush. Others enjoy the glory that comes with success. Either way, you have excellent resources at hand that can be used in your struggle with the competition.

You've already identified the common enemies your company has, and you know how to frame this in a way that your people will care about. With that in mind, evaluate the skills and resources of our more aggressive friends and give thought to how you might best deploy those forces in your quest to outperform the competition. There's plenty of opportunity for adrenaline for those who fight for no other reason. Your efforts to achieve dominance in your market will also present a continual series of opportunities for glory, giving your fiercest spirits a chance to bask in the glow of success.

When you redirect the efforts of your most problematic people, you're using the same tactic as many great generals through history. Find the meanest, scruffiest, and most resourceful group you can get your hands on; offer them something they care about; and then turn them loose on the enemy. If they're going to cause trouble anyway, wouldn't you rather it be for your competitors?

> Harness the energy and the love of conflict innate to many hypercompetitive people. Your task is simple but not easy: direct their attention away from internal struggles and out toward the marketplace.

# Be Bold with the Enemy but Humble with Each Other

Great warriors often have a brash and abrasive nature. They're aggressive, arrogant, and supremely confident that they're superior to all others. This is exactly the attitude you want in battle. However, it doesn't take much imagination to see the trouble this can cause on the home front. This means it is necessary to strike a balance in attitude based on the situation. It's not an easy thing to do, but if you fail to manage this properly your company will soon fall on each other like a pack of hungry dogs scrapping over a single lean bone.

When people fight, someone usually ends up getting hurt. The damage can be minor or severe enough to keep them from functioning properly for a prolonged period of time. In New York City, there are a number of companies who use bicycle messengers because of their ability to avoid the gridlock inherent in city traffic. If you employ such people, imagine if one of your delivery agents were to go out this weekend, get drunk, and start a barroom brawl that resulted in a broken leg. Sure, he can hobble around on crutches, so it's not like he's altogether incapacitated. Nonetheless, as a bicycle messenger, he's completely useless to you now and will be for many months to come.

It's easy to spot the consequences when there's physical impairment, but if your people are fighting among themselves,

there's also going to be damage at one level or another. Whether it's bad attitudes due to a bruised ego or losing talented employees as a result of heated arguments, when people fight it's going to end badly for your organization.

This would be enough of a challenge if your job were only to roam the halls and function as the staff referee, doing your best to keep that inevitable human conflict to a minimum. It's even more difficult when you're actually trying to rev your people up and create a spirit of competitiveness. It's a little like asking your people to manufacture gunpowder and then complaining that it's dangerous. No one ever said success was easy.

You absolutely want to encourage an attitude of conquest in your people. If three hundred Spartans can hold off an army of a million Persians, there's clearly an advantage to having a well-trained and highly spirited organization. That said, it's important to keep the spears pointed in the right direction. If your people start poking each other, you're going to end up with quite a bit fewer people who can make an effective contribution to your efforts.

In your efforts to engender a competitive spirit at all levels of your organization, the trick is to always remind everyone who the enemy is. It's okay to have a little internal competitiveness, with each person trying to outperform the next in the name of higher productivity, but you can't let that devolve into internal animosity or political strife.

Framing things in the proper context will help you enjoy the benefits of a more aggressive spirit while minimizing the risk of your best people poking each other's posteriors with long, pointy sticks. Individual achievement is good, as is the excellence of your groups. More important, however, is the concept of *us vs. them*. When you're fanning the flames of their competitive nature, be sure that everyone understands that "us" means the company as a whole while "them" is your

competition. That's not always as obvious to people as you might think.

When approached in this manner, your people can freely engage in bold, brash, and superior attitudes toward those lowly, lesser creatures who work at other companies. Build a strong sense of your organization as a whole, something your people can relate to and take pride in. Allow that to increase their confidence and promote an aggressive, take-no-prisoners attitude as they work to demolish anyone who defies you in the marketplace. It's a powerful tool to have at your disposal provided you're eternally vigilant in looking for trouble and putting out the fires before they spread.

# Sharpen Skills through Frequent Games

Somewhere between life as a rock-and-roll musician and the years I've spent in tech, I took yet another path and ended up in the sales business. What started out as simple sales jobs in an effort to supplement the meager pay of a musician ended up with me running my own consulting company and training and coaching the sales staff of client companies. I'm not entirely sure how that happened. I think tequila was involved.

Regardless of how I found myself on yet another alien planet, it was once again highly educational. Nowhere in the business world is the spirit of competitiveness more finely honed than in the sales department. There are also few groups in need of as much babysitting and hand holding as the average sales organization unless you happen to be teaching elementary school.

These are highly motivated and talented people, but they're also creative by nature. Creative creatures as a whole tend to

be a bit more high maintenance than the average person. This is truer still for the top performers. They can be pesky and problematic to be sure, but they're worth the trouble. Some of the most high-performance sports cars on the market can be a bit finicky to maintain, but they're a sight to behold at full throttle.

When I first started teaching sales, I naively thought that money was a motivating factor. I'd spent a lot of time working straight commission jobs prior to that and had always enjoyed the fact that if I wanted more money, all I had to do was work harder and make more sales. You can imagine my surprise then to discover that this simple math didn't motivate most salespeople to put in their best effort.

One of my clients had a small phone room with a few dozen people selling auto parts to garages and repair shops. This was in Florida, where wages tend to be a bit lower than average to begin with. It also wasn't the kind of job that bought you a Ferrari. Many of these people were delighted to be making more than minimum wage. They could have made a great deal more than that, but for the most part they just slogged along with minimal sales, and thus, minimal paychecks.

In an effort to wind them up, I put a small ship's bell up on the wall next to the whiteboard where they would write down the sales they had made. Make a sale, you get to ring the bell. At the end of the week, the person with the most sales got some trivial reward (my client wasn't one for lavish bonuses), about enough to buy you a cheeseburger and fries.

The ensuing chaos took me completely by surprise, not to mention the tenant in the office next door, who thought that we'd left and a group of fireman had taken our place. The bell rang continually, each person trying to make more noise than the one before. Almost all conversations became a running series of good-natured taunts, each person describing how they were going to leave the others in the dust and eat that

coveted cheeseburger come the weekend. People, as it turns out, are wildly motivated by ego, much more so than money. Who knew?

No matter what job your people have, it can easily turn into drudgery as the weeks grind on. Even if we believe in what we're doing, the best of us can get worn down from time to time. If you want to keep your people operating at peak efficiency, you need to keep them motivated. That's equally important if you want them to grow and improve in their craft. One very effective way of doing this is through competition and games.

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Depending on the group, it may be easy to motivate people with simple competitions for inexpensive rewards. People like to win, often for no other reason than the thrill of victory.

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Regardless of the work being done, there's always a way to measure it. That means you can compare the output of one person, or even one tribe, to another. This is the basis of all competition. If you can measure it, you can score it. Once you have a score, you have a game.

Many times, people compete for prizes. If you play on an NFL team that wins the Super Bowl, you're going to make more money as a result. However, it's not a requirement that the reward be monetary or even tangible as long as there's recognition. The kids who play grade-school football don't get expensive championship rings. They play for the joy of the game and the glory that comes from winning. Get creative and find some ways to inject both fun and competitiveness into your environment. In any group, make it a fair fight so that everyone is motivated to try their best. Above all, when the game is over and the scores assessed, make sure everyone

knows that as important contributors to the company, they're ultimately all on the same team. And remember, this is supposed to be fun.

# Glorify All Who Compete, Not Just the Champions

As noted earlier, not everyone is a highly competitive creature. Additionally, the skill level of your people will vary greatly. If you hold games in which there are winners and losers, there are people who will always finish dead last. Instead of motivating them, it will simply make them feel bad. They'll dread the games, resent the outcome, and if anything their overall performance will diminish rather than improve.

If this were the high-stakes world of professional sports, with fame and fortune riding on the outcome, it would be easy to dismiss these people as not worthy of competing. In such an environment, there's a general disdain for anyone but the big dogs. Consequently, people often care about nothing more than winning, and the perks that come with it.

That said, the sports world also has the notion of a handicap, a way of leveling the playing field so that the one rock star doesn't consistently outperform all competitors in a manner that would discourage others from even trying. You can apply this concept to any of your games so that everyone can participate and be motivated rather than disheartened as a result.

One way to accomplish this is by weighting the scores based on the talents of the participants. The more adept may complain that this takes away their inherent advantage, but that's rather the point. If every game is a blowout with the same result, your champion will find that she soon has no one

to play with. By leveling the playing field, everyone can give their best and feel like a respected part of the whole.

You can also break people out into different competitive groups based on skill level. If you're assessing the performance of someone with two decades of experience, it would be easier to compare him with others who have the same amount of road behind them. Those who are just getting started in their career can have fun with their peers, and both groups will more easily relate to their competitors.

Part of the reason you hold games is to allow people to be winners. However, in order for there to be winners, there must also be losers. Naturally, this isn't how you want your people to see themselves. At the same time, you don't want to take away the good feelings that come from being the champion. It's a dilemma. Fortunately, it's one that's been solved long before we showed up to the party.

One of the most prestigious sporting events on the planet is the Olympics. Populated by world-class athletes, each at the top of their game, it's a festival where the best of the best pit their skills against others of equal talent. Each and every one of these competitors is a champion just by virtue of being accepted. This isn't an open invitation where anyone who wants to show up can join in. Your country has to choose you, and for that honor you have to be pretty darned good. From that perspective, once you've been accepted to compete in the Olympics you can hold your head high whether you got the gold or nothing at all, secure in the knowledge that you are still among the best in your field.

You can promote a similar attitude among your own people. If you've fostered a spirit of conquest in your company, you have a staff who should feel like they're the best of the best by virtue of the fact that they work for you. Whether you're in a dominant position in your market or are a scrappy upstart, you

want your people to feel like the elite, a talented and capable crew who can accomplish anything and change the world.

This is how, even in games with winners and losers, you can ensure that everyone feels good when it's all said and done. After all, you don't hire just anyone. If they made the cut, then, like in the Olympics, they're champions just by virtue of being there.

When you honor everyone who plays and not just the winners, your games can build confidence and a strong bond between coworkers. People who feel like champions work like them as well.

# Cheer Each Other On

In any arena, you can find examples of those are considered to be a bad sport. These are the selfish, self-aggrandizing competitors who believe that the secret to success is making others feel bad. Their taunts and jeers aren't meant in fun but rather to discourage and dishearten the competition. If that's the only way you can win, go home and practice more. You're not nearly as good as you think.

This is obviously not something that you want in your own games. It does nothing to bring your people together and neither does it make them feel stronger. Of course, not everyone engages in bad behavior because they're a malevolent spirit. Sometimes they just get caught up in the desire to win. On other occasions, people put up a false front of arrogance to hide inner feelings of inadequacy. Regardless of the motivation, however, it can poison your games in a heartbeat.

One of your goals as a manager is to bring people together. Turning work into a competition in which everyone wins and has fun together is one of the highest forms of workplace art.

To counter this, you need to foster not just an atmosphere of competitiveness, but one that's positive and encouraging as well. This isn't as hard to accomplish as you might imagine. It's just a matter of framing things in the proper light.

Back in my musician days, parties and less official festive gatherings were a constant in my life. Like most people, I had a group of friends and acquaintances who were frequent fliers on such occasions. In between the drinking and howling at the moon, we'd often play games. One of our favorites was a dice game called Farkle. I don't know where it came from. It may very well have been made up by one of our pack. It was simply played with six dice and rules for keeping score.

The general concept was that certain combinations earned you points. As long as you earned points on each roll, you could keep going. When you stopped for that turn, you got to keep what you accumulated. However, if you rolled and came up with no points, you passed the dice and got nothing. That was known as a Farkle. I'll leave the linguistic origins of that term to your imagination. There was an element of risk with each roll.

In a cutthroat environment where each person is only interested in winning, you would naturally expect them to hope for a Farkle when each of their opponents rolled. However, in our little world, there was a culture that went along with the game. We were all highly enthusiastic as each person accumulated higher and higher points. When they stopped and had made a big score, we cheered as though it were our own accomplishment. When they went a bridge too far and got

nothing, we were all let down. Even though there were no official points for the highest-scoring roll of the evening, it was a badge of honor nonetheless. We also had a sense of group pride on those nights when a new record would be set. Remember, we were broke and easily amused.

In an environment where your competitors were also your most enthusiastic cheerleaders, every game was great fun no matter who won. In fact, there were numerous occasions where we got so caught up on the high rolls that we forgot to keep score. Of course, howling at the moon might also have been a distraction, but in any event it was a consistently positive experience for all. As a result, everyone wanted to play, even those soft-spoken people who normally wouldn't want to compete.

In fairness, this was a group of idealistic hippie musicians along with our friends and family, so perhaps it's a bit too positive and feel-good for your perspective. With that in mind, there was a variation on this that I encountered when a friend of mine taught me to play Go, a Japanese board game of a strategic nature not unlike chess. When playing most board games, it's unlikely that your opponent will point out that you just made a stupid move. It becomes self-evident when it's their turn and they take advantage of it.

In Go, however, you're encouraged to point out the vulnerabilities that your counterpart has opened himself up to. Unlike Farkle, in which we encouraged each other just for the good feeling of it all, in this game there was a more competitive reasoning. The glory of the victory was directly proportionate to the skill of the adversary you defeated. Consequently, you wanted someone playing at the top of their game so that when you won, it was something to be proud of.

Personally, I had more fun with Farkle. Nonetheless, no matter which approach you take, it's important that you cultivate an environment in your games that's mutually supportive rather

than allowing them to become an opportunity for people to tear each other down.

# Raise Supporting Positions to a Place of Honor

Running a company and competing in the marketplace is a team sport. For all but the simplest of products, you'll need a collection of people who possess various talents in order for your business as a whole to be effective. As is typical in such groupings, some positions are glamorous by nature and some are grunt work. Nonetheless, you need everyone's contribution or no one succeeds.

When your company is doing great things, there are going to be those in high-profile positions who get the most glory. Senior staff usually take credit for the winning strategies, and of course without sales and marketing, nothing happens in the first place. You might also have a couple of product designers or other such specialists who get the spotlight.

There's nothing wrong with this. In fact, it's exactly as it should be. They all did great things. They deserve the applause. Even so, without everyone else putting in a solid performance in supporting positions, there would simply be no victory to celebrate.

During his term of office, President Eisenhower spoke of the military-industrial complex. The term referred to the large collection of manufacturers and related industries that were necessary to build the weapons and equipment of war. Given his role in World War II, he had a well-informed perspective on the matter.

It would have mattered little how brilliant the field marshal Erwin Rommel was as a strategist if he had no tanks to

command. He could have had the most capable and highly trained crews on the planet, but without panzers to drive they would have been little more than infantry. Consequently, the industrial production capabilities of every nation involved in the conflict were just as crucial as the strategic skills of their leading generals. You can't have a shooting war without bullets.

The factories and people who produced the planes, guns, and parachutes, as well as the less glamorous supplies such as socks and toothbrushes, were therefore extremely important to the overall effort. Any question of this can be laid to rest by the dubious honor these production workers received as being high-priority targets of bombing raids. No country is going to waste precious resources strafing the local cattle. They're going to attack those operations that can provide supplies to the frontline troops, explicitly acknowledging the critical importance of support operations. The cows, of course, couldn't be happier about this.

Fortunately for those of us doing battle with our competitors in the business world, we don't draw the kind of attention that would cause us to scurry to the nearest bomb shelter. Nonetheless, it's equally important that we understand the importance of these positions in our own companies.

Without supporting people, your company cannot complete its transactions. You would have no appointments or sales. Your paperwork would get lost. Even if it didn't, it wouldn't matter because there would have been no one to deposit the sales revenue into the company bank account. Without the backing of all these support organizations, you simply can't succeed.

Each company has its own way of recognizing contributions. Sometimes it's monetary; other times it's an awards ceremony. Probably the most effective method is praising your contributors on a daily basis, or referring to their accomplishments in conversation with others. The high-profile

people never go without accolades. At the same time, those in the trenches rarely get any at all. If you've ever worked in a company that had low morale and a lot of negativity, it's likely that this was a contributing factor to the bad attitudes you encountered.

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People in lower-paying support positions rarely get the accolades and attention they deserve from higher-ups. An easy way to boost morale and improve overall performance is simply to acknowledge, sincerely, the jobs done by people who aren't rock stars. When you show respect, you gain loyalty.

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This gap is further encouraged by the way we're conditioned to view low-paying positions. I've worked in factories, flipped burgers, and done no small amount of other menial minimum-wage jobs. When I was making very little, I noticed that we were consistently treated like stupid cattle at best and with outright aggressive abuse at worst.

Bear in mind that the lower-wage workers are the people who aren't getting paid well and are doing the grungiest work in the place. They can get another minimum-wage job anywhere else. When you're asking a great deal of someone (try scrubbing toilets all day for a living) and giving very little in return, you'd think that you'd want to at least be nice to them, lest they flip you the social finger and leave you to clean the bathrooms yourself. And yet, people at this level are frequently treated with profound disrespect.

This is nothing new in the world. It's also a tremendous opportunity for your company. When you make it a point to give those in your lowest-level positions respect on a daily basis as well as glory when the company achieves great things, they'll develop a sense of pride in their work that no competitor

can match. You'll also earn a great deal of well-deserved loyalty. As a result, when you compete head to head with others in your market, you'll have world-class support behind your every effort. That's not only a tactical advantage, it's all the more valuable because your competitors will probably never even think of it.

# Give Your People Heroes to Admire

Everyday life can be a grind. After giving it all you've got, day in and day out, it's not hard to find yourself exhausted and occasionally even a bit disheartened. Life isn't fair, and even if it were, we sometimes operate at less than our full potential. That's why we need heroes. They inspire us and kick us in the pants at the same time, encouraging us to get up off the mat, dust ourselves off, and try harder.

It's become ever more popular in the entertainment world to present heroes as flawed, self-doubting humans, often grappling with their own inadequacies. I'm not sure if this is more of the depressing trend of a shoe-gazing, dystopian outlook or if the purveyors of such nonsense feel that it's easier for us to relate to heroes if we knock them off their pedestals. Either way, they completely miss the point of the exercise.

Heroes, be they comic book characters or other fictional creations, are supposed to be larger than life. Their purpose is to uplift us, give us hope, encourage us to dig deep, and reach for something greater than we thought ourselves capable of. We have these exalted figures in the real world as well. Often, this is the glamorization of someone who did great deeds but is nonetheless just as human as you or I. We could pull out the microscope and analyze them in great detail, pointing out each

and every flaw that we find with great glee, but how would we benefit from that?

Truth is important, as is being realistic. However, you'll find that both of those terms are often more fluid than you're comfortable with. The Mongols revered Genghis Khan as a great leader. After all, they became powerful and prosperous under his rule. The countries he conquered and pillaged consider him the spawn of the devil. Each sentiment is true based on the given perspective, and yet they're completely contradictory. How can he be both good and evil at the same time? As it turns out, truth is often relative.

The same can be said about being realistic. If I accept the reality that I can't fly without the assistance of the appropriate craft, it will keep me from jumping off a building and encountering a bad end to an otherwise good life. When I dream of great things that I can accomplish, however, I'm often told by those of less ambition that I shouldn't aim so high. That's typically followed by the admonition to be realistic, which, in that context, means that I should accept someone else's limitations. No thanks. Realism isn't always what it's cracked up to be.

How then should I deal with a real-life hero, someone who's gone above and beyond the call and is an inspiration to her people? Some would go to great lengths to discover her human frailties and point them out to everyone they meet in an effort to knock her off her pedestal. Others choose to benefit by employing the same suspension of disbelief that they offer to an inspirational character at the movies.

Does a woman who has achieved something remarkable and uplifting need to be completely devoid of flaws in order for me to be moved by her example? If this is true, we'll forever be without inspiration, for there will never be perfect people.

In fact, people don't even need to be real to inspire. I acknowledge that I'm unlikely to meet a little green Jedi master in my lifetime. Even so, I can still hear him talk about the ways of the Force and feel motivated to reach for something higher and better in myself. Regardless of whether or not I can levitate a spaceship, if the result is greater personal effort that will make me smarter, stronger, and better, what do I care if the source of my motivation is perfect, or even real? Inspiration is inspiration. I'll take mine wherever I can get it.

They may not be as exciting as superheroes or ancient warlords, but you also have heroes in your own environment. All you have to do is look for them. Furthermore, they exist at many levels. Your lower-level support people need inspiration every bit as much as the high-profile performers. Your heroes don't have to be perfect. They don't even have to levitate the occasional X-wing fighter. They just need to show us that the difficult things can be done and that we're stronger and smarter than we often give ourselves credit for. In short, they just need to help us believe in what we can achieve.

# Celebrate Victories with Great Enthusiasm

Many of us have worked on projects where each great accomplishment is greeted not with applause but merely another deadline. We might endure that once or twice, but after a few of those instances, it just feels like a death march. Against all laws of physics and commonsense, the energy level and motivation go down with every success. In the tech arena, this happens all the time. If you're not careful, all that hard work and extra effort is going to put your company right out of business.

There are limits to human endurance. We can push hard for finite periods and we can maintain a steady effort for longer, but eventually we need to recharge. Some of that comes from sleep and the occasional vacation. In an industry where we're passionate about what we do, however, we're often going to work ourselves to the extreme limits. A good night's sleep or a couple of days away from the office will help, but we may find when we return that we're still not completely recharged. We need more.

For as long as humanity has gathered in societies, major festivals have been held at certain times of the year. In the spring of olden times, there was much work to be done. It was the season of birth and growing not to mention the chance to make sure you were well fed in the winter. The ground was prepared, crops were planted, livestock attended to, homes built and repaired, and all while the weather was good. The list of chores was seemingly endless, but all were necessary for the survival of the village.

Slack off in the spring and you weren't going to have much fun when the snow comes. And the snow always came. Back then, winter wasn't something we watched on television from inside our comfy, heated houses. It was a dangerous and challenging season that many didn't survive.

Even so, life then wasn't all gloom and hard work. When winter passed and spring came along, people in villages everywhere prepared to party. It was a celebration of the planting season and the hope it brought for the future. The spring equinox was also a reminder that you'd survived yet another winter. Bright costumes helped to brighten attitudes. It was a time to drink, dance, and be glad you were still alive.

In a similar fashion, we also partied with great enthusiasm in the fall, after the hard work of the harvest. The crops were in, we had food for the winter, the roofs were patched, and the

cows were fed. We were exhausted, of course, but it was a good feeling.

Then as now, there's nothing like celebrating with your friends at the end of a long project to recharge your batteries and give yourself renewed energy for the next round of work. You're going to go back to putting in long hours, enduring many frustrations, and occasionally wondering if you should just chuck it all and become a hermit in the woods.

When you finally accomplish your objectives or enjoy a victory over your competitors, it's time to drink and dance by firelight and renew your spirit. If the HR department is a bit skittish about a bonfire in the middle of conference room A, you can always find a more appropriate means of celebrating. What's important is that you play together every bit as hard as you've worked.

We don't dig ditches for a living. We're fortunate in having a career that we're passionate about. In fact, that enthusiasm is one of our great competitive advantages. People who are fired up about what they do invariably produce the best results. When you're looking for ways to maximize productivity or find that next killer idea, don't overestimate the power of a good party. Howling at the moon is optional but highly recommended.

# Always Lookto the Next Conquest

The moment you stop dreaming, you stop living. When you're no longer focused on what you can achieve tomorrow, your momentum stops. Shortly thereafter, it begins to move in the opposite direction.

If there's no new victory to achieve or dragon to slay, there's no point in putting in all that extra effort. While dragons would view this lack of effort favorably, the steady decline of your

company will probably not be to your liking. This means that you always need to have a new quest, a new goal to achieve.

The scope of these ambitions can and should vary depending on the groups involved. For the CEO of a company, it's perfectly acceptable to focus on a multimillion dollar increase in revenue next year. For the guy working the phones in your tech support department, a measurable increase in customer satisfaction would be more appropriate.

In each case, the goals have to be practical and yet just slightly out of reach. We should have to stretch for them and put in that extra bit of effort before we're able to make them happen. Success that comes too easily isn't valued. If you're serious about celebrating your victories, it's important to have victories worth celebrating.

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Set goals that are practical but also slightly out of reach. You want people to stretch, and to value the achievement when it comes. You'll also value the increase in productivity.

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It's also highly recommended that you have a slight lull in the action before announcing your next grand vision. If your people have worked themselves into the ground on the previous project, even a party isn't going to be enough to light the fires again. When you exert great effort, it's important to take a deep breath. If possible, give people some time off. Shuffle the schedules around if you need to in order to keep your operations covered, but give people that deep breath so that they're not on automatic pilot when the next big challenge comes their way.

However, when the confetti's all swept away and everyone's feeling fresh and perky again, don't wait too long before

unveiling your next plan. If you've built a proud and highly competitive group, your people are going to crave the thrill of battle. When they do, that's when you know you have an elite force that can take on any competitor.

When dreaming and scheming for the future, you should also involve your staff. They're the ones who were with you all the way through the last adventure. As a result, they're going to have a great many insights that you may have missed. Between you and them, there's an excellent chance that you'll end up with a long list of new goals, from which you can choose the most juicy prospects.

Work hard, play hard, and rest hard. When you're done, look to the horizon once more and find a new destination worth sailing to. Just be sure to keep the cycle of work and rejuvenation in mind as you make your plans. Even the ocean doesn't stay at high tide all day.

# Summary

It's not the size of the dog in the fight but rather the fight in the dog. As old sayings go, it's fairly appropriate in our business. After all, no one ever talks about the cat-eat-cat nature of the business world, unless you happen to be working on a viral video.

If business is war, then by its very nature it's a high-stakes contest. Professional athletes take matters of competitiveness seriously. As a result, we fill stadiums to cheer them on. The tech market becomes more crowded with each passing year. If you want to take your business to the next level, build a culture of conquest and then unleash your people on the competition.

# Persuasion

## Never Forget That You're Dealing with People.

Unless you work in the marketing department, there's a good chance that you don't feel the need to master the art of persuasion. Leaders have a better grasp of this skill than most. The majority of people don't pursue it at all.

Nonetheless, no matter who you are and what part you play in the overall scheme of things, you have an agenda. Perhaps you're running the company and want to move it forward in the marketplace. If you're lower on the chain of command, your interests could be related to the success of your group. Regardless of the category you're in, you at least have a career, and who knows, maybe even a personal life.

Those are plenty of opportunities for a well-stocked agenda. If you can't effectively promote it, you don't get what you want. It's as simple as that. Many avoid learning the mechanics of sales because it seems sleazy and distasteful to them. Fortunately, while there will always be snake-oil peddlers among us, persuasion doesn't require you to be shallow, phony, or unethical. In fact, you'll get your best results when you're not. Ultimately, it's all about understanding people, which isn't nearly as hard as you might think.

# Make a Friend

Anytime you ask for something, it generates tension. It might be so minimal as to be undetectable, and it goes away quickly if the other person is predisposed to agreeing with you on the matter. You'll notice it much more when your counterpart isn't inclined to grant your wish. In such cases, you have obstacles to overcome and the emotions that accompany the ensuing tension.

Naturally, when you're trying to get someone to agree with you, the fewer the obstacles the better. The best way to eliminate unnecessary discomfort in the beginning stages of the conversation is to put the other person at ease. In other words, make a friend.

This isn't terribly hard to understand. In a social context, it's typically considered rude to walk up to someone and immediately start talking about what you want. We're expected to at least observe the niceties of interaction first by asking how the person's doing and making a bit of small talk.

It's really no more complicated than that in a business setting. When you meet with someone, it's both polite and worthwhile to spend a few minutes chatting amiably. It gives you a chance to get to know them if they're not a familiar face. Even if they are, you're able to get a sense of what their mood is at the moment.

Talking about the weather is a bit of a cliché, but people do it for a reason. Everyone experiences atmospheric conditions, so it's something you know you'll have in common with another person. People also talk about sports, TV shows, and other cultural touchstones. Even if it's a stranger, it gives you something you can both discuss, and conversation is the first step to building a good relationship.

In addition to putting people at ease, making a friend has another benefit. People who like you are often inclined to go along with your plan just to help you out. We do that for our

friends. In fact, many times top salespeople make money because the customer buys them rather than their product.

For those of you worried about having to become a used-car salesman in order to be effective, you can hang that plaid sports jacket back up in the closet. You won't be needing it. You'll be at your most productive when you're honest, open, and sincere.

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Influence in business has nothing to do with selling snake oil to others. Instead, be open, honest, and sincere. You'll greatly improve your chances at getting what you want, and you just might make a friend.

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Yes, there will be times when you have to frame your position in the most positive light, and you'll also have to engage in the occasional round of parry and thrust as you overcome the objections of others. Being true to who you are does not work against you in those moments. It actually works very much in your favor.

If you were talking with someone who seemed phony and untrustworthy, how much credence would you give to what she was saying? On the other hand, if you were approached by someone you felt to be a straightforward and respectable person, you'd obviously be more inclined to believe her.

To make friends, you don't have to become some obnoxious social butterfly who offers shallow one-liners instead of sincere conversation. You'll find that if you treat the person you're doing business with no differently than you would one of your friends, he may soon become one of them. At the very least, you'll have a cordial and comfortable start to your dialogue. Either way, when it comes time to talk shop, you'll be making your case to receptive ears.

# Leave Your Emotions at the Door

A person in an emotional state is unreasonable by definition. In fact, while it's possible for reason and emotion to share the driver's seat, it's a rare and uncomfortable event. Besides, the seat belt never quite seems to fit. As a result, we tend to operate based on either emotion or reason, depending on how we're feeling at the moment.

When emotions are doing the driving, it tends to be a little hard on the insurance rates. We get angry or we cry, we're too impatient, or we're so sullen as to be useless. These are just a few examples, of course, and they're of a more negative variety. We experience positive emotions as well, but they can equally leave us unbalanced and not in our most reasonable state. If you've ever been in love, this needs no further explanation.

When you're focused on persuading another person to agree with your request or point of view, you have two sets of reactions that contribute to the outcome, yours and your counterpart's. If either of you are off balance, it will make even normal conversation difficult. Add the implicit pressure of trying to convince someone to agree with you and the potential for sparks is even higher.

It doesn't stop with these two sets of emotions, however. They also combine and create an atmosphere in the room that can be as palpable as a heavy fog and about as easy to navigate. This combination is far more complex than the simple numbers you dealt with in your high school math class, but there is a form of arithmetic nonetheless. Two negative people make for a negative vibe. A positive person isn't guaranteed to turn around her opposite, but the potential exists. Naturally, two happy people make for the best conditions.

There are sales organizations that intentionally manipulate the emotional state of their targets as a way to gain control and

make the sale. I once knew someone who worked for a dating service. This was back in ancient times before there were Web sites for such things. In fact, the backroom computer probably occupied the entire backroom. It was a very predatory operation, charging thousands of dollars. His description of how the company would attack and twist the emotions of lonely and vulnerable people brought out an emotional response in me. I wanted to stuff him in the nearest trash bin.

While I obviously don't think much about that approach to persuasion, it's important to keep in mind that not everyone on the planet is a good guy. There are many people who will intentionally try to get you angry or wound up so that they can more easily control you. If you're aware of the tactic, you're less likely to be sucked in by it.

Most people in the business world don't want to know anything about sales to begin with. They certainly have no desire to sink into the gutter in order to accomplish their objectives. Fortunately, it's not at all necessary. You'll do your best work when you and the people you're speaking with are in a reasonable rather than emotional state.

With that in mind, it's important to be aware of everyone's emotions, especially your own. If you feel yourself losing control, you're no longer effective and can be easily manipulated yourself. The key to keeping the situation positive and practical is to avoid letting things get personal.

I once worked with a group of pretty strong-willed programmers, which is not exactly an endangered species. They were all very bright and in any given meeting there might have been several good ideas. The conversations were often intense, as everyone was passionate about the project. Even so, we consistently had productive meetings because we had a golden rule to which we adhered. Attack the idea, never the person. By keeping that one simple rule in mind (and reminding others on occasion when they veered a little too

close to the edge), we kept the conversation within the domain of reason.

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Attack the idea, never the person.

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In your dealings with others, you won't always have a consensus on that rule, but you can certainly play by it yourself. You can also use it to gently steer the conversation when you see others either taking things personally or gearing up to attack someone on that level.

In all of your dealings, do your best to keep things friendly and cordial while making sure that reason does the driving. If emotions reach for the wheel, a well-placed elbow can often do the trick.

# Speak the Other Person's Language

We've touched on this concept previously and it's especially true in the art of persuasion. You simply can't have an effective conversation without a common language, and it's very difficult to promote your agenda without talking. In our case, we're making a more figurative use of language since obviously the conversation itself requires that both parties understand the words being spoken.

Speaking people's language also implies understanding who you're dealing with. If you know their agenda, their perspective, and their background, you have a much greater ability to communicate. More important, you have a decided advantage in promoting your own agenda, as you'll be able to frame it in a way that makes sense to them.

I often refer to a person's religion as being an important factor in technical conversations. By that, I don't mean their spiritual values but rather their passionate views on the brands and type of technology that should be used. Much like actual religions, people in our industry will often adhere tenaciously to a singular point of view and be completely unreceptive to anything beyond its borders. Naturally, this can create a great deal of difficulty when trying to work out a problem in a roomful of competing religious views.

As a very mild example, many people who went to college feel that anyone hired should possess a degree from an accredited university. Those who don't are simply unworthy. There is of course another point of view that focuses more on the capabilities of the individual than on his pedigree. There is no right and wrong in terms of these perspectives. Each raises valid points. However, not everyone is open-minded in his assessment of this issue, and they may doggedly insist that one or the other approach is the only correct path.

If you're going into a meeting to discuss HR topics, it doesn't matter which side of the fence you sit on or even if you prefer to perch atop a post. What's important is knowing how the person you're speaking with feels, and why. Your agenda may have nothing to with hiring practices, but how your coworker feels about qualifications will doubtless color their perspective on many of the points you discuss. By knowing where she stands, you'll be able to avoid potential flashpoints. You'll also know when you can leverage their beliefs to bolster the point you're making.

A similar advantage can be obtained by knowing a person's agenda. We all have one, even if it's no more complicated than holding a steady job and avoiding overtime. Of course, in the business world they're often more complex than that.

Imagine a meeting where you're trying to sell the group on your project. You know that one influential voice feels strongly

about using the XYZ technology. You couldn't possibly care less as long as you get the results you're looking for. You just want to get the project approved.

By navigating the conversation to the topic of technologies and suggesting that the XYZ approach is really the way to go, you're going to get this person's immediate attention. If you're further able to suggest that she's the best choice to handle that chunk of the show, you'll doubtless have her enthusiastic backing. You're now in a much better position to promote your own agenda because you understood hers and found common ground.

The art of diplomacy is closely linked to persuasion. It's not a requirement, but the smoother you can keep the conversation, the more likely you are to be productive rather than falling into pointless bickering because someone was offended. Once again, by having an in-depth understanding of the people involved, you're in the best possible position to create an atmosphere that lends itself to getting things done.

Along those lines, you also get an additional bonus. When you go to the time and trouble of learning other people's language instead of just assuming they should understand your own, it makes an impression. Rather than bursting into the room and demanding that everyone do it your way, you've demonstrated yourself to be a thoughtful and considerate person. Consequently, you've already started building bridges, that first necessary step in spanning the gulf between you and them.

# Think in Terms of Their Benefit

A constant theme in both my writing and speaking is that of self-interest. It's a fundamental component of understanding people and consequently is something that should be reinforced on a regular basis. The better you understand

others, the more likely you're going to have a productive interaction.

Remember, nobody gives a rat's rear end about what you want. They're too busy thinking about their own dreams and desires, or at the very least how to deal with the day-to-day dilemmas that we're all faced with. You might think that this is terribly inconvenient when it comes time to make a persuasive pitch for your own needs, but in fact it's one of the most powerful tools you have at your disposal.

If you've taken the time to know the person you'll be speaking with, then you'll have a very good idea of what they want. Among the oldest bits of advice for positive human interaction is the adage that you should walk a mile in the other person's shoes. While it might explain why he has smelly feet, it will most certainly allow you to see the world from his point of view.

Even though this is an incredibly useful exercise, it's one that few ever attempt. Of course, the reason for this is that most of us are wrapped up in our own wants and needs. Dealing with someone else's footwear sounds like taking time away from our own agenda. Consequently, people dismiss it and turn their attention back to their own interests.

Those who do take the time to deeply ponder life from the other person's point of view are given the keys to the store. You know what you want to accomplish. Now you know what the other person cares about. All you have to do from there is communicate how what you want helps him get what he wants.

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It can't be said enough: People act based on self-interest. Figure out what another person wants out of life and you

have the keys to the castle. Persuasion and teamwork become much, much easier.

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There's nothing new or novel about this approach. In fact, the reason it's been around for so long is that it continues to work. No matter how many iterations society goes through, people are still people. If you can help them in their own quest, you're going to immediately make a friend. If you can find a way that your journey comes into harmony with theirs, you'll not only get what you want, you may find that together, the two of you are now an even-more-powerful force for achieving your common goals.

If you haven't done so already, grab a sticky note and write one simple phrase on it and post it at eye level on your bathroom mirror. Each morning, when it asks you, "What's in it for me?" just imagine it's the voice of those you want something from. If you put heart, body, and soul into answering that question in a way that would be meaningful to them, your success rate is going to skyrocket.

Your inner six-year-old may become quite indignant at some point and demand to know why you should have to cater to the rest of the world. After all, you're just as valid a human being as anyone else, so why shouldn't others think about what's in it for you instead? That's a perfectly logical question, especially from a grade school advisor. However, if you cling tenaciously to the notion that life should be fair, you're going to accumulate a lot of bumps and bruises. Neither life nor business plays by the rules. Why should you have to be the one to take the high road? Because you can.

That's exactly the reason it's such a powerful tool. Even though it's an approach available to all, very few bother to try it. Consequently, when you're the only one in the room who's thinking from everyone else's perspective and trying to find

ways to help them accomplish their goals, you're going to stand out. You'll not only be more successful in your dealings with others, you'll soon gain a reputation as being someone who's worth knowing. That creates more and more relationships, and in the business world, that's power.

Tell your inner child to go suck on a lollipop. You're the grown-up, and you know what you're doing. Besides, you're the one who pays for the lollipops. Know who you're dealing with, answer the question on your bathroom mirror, and you'll be well on your way to realizing your own dreams.

# Perfect Your Timing

In comedy, timing is everything. It's equally important to getting what you want in business. If you don't think there's any comedy in this industry, you're just not looking hard enough.

There will be occasions when you have to pursue your agenda right here, right now, regardless of circumstances. However, if you remove impatience from consideration, you'll find that those cases are few and far between. For the most part, there will be a fairly large window of opportunity for the things you want to accomplish if you're planning far enough ahead. Having a longer period of time in which to achieve your objectives is an important factor in your success, as it allows you to make your move at the most opportune moment.

The first thing to consider when deciding on your timeline is the overall environment and whether it presents obstacles or is conducive to your plan. Imagine proposing an initiative that would require hiring three new people. That doesn't sound like such a big deal in and of itself. However, if your company just went through layoffs because business is slow, they're going to laugh you right out of the conference room. A few months

down the line, when things are getting back to normal, your proposal can be judged on its merits alone. Which would you prefer, a quick failure or a slower success?

You also need to consider the competitive threats to your plan. If you'd like to get a few new computers for your group and another tribe is currently making a big push to get more gear as well, your request could get lost in the shuffle. Depending on the politics, the other tribe may even try to blow you out of the water completely just to keep their own supply lines unhindered. If you step to the side and let their plan run its course, you can then make a case for your own needs without dodging the barbs of another department.

Timing is also important when dealing with individuals. On the most basic level, you need to consider the mental and emotional state of the person you're trying to persuade. In a perfect world, we would all leave our personal problems at home and be completely professional in the workplace. Should you ever find such a world, save me a seat. In the meantime, as long as you're dealing with the human race, our individual frailties are just part of the package.

Imagine a breakfast meeting with a coworker who just that morning had a nuclear argument with his wife before heading off to work. He's angry, emotional, and probably just looking for someone to take it out on, whether he realizes it or not. Without knowing any of this, you come strolling into his office. Since you probably don't wear asbestos underwear on a daily basis, it's unlikely that you'll enjoy this experience let alone accomplish your goals.

If you're blindsided by an unforeseen scenario that creates a bad atmosphere for your conversation, find the door as quickly as possible. There are a million and one ways to gracefully get out of a conversation at the last minute. Apologize, come up with a reasonable excuse for why you'll have to reschedule, and run as fast as you can for the exit.

Wait for the right time to have an important conversation. If the other person is in a bad mood, back out. If the company is going through unexpected travails, hold off. When you slow down and get a feel for the situation, you'll know if the time is ripe to press your initiative.

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Using our same unfortunate colleague, you may have already picked up on the fact that he's having some problems at home, whether from water cooler gossip or casual conversation with him. Unless it's a large-scale problem, these things often resolve themselves in a matter of weeks. The best way to avoid injury in a conflict is to be somewhere else when it takes place. In this case, that means holding off on asking for a meeting until his personal crisis has passed and he's back on an even keel.

One day, in the decidedly dystopian future, the machines may very well take over the planet. I, for one, will not welcome our new robot overlords. Sure, you'd never have to worry about things like this with an android that's completely devoid of emotion. On the other hand, you'd forever lose that spark of inspiration and brilliance that comes from some undefined place within the human experience.

Without a doubt, people and their little personality quirks can be pesky and inconvenient. Even if they weren't, we're never in control of the larger environment in which we operate. That being the case, the best move is to be keenly perceptive, wait for the opening, and make your move when the time is right.

# Ask for More Than You Want

Pitch 'em high and watch 'em buy. That was one of the many truisms we lived by back when I taught salespeople how to

make a living. It's really one of the most basic forms of negotiation, and yet a surprisingly large number of people don't employ it when they're trying to get something they want.

The first example of this is the haggling typical of street vendors in your local market. You examine a product and ask the price. The proprietor tells you it's thirty dollars, at which point you gingerly place it back on the shelf, roll your eyes, and head for the next vendor. Naturally, the merchant stops you to ask what the problem is, at which point you speculate aloud that his recreational activities might be having hallucinatory side effects on him. Furthermore, you tell him that the product isn't worth a dollar more than twenty. Ultimately, after a lively conversation, the two of you agree on twenty-five dollars.

You walk away from the transaction feeling rather superior about getting a good deal. What you don't know is that your sparring partner would have taken twenty dollars and still made a profit. However, if he'd started at that price, you would have offered ten. Even compromising at fifteen he would still lose money, meaning he'd be forced to decline and get no sale. Therefore he started off with more than he needed, leaving room for both bargaining and a profit.

There's another angle to this as well, and you see it on late-night TV every week. In a loud, excited voice, the announcer tells you about an amazing gizmo that slices, dices, and occasionally dances the mambo across your kitchen countertop. After listing an impressive array of features, you're told that it's a product that normally sells for over a hundred dollars. Today, however, you can buy it for just $19.95. What a deal!

Naturally, the product is made out of plastic thinner than the cardboard box it comes in and will last about as long. In fact, the box probably cost them more than the item it contains, so at twenty bucks a pop they're making quite the profit. Even so,

because this is such a tremendous savings, people are compelled to reach for their credit cards. If it didn't work, companies wouldn't keep using the tactic decade after decade.

Lest you think that this is just preying on fools, the psychology of getting a bargain affects us all. A couple of my friends, high-level managers and quite intelligent, once ordered a device that made tortilla bowls for salads from just this kind of TV commercial. Because it was such a good deal, they bought two.

In addition to the perceived benefit of getting a bargain, starting with a high price also implies greater quality. One of my clients sold office supplies and I was trying to make this point, so I sat all the salespeople down and made them watch me pull two identical ballpoint pens out of the same box. I held them up and described each as being functionally equivalent to the other, after which I priced one at double the price of its counterpart.

From there, I drove them 'round the block and talked about people who wanted only the best and wouldn't settle for less. These were people for whom price was not the consideration; that was for lesser mortals. By the time I was done, I had painted the higher-priced pen with shades of quality while simultaneously appealing to the ego of the listener. A show of hands at the end of the pitch had them all buying the higher-priced pen. Not so much as one person opted for the less-expensive version. At that point, I put the pens both back in the same box, threw it to the salesperson nearest me, and told the people to stop whining about price objections. Sales that day skyrocketed.

You'll see more subtle and well-backed examples of this tactic everywhere if you look closely enough. Unlike my blatant charade, companies will typically have at least some substance to back up the claims of quality that appeal to your ego. A dollar-for-dollar comparison, however, will rarely show this to

be totally justified in the price. People simply assume that you get what you pay for and figure if it's more expensive, it must be better.

Whether you're trying to get a budget of $100k for your project and ask for 50 percent more or you're considering how to price your product in the marketplace, never start with the amount you actually want to get. Here's a quick tip to tell you if you started high enough. If people said yes to your first offer, you didn't.

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If people agree immediately to your offer, you didn't ask for enough.

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# Give Them a Reason to Act Now

If you want action, you need a decision. More specifically, you need one now. A common mistake people make in promoting an agenda is to lay out the facts and figures, ask for an agreement, and walk away empty handed because there was no real reason for the decision maker to act now. If you've ever had people tell you that your idea sounds good and they'll get back to you, you know that they never do. Your pitch is dead in the water.

Returning to our highly obnoxious but equally successful late-night announcer, you'll find that urgency is a big part of the pitch. In one way or another, you'll be told that in order to get this fabulous deal, you have to act now. If you wait until later, you may not be able to get it.

Once again, logic is ill equipped to explain the reactions of the human species. I've seen the exact same commercial play every night for weeks on end, always with the same message.

Buy now. Tomorrow might be too late. Even though weeks of tomorrows come and go, my professional training, not to mention the fact that the company keeps paying for very expensive TV time, tells me that people continue to call that 800 number, frantically hoping they're not too late to give someone their money.

If you've ever bought a car, you've encountered a different form of urgency. Auto dealerships try to make the purchase an exciting one and do their best to get you emotionally attached to the car they're trying to sell you. At the end of the pitch, you might tell them that you want to think about it and will come back tomorrow.

The seasoned salesperson will then shrug as if to offer condolences on your bad fortune. Apologetically, he'll convey that it probably won't be available tomorrow because another person was interested in it and will be calling back in just a few minutes. However, because you seem like such a nice guy, he'll go ahead and give it to you if you take it right now. Think that sounds hokey? It's a staple of the business and for good reason. It works.

Part of successfully creating urgency is in the setup. I've seen sales organizations use things that just made your brain reboot because they were so out there, and yet they were effective. I once listened to a salesperson who was combining urgency with the concept of offering a massive perceived discount. As you might expect, what he was pitching for twenty bucks was worth around twenty bucks, but he promoted it as normally costing a hundred because it was of such high quality. This was an incredible discount of 80 percent. At this point, the BS filter of even the most naive person is likely to go off like a fire alarm. After all, if it's worth a hundred dollars, why would someone sell it for twenty?

Our pitchman explained to his prospect that the guy driving the truck at the loading dock was drunk. Instead of backing up to

the dock, he rammed the eighteen wheeler straight through the concrete wall, leaving a hole the size of Texas. Rather than take a chance on people coming by that night and stealing everything (he actually said he was afraid the hippies would sneak in and try to smoke the inventory), the company decided to just liquidate it all at cost. Obviously, it had to be sold today before the sun went down. I watched him make sale after sale to what I was sure were otherwise intelligent people.

Does that seem a little too far-fetched for you? Think about that the next time you see a car dealership promising to sell you that buggy of your dreams for just one dollar over invoice cost, but only if you act now.

I've given you a lot of examples that I consider to be just south of sleazy. We both know that you aren't wild about pitching someone in the first place, let alone selling your soul to get what you want. The reason I've told you all of these less-than-ethical tales is to illustrate the effectiveness of the technique. From the fundamental concept of the limited-time sale to our less-than-scrupulous merchants, people consistently use urgency as a persuasive tactic because it's effective.

With that in mind, consider this. If giving people a reason to act now works even when the deal is not at all good for the consumer, imagine how well it's going to do for you when presenting something that actually has value.

# Be Prepared for Objections

With very few exceptions, people aren't going to say yes to your first offer. There will be a host of reasons for which they'll be inclined to say no, some of them valid, some not so much. Regardless of how legitimate they may be, if you're not prepared to answer their objections, they're simply not going to agree with you.

Although I framed it in other ways for years when working with salespeople, I discovered a great metaphor for this when watching an episode of *The West Wing*, a long-running TV drama about the White House. One of the senior staff members was making an unpopular argument to a woman he wanted to date. She was a schoolteacher and had read one of his position papers outlining principles that were not at all advantageous to her profession.

The memo had been given to her by someone else who just wanted to have a little fun watching the sparks fly. It turns out that the paper didn't reflect his personal opinions. It was what they termed opposition research. When the woman offered a blank look in response to the phrase, the prankster told her that when they were gearing up for a political fight, they had the smart guys take the opposite position. It helped them better prepare against any and all arguments their opponents would offer.

When you want to persuade someone to agree with you, that's exactly the exercise you should perform well before the encounter. Put yourself on the other side of the table and make a list of each and every objection that might be made, from the serious to the silly. Attack your position aggressively and without mercy.

When you're done, you should have a list of all the arguments you're likely to encounter. Make a pass through your list to tighten them up into short one- or two-sentence descriptions. This not only makes it easier for you to use in preparation for your presentation, it also ensures that you really understand the core of the issue.

Armed with a list of things people will say to justify not giving you what you want, go on to write out a rebuttal under each of the objections. In other words, explain to the person you're addressing why any of the issues she raised isn't a problem and therefore shouldn't prevent her from saying yes.

When you're preparing your responses, be sure that in each case you begin with validating the concerns, no matter how stupid you think one might be. People don't like being told that what they believe is wrong. Should you make that mistake, they'll typically become defensive and that, rather than the objection itself, will be the next barrier you have to overcome. It's an unnecessary battle and one that's easily avoided.

Begin by agreeing with the objection and letting people know that you think they've made a valid and intelligent point. This diffuses the tension and shows that you have respect for them, always valuable in any conversation. From there, navigate smoothly into your reasoning by explaining that while their objection might normally be a problem, here's why it's not in this particular case. This allows you to address their concern without offending them and return to explaining why they should agree with you.

There's one additional part to this that's very important to master. People will often say no but not give you the real reason that they don't want to go along with you. Sometimes they'll be aware of this; other times it will be subconscious. Either way, if you're not answering the right objection, you can't win.

When selling a product, the most common example of this is someone telling you that they're not going to buy because the price is too high. This can be a dilemma for the salesperson who has no authority to lower the price. Additionally, your price

may be just fine. The problem is that price is often just a kneejerk reaction when someone really wants to say no. Perhaps a guy is looking at a shiny red sports car at a dealership. The salesperson tries to close the deal, but the customer balks, saying it's just too much money.

In fact, it's a fair price and our less-than-cooperative customer could afford to buy three if he wanted to. That being the case, why is he saying no? Our consumer knows full well that if he spends a big chunk of money on a new car without so much as discussing it with his wife, he's going to be sleeping on the couch for a very long time. It doesn't matter how you feel about that objection. If it's important to the person you're trying to sell, it's a barrier you'll have to overcome in order to succeed.

In this case, to address the spoken objection you would have to lower the price. Even so, you wouldn't make the sale. What you have to do is what's known in the trade as flushing out the hidden objection. If you have a sense of what's really going on, you can ask a leading question. You might buddy up and make a guy-to-guy observation that in most cases, an impulse buy like this would mean a week on the couch. If your prospect nods, you're on the right track and can then overcome the real objection, perhaps by suggesting he buy two cars, one for him and a faster one for his wife.

You won't always know what the real problem is. This can be handled by asking gently probing questions. You can appear genuinely perplexed, since what you're offering is reasonable. You might then suggest that in addition to the perfectly valid spoken objection, you can't help feeling that there are other concerns as well. As you get the other person to open up and talk about them, you're once again in the game. Now that you know what's really standing between you and an agreement, you have the opportunity to solve the problem and get what you want.

# Get an Agreement

I've seen many otherwise-talented salespeople follow all of these practices and still not make the sale. They'll make a friend, explain the value very persuasively, and overcome each and every objection with ease. In the end, they'll still have no agreement. The reason for this is simple. They never asked for one.

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Ask them to say yes. Good salespeople learn early on that when you don't ask, you don't get. So ask, and get.

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In the sales biz, the method by which you ask for an agreement is known as a closing question. Closing means completing the transaction; hence the phrase. No matter how articulate you are, unless the other person says yes, you've accomplished nothing. Therefore, you need to ask them to say yes.

Of course, you have to be a bit more eloquent than this. You'd look pretty stupid ending a polished presentation with the phrase "Will you say yes?" That sentence has two problems. First, it's clumsy and obvious. More importantly, however, it sounds like you're begging, which is never a strong bargaining position.

One of the most common closing techniques is what's known as assuming the sale. This means rather than appearing to sit on the edge of your seat, hoping and praying that the other person will go along with you, you just assume that what you've proposed is perfectly sensible and that obviously he will agree.

At this point, assuming there are no more lollipops to consume, we can put your inner six-year-old back to work. Some of the

greatest natural salespeople on the planet are children who are trying to get what they want. With no formal training, they nonetheless instinctively know what the business professional often misses. You'll recognize this immediately when you hear, "Mom, I'm going to grab another lollipop, okay?"

Regardless of your feelings about sugar intake or dessert before dinner, that's a classic closing question. First, your son just assumes that you're cool with him getting another snack. That's why he's not engaging you in a deep philosophical dialogue about the relative merits of his request. After all, if there's no conversation, there's no opportunity for you to say no.

After the assumption comes the power in the statement. When someone uses the word "okay," we instinctively bob our head up and down, right? If the final word in the previous sentence also induced that reaction, that's because it's the same technique with a different word.

The bobbing of the head brings up another thing to keep in mind as you're working toward your agreement. Many times, salespeople will use what's known as the trial close as part of the buildup. They may make a certain point and ask a question that gets you to agree. Sometimes, it's a tactic to eliminate objections before they arise, but often these are very obvious questions to which yes can be the only sensible answer. If a rep was selling air filters, she might observe that breathing is good, right? We nod our head because, yes, breathing is good.

The psychological effect of continually eliciting small agreements as you go along is that you've put the other person in an agreeable state of mind. That doesn't mean reason goes out the window or that all objections will magically vanish, it's just one more step in your favor.

Ultimately, however, you must ask for an agreement. It might be an assumptive close, as our small, snack-loving friend has

demonstrated. There's also something known as the decision close, which amounts to asking people if they'd prefer to say yes or would rather just say yes. If you're trying to get someone to agree to a meeting with you, you could ask them if Tuesday is good or if they'd rather just meet on Thursday. They may come back at you with the response that neither of those days is workable; it absolutely must be Wednesday.

What you've done in this case is blow right past the obvious question of whether or not they want to meet. Instead, you're assuming they do and are asking them which way they'd like to say yes. They may respond with a different day due to the reality of their schedule. Often, they'll do so only because it gives them a feeling of being in control. In other words, you're not telling them what to do. They'll be the one to decide how they want to say yes.

There's one other important step when asking a closing question. After you've asked them to say yes, shut up. Whoever speaks next loses. When you ask a question, it generates tension. That tension is relieved when someone starts talking. It doesn't matter who. Consequently, after asking the question, if you wait a couple of seconds and begin speaking again, you've destroyed the tension that your question created. Sometimes these pauses can be long, but hang in there. Eventually, they'll speak. Even if they offer another objection, the momentum is on your side.

Of course, these are just a couple of examples of closing questions. In fact, I'm just covering the basics of persuasion in general. There are entire books on the subject, and a great many of them cover the topic of sales. You don't have to be in the car business to benefit. You have an agenda. Learn to promote it effectively, or you'll consistently lose out to others who do.

> Learn to promote your agenda—and you have one whether you've thought about it or not—or you'll play doormat to those who promote theirs time and time again.

# Believe

The last item on our list is a bit more subjective and borders on that nebulous area of positive thinking, spirituality, and other such regions where reality can't always be demonstrated in concise black-and-white terms. If you're looking for someone to teach you about such things, I'm not your guy. I have a hard enough time figuring out the things I can touch and feel, let alone answering those complex questions of life, the universe, and everything.

Nonetheless, when you're attempting to persuade others, attitude is everything. We've all met the mopey, depressed character who assumes with resignation and a deep sigh that things just aren't going to go his way. You can talk until you're blue in the face and offer irrefutable logic that demonstrates how his life will get better, but he'll have none of it. He'll either argue your points, ignore them, or both. When you walk away, he'll still be convinced that he lives under a dark cloud and enduring bad things is just his destiny. Furthermore, history will prove him right.

I don't need magic to explain this. If you believe that you're screwed no matter what you do, there's no incentive for you to get up off the couch. While fortune sometimes smiles on us no matter where we're sitting, in the game of life you have to play to win. If you want good things to happen, you have to get up off your well-worn sofa and put forth some effort to get what you want.

If you're out of work, it's unlikely that the career fairy is going to visit you in your sleep and put a job offer and a stack of stock options under your pillow. You have to wake up each morning, review every job listing you can find, hit the bricks to do a little networking, put together a good resume and hone your sales pitch for when you get the interview. Implicit in all of these actions is the belief that you will ultimately succeed and find a job. Otherwise, why would you bother doing all that work?

In addition to the technique of practicing your persuasive techniques for when you land the interview, belief also plays a big role in the meeting itself. Put yourself on the other side of the desk. If our depressed gloom-and-doom friend is talking to you, he'll probably be staring at his shoes and listing all the reasons he's sure you won't hire him. Our next contestant walks in with a bright and optimistic attitude, exudes a friendly confidence, speaks in positive terms about all the good things he's going to do as your employee, and in parting says that he's looking forward to working together. In short, he believes, and you should too that you are going to hire him. Which one are you going to choose?

It's no different regardless of what you're trying to accomplish. When you're working to persuade others to agree with you, no matter how many times you've failed or the various ways people have told you to get lost, you have to start each conversation anew with the belief that you'll succeed.

We all have our ups and downs. No matter what you endure, if you want things to get better you have to get up off the mat and try again. I have a kitchen magnet on my refrigerator that I've had for decades. It's there to remind me of exactly that, phrased in a way that I can grasp no matter what I'm going through at the time. It simply says, "You gotta believe!"

# Summary

No matter what you're trying to accomplish, if you want to get other people to support your efforts, you have to persuade them. This doesn't require unethical behavior or the employment of any tactic that would go against your personal values. The person on the other side of the conversation is also human, and we all have the innate ability to sense fraud. This means that by being true to yourself, you'll actually be more effective in your efforts.

The mechanisms of persuasion are very much like electricity. Raw power is completely devoid of moral implications. It can allow you to turn on the blender and make yourself a margarita or you can grab the wrong wires and wake up dead. Either way, electricity was just doing its thing, the way it always does. How you use it is up to you.

Persuasion is simply another form of power. Properly employed, it will deliver results that you can feel good about.

# Strategy

## Teach Tactical Skills to Every Person in the Empire

There's a tendency in most companies to leave strategic thinking to those in the upper echelon of management and let the working-class stiffs just concentrate on doing the tasks for which they were hired. If you're in a leadership position at any level, we do hope you have some capacity for strategy or you're going to crash us all into a wall. However, if you confine tactical skills to the realms of the executive suite, you're really limiting your options.

As with any endeavor involving those pesky and imperfect human beings, ego is partly to blame for this perspective. Only important people think about the direction of the company. If everyone did, those at the top would feel less special. Of course, no one would admit to this kind of arrogance, but it's not difficult to spot. A question worth asking is just how exalted a top-level leader will feel when his company gets outmaneuvered and put out of business by the competition. Looking for a new job because you killed your old one can be a humbling experience.

A good idea is a good idea, regardless of its origin. If the janitor comes up with an innovative marketing idea, it's no less brilliant because it was dreamed up by the guy emptying your trash. It either works or it doesn't. If it's successful, what do you care where it came from? In any sizeable company, there's a good chance that you don't know the comprehensive

backgrounds, interests, and talents of the people working for you. Assumptions about these things are usually made just based on the position a person holds.

Your organization is teeming with great strategic ideas, but you can't profit from them unless you seek them out. Furthermore, some of the most qualified tacticians you have are the people on the frontlines who face off with the enemy every day. If you want to tap into this valuable resource, you need to make it a priority to encourage and teach strategic thinking throughout the company. Help those with potential to hone these skills and make it clear to all that good ideas will not be an imposition on you but, in fact, will be highly valued. Some of the notions you hear may be a bit unpolished, but in the end you'll reap a bountiful harvest of maneuvers that otherwise would have never come to your desk.

# Remember That Business Is War

Many people are uncomfortable with the notion of warfare as a model for business. This is particularly true of creative creatures, who tend to be on the idealistic side to begin with. No matter how you try, you're not going to change a person's basic nature. However, you don't have to be a wild-eyed barbarian to make a contribution to the overall campaign.

More importantly, no matter what you're trying to achieve in the workplace, it's difficult to win if you don't understand the rules. Some might assume that the business world is a calm, peaceful place where the best ideas consistently win and people are always treated fairly. For those unfortunate souls, the strategies they create for personal advancement will fail as soon as they encounter the reality of the real world, where everyone's out for their own gain. On the other hand, if you view your environment, both internally and in the marketplace,

as a competition for territory and resources, you'll be able to come up with sensible plans that have a fighting chance of success.

Whether you're the leader or just one of the pack, you work in an environment of aggression. Out on the rough-and-tumble streets of the free market, your company is a target of other enterprises. They want your customers, your best employees, and if they can get a good parking space out of the deal, so much the better. As far as they're concerned, their world will be much better once you're gone and they've had their pick of the spoils.

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Never forget: You and your company are targets for bandits who want to steal your cattle, burn your village, and leave you twisting in the breeze. This includes competitors both within and without.

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This can be more exciting than even the most engaging video games. The stakes are much higher and thus the rewards for success that much more tangible. It's a game in which you must always be on your guard, looking for the next place your competitors will attack. Furthermore, you have to be on the move yourself, always thinking a dozen moves ahead and trying your best to outwit everyone else who's playing.

The fun doesn't stop at the front door to your business, of course. Once you step inside, your first reaction should be to duck and then look both ways. The many tribes in your organization are always engaged in one skirmish or another. If you happen to get hit by a stray arrow in the process, well, that's not really their concern.

Depending on your level of leadership in the overall scheme of things, you'll either be concerned with the health and well-

being of your own tribe or the overall business problems caused by constant internal strife. Either way, you're standing in a war zone. As long as you try to see it otherwise, you'll be ineffective in creating the kind of positive change that will move your tribes, and your company, forward.

The first and most important rule of strategy is to realize the need for it in the first place. As long as you think that you can get by without it, you'll never put forth the effort needed to become a great field commander. Tactical skills are no different than any others. They sharpen with practice and are honed to their finest edge in the hands of those who are passionate about mastering the craft.

Of course, you do have a choice in the matter. Early in my programming career, I worked at a company where a skirmish came up over a software deadline. The small team I was on, consisting of me, another programmer, and a manager who had little interest in managing, came in two weeks late on a major project. As anyone who's been in the business knows, that's almost a home run. Even so, the client was unhappy, and thus my company was looking for a scapegoat. I loudly proclaimed that I wasn't hired to play politics; I was there to write software. While others were maneuvering for position, I simply chose not to play.

How did that work out for me? I was fired by my manager, who had done nothing to help the project but was much more adept at the game than I. When I complained to the owner of the company, he offered a sincere smile and an apology and told me that while he thought the call was bogus, he had to support his manager. He also said that he was sure I understood that politics were just as much a reality as anything else. He was wrong. I didn't. However, after that day I never again lost a battle because I didn't engage.

You can improve your strategic thinking or you can choose not to play. The choice is yours. However, if you decide to opt out,

the only thing you'll accomplish is providing a stationary target for your adversaries.

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Want to be a sitting duck? Pretend you're above the fray when it comes to company politics. It's OK to lose a battle once in a while, but don't lose it because you refused to engage.

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# Know Your Enemy

With that in mind, one of the first things you should do is look at the world around you, within and without, and make note of the competitive forces arrayed against you. No matter how often paranoia may feel justified, we all know that not everyone is out to get you. It just seems that way at times. Consequently, the first thing you need to do is learn to distinguish between friend and foe.

In an arena where everyone is trying to advance their own agenda, you'll have a number of different contestants. Some will simply ignore you; you're not relevant to their goals. Therefore, you're not in their way. Why waste arrows on bystanders? There will also be those who see you as more of a profitable ally than an adversary, changing the relationship from confrontational to cooperative. Then, there are the people who want something that you control. If you take a quick look in the mirror, you may notice that you have three red concentric circles painted on your posterior. Depending on how fast on your feet you are, there may also be a couple of arrows sticking out.

It is to this last group that you should give your attention. Depending on the scope of the conflict, your antagonist may be a collection of people or just an individual. In group

engagements, there may be more than one significant figure who drives the overall strategy. In a one-on-one encounter, of course, you're dealing with a single person. Either way, your first task is to identify those who aim the bows, unless you enjoy looking like a pincushion.

One of the oldest bits of advice in the history of warfare is to know your enemy. While this implies identifying who he is, what it really means is understanding the way he thinks. If you can see the world through his eyes, feel his emotions, and know the strengths and constraints that his logic must navigate, you can more effectively predict how he will attack.

Sun Tzu's book *The Art of War* has numerous English translations, each a bit different. In the one on my shelf, there's a great line: "If you stand by the banks of the river long enough, you will see the bodies of your enemies float by." If this is the perspective of your adversary, it tells you that she values patience. With luck, one of your other enemies will get rid of you. If not, she has a willingness to wait and allow you to expose your own weaknesses.

General Patton was an extremely aggressive tactician. In his book *War As I Knew It*, he states that a good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan next week. He valued audacity, rapid response, and had one standing order. Always take the offensive, never dig in. Patton wasn't going to sit around and wait for you to do something. Instead, he took the initiative and set the terms of engagement himself whenever possible.

Knowing who you're facing will tell you a great deal about what you can expect to happen. It's important to know if he will sit patiently, following Sun Tzu's advice, and allow you to create your own demise. Alternatively, he might be prone to attacking you openly and aggressively. These are just two examples, of course. There are a great many ways to confront an adversary. It's not as important for you to know every technique as it is

for you to be intimately familiar with the style and tactics of the ones who are coming for you.

In addition to understanding the nature of the people behind the strategies, it's also helpful to know their agenda. What do they wish to accomplish and by when? Keen insight into the desires of others is the next best thing to having your own personal fortune-teller. In fact, this is the basis of traps, both in battle and in hunting animals.

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If you know the nature of your adversaries and what they want, you have all you need to lay the perfect trap or make an effective offensive maneuver.

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The idea is simple enough. When you know what people want, you can count on them to reach for it. If you also understand something of their nature, you'll know how they tend to go about doing this. These two pieces of information will then tell you how to set the perfect trap. You know where they're going to be, how they're going to get there, and what action you can then expect them to take upon arrival. This will allow you to dig a hole in the ground, cover it with leaves, and wait for them to walk over it as they reach for the object of their agenda.

Another useful method of knowing your enemy is the study of history. We tend to be creatures of habit, doing things in a similar manner over and over again according to our nature. Additionally, commonsense dictates that if a tactic was successful, it's likely to be employed again. Therefore, by immersing yourself in the past you can often predict the future with uncanny accuracy. This might get you in trouble with the local gypsy union, but it's worth it nonetheless.

# Build Strong Alliances

The history of nations is one long shifting of alliances. If we're stronger as a group than we are individually, then several groups working together are more powerful still. This is the reason that great leaders throughout history have sought to unite the tribes. Sometimes this was accomplished at the tip of a sword. Just as often, however, tribes came together of their own accord, if not out of friendship, then at least driven by mutual need.

The best way to win a fight is to prevent it from happening in the first place. A friend of mine teaches the traditional Japanese martial arts, both those that are fought empty handed and with weapons. During one class, he wanted to show his students how difficult it was to avoid injury where bladed weapons were concerned. He handed each of them a red erasable marker of the variety the average geek finds at the whiteboard. From there, he walked them through a series of exercises as well as rounds of free-form fighting.

When the class was over, the traditional white karate *gi* that everyone wore was covered with red slashes from head to toe. It's worth mentioning that these were all students with many years of training. Even so, no matter how many times they cut their opponent, it was difficult to do so without incurring a few cuts of their own. As he told me this story, we gave thought to what it must have been like to be in ancient battles with thousands of swordsmen on each side and how they ever survived. Of course, most of them didn't. In a clash of armies numbering in the tens of thousands, it wasn't unusual for tens of thousands to die.

While that might seem particularly grim, it points out the first benefit to strong alliances. No matter who you engage with, when it's all over you're both probably going to have a few red marks on you. I don't care how many times I cut the other guy

if I get sliced to ribbons in the process. I figure it's better to avoid the conflict altogether, and this is what the power of united tribes allow you to do. If an adversary is thinking about attacking you, the first thing they're going to do is scope you out to see what kind of a target you provide. If the peek up over the ridge and see that the strength of your alliances gives you overwhelming firepower, they're most likely going to look for an easier target. Problem solved.

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Uniting the tribes is a great way to avoid conflict that might otherwise seem inevitable. Suddenly, you have twice or three times the talent, the insight, and the enthusiasm. You also have fewer arrows poking out of your posterior.

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There are a great many other benefits to alliances, of course. You have the combined talents of a diverse group and that many more arms and legs working toward a common goal. You also have the strategic thinking of the combined group, which will often see beyond your personal blind spots.

When you're building relationships, networking with like-minded people is always a good place to start. Kindred spirits will often have similar strategies and goals. They also tend to navigate by the same moral compass. Even so, don't overlook those who have completely different talents and perspectives.

You'll often find that you're stronger by joining forces with a diverse collection of people due to the many additional capabilities you gain. If your army is comprised of lots of guys carrying spears, combining with a similar force will make you an even-bigger group of guys carrying spears. You still have the same capabilities, just a lot more of them. However, you also still have the same limitations. If you partner with a bunch of Mongols who live on horseback, you now have both strong

infantry and a capable cavalry, increasing both your numbers and your abilities.

The most important aspect of working with a diverse collection of people is communication. If you join forces with several groups, or even individuals, who perform vastly different duties for your organization, they are each going to have their own frame of reference. This doesn't mean you have nothing in common. Chances are that you came together due to a common set of goals. However, the key to uniting tribes is the ability to speak a common language so that everyone sitting at the table understands what's really being said.

Whether they're internal departments or other companies in the marketplace, when you approach people to discuss an alliance, you need to present two important pieces of information. First, you have to answer the fundamental question of what's in it for them. This assumes you've done your homework and know their agenda, where they're having difficulties, and how you can help.

That leads to the second part. You should always approach things from the perspective of the other party's benefit, not yours, if you want to get their attention. Having done that, you should then be sure to let them know your own motives for the alliance.

Most people will raise an eyebrow when someone approaches them offering help and seeking nothing in return. While there are altruistic souls out there who would do just that, your potential allies have lived long enough to know that everyone has an agenda. If you don't make yours plain, they'll be suspicious of your motives. When there's something in it for everyone, however, the power of joined forces is a significant tactical advantage.

# Cultivate an Information Network

The best strategies come from informed leaders. If you don't know what all the other tribes out there are doing, your best-laid plans will almost always end in disaster. Even with the best possible information, you'll almost always encounter the unexpected. Be that as it may, you want this to count for the smallest percentage of your predictions.

People go to industry trade shows for a number of reasons. One of them is to keep a finger on the pulse of the market, knowing which competitors are selling what products and getting as many tips as possible on what's likely to show up in the future. Naturally, you can't just walk up to the booth your fiercest competitor is operating and ask them about their plans for the future. As in most things related to information, you have to be a bit more subtle than that.

Another reason to visit trade shows is to meet people and build relationships. It's been said that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and this is certainly true in business. If you're a software business, you might find yourself in direct competition with a company like Apple, who has strong offerings in both hardware and software. From a similar perspective, a company who manufactures hardware may find the firm equally challenging. Because the two of you are not direct competitors but have a common enemy, the opportunity for friendship exists.

You'll each get your input from different sources, and given that you focus on different aspects of technology, it's likely that the information you garner will be specific to your own agenda. When both are combined, you'll doubtless get a few bits and pieces that you don't really care about. However, you'll absolutely end up with a larger bucket of relevant intelligence than you would working alone.

> If you want information about your competitor, seek out their other enemies and share intelligence. You can then start drawing a map with your new ally that shows where your common enemy's vulnerabilities are.

Even if you're both in the same area of technology, as long as you're not directly competing against one another, you can benefit by sharing what you learn. If you're smart about it, you'll cultivate many such sources, and so will the other company. This means you're no longer talking across a cup of coffee with one person. You have access to an entire network of information. As with any long-lasting relationship, honesty, trust, and a willingness to give as much as you receive are important things to bring to the party.

The same principle works internally, on both a tribal and personal level. You'll find that translators are an obvious good source of news. The alliances you form will naturally provide yet-another excellent pool of information.

A network doesn't have to be an official relationship requiring matching jackets and decoder rings. It can be as simple as frequent watercooler conversations or having lunch with people you enjoy talking with. There are also those who love to gossip. News is news, and while you may need to take some of your informants with a grain of salt, the most important thing is to keep your ears open. Get to know people who have insights that you would value.

You'll always have better luck if you approach things sincerely and show yourself to be someone who cares about the other person's needs as well as your own. Nobody likes the idea of being used, and that's the feeling you'll engender if you show up and just start pumping them for information. Instead, start much as you would with any new relationship. Know who

you're dealing with, what her agenda is, and thus what she values. With that in mind, you're then in a position to be the first to share, passing along things that you know would be of value to them.

If it becomes apparent that this is a one-way street, you can quietly fade away over time. For the most part, however, people will reciprocate, and you've added yet-another listening post to your ever-widening information network.

# Think Several Steps Ahead

As the noted microbiologist Louis Pasteur once observed, fortune favors the prepared mind. In the complex arena of competition, things are constantly in motion. While there's no way for you to be prepared for every single thing that might come your way, you can certainly be ready for most of it.

Of course, in order to do so you have to be willing to put in the effort. A prepared mind does not magically show up one morning at the breakfast table, perky and ready to engage you in a lively conversation regarding your numerous options, opportunities, and weaknesses. It's something that you develop gradually by applying consistent effort to the task of becoming a master strategist. While that may sound like a lot of work, the rewards make it a worthwhile endeavor.

Chess is frequently used as a metaphor for tactical thinking, and with good reason. It's an ancient game that pits two players against one another in a battle of wits. The fact that there are only two sides makes it easy to understand the concept of thinking ahead. You've doubtless seen those chessboards mounted on a rotating base so that you can play the black side, spin the board, and then play the white side. This allows you to expand your thinking by considering the effect of your moves both from your perspective and that of

your opponent. You can then start considering strategies for several moves down the line and flip the board to come up with alternatives to counter them.

Learning to think ahead is easier than you might think. Using our board game as an example, it starts out as simple as moving a piece and then considering each of the moves your opponent might make as a response. Typically, your move will either create a threat to which she must respond or open an apparent vulnerability for her to exploit. That narrows the number of likely responses to each move down to a manageable few. For each of your opponent's potential responses, you then consider a number of moves of your own, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. You then flip the board around once more to consider their retaliation and so on.

This might look like an ever-expanding hierarchical chart, with each move splitting off into several additional moves, each of which forks off into a few more. Viewed all at once, it can look complex and intimidating. However, like most things in life, if you break it down a step at a time, it's actually quite manageable. Hardware and software engineers do this all the time. A craft that looks mystifying to the uninitiated is in truth little more than just putting one foot in front of the other. Obviously, we're not playing chess but rather managing the strategies of your group or company. However, the parallels are fairly transparent. You've taken the time to understand your own agenda and how it comes into harmony or conflict with that of others. As you make your plans to move your project forward, release a new product into the marketplace, or build alliances and stave off competitors, you're simply looking at the board, predicting the best path to success and moving one step at a time. By thinking several steps ahead, you're better prepared for whatever resistance you encounter.

Now, let's take it to the next level. Chess is a nice game but pales in comparison to the complexity of multiplayer online games. Where you had a nice, tidy little world with one and only one opponent, you're now managing your fortunes in a crowded atmosphere of constantly shifting agendas and alliances. You know, just like the real world.

Nonetheless, the concept remains the same. Both individuals and groups move with a single mind when observed from the proper perspective. Once you've improved your ability to think ahead in a two-party scenario, simply apply those same skills to thinking in a multidimensional manner. No different than a nice game of chess, it's still just moving, and thus thinking, one step at a time.

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The business world really is like a multiplayer online game: You're managing your fortunes as best you can in a world of shifting alliances, all the while dealing with people who have hidden agendas. Just as in this type of game, considering the likely responses from those people or companies affected will leave you well prepared and improve your rate of success.

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# Always Have a Backup Plan

Of course, no battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy. You can think things through and have as many options for each scenario as possible, but sooner or later someone's going to hit you with something completely unexpected. If you're not faced with a clever adversary, Murphy will be happy to step in and provide the same level of excitement. Things will break without warning. What should have taken a day will take a week. The person you thought you could depend on will turn

out to be a complete flake. Regardless of the situation, you'd better have a backup plan or you're not going to enjoy the experience.

You can view this as the next logical step that occurs as a result of thinking ahead. It's a way of laying out your plans based on what you've seen as you gaze into your strategic crystal ball. In any initiative, you're going to have a primary thrust to your efforts. Along with the steps in your plan, you'll have a few forks in the road as well, which will come in handy should your ideas hit a bump in the road.

For example, estimates in the world of technology are more optimistic than any of the visions the most drug-fueled hippie in the 1960s ever saw. You may have planned a new release that includes half a dozen certifiably cool features. Since you want to coordinate your marketing and have things prepared when your product is ready to go, you'll probably set a few things in motion based around the calendar date of the project's completion. Then, one day, you wake up sober and realize there's no way on earth that the project will be finished that soon. In fact, it'll take at least double the time that you'd expected. Now what?

If you're close to the release date when you have this epiphany, panic may set in, followed soon thereafter by a visit to the local pub. Sobriety can be highly overrated. Of course, that does little to solve anyone's problems, with the possible exception of the person who owns the bar.

If this isn't your first rodeo, you will have recognized in the very early stages of planning that there might be unexpected delays. Based on this foresight, you will be able to view those six features as individual entities, prioritize them based on their level of coolness, and have a backup plan that will allow you to cleanly drop a couple of features if needed and still make the release date.

This requires thinking in a number of directions, as there are implications for any activities that are influenced by the project. In this case, you might also take a more modular approach to your marketing, giving you the ability to be as flexible in that area as you were with your project. A few features disappeared from this release? No problem. If you execute your backup plan in marketing as well, you can drop those modular promotional devices and roll out a launch that's in complete harmony with both the project and reality.

Now, let's walk our way back to the beginning and see how to create these failsafes. For whatever goal you're working to achieve, one of the first things you'll typically do is lay out your strategy to get there. This will start conceptually and then move into plans for execution, one step at a time. When you're done, you'll have a plan that you can put to work.

Next, it's time to walk through each and every step and play devil's advocate. You start by flipping the chessboard to the opposite side and looking at what you've learned using your ability to think ahead. Then, you hit that step with every disaster you've imagined. NASA does this all the time when training their astronauts for a mission. You just lost your primary thrusters. Now what? Got that handled? Great. Now you have an oxygen leak. And so it goes, throwing disasters at your plan every step of the way and teaching yourself how to survive them.

When you're through, you'll know which adventures are survivable, which aren't, and how to deal with the latter in a way that keeps you on track. Even though it's unlikely that you'll predict potential problems with unerring accuracy, learning to create a backup plan for every step gives you additional benefits. In the process, you'll continually train yourself to think on your feet and come up with creative solutions to last-minute problems. That's a huge advantage in and of itself.

# Never Give Warning

The element of surprise is another time-honored military tactic. You've been working hard to think ahead so that you can be prepared for anything the bad guys might throw at you. If you think they don't perform the same exercises, you're either unrealistic or have some very inept bad guys at your disposal.

For the most part, you're going to be matching wits with others who have a similar degree of talent in this area. With that in mind, any move that they can see coming is one that's going to encounter some resistance. Therefore, the only logical approach is to make sure that they never see it coming.

Obviously, as we learned earlier, loose lips sink ships. Consequently, one key component of surprise is very simple and easy to implement. Keep your mouth shut. However, when dealing with people, it's a given that not everyone is going to share your same dedication to keeping secrets.

One way to protect your plan from the natural tendency humans have to blab everything they know is to limit the information they have in the first place. This is the idea behind sharing things on a need-to-know basis only. Few things are ever completely simple, and there's a complication in this approach as well. The more informed your people are about what's going on, the more you benefit from their insights and creativity. Limit what you share, and you limit this potential.

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People are going to talk. To preserve the element of surprise in an initiative or product launch, think hard about who really needs to know about those aspects that, if leaked, would wreck the surprise and thus enable competitors to turn the tables.

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The best way to make decisions on what to share with the group and what to hold close to the vest is by considering the tactical value of the information itself as it relates to the need for secrecy. In other words, if it were leaked, would it destroy the element of surprise? If so, it's need to know. If not, it's a calculated risk but not a critical vulnerability.

There's a flip side to this as well. Since people like to talk, sometimes the most strategic thing you can do is let them. If you have people, and we've all met them, who simply can't keep their mouths shut, then give them something fun to talk about. Fill them in on the intimate details of your plan. Explain to them how important it is to keep them secret. That will, of course, make it all the more exciting for them to talk about. Then just step back and let nature take its course.

Why on earth would you wind them up like a toy robot and let them go, knowing full well that the information they convey will go straight to your competitors? If you've been playing along at home, by now you know that part of your job is to know your enemy. You've learned how to think ahead well enough to know what they're up to as well as how they're likely to respond to any given situation. The scoop that you shared in confidence with a known gossip is actually disinformation.

If you want to move to the left and you don't want the opposition to block you, tell them you're moving to the right. Naturally, they're going to shift all their forces in that direction so that they can be ready for you. That's where controlling both the information and the element of surprise comes in handy. Without warning, you can now waltz merrily through the gaping hole that they've created to the left by responding to your disinformation.

Of course, you don't have to feint at all if you're good at keeping secrets. Steve Jobs was a master of this technique—keeping revolutionary new products completely under wraps until he was ready to casually mention at an event, "One more

thing . . . ." The mobile industry never saw the iPhone coming until it was too late.

Does this all seem a little sneaky to you? If you do it right, that's exactly what it is. This isn't a polite game in the school yard with your childhood friends bound to the acceptable rules of the activity. You're living in the real world, where bad things often happen to good companies. Keep that moral compass handy. However, make sure that you don't give away your position, or anything else, until you want the opposition to know it.

# Improve Your Skills Daily

In business, there is no final destination. Well, actually, there is one final resting place that fits this description, but it's probably not a location you'd care to visit. Graveyards are rarely a pleasant experience unless you're filming a good vampire movie.

Life in the fast lane offers a simple observation that's worth noting. If you're not constantly improving, you're standing still. At the very least, it will seem like you're not moving as your competitors, each of whom are constantly riding faster ponies, zip past you.

With this in mind, you should dedicate yourself to a life of constant study and improvement, from now until that day when you reach your own final destination. If that sounds like a grind, take heart. It is a lot of work, but it's infinitely more fun than finding yourself on the flat of your back because your competitors are continually knocking you down.

There's also another way to keep the path of constant improvement from becoming drudgery. After all, none but the most obsessively disciplined humans will continue to do forever that which they find unpleasant. The trick is to enjoy the

journey. This is something that entrepreneurs and creative people do instinctively. The work they do is something that they're passionate about. That often leads to a problem of the opposite extreme, as many an irritated spouse has observed about their workaholic counterparts.

Be that as it may, the things we enjoy are not work, no matter how much or for how long we toil. In the same spirit, if you want to continually improve your tactical thinking, you have to enjoy strategy. For some, this will be a natural love. Others will find that it's an acquired taste that comes over time, typically after seeing how much they enjoy the success it brings.

Even if accomplishment doesn't make you love it, that affection can still come over time. I drink my coffee black, no sugar, no cream. To many, that's a bitter and unpleasant experience. For me, it's normal. When I was young, I used to put a ton of cream and sugar in my morning coffee. However, after waking up with one hangover too many back in the dubious days of rock-and-roll, I learned to drink it black, straight out of the coffee pot, because I really didn't feel like fooling with even modest preparation first thing in the bleary-eyed morning. Tequila is an unforgiving mistress.

As the years went by, I started drinking coffee from around the world. While I wouldn't call myself a connoisseur by any stretch of the imagination, I began to learn the characteristics of each bean and the implications of the roast. I came to enjoy different varieties for their particular characteristics. That's a little hard to do when it's buried under a metric ton of sugar and dairy products. What started as an exercise in necessity over time became a benefit in unexpected ways.

With that in mind, even if you're not excited about the art of strategy right now, know that over time it will become familiar. As with so many other things in life, the familiar frequently becomes the thing we're most fond of.

There's an old musician's joke about a guy who's walking down the sidewalk in New York City carrying a guitar case. He stops someone on the street and asks the stranger if he knows how to get to Carnegie Hall. Looking first at the musician and then at the guitar, the other person replies, "Sure. Practice, man. Practice." Strategy is a critical component of your success. If you want to get good at it, there's only one way.

# Socialize Frequently to Brainstorm

Of course, all this talk of hard work and practice doesn't sound like a lot of fun, but that doesn't have to be the case. People get together to play strategy games all the time. The fact that the plans we're talking about here affect your livelihood should only add to the excitement of such gatherings.

In fact, just as we created games to encourage a spirit of competitiveness, there's no reason you can't make your brainstorming sessions equally entertaining. Because I've spent a lifetime hanging out with the creative class of humanity, I know the joy of getting together with a group of people to make music, shoot videos, or bring any other such concept to life.

I also bear the battle scars of a few failed dot-com start-ups. I guess I wouldn't have much street cred as a geek if I didn't. While I enjoy software development much in the same way that I like writing songs, one of the most exciting parts of starting a new venture has always been the brainstorming sessions. They start, naturally enough, with thoughts on products and services and how you can create the next bright and shiny object. If you've hooked up with the right people, though, that's only the beginning of the fun.

Unless you live in a cave or are completely delusional, you'll realize that it's a highly competitive market no matter what

you're selling. It's rare to have a completely unique idea. For the most part, art and technology are evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Consequently, there's not going to be a big empty space just waiting for you to fill. If you want your own little corner, you're going to have to elbow your way in and fight off all manner of competitors.

I've burned countless hours of long-distance phone calls brainstorming with business partners on the strategic aspects of bringing the product to market. There are challenges to getting attention, building a customer base, positioning yourself better than the competitors, fending off threats, making advances of your own, and many other areas. You'll find that as you start exploring these notions with kindred spirits, everyone gets caught up in the excitement. It's very similar to the fun you have at a party, where teams form up and you play a word game or some other group activity.

If you go about it the right way, everyone enjoys themselves and will naturally fall into roles that are both comfortable and productive. Some will be the idea people. Others will instinctively play devil's advocate, highlighting the moves your competitors could make to block you. The combined interaction is an upward spiral of both strategic achievement and enjoyable group interaction.

You'll always have those who are natural strategists, just as you have natural leaders. There will also be plenty of people who don't have much experience or are self-conscious about participating. Of the latter group, self-confidence may also be low, at least in this area. If you want to get the most out of the experience, not to mention the best possible ideas from around the table, it's important to be aware of each person's comfort level.

Knowing who might be tentative tells you who to encourage. For the shy or inexperienced, your dismissals will need to be

gentler and your praise more easily earned. In that way, you'll gradually build them up to be yet-another strong contributor.

As for where and how to gather, that needs little instruction. People have been coming together socially to have a good time since the dawn of humanity. You can try to do some of this at the office, but that tends to be difficult due to all the other work everyone has to do during the course of a normal business day. In general, getting together socially is both more practical and more relaxed. The latter is an important consideration for any creative endeavor, and strategy certainly falls in that category.

Of course, you can't mandate that people gather after work to grab a cheeseburger and share their plans for world domination. Well, I suppose you could, but the best and brightest rarely stick around in such draconian environments. Like every other part of the company culture that you work to create, it's best to foster an environment that makes this a natural and acceptable part of the job. If you lead by example and allow it to grow organically, with people joining in because they enjoy it rather than out of a sense of obligation, you'll naturally bring together your best and most enthusiastic minds.

## Share Everything You Learn

Speaking of culture, another thing you want to encourage is a spirit of sharing. It's not uncommon for people to hoard their knowledge in order to increase their perception of value and status. For that sort of person, every little thing that they give away to others lessens them. Since they're no longer the only person who knows this little tidbit, they're just a little less special.

> Don't be afraid to share what you know. Some of the most insightful business people are those who are transparent and happy to help out anyone, anytime, with advice or instruction.

This is not only limited thinking, it's also fairly inaccurate. It's not hard to spot that personality type, and they're rarely admired. On the contrary, they come across as petty, manipulative, and selfish. On the other hand, this wouldn't be so common if there were no benefits to it. When you're the only person who knows how to do something, that does at times raise your status and value. Of course, any businessperson with a clue also realizes the vulnerability that such a single point of failure can cause and does their best to replicate the knowledge. This is usually accompanied by a fair degree of kicking and screaming.

There's also value to the opposite approach. When you go out of your way to share knowledge with others, it can also increase your status. Naturally, you have to go about this the right way and do so with people who are actually interested in learning. To do otherwise is to promote an image of yourself as a know-it-all, rarely something that paints you in the most flattering light. However, with those who are eager to learn, there's both a personal and practical benefit to teaching.

It's a great deal of fun to see that spark in someone else's eyes as they catch on to what you're saying and learn to apply it. It makes you feel good, and the respect you earn is genuine. I'm all for feeling good, as many a nightclub patron would testify, but there's actually a tangible benefit to it as well.

When you help others become better strategists, you're strengthening the group to which you belong. That means better group benefits for everyone, which, in the case of high-

level business strategy, means a more successful company. By mentoring others, you also gain value and status as a teacher whose expertise is sought out. From the perspective of your personal career, such things are always in the plus column.

As we've seen in other areas, the spirit of sharing is also a powerful force in building relationships. It's a tactic we've applied in many areas thus far. When you reach out to help others, for the most part they're going to be inclined to interact with you favorably. It's no different in this instance.

There's an added benefit as well, although it's a bit more subtle in nature. In *Illusions*, a philosophical book by Richard Bach, there are a series of aphorisms sprinkled throughout, each a seed thought for further contemplation. One of my favorites, which I've found to be true in my own life, is, "You teach best what you most need to learn." You'll find as you have to explain concepts to others, you clarify your own thinking and continue your own growth.

## Summary

What you grow has a great deal to do with the kind of seeds you planted, and perhaps, in some instances, the particular state and federal regulations that may come into play. If you want to become a strategic powerhouse, you need to cultivate that capability on a person-by-person basis.

One of the most popular pastimes in tech culture today is gaming, and a great many of the games are strategy based. With that in mind, encouraging tactical skills is not only easier but to many will feel much less like work and more like play. That's usually when you know you're on the right track.

# Brilliance

## Eliminate All Obstacles to New Ideas

We're in the idea business. Our stock in trade is coming up with cool new things that people haven't been able to do before. It's the reason people pay us. Some industries benefit from an atmosphere where change is slow to come. You'd be rather uncomfortable if your bank hit you up each week with changes on how they were managing your money. In a similar manner, infrastructure needs to be somewhat stable to be useful. If the TCP/IP protocol were changing on a daily basis, the Internet would fall apart.

On the other hand, we in tech are judged heavily by the newness of our notions. We're more susceptible to fads and trends than the average high school student. We can be cool one minute and absolutely ancient the next. The only way to survive is to have a continual stream of new ideas.

Unfortunately, most companies are actively hostile to change. They don't think of themselves in this manner, of course. Nonetheless, if you've spent enough time touring the corporate world, you'll find that they have a name for those firebrands who constantly have bright new ideas. They call them troublemakers.

If you want to survive in a fast-moving culture where the current cool is tomorrow's terrible, you need to create an environment that not only tolerates but actively encourages

new ideas. If you don't, you'll soon join the list of has-beens who litter the seedy back alleys of the brave new world.

# Foster Disdain for the Status Quo

There's a tendency in most established companies to cling to tradition. Don't get me wrong, I like a good tradition every now and then, particularly if it involves howling at the moon. However, if they're going to be useful, you have to understand where they came from and be able to determine if they still have value.

For many years, I gathered monthly with a group of musician friends. Some were techies, some were construction workers, and some were still figuring it out, but the common bond was music. We would stay up all night doing an acoustic guitar in the round, each person singing a song or two, the others joining in with harmonies and other parts.

Periodically, someone would walk into the living room with a tray full of shot glasses, each filled to the brim with cheap tequila. We would pass them around, throw back a shot, and then literally howl at the moon. It was silly. It was fun. It was a tradition.

One day, someone showed up with a bottle of very expensive tequila. On cue, a tray full of shots made its way around and we all stood to share a drink. However, after we downed the shots, there was a conspicuous, pregnant pause. For a moment, we looked at each other with blank stares. Then, remembering what we always did, we threw our heads back and howled at the moon. It turns out the reason for the tradition was simple. Cheap tequila hurts. Howling at the moon helps the moment pass.

When you're considering the way you do things in your company, it's worth openly questioning the status quo. Is there

a reason for your tradition and if so, does it still hold up today? The disdain I promote doesn't mean you should give up your history altogether. From that night on, we still howled at the moon. We just did it for a different reason—the pure, silly fun of doing so. While the value was different, there was still value.

As you look at your own history, scrutinize your deeply entrenched policies mercilessly. If they no longer serve a purpose, chuck 'em out the back window. If they're still valid, that's perfectly fine. It's also okay if they serve a new purpose, as our canine antics did. What you want to create is an atmosphere that disapproves of clinging to something for no other reason than the fact that it's the status quo.

You'll get some resistance to this attitude, of course. Many people will be deeply vested in the way things are currently done. They've feathered their nests and have become either comfortable or powerful as a result of the process that's currently in place. Shake up that process and you threaten everything they care about. How would you feel if that happened to you?

You can't create an atmosphere of brilliance and innovation if you allow your people to cling to the past. If you're serious about this, you'll lose some people. That's fine, as these probably aren't the sort that you needed in the first place. They're not going to move you forward. They're going to do their level best to dig in their heels and drag you into the past.

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Innovation requires changes in skills, practices, processes, and everything else related to work. Some will resist the change and hold you back, clinging desperately to the way things have always been. Show them the benefits of change or show them the door.

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Others will be more receptive to change, particularly if they feel like a part of some new movement, having a sense that the company or group is going somewhere. By fostering an attitude that your people are all part of the elite, that glamorous class of creatures who forges new trails and boldly goes where no geek has gone before, they'll feel rewarded rather than threatened. When this way of thinking becomes pervasive, you'll find that your people are coming up with a steady stream of new ideas because that's what you've encouraged them to do.

# Forget How Others Have Done It

There's no such thing as a creative person without influences. It's the height of arrogance to state that you're a genius who came up with a grand vision all on your own, with help from no one. Don't be silly. Of course you had help. Your idea might indeed be highly innovative, but it was influenced by the world around you. It certainly depends on it to function.

The iPhone was a game changer. It was also built on countless technologies that came before it. Mobile devices are of little use without batteries or a cellular network. Apple also didn't invent plastic, metal, or glass. We may not all stand on the shoulder of giants, but we certainly build our houses by laying one brick on top of another.

I mention this so you don't think I'm suggesting that you reinvent a perfectly good wheel just for the sake of doing so. There will be a point in the process where you'll want to take advantage of some preexisting components that work perfectly fine for your needs. However, the conceptual stage is the wrong place to think like that.

If you want to come up with something new, innovative, and possibly even world changing, you have to be brave enough to

step out into the void. The vacuum of space is daunting in its emptiness, and more unsettling still in its implications. Imagine a chunk of empty space so vast that you could see no stars, no planetary bodies, and not even the occasional metal probe zipping by from a third-rate planet in the backwaters of some distant galaxy. Nothing. Just you, a spacesuit, and complete emptiness. If you don't find that a little disconcerting, it's only because you haven't truly immersed yourself in the thought.

That's the kind of emptiness you need in your mind in the beginning stages of the creative process. If you think that's easy, just give it a try. People from a wide variety of philosophical disciplines practice meditation of one kind or another. Ask any of them and they'll tell you that the most difficult thing to do is clear your mind and stop the internal chatter. You can sit on a pillow and contemplate your naval or kick back in your easy chair in a quiet room. However, regardless of the setting you'll find that after a very short period of thinking about nothing, you're once again thinking about something, even if it's the fact that your sitting there trying to think about nothing.

The topic of meditation is beyond the scope of what we're doing here and, even if it weren't, you'd need a more qualified guide. I don't know much about it. What I do know is that stepping into the void is both intimidating and hard to do. I also know that while the edge of the Earth may be where dragons lie, the void is home to inspiration.

We're so heavily influenced by all that surrounds us that it's difficult to think in new ways. Much like the difficulty of clearing your mind, it's hard to hold onto a new idea without it being magnetically snapped back to a relationship with something that already exists. While that's not always a bad thing, it does tend to make your ideas derivative rather than innovative. If you can find a way to enter the void, you'll find that magnetism has no power there. It's a difficult state to achieve, and you

may only be able to go there in short bursts, but it's worth the effort both for you and your entire creative team.

Naturally, the board of directors would be less than impressed on their visit if they found the entire staff relaxing in a lotus position and pondering the infinite. You can't have success without a measure of practicality. What you're looking for is not an all-day sit-in but rather a group of people that understands the value of the void and finds their own ways to get there.

Eventually, inspiration leads to perspiration. A great idea is completely useless unless it's brought to life in a tangible and useful way. As you move into the design and implementation stages, you'll look at what it takes to make your vision a reality. When there are existing components that can be plugged in and that approach doesn't limit your creation, it's efficient and sensible to do so. Got a product that runs on electricity? Use electricity. Sure, you could spend years trying to come up with a different power source, but if the current variety gets the job done, use it and ship the product.

If it's truly a new idea, you'll probably have to roll your own from time to time, and that can be great fun. The most enjoyable moment, however, is when it leaves your front door and is used by others. With that in mind, find a way to create an empty slate in your mind, innovate, and then shift to a practical attitude as you bring it all together.

# Avoid Cleverness That Brings No Benefits

Those of us in the tech biz are clever people. That's a problem. I've seen a great many projects and companies fail over the years. Often it's due to institutionalized corporate stupidity. Sometimes, however, the best and the brightest are the ones

who guarantee that a company will drop dead within a year. If that seems counterintuitive, I think you'll find that notion applies to reality in general.

The cleverness syndrome is certainly not limited to the techie class, but if there's a poster child for this affliction, we're it. No one is as easily fascinated with the tools of the trade as we are, and it causes untold trouble. The problem is one of perspective.

If you run a business, you have one and only one obligation. Make money. Idealistic people like to talk about a company's moral and social obligations. It would be great if such a thing existed, but it doesn't. A corporation is an entity formed for commerce. It owes allegiance to the owners, and its responsibility is to turn a profit. If it's more profitable to grow a conscience, then a conscience it shall have, but it's important to keep your eye on the motive rather than the outcome.

Most companies don't have moral dilemmas to wrestle with and can be both profitable and good corporate citizens at the same time. That doesn't alter their prime directive, however. If you create products and services, you do so in order to generate revenue and make a profit. That's the reason your business exists. By a convenient coincidence, it's also what keeps the payroll account alive and kicking. Ignore this reality and you'll soon find that you don't exist at all.

Creative creatures such as techies, however, see things in a very different way. While the owner of the company is concerned with all those pesky things like merchandise cost, market share, and net profits, those who create things for a living get caught up in the notion that their project is what's important.

If you've ever met a software developer or hardware engineer, this needs little explanation. They're so immersed in doing something cool that they often lose sight of the more important

matter. Will anyone pay for this thing? While there are exceptions to every rule, for the most part people simply don't care as long as the paychecks keep coming and they can keep playing with their toys.

This bears a striking resemblance to the world of musicians. Hang out with someone who plays in a band long enough and you'll hear the same perspective relating to bars and their owners. Musicians think that it's the club's responsibility to fill the room. The band is just there to entertain. Because of this, they're often a bit cantankerous when trying to book a gig should the club owner have the temerity to ask how much of a following they have.

From the proprietor's side of the conversation, a nightclub is a business. Bands are an expense. It pays this money for one reason, and one reason only. Live music can bring in a bigger crowd and thus the establishment makes more money. The math and its related question are simple. Does the money the club spends on a band bring in enough business to turn a profit, or at the end of the night did it lose money on the transaction? To anyone owning a business, this is extremely basic logic. To creative creatures, it's representative of a pub that doesn't have their priorities in the right place. One of these perspectives is somewhat out of touch with reality.

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Cleverness only turns into dollars when customers value it. Otherwise, it's just a drain on time and money. Think in terms of value rather than the cool factor, and you'll keep your vision clear.

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Untold thousands of dollars, millions more likely, are wasted each year on product development because of this very thing. The people involved in a project get caught up in the cleverness of what they're doing, what technologies and design

philosophies they're using, and a host of similar issues that causes delay after delay. At the risk of being burned at the stake as a heretic, I have to state the obvious. Your customers couldn't possibly care less.

Marketing is all about selling the benefits of your work to someone who's willing to part with their money to receive them. No one cares how the sausage is made. People will only give you their hard-earned cash if they perceive a value in what you're offering. If your cleverness is in fact a tangible benefit, you've done something great. If it's not, you're very likely wasting time and money for something that isn't going to increase sales one iota.

If you want your company to succeed, focus on developing benefits that your market will want to pay for. The iPhone didn't sell because it was clever. It sold because Apple transformed a mobile phone into a portable computer. That offered a great many benefits and people stood in line to throw money at the company.

Provide value, not cleverness. If you think the coolness of your creativity should matter more than what helps the marketing department, sell your computer and learn to play guitar. Your perspective won't be any more valid in the world of bands and bars, but you might meet someone cute in the process. At the very least, you won't be in our way anymore.

# Be Open to New Ideas from Anyone

As we noted in our journey through strategy, a good idea is a good idea no matter who it comes from. There's a class consciousness in the creative world of technology that isn't terribly surprising given that we're dealing with humans, but it's

certainly limiting. In a software shop, programmers are the ones who come up with application ideas. Should those of other occupations make a suggestion, they're either ignored or at best patted on the head in a condescending manner.

For a number of years, I was married to a woman who was also in the software business. In fact, she'd been at it a lot longer than I had. She worked in quality assurance, which we call QA for short. She was a professional software tester. This also made her an expert in using software and seeing things through the eyes of a customer.

It's actually rare for companies to hire a QA staff, which explains a lot about why software is so often buggy. Nonetheless, I've been in shops where they do and it always surprised me to see their opinions dismissed out of hand in design meetings, if in fact they were invited at all. The attitude in general is that if you're not part of the group who actually slings code, you really don't know what you're talking about. This is not only dumb; it's unprofitable.

When talking about strategy, I used the janitor as an example. In this instance, it should be even easier to see the value that a different perspective can offer. If your job is to bang on software day in and day out, you're going to know better than anyone when something is clumsy. You'll also have some pretty good ideas on how to make it better. The fact that you can't write the code is irrelevant. Your ideas are either good or they're not.

Of course, this extends far beyond the logical connections, as our janitor would be quick to point out. It's a pretty-safe bet that anyone who works at a tech company uses a fair amount of tech in their daily lives. That may not give them the ability to design something cool and bring it to life, but they'll often have some specific ideas about features or other benefits that are certainly worthwhile. After all, the ultimate expert on the value

of your software isn't the person who wrote it but rather the one who uses it.

I've never really cared much about following the crowd. When the direction I travel is in harmony with the rest of the herd, I'm happy to moo along with everyone else. When it's not, the absence of bovine companionship troubles me little. I mention this because I've heard more than once that my approach to life is just plain weird. A case in point is how I tend to treat strangers.

When I go to the local taco joint to grab lunch, I'm typically greeted by a minimum-wage fast-food worker. Often, these people are exactly who you think they are, those with no marketable job skills who end up doing menial labor because it's the only gig they can get. Apparently, that's how they're supposed to be treated as well.

Customers stand in line and then place their orders, ignoring the staff as much as possible and being about as cordial as they would be to a robot when an interaction is required. When it's my turn, I often chat with them a bit while they're getting things together. Nothing major, just friendly conversation based on current events or what I've learned about them through repeated visits. I might ask how the kid's soccer game went last week, or how that new song they're writing is coming along. We laugh and joke with each other, I get my tacos, and then I leave.

Why bother treating someone like a person when their job is just to dispense food and take your cash? I'm not sure I could give you a valid answer beyond the fact that I enjoy a good conversation. However, there's another part of this question that never gets asked. Why do I treat someone with respect when they're just some common minimum-wage flunky? That's where you lose me and, more importantly, where you lose significant value. How do you know that the person slinging tacos at night isn't going to school to get their degree in

nuclear physics during the day? You could be talking to the next Einstein, but you'll never know it if you consider them to be lower than dirt.

Arrogance and class consciousness aren't just rude. They're incredibly limiting. People outside your cult will see the world in ways you could never imagine. If you truly want to innovate, you should look for ideas in places your competitors neglect. Get to know people outside your circle and listen to what they have to say. It's a secret weapon that few are wise enough to employ.

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Get out of your bubble and talk to people you don't normally talk to. Listen to what they have to say about life, and about technology. If their ideas sound crazy to you, so much the better. It could be a sign you've been caged in your own echo chamber for far too long. Besides, the crazy people always know where the best parties are.

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# Celebrate the Power of Group Creativity

One plus one is greater than two. If you think I slept through math class in high school, you may be right. Nonetheless, my logic is sound. Any time two or more people congregate in the same room, there's the potential for magic. I'm not talking about wizards and wands, although that would certainly be fun. Even so, I can't give you a concise, black-and-white description of what happens, as much of it is wrapped up in the mystery of human existence.

At such times, I find myself falling back on empirical evidence, knowing that a thing is so simply because I've experienced it

repeatedly. Get a group of people together who are excited about creating something, and you can throw that old high school textbook into the nearest fireplace. When the circumstances and personalities are right, the conversation embarks on an upward spiral, each idea being reinforced by the group and used as a stepping stone for the next.

Given my background in the world of smoky bars, loud music, and more than occasionally drunk sound men, I can at least offer you something in the way of science to explain this. It's called a feedback loop. While you may not know the mechanics, you're certainly familiar with the squeal that results from someone getting a microphone too close to a speaker.

The feedback you hear is the result of nonstop amplification. In other words, a sound that just keeps getting louder and louder until the sound man passed out on the mixing console wakes up and turns down a knob. It works like this. You speak into a microphone and it passes the sound along to an amplifier, whose job it is to make that sound louder. It then sends the sound to the speaker, whose job it is to wake the neighbors.

However, imagine what happens if you're standing right in front of the speaker while you're holding the mic. The sound you just created comes out of the speaker only to go immediately back into the mic, but this time it's louder because it was just amplified. As you might imagine, this is an endless loop, because the louder sound comes out of the speaker and repeats the round-trip forever unless something changes.

As with most technology, these round-trips all happen very fast, seemingly instantaneous in making the rounds. What started as a single word gets amplified over and over again until it's a loud squeal that, of course, keeps getting louder. Personally, I think this is just nature's way of waking up inebriated sound men, but I haven't tested that theory.

You can think of this as a perpetual motion machine of sorts, only one that operates on sound instead of physical motion. In a similar fashion, when you get like-minded people together and the atmosphere is right, the ideas are continually amplified. This can be a considerable benefit if you're attentive and can properly manage the experience.

Amplification can be beneficial or destructive. When you're in a loud bar, properly managed amplification is your friend. It's what allows you to be heard above the clatter of bottles and the clamor of conversation. Left unattended, however, it becomes a horrible, ear-piercing shriek that leaves everyone bolting for the door.

In the case of group creativity, a cycle of continual amplification can lead to brilliance. It's exciting, invigorating, and produces positive results. As with sound, however, left unattended it can have disastrous consequences. In this scenario, it leads to arrogance and a blindness to reality that comes from being absorbed in your own coolness. The results are far worse than a loud screech. They can be fatal to your company.

We know that power can be dangerous. However, we don't shun electricity because it can kill us. Instead, we use commonsense and proper precautions when handling it. In the same fashion, the continual amplification of group creativity can be an extremely beneficial force when approached with attentiveness and commonsense.

Your creative people need time in isolation, but it's also important that they have time together as a group in an atmosphere that encourages this sort of exchange. Of course, you can't legislate creativity. If you force people to sit in meetings just so that they have time together, you'll only succeed in creating a camel. For the uninitiated, that's a racehorse that was designed by committee.

How you bring your people together will depend a great deal on your corporate culture and your own creativity as a leader. The solutions are sometimes more subtle than you might think. When Steve Jobs became a major force at Pixar, the innovative animation film studio, he influenced the design of their new building in many ways. One of them was to create a huge lobby through which everyone would have to pass to get to the bathrooms and other common areas.

His intent was less architectural than practical. He wanted to encourage people to spontaneously come together in order to drive just this sort of creative spark. Pixar enjoyed tremendous success and given that they were in the creativity business, the power of group interaction was no small factor in their accomplishments.

If you're looking for amplification that will power your ideas to extremes, all the ingredients you need are right in front of you. As with any good cocktail, it's all in how you mix them.

# Educate Everyone about the Big Picture

In order to create a culture of excellence, your people all need to be working at a high level toward the same common goals. While it's easy enough for the CEO to think of market share and profits and how to manage people in order to increase both, for most people that perspective isn't a part of their daily reality.

This creates some obvious limitations. If your staff doesn't understand the big picture, how can they possibly be expected to deliver brilliance? Sure, they may have a lot of good ideas, but if those notions aren't in harmony with the overall plan, they're of limited value.

Informed employees give the best input. The default for any department is a collection of people who are focused on their job alone. Of course, there are a lot of businesses who would be thrilled if their people achieved even that much. In our industry, however, we're held to a higher standard. We're expected to build the future.

Therefore, programmers have to care about more than just coding, accountants should see more than columns of numbers, and the guys in the warehouse should understand the hopes and dreams of your company as well as anyone else. You can't have everyone rowing in the same direction until they have a chance to look at the compass.

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One of the tech leader's main jobs is to help everyone see the big picture. To be effective, put your vision in terms that each team member can understand. What matters to a coder won't matter to a marketer.

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The largest part of this effort falls on your leaders. You can't just send out a memo detailing arcane financial calculations for profitability or equally obtuse market projections. Most of your people won't have the slightest idea what those things mean.

Another variation of this unsuccessful approach is the motivational poster, where the company hires some firm to come up with pretty pictures and lofty statements that are supposed to inspire workers to ever-greater productivity. About the only thing such shallow programs generate is the rolling of eyes. The problem with this approach is twofold. It's both vague and shallow. Worse still, you have smart people working for you, and they'll spot this in a heartbeat. Rather than improve their output, it will often have the opposite effect. Insulting someone's intelligence is rarely a stellar motivational plan.

If you truly want to enlist the hearts and minds of your people in order to come up with effective and innovative ideas, you have to be practical and down to earth. That means as a leader, you're now translator in chief. You have to take that grand vision, the horizon you're all rowing toward, and break it down into the common man's language. Furthermore, you have to then reframe it in the context of each department. What's meaningful to your geeks will have little relevance to the guys in shipping.

If you want to lower overall costs, you can talk to developers about time to market and prorated payroll costs, showing how delays translate to bottom-line costs. If you further explain that the budget for those cool new computers they want is tied to profitability, you'll have an attentive audience.

The people in marketing understand money, but they may not be clear on how the technical features of your latest product translate into benefits they can sell. More sales means higher commissions. Salespeople care about that sort of thing.

The guys in the warehouse understand logistics, boxes, and sweat. When you talk to them about efficiency, the dollars that are saved by not moving a box twice also translate to fewer sore muscles. If you've ever done manual labor, you can guess the enthusiasm for that goal.

We've done more in these examples than translate a high-level business concept into something workers at a departmental level can relate to. We've also followed the fundamental principle that should be at the heart of every interaction you have with your people, showing them why they should care about our desires.

If you take your high-level goals and break them down so that every person can grasp them, you've done more than just show them the big picture. By taking the time to do so and showing them how their personal efforts can make a real

difference for the company at large, you've made them feel like a part of the success. Of course, we all know that they are, but in most companies it's rare to actually have that feeling. When they do, their level of motivation will surprise you. Everyone likes to be part of a winning team.

# Listen to the People Who Do the Work

Making sure people understand the grand vision is good, but communication that travels in only one direction doesn't provide for a very stimulating conversation. The entire point of engaging your staff and sharing the ambitions of the company is to get something in return.

At the simplest level, you have the factory workers whose manager understands productivity as it relates to profits. In such an environment, the only interaction the workers tend to get is a veiled threat to work harder or be replaced. You probably have a pretty good idea of how that would go over in the tech world.

What we want from our people is more than just hard work. We need their brains, their schemes, and their inspiration. If we want to innovate and build that shiny new future, they're the ones who can tell us how to get there. Consequently, when everyone who works for you understands the direction your company is taking and what the goals and challenges are, they're going to have ideas. Of course, these are of little value unless you hear them.

The hard part isn't getting people to talk. Everyone has an opinion and most of them have ideas, too. Furthermore, since they're domain experts in their chosen field, those thoughts are going to be qualified and worthwhile. This doesn't mean that

you'll want to implement each and every one of them, but if you go about it properly you're never going to have a shortage of options and solutions.

When the development is done and your product hits the streets, it's unlikely that your customers are going to be engineers. If you're in the business of designing tablets, you may find that your customer base is a very diverse collection of people who use your products in a variety of ways. How do you gain the insights you need in order to build a better mousetrap? Obviously, you talk to the mice.

The people in your company are probably just as diverse as your customer base. How would someone in accounting use a tablet? Chances are good that she'd approach it differently than the guy who drives a forklift in the warehouse. The marketing people would have yet another set of uses, which would not include all of the applications a senior executive might employ. Want to know how to make your tablet irresistible to your market? Ask your market. Conveniently, most of them are right down the hall.

To build a shiny new future, engage the people who work for you. Give everyone in the company a chance to be in on product development. Hand out prototypes, have them take customer surveys, let them imagine the logistics of the launch, and use any other methods you can think of. Your market is easy to find. It's right down the hall. Much of your job in managing this input is serving as master translator, once again. You'll gather a wealth of ideas, complaints, and other useful observations from qualified sources. However, your hardware engineers won't speak the same language as your accountants or warehouse workers. You have to analyze and break down the input you receive and then reframe it as enhancements and fixes to your product line in a way that's meaningful to the people on those teams.

Another way your departments can contribute to the big picture is by offering their perspective on the work that they do and how your projects and policies affect it. A product starts as an idea and then moves through design, implementation, and testing before being released to the market. A designer may feel her work is done once she's passed along her piece of the puzzle to the engineering group. In reality, no one's job is done until it ships and people start paying for it. That's when the real fun begins.

In addition to creating the product, your company has to market it, ship it, process the orders, support the customers, and do any number of other related tasks. It's only when all of that comes together that you achieve profitability, let alone world domination. Consequently, listening to the people in various departments, now informed on the overall thrust of your efforts, will give you greater insights into improving your operations.

Your warehouse workers are actually the best candidates to suggest how fulfillment of the new product can be handled more efficiently. After all, this is what they do for a living. Your customer service reps lived through the chaos of your last release. If you listen attentively, they'll tell you many ways that you can streamline operations, reduce customer frustrations, and thereby build a more positive image for the new product. Each and every group can give you valuable information that will increase your market share and help your company grow. All you have to do is ask, and be attentive when they respond.

# Create an Inspirational Environment

The best way to encourage brilliance is to create a workforce that believes in something. Your company believes in profit.

Employees are big fans of regular pay. While these are necessities, they're not the sort of things that inspire us to reach for new heights.

People love having a cause and being a part of something bigger than themselves. That's a perfect fit for the tech sector. There is a great deal of idealism in our industry, and for good reason. Bright, talented people are working for companies that have the power to change the world. That's a powder keg of inspiration just waiting to be lit.

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Your company has the power to change the world. Let your workforce know it. From that point on, they'll be on a mission to prove you right.

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There's no need for your company to pretend to be something it's not. A business exists for the sole purpose of making a profit. That's not something to be ashamed of, and you do yourself no favors if you try to convince your people that your driving interest is to save the whales. Anyone with a brain is going to know that you're trying to make money, and the fact that you try to frame it otherwise is just going to make you look bad.

Google is famous for their motto, "Don't be evil." That might have played as a start-up, but now that they're a massive, world-dominating corporation, most people view that statement as something that more closely resembles the business end of a bull.

Google is a huge, profitable corporation. Good for them. But don't be evil? Seriously? Better that they should retire that phrase altogether. Not only does it seem unlikely for a huge international company to be without moral flaws, it almost feels like an apology for being so rich. If you're an entrepreneurial

American success story, you should embrace it and hold your head high.

Part of the problem is the misconception that money and virtue are mutually exclusive. Of course, that's complete nonsense. Money is a form of power, and power is amoral. How you use power is a completely different conversation. You can be good or evil whether you have five bucks in your pocket or a bank account in the billions. If anything, money merely amplifies your character. This is neither good nor bad in and of itself. If there are problems with the quality of your character, it's there that you should put your efforts. How much or how little money you make is irrelevant.

With that in mind, the first ingredient for creating an inspirational environment is honesty. Be true to who you are. You are a for-profit corporation. Say it loud, say it proud. Make no apologies for your wealth if you have it, or your ambitions if you don't. If you stand up straight and tall, showing everyone who you really are, you'll gain the respect of many for that reason alone.

From there, you can move on to addressing your cause and beliefs in a manner that won't come back to bite you in the bottom later. Maybe you launched a start-up to finally deliver on the long-overdue promise of a flying car. Three-dimensional space offers much more elbow room. Imagine the countless traffic jams that you could eliminate through the freedom of the skies. The benefits could range from things as serious as fewer accidents and fatalities to the simple joys of spending less time in gridlock and more with your family.

The fact that you're designing your car with a solid profit margin is not in any way incompatible with your enthusiasm for your cause. You want to change the world and make it a better place. You want to get filthy rich in the process. There is no conflict. This means you can draw the best and brightest based in part on your dream. The world is full of engineers, but a

subset of those will share your passion for these ideals. They'll join just as much for that reason as for the paycheck you offer.

By the way, anyone who thinks you can't be idealistic and make money at the same time should immediately start shredding their paychecks and tell their employers that they'll be happy to work for free. We do this stuff for the money. It just so happens that in this business, we get to do it for so much more.

If you don't have a cause, get one. If you're a dull, boring business who exists for no other reason than to turn a decent quarterly profit, perhaps this approach isn't for you. Of course, should that be the case, it's also likely that you're not one of us and in fact work in a completely different industry.

Passion is power. Find something that your people can get excited about and add it to your company identity. Through honesty and a sincere desire to make something happen, you'll create an environment that sizzles with potential.

# Overcome Fear of Change

Innovation, by its very nature, creates change. In our industry, it's one of our core principles. We live to create new things, embrace new ideas, and push the world one step closer to utopia. It's therefore an inconvenient truth that by and large, people really dislike change. It makes them feel uncomfortable, threatened, and insecure. It can take away everything they've worked for. It can require them to do more work today than they were able to slide by with yesterday. Change is scary.

Humans have a herd instinct that's as old as the species itself. It's a primal thing, and it drives us in countless ways. While many of us cope with life fearlessly, you certainly can't expect that to be the case for every person on the planet, or even in your company for that matter. This means that you have to

become adept at recognizing the things that tend to make the herd nervous. Stampedes are a little hard on the carpet.

Now more than ever, we have a great many dilemmas from which to choose. Even so, fear of change ranks right up there at the top. Above and beyond the desire to avoid hoof marks in your hallways, there's another reason to care about this. People don't do their best work while in the grips of anxiety.

Like it or not, since innovation creates change, you can't achieve your goal of building a highly innovative company without causing trouble at the same time. The best you can do is position yourself to deal with the problems that you know will inevitably come your way.

Since we've been working all along to understand the agenda and motivations of others, you'll find that this a familiar tool in your quest to keep the cattle in a less-than-foot-stomping frame of mind. This starts with the assumption that every change you make is going to tick somebody off. In any organization of more than a few people, that's a pretty safe bet.

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Change creates trouble and irritation for some people. Think through all those people who might be affected by change, how they'll likely react, and plan to deal with the reactions constructively. Show them why change, in this case, is good for them and for the company.

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Therefore, the first logical step would be to do a bit of recon to understand who's going to be affected and how. Sometimes a new way of doing things will threaten the power or turf that someone's accumulated. Other times it will have to do with working more overtime. Job security is also a frequent guest in the anxiety closet. When things change, people often get fired.

It's not an unreasonable concern. Of course, these are just a few examples.

The specifics of how you deal with these fears are as varied as the situations and people themselves. As with many of life's little dilemmas, there's no one-size-fits-all answer. There is, however, a basic framework that you'll always find dependable. Once you've done your homework, you'll know who will be affected by the changes. You'll also have a good idea of why the prospect makes them uncomfortable. The next step is solving the problem.

Since you've taken the time to know your people, you'll have a good understanding of their hopes, dreams, and ambitions. In a less lofty category, you'll also be familiar with the small creature comforts and perks that they happen to care about.

The working assumption is that there are benefits to the change you're creating. Otherwise, why would you be doing things differently? Therefore, your task is to sift through the benefits, match them up with the things your people care about, and demonstrate to them that different is not bad. Different is actually better, and here's why. Once you lay this out in terms of things they care about, you'll often find that those with negative attitudes transform into your most ardent supporters.

Translating the benefits won't always be simple or easy. You may have to take it step by step, from presenting the good done for the company all the way down to the resulting benefit to the employee. Even though that's a lot of work, it's not nearly the amount of effort as the damage control that would result from a stampede of negativity. You spent a lot of time and money on this herd. Keep 'em happy.

# Always Look to the Next Great Achievement

Tomorrow never sleeps. In the constantly shifting world of technology, what's cool today will be mundane a month from now. People don't get excited about paying for boring stuff. This means that you can never rest on your laurels, content with this today's great success.

I got out of the sales business for a variety of reasons. The intrigue of a close encounter with an 8086 IBM PC was certainly among them. However, I grew tired of the fact that no matter how many days or years I spent in the business, my experience didn't translate into value in any appreciable degree. You could be a seasoned old hand or a rookie just in off the streets, it didn't matter. Neither did your high sales totals from the day before. The only thing your manager would ask you is, "Yeah, but what have you done for me today?"

In tech or most other careers, you grow in your field and become more valuable as a result. For a salesperson, each and every day is measured by how much got sold, and nothing more. Who cares how much experience you have if the new guy is blowing right past you?

I thought I'd left those days behind. As it turns out, there's a certain degree of it in our business as well. Fortunately, it's not the only thing we have to concern ourselves with, and our time and talent does accumulate and present greater value over the years. Nonetheless, a peek into the mind of the average consumer shows him to be just as impatient as a sales manager. "Yes, the gizmo I got from you last month was cool, but what have you done for me lately? The XYZ company has a neat new shiny object. Maybe I'll just go spend my money with them."

It's a never-ending cycle, and you have to be warm and fuzzy with that if you're going to stay in this industry for any prolonged period of time. There's also an inherent danger that this highlights. No matter how big, popular, and rich you are today, it could all be over forever if the market shifts in a different direction. To a degree, this is true in many industries, as the manufacturers of buggy whips would be quick to point out. In our world, however, it's a risk of epic proportions.

We sell fads and trends. Sure, to a certain degree we sell benefits as well. Personal computers forever changed modern society. However, much of the functionality provided by PCs and laptops is now just the norm, no more remarkable than having a TV in your living room. In fact, PC sales have been in decline since the emergence of mobile devices, particularly the pads.

Some say that desktop computers are now an old-fashioned idea that no one needs anymore. What really happened is saturation. Everybody has one. It's nothing new. It's boring. It's not shiny. Additionally, the emergence of mobile devices allowed consumers to differentiate based on need. Computers are for creating content. Tablets and phones are for consuming. As it turns out, the majority of people don't need massively powerful application suites like Microsoft's Office. They're not doing software development and they're not creating professional audio and video content. They don't need a box to create things. They need a pad to consume them.

Between saturation, the splitting of sales based on need, and the undeniable coolness factor of mobile gizmos, PC manufacturers are taking a beating. It's a classic example of the need for new achievements.

Microsoft, for most of its history a software company, put effort into straddling the fence by manufacturing a class of PC that doubles as a tablet. They revamped Windows to target mobile devices and partnered with hardware manufacturers to create

more hybrid devices. Regardless of the success of these efforts, it's an example of a company who understands the need to produce continual achievements in order to stay relevant.

There are great opportunities and equal rewards to be had in our industry, but you can never afford to rest easy. If you're a one-trick pony and the market shifts, it's the glue factory for sure. Ours is a business that does not suffer fools.

# Summary

The best way to stay safe is to realize that you're not a product company, and neither are you engaged in selling a service. You're in the idea business. It's the only currency of any lasting value in this industry and certainly the only thing that will keep you alive.

The world is full of ideas, but most companies do everything in their power to keep those notions from seeing the light of day. Entrepreneurs and seasoned old hands alike often get fixated on the offering that they've built a company around. The problem with this way of thinking is that your competitors are doing the exact same thing. They're all busy fighting it out in the marketplace and constantly tweaking their products to gain even the slightest edge.

That's not much of a competitive advantage. If you really want to dominate the market, don't obsess over your product. Instead, pour your energies into building an creativity factory, a friendly and supportive home for innovation and brilliance that delivers a continuous stream of that most valuable of resources, the idea.

CHAPTER
12

# Morale

## Never Underestimate the Critical Importance of Emotions

If you had a roomful of robots, you'd never have to worry about all those pesky frailties of human nature. You'd simply power them up, tell them what to do, and hope they had a firm grasp of the Three Laws. Your shop would hum right along with mechanized efficiency, and everything would happen right on schedule. Who knows, if you could get one to hold still long enough to strap an apron on her, you might even get one step closer to the world of the Jetsons. It would be a peaceful, serene existence with nothing but productivity and somewhat-elevated power bills.

Of course, by design, you'd lose the human factor. Whisked away by the same broom that rid you of all those unpredictable emotions would be inspiration, brilliance, and innovation. The same biochemical malfunctions that wreak havoc in the workplace also generate the creative spark that moves society forward. It's been said that the development of technology is an exercise in trade-offs. Be that as it may, there's not a computer on the planet that offers the wide array of difficult choices that the average human being brings to the party.

If you decide to go green and hire people instead of oversized battery packs, emotions are a part of the package. They're responsible for some of our greatest achievements and most

heinous crimes. Like all forms of power, our feelings are rocket fuel that can be used for good or evil. Nonetheless, if you want your people shooting for the stars, it's important to take their feelings just as seriously as that spreadsheet you've been staring at all day.

# Remember That the People Are the Empire

It's easy to lose sight of what a company really is. They're traded on Wall Street and referenced in the news much in the same way as you'd refer to a stray brick. The way we talk about them, you'd think they were just inanimate objects, the toy building blocks with which we construct our fortunes.

In fact, all of the buildings, equipment, and parking lots your company possess are completely useless in and of themselves. Without people, they're merely the props and set pieces to construct a modern-day ghost town. You can't even get a tumbleweed to roll down the vacated streets because you don't have anyone to give it a push. The force behind your enterprise that allows it to move, shake, and do interesting things with stock tickers is that powerhouse of creativity, the common human being.

A company is a collection of people working toward a common goal. No matter what assets you have listed on your ledgers, the only thing that can move the merchandise, or create it in the first place, is a person. Sure, you could fire up one of your robot buddies to do the job, but you'll need a human to design and build it first. We are the movers and shakers, not the bricks and spreadsheets that surround us.

If you want your business to do great things, you don't stand in the hallway giving a motivational speech to a printout of last

month's earnings statement. Well, I suppose you could, but there's an excellent chance that it would be your last official duty before the folks in white jackets came to escort you to more peaceful surroundings. When you want to make something happen, you talk to a person.

Of course, the problem with that is the fact that people are highly individual and have a wide array of emotions and reactions, not to mention more baggage than the average 747. This makes us as unpredictable as we are productive. On a good day, we can scale the highest mountain. On a bad day, we may very well throw you off the peak.

Since the people are quite literally the living, breathing cells that comprise your corporate entity, that means their feelings and attitudes combine to form a key component of your company's culture, its personality if you will.

I took a job once at the office of a huge international corporation. I worked there for exactly two weeks. It was a dozen days more than I could stand, but I believe in giving people, and even companies, a fair chance. From the moment I walked through the doors on my first day, I was hit with a wave of negativity that was almost visible in the air. There was an atmosphere of cynical resignation and in many areas an almost-hostile attitude for no apparent reason.

At first, I thought I'd just bumped into a couple of unhappy people, but from department to department I saw the same thing in almost every person I met. These people exhibited an open disdain for their jobs, their company, and were none too thrilled with each other. There's no amount of money that can keep good people in an environment like that.

This wasn't some sweatshop factory filled with minimum-wage workers doing grimy and unpleasant work. It was a highly respected *Fortune* 500 company in the tech sector. Their products had been the worldwide standard for decades. Today,

this company is a shadow of its former self. They didn't keep up with changes in technology that the digital age introduced. Worse still, it made the all-too-common mistake of thinking that it wouldn't have to change in response to the Internet and other aspects of this new age.

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If the executive team of the company you're working for thinks it's bulletproof, start looking for another job, and fast. You probably don't have much time.

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The company's core business became obsolete. It didn't happen overnight, and the village idiot could have seen it coming years in advance. I read more than one article in the news with journalists shaking their heads in wonder at how such a prosperous company could blindly walk off a cliff like that. I didn't have to wonder. I'd seen them from the inside. When your people give up, you're done. Couple that with the hubris of upper management believing that they are bulletproof and the result is more predictable than the three-act play.

Your people are the heart and soul of your company. It will live and die with their feelings. When you understand the link between profits and all those touchy-feely emotions, they'll suddenly seem much more important to you.

# Keep the Goals Believable

It's important to reach for the stars. However, if you don't have a good rocket handy, or at least a reasonable plan to build one on the drawing board, people are just going to roll their eyes and keep walking. No one is going to waste their time on a goal that's clearly not achievable.

A reasonable stretch can invigorate us. Muscles get stronger by being pushed just a little further than normal, and well-considered goals work in much the same way. However, when the carrot at the end of the stick is too far away to reach, it can have the opposite effect.

If management is expecting huge gains that simply aren't in line with the laws of physics, people will become disheartened. Assuming they'll be blamed for the failure and realizing that it's inevitable, they'll shrug their shoulders and adopt a self-defeating attitude, believing that there's no point in even trying.

You might think that unreasonable expectations would simply cause people to fall short, meaning that you just won't get the gains you wanted. You might even expect to receive at least a little progress. The worst thing that can happen is that you just won't see any improvements at all, right?

On the contrary, when people become disillusioned, they don't stand still. They slide backward, sometimes with conscious intent. Things don't just stay the same. The begin a steady journey in the opposite direction.

I don't know what happened to destroy the spirit of the people in the company I mentioned. They'd been around for a long time, so it's unclear what poisoned the water. However, the degree of negativity that I saw there is exactly the sort of thing that can happen when you force your people to give up by constantly beating on them for something that's just not realistic.

Of course, there's a fine line between the unrealistic limitations most people subject themselves to and a goal that's within their reach if they would just try a little harder. At such times, many will complain that you ask the impossible. That's understandable. As a leader, you're in the business of accomplishing the impossible. Your people aren't. They often

can't see past their own fears and feelings of inadequacies, and that's where you come in. You've got to bridge the gap and show them how that carrot really is within reach.

Part of the difficulty in setting your goals is the fact that the people in the trenches can't really relate to the large-scale vision that you have for the company. They see your lips moving and understand the words coming out of your mouth, but they simply don't absorb the message. The movement of tribes or competitors, which are groups of people numbering in the thousands, is as clear to you as a man walking across the street. To your people, however, it's just a vague jumble of visual noise. It's not that they're stupid. They simply can't relate. If you want your tribes to get excited about something, you have to make it real to them.

Once again, you must don your costume and take on the role of translator in chief. The flashy garb isn't necessary in the strictest of terms, but you may as well have a little fun while you're at it. Besides, you might look good in spandex tights and a cape. In any event, you have to get their notice before they'll hear your words. Whether it's with an impressive visual or just an effective presentation, it's important to lead with an attention grabber. Entertainers do this all the time.

Many years ago, there was a band who played at Mother Blues, one of the top rock-and-roll bars in Dallas, Texas. They went by the name of Shotgun. It was a good group, but this was a club that always had top-notch acts. Given that the clientele were likely to be stoned out of their minds before they even made it through the front door, you needed a little something extra.

The first time I saw them, I was there in time to catch their opening set. They walked on stage, kicked off the song, and in the second measure there was a double-barreled blast of flame, smoke, and explosions loud enough to carry over a blaring band. If you were there, chances were good that by the

third measure you were sitting very straight in your seat and were quite alert, regardless of the state you arrived in.

You want people to do more than nod their heads and agree to follow orders. You want adrenaline. While I'd advise against explosions in the meeting hall, you'll nonetheless need some verbal pyrotechnics if you want to fire them up. Once you do, it's time to start translating. This is another place where understanding your people and the reality of the work they do pays off handsomely. With that knowledge, you can take your overall goals, break them down into bite-sized chunks, and paint them in the same colors that your audience wears.

As always, show them why they should care. Then explain why the idea is not as much of a stretch as they might have thought. Give examples where possible to make it concrete and real to them. When you do it right, they'll not only put their shoulders into the work, they'll do so with great enthusiasm.

# Emphasize the Victories, Not the Defeats

It's common knowledge that if you're not failing every now and then, you're just not trying to accomplish anything worthwhile. Any fool can plod along and successfully do the same thing day in and day out. At the end of a year, she'll have no failures. She'll also be standing exactly where she was when the year began. To truly make a difference and move your company forward, you've got to stick your neck out. Sometimes you'll accomplish great things. Other times you'll end up with little to show for your efforts but a sore neck.

The business world has many leaders who are overly aggressive in their pursuit of progress. They can be dominating and even intimidating figures. Fueled by the times, they

succeed and ignoring the consequences, they often push their people as hard as they can. Many also believe that there are no reasons for shortcomings, merely excuses. That may look good on a motivational poster, but it's not a very realistic assessment of the human race.

Since failures are going to happen from time to time when you're truly pushing the envelope, it's not hard to imagine the reaction that you'll get from this sort of management. Regardless of the individual personality and the manner in which it's delivered, the message is the same. You were given a simple goal and you couldn't deliver. What kind of weak, stupid, worthless creatures are you, anyway?

It's not exactly a page out of Dale Carnegie, and the effect it has on people is exactly what you would expect. If you berate people every time they fall short, they're going to find a safe place and never venture from it again. Of course, when your people are playing it safe, your company is dead in the water.

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Failure is part of success. If your people aren't taking chances, they aren't moving you forward.

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There are valuable lessons to learn from falling short. To ignore them would be to set yourself up to make the exact same mistakes all over again. It's perfectly acceptable, and in fact quite necessary, to have a postmortem when a project wraps so that you can see what went right, what went wrong, and what went so far south that it needs a passport. As in all things where people are concerned, how you go about it is everything.

The first and most important thing to remember is that you should always address the issue, never the individual. The head of hardware design isn't the issue. The engineer isn't the

problem. The failure that caused your new robotic housekeeper to do a spirited pole dance at a major media event was a specific glitch in a circuit board. While that might make for good television, it's not going to help you sell more units to homemakers who are more interested in a well-made bed than burlesque entertainment.

Establishing blame doesn't fix the problem, and neither does it prevent a future performance. Instead, talk about bits and bytes. Brainstorm on how to make testing procedures more robust. Congratulate your team for their passionate efforts to push the envelope. Yes, you heard me right. I just suggested that you congratulate someone for making a mistake. When put in the proper context, it can show your people that you place value on initiative and creativity and have little interest in scapegoats.

Even though you're discussing the things that went wrong and how to do them better next time, you're not focused on the defeat. You're simply helping your team sharpen its sword. As long as everyone sees it that way, failure is not a cause for fear and dejection. It's merely a frustration every success-oriented person feels that will drive them on to the next success.

Emphasizing the victories is easy and instinctive. Everyone wants to celebrate when things go right, and well that you should. If you make your people feel safe and proud even in defeat, you'll have a group who will never be afraid to try something difficult.

# Glorify Every Contribution

Celebrations come in many forms, and a great deal of it depends on your company's culture. However, just as focusing on defeat can create a risk-averse group of workers, an ill-conceived congratulation can create massive resentment.

Wars are typically won through a series of battles that involve large numbers of average people. Personally, I see nothing average in someone who is willing to fight and die for a cause, but in this case we're speaking in a relative sense. There will always be great generals as well as those natural-born warriors who are instinctively capable of doing remarkable things. Then there's the rest of us, peering out from our foxholes, doing our jobs, and making sure the overall effort succeeds.

At the end of the day, the hero gets a medal and the general gets another star. Both deserve it. However, without countless others doing their part, there would be no success to celebrate. Whether it's large-scale battles or a significant business initiative, the overwhelming majority of the work is going to be done by the rank and file. If you honor the larger-than-life figures and then ignore the common soldiers on your way to the door, you won't relish what they have to say about you once you're out of earshot.

You don't need to put each and every person in your company on a pedestal of equal height. In fact, it's a patently bad idea to do so, as it makes those who do accomplish great things feel that there's little point in their efforts. That said, it's important to find a way to recognize everyone who was a part of the overall success.

It's not necessary to shower them with riches, although they probably wouldn't put up much of a fuss if you did. What's important is that they feel valued and appreciated. Counterintuitive though it may be, that goes further with the average person than a truckload of money. Money comes and goes, forgotten not long thereafter. It can even backfire on you. When people think you don't care about their feelings, throwing money at the problem is perceived as a shallow attempt to buy them off rather than addressing the real issue.

You absolutely need to give your people solid financial rewards or they'll go to work for your competitor in a heartbeat.

However, even if you're paying them well and offering other forms of compensation in line with their profession, if you don't give adequate attention to their emotions they'll leave you just the same.

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A decent paycheck isn't sufficient motivation for an employee. The rock stars always get enough attention; you need to be sure to also shine the light on the rank-and-file workers who set the stage for company success.

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Consequently, when you're celebrating your successes, make sure that you find ways to put the rank-and-file in the spotlight. The most critical consideration in your efforts is sincerity. Don't offer phony and meaningless trinkets, and don't try to make a bigger deal out of their contribution than it merits. This is really much easier than you might imagine. Just think of the many one-on-one relationships you've had over the years, and then consider how your actions would be viewed by a single person. If your behavior is down to earth and you're being honest, it's going to go over well in both scenarios.

# Remove Drudgery with Spirit, Flair, and Artistry

Success isn't something that just appears like a bolt from the blue, striking the fortunate with fame and glory. It's the last drip from a faucet that's preceded by an extraordinary amount of work. While the end result may be glamorous, all the effort leading up to it rarely is. To accomplish your goals, you not only have to roll up your sleeves, you have to convince a lot of others to join you. Whether we do it for a paycheck or in the

hope of making a difference, those long hours and tedious tasks are no less inspiring. Any way you look at it, it's grunt work, but it has to be done.

There are a number of ways that you can encourage your people to dig in and do the dirty work. In my factory days, this was accomplished by having a supervisor constantly yelling at you with threats of being fired if you didn't work harder. Surprisingly, this didn't bring out the best in people.

Of course, that attitude exists in our world as well. Even if you don't smell the grease, it's still factory work. In fact, a fair amount of tech has taken on that exact vibe, plugging talent into production schedules whose unrealistic deadlines make them every bit as much of a grind. If you have a software system that requires a million lines of code to be written and you know the day you want to release it, you hire some bodies, throw them at the project, and tell them to crank out code as fast as they can. Whether you motivate them with threats or not, it's grunt work just the same.

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> Make no mistake—the modern tech company can become a factory designed to pump out code and products, much like the manufacturing plants of yore. Don't complete the picture by using the abusive motivational techniques used with minimum-wage workers.

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In addition to the drudgery and long hours required to bring the typical project to life, there's often another factor that diminishes your workers' capacity for high output. The business world tends to be run by buttoned-down types who prefer quiet workplaces and a conservative, unexciting environment. Dress codes are often enforced even for those who have no contact with customers. Cubicles are mandated to be, well, boring.

If you work in a trendy Silicon Valley start-up, you might find some of these rules a bit more relaxed. However, glamorous though it may be, the Valley represents just a tiny fraction of the tech work going on. The majority of tech work in America and the rest of the world takes place in regular companies who still play by conservative rules of conduct. While that might work just fine for many professions, the tech sector is driven by creative people, and this sort of oppressive atmosphere just makes us want to bolt for the exit. At the very least, it's not exactly inspiring.

If you've ever been to a Japanese steak house, you'll know that part of what you're paying for is entertainment. People gather around a grill where the chef holds court, twirling knives in the air, setting things on fire, and in general putting on a lively show. Cooking can be a dull and tedious task. Ask any of us who've flipped burgers for a living. However, the guys serving up the food in your local Japanese steakhouse are having none of that. The more successful restaurants hire as much for personality as for culinary expertise.

You can have a similar experience at the local sub shop should you happen upon one that allows the servers to have a personality. Freedom alone does not an entertainer make, but it at least opens the door for such people to enter. These are the people who throw ketchup bottles, spin knives, and offer a delightful banter as they zip through the process of making your sandwich. It's even more enjoyable in this context, as we usually don't expect anything more than a turkey on whole wheat with a little mustard.

You might think that they'd get in trouble for slowing down the line with their antics. However, if you pay attention, you'll notice that these are always the fastest and most efficient workers in the place. They have their routine rehearsed and polished like a Broadway play. The entertainment hides the fact that this is an extremely efficient worker who does the job with

a smooth precision and no wasted movement. If you're in a hurry, make sure this is the person who fixes your lunch, as it will always be the fastest-moving line.

In addition to being highly productive, such workers are also very good for business. The person who delivers the goods with flair and style is a joy to behold. In jobs where they interact directly with the customer, repeat business will be through the roof. I get a good sandwich faster than anywhere else, and I have a great time while waiting for it? You can be sure I'll be back, probably with a friend so that I can show off my new discovery.

Our industry doesn't usually involve performing for the client, but the basic principle holds true just the same. When you encourage people to inject their own personality and style into their work along with the understanding that it's okay for them to actually have fun, you'll have the most productive workers in the industry. All things being equal, happy, energized people do the best work.

# Realize That Enthusiasm Is Contagious

Injecting personality into your job does many things, but the most noticeable effect is spreading enthusiasm. People who have fun with their work are highly enthusiastic about it. In addition to the benefits you get from that one worker, however, there's an added bonus. It creates a ripple effect that spreads to those whom your livelier personalities come in contact with, lifting their spirits as well. Simply put, enthusiasm is contagious. This isn't a secret. The marketing world has known this for ages.

Why do you think the guy in the late-night car commercials is screaming at you, waving his arms and jumping up and down as he encourages you to drop what you're doing and drive to his dealership as fast as you can? Did you think he was just some unbalanced wacko or a hyperactive soul who needs to seriously cut back on his coffee consumption? Should that be the case, it's quite the coincidence that you can find his counterparts in almost every city.

You'll see the same principle at play when you're watching all those 800-number commercials that frantically pitch their wares for $19.95. The announcer is typically talking very fast and in a loud, powerful voice, just dripping with enthusiasm. But wait! Before you say yes to my theory, there's more!

This isn't just some observation I stumbled onto while clearly watching way too much late-night TV. Remember, I spent a long time teaching salespeople how to make a living, and that means moving the merchandise. The life of a salesperson is based on a very simple precept. No sales, no paycheck.

One of the things I looked for when hiring was the ability to convey this excitement, and it's something that I continually pounded into their little brains over and over again during training. If you want the customer to get excited, you have to be excited yourself. It's contagious.

To those who raised an eyebrow at this, I simply pointed to the sales board. Without exception, the top performers were always those who could be upbeat and enthusiastic no matter how they were actually feeling that day. I've seen them drag in with an oppressive hangover and stumble to their desk, all the while groaning about how horrible they felt, only to suddenly come alive the minute they had a prospect on the phone.

If you think that's easy, I'll take you out drinking sometime and we'll see how well you do the next morning. It's incredibly difficult, and yet, they put themselves through this painful

exercise on call after call. Why would they subject themselves, and their pounding heads, to such abuse? Because it works.

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Enthusiasm is the secret sauce that transforms your company and your products into something special in the eyes of the market.

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This isn't limited to the realm of marketing. You can observe the same effect at a concert, sporting event, or even your local high school pep rally. When we gather together in groups, it's hard not to get caught up in the excitement.

The guy at the back of the bar who's standing on a pool table and screaming, "Free Bird!" at the top of his lungs isn't nearly as drunk as you think. He's just caught up in the moment. When the band is good and they wind the crowd up, everyone goes along for the ride. Think of it as a kind of secondhand smoke that doesn't kill you. You know, unless you fall off that pool table.

Naturally, this level of adrenaline can't be sustained indefinitely. In fact, the reason many states created lemon laws to protect people from buying junk is due to a principle called "buyer's remorse." That effect is directly related to such secondhand enthusiasm. The pitchman is excited, you get excited, and before you know it, you've bought a used 1970s Ford Pinto that has the rather-inconvenient tendency to burst into flames when hit from behind.

Caught up in the moment, it seems to you like a great idea at the time. A couple of days later, however, the magic wears off, and your logical mind is let out of the closet that your emotions shoved it into. Looking at things from a more rational perspective, you realize it wasn't such a hot deal after all. These laws are designed to let you return your purchase within

a few days to protect yourself from this kind of contagious disease.

Of course, you're not selling used cars and it's likely that your product isn't priced at $19.95. Nonetheless, you have a group of people who work for you and if you've been paying attention you realize the need to fire them up and keep them motivated.

As you do, be aware of the ripple effect that you get as one person's positive attitude rubs off on those around her. While the adrenaline does wear off in time, when you repeatedly get your people excited about what they're doing, you're slowly conditioning them. Each time, it becomes easier and easier to engage their enthusiasm for your goals. As history and late-night TV have shown us, this can produce powerful results.

# Actively Eliminate Negativity

Enthusiasm isn't the only thing that's contagious. Its evil twin, negativity, is just as virulent. While going viral might be a good thing if you're promoting a cat video, it's certainly not the kind of thing you want to see when it involves the intersection of workers and attitudes. It can kill a company faster than a dot-com crash.

As you work to combat this particular plague, you'll find that a great many of these people don't actually have a terrible outlook on things. It's common for people to be negative purely out of habit. That's further fueled by the fact that the Internet is an ever-increasing factor in the life of the average techie, and it's heavily skewed toward cynical, snarky behavior. The end result is people parroting attitudes and opinions in the workplace that aren't really their own. It probably isn't a galloping surprise that a significant portion of the human race doesn't always do its own thinking.

Regardless of the reason, whether a legitimate beef or negativity by osmosis, you have to kill it on sight or it will spread like a destructive wildfire through your company. In the case of people who passively express the attitudes of others, you'll find that many times they don't even realize that this is what they're doing.

The easiest way to nip this sort of thing in the bud is to question their statements. Do they really believe that this project is doomed or that upper management sucks? When you put it to them point blank, they'll either say yes and give you the details that led them to that conclusion or they'll start stammering, suddenly forced to reach for an opinion of their own. In the latter case, it's not difficult to steer them in the right direction once they've validated your hunch that they don't really believe the gloom and doom that they're spouting.

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Negative attitudes and beliefs can doom a project. Don't be afraid to question them.

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I chose the word questioning with conscious intent. If you challenge people or are threatening in any manner, they'll instinctively become defensive. That helps no one. If you're attentive to how you present things, you can ask questions in the most innocent of manners that won't cause them to hit the searchlights and man the machine-gun towers. The goal isn't to beat them into submission but rather to draw out their true feelings.

When they discover that what they're saying isn't in line with what they think, the problem often solves itself. Simply remind them of what a powerful influence they have on others, which is both true and something everyone likes to hear. Then, connect the dots by pointing out that damage to the company rolls downhill and tends to hurt the payroll account.

Of course, you may discover that they really do have a problem with something. You'd think that someone who's unhappy would simply speak up, raise the issue, and seek resolution. Because you're a leader, that's how you're wired. However, humans come in all shapes, sizes, and dispositions, and a great many of them don't care for confrontation. Instead, they'll just sit in a corner and grouse.

By questioning their attitude, you have the opportunity to draw out the thing that's bothering them. More often than not, it's something you can find a solution for. In other words, they could have been happy a long time ago if they'd simply spoken up, but it's unwise to expect people to be other than who they are. Armed with this information, you now have a chance to solve the problem and return them to a positive state of mind through your actions. As an added bonus, they'll be pleased that you cared enough to help them.

There is a third class of creature. The planet has no shortage of bad spirits, and there are those who revel in chaos and destruction for no other reason than the fact that they enjoy it. Reason will not affect them. Threats and punishment will not change their nature. They simply want to tear things down, and there's nothing you can do to make them behave otherwise.

This will be the extreme minority of cases that you encounter. Consequently, before you put someone in this category, do your homework very thoroughly and be sure you understand him completely. However, once you've done so and reached this conclusion, there's one and only one solution. Show him the door, and do so without hesitation. You're not being mean to anyone. You're protecting everyone else in your company. It's your duty.

# Understand the Importance of Taking Breaks

Burnout is legendary in our business. It's almost impossible to talk to someone who's been around for a while without hearing tales of at least one project that turned into a death march. Sometimes, this is the result of poor management, capricious deadlines, and the factory-worker mentality that continues to grow in our industry. Other times, people knowingly shoot themselves in the foot with the greatest of enthusiasm. We're passionate about what we do, so long stretches of overtime are often a self-inflicted wound. Either way, it spells trouble for your company.

Patton observed that tired soldiers are pessimistic solders. As we all know, that state of mind leads to lack of effort and poor decisions. If this happens in an environment with life-and-death consequences, it can certainly happen to you.

I spent the majority of my coding years as a mercenary, a contractor for hire who was paid by the hour. I chose this path for a couple of reasons. The money was typically better than that of a salaried employee, but you also got paid for each and every hour that you worked.

This had an added benefit. I got tired of working countless hours of overtime when I was salaried. When companies have to pay for the extra time, as they do with contractors, there's a tendency to ask a salaried person to pull the all-night shift rather than the mercenary. Better them than me.

Even when payroll cost wasn't a deterrent, I still did my best to minimize the amount of all-night fun that I was asked to participate in. Like many in this business, early in my career I was so passionate about what I did that I was happy to work day and night. It also helps to be single. However, after a few death marches of my own, I reached the same conclusion as

many of my contemporaries did. I had no desire to make burnout a regular part of my life.

When asked by the true believers about this heretical perspective, I was able to avoid being burned at the stake by asking them one very simple question. Sure, I could pull yet another all-nighter, but did they really want the code that I had written, bleary-eyed, at four in the morning?

Don't get me wrong—I'm as neurotic about hitting deadlines as the next guy. I wasn't bailing on the overtime because I was lazy. I avoided it because it was a patently bad idea that wasted my time and generated poor-quality results. For the uninitiated, we call those "bugs." Not only would I spend a lot of hours working through the night, I'd have to go back to that exact-same code later and fix the mistakes that my brain was too sleep deprived to recognize the first time around. Another of Patton's comments was that he didn't care to pay for the same real estate twice. I couldn't agree more.

There was a time early in my career when I was working all day on one contract and then had a second gig at night. Usually this wrapped up in time for me to get to bed and catch a reasonable amount of sleep, but deadlines will be deadlines. Eventually there was the need to work through the night for an entire week. One evening, I'd spent the entire night running in circles trying to fix something and only managing to make it worse. Somewhere around two in the morning, I froze in my tracks. I'd cut some code and pasted it to the clipboard. Suddenly, I didn't know what it was, where it came from, or where it was going. Muscle memory told me that it was currently residing in the clipboard. Nothing else was clear.

At that point, I pasted it into some convenient place, stood up, and told the crew I was done for the night. Leaving that soon tended to get you branded as a wimp, but I didn't care. I went home, slept, and the next day hit the same problem refreshed and with a clear perspective. What I'd struggled with for hours

the night before I fixed in fifteen minutes, and it was a solid fix.

It matters little whether it's by mandate or personal passion. If you're not careful, all that hard work your people are putting in will run your company straight into the ground. Regardless of how critical your deadlines are, you need to make sure that you find a way for your people to take a break on a regular basis. Not only will their productivity increase, you'll save yourself a wealth of pessimism and negativity that are guaranteed to accompany any death march worth its boots.

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Don't "pay for the same real estate twice" by having your people pull all-nighters and then spend the next day fixing the problems their bleary-eyed work created.

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That said, it's not enough to just take time off. In addition to hours away from their jobs, you also need to find diversions for the people who work for you, something else that their body, mind, and spirit can embrace. That's the only way they can truly let go of their work. This is why high-level executives will go off to climb a mountain or take on other such dangerous hobbies. Because inattentiveness could kill them, they're forced to be completely absorbed in the task at hand. By definition, that leaves no room for work in their minds, and thus they truly get a break.

Whatever it takes, be sure you put as much effort into recharging your people as you do working them. While it may seem like wasted time in the short-run, the benefit to their morale and the increased enthusiasm they return with will work out to a solid net profit.

# Socialize Frequently and Sincerely

This isn't the first time I've touched on the topic of socializing outside of the office. There are a number of important reasons for this, but by now you've surely guessed one of them. I like to party. Like most everyone else in this lunatic asylum we call an industry, I work very, very hard. However, unlike many of the other inmates, I play hard, too. It's the only way I can keep my head screwed on straight.

You'll find that this is true for everyone else in your company as well. They may not realize it, however. It's also worth noting that those in the geek business are stereotyped as having no people skills. While it's true that I snuck in through the side door after a couple of rather-social past lifetimes, you'd be surprised how well even the geekiest of us interact with others when we're in the right environment.

You wouldn't put a bunch of blue-nosed, conservative, old-money socialites in the same room with a gang of rowdy musicians and expect anything that didn't end with police lights and lawyers. It's not that these two crowds hate one another. They just don't have anything in common. Commonality is the social lubricant that binds society together, at least when cheap tequila isn't available.

If you want people to mix, you have to have connection points. If you were to take our snooty socialites and cut a few from the herd who happened to like the same music as the musicians, the two groups would have something to talk about. Furthermore, their differences would actually contribute to a more enjoyable conversation, which is the staple of any good story. In a similar fashion, your accountants might not have much to say to a bunch of blue-collar warehouse workers. However, there are people on both sides of the street who might be very fond of boating, at which point you have yourself a conversation and perhaps even a late-night fishing trip.

More importantly, when you find these connection points and arrange your gatherings in a way that naturally brings people together in those areas, you get something a lot more important than conversations. You create new friends. That's a very powerful thing.

I spent a number of years writing air traffic–control software for a very small shop. There probably weren't thirty people in the entire company. I liked each and every one of them, which is a very rare thing in any workplace environment. As you might imagine, that made a huge difference in our interactions, especially when deadline pressure was the atmospheric condition of the day.

Being in the aviation industry, things slowed dramatically for the company in the wake of 9/11, and eventually they had to make cutbacks. I was far and away the most expensive guy on the team, so my boss gave me the news and a couple of weeks' notice, apologizing that it was the best he could offer.

Instead of being angry, I felt gratitude for all the years I spent there. It was a fun gig with great people. Consequently, I walked across the street, bought a thank you card, and put it on the refrigerator in the lunchroom. In my last two weeks there, I was highly motivated to help everyone involved pick up where I left off so that nothing fell on the floor due to my empty seat. I didn't do that for some abstract notion of a company. I did it for my friends.

It's unlikely that you'll have an organization where every person likes everyone else, but you should reach for that goal just the same. As you bring your people together and encourage them to have fun and enjoy each other's company, you're forging bonds that will reinforce every aspect of your company. The people who play together stay together.

# Believe That You Are Superior to All Other Empires

Arrogance is a destructive force. It insults people and creates blind spots that you could drive a tractor trailer through. Confidence is another matter entirely. While the two are related, you can certainly have one without the other. Many an obnoxious punk tells the world that he knows it all while hiding massive insecurities. More importantly, some of the nicest, most beloved people in the history of humanity have had a tremendous sense of self-worth without being a jerk about it.

Belief is the cornerstone of any successful endeavor. You simply can't succeed if you don't think it's possible. You'll curl up in a fetal position sucking your thumb instead of stepping out into the big, bad world to solve your problems.

Elite military units have long understood the power that comes from confidence and the belief that their members are the best of the best. Such a feeling binds people together. Just as enthusiasm is contagious, so too is confidence. Given that soldiers are in life-and-death situations on a regular basis, it's easy to see the practical application of this belief. If you're in a firefight surrounded by a bunch of draftees who didn't want to be there in the first place, chances are very good that you're not going to have unwavering faith in them.

This can lead to working in isolation, often a very dangerous thing in combat. There's a reason the Romans rocked the world. They operated as a combined, disciplined unit, which was proven to be much more effective than an army full of individual warriors who each worked alone.

If, rather than cohabitating with the unwilling results of lottery selection, you joined one of the elite fighting units, you would know that regardless of your situation, each and every person there had excellent training. Furthermore, because of the tight

bond and extreme confidence of the unit itself, you would all work closely together and thus be much more effective. In other words, you would have a much better chance of getting out of that mess in one piece.

Confidence also breeds boldness. When you believe in the people you work with and know that you're superior to all others in your industry, you're not going to be afraid of risk. You'll take chances and make the big plays because you know that your people can pull it off. Without that belief, you might prefer to sit in a nice, safe corner while your competitors pass you at every turn.

Even though you want to stop short of arrogance and the problems it can cause, don't be afraid to strut. When you believe that you're superior to all other companies, you're going to move forward with extremely high spirits. That adrenaline will pull you through the tough times and make you a fearless and unstoppable competitor in any encounter.

Steve Jobs had the Macintosh team fly the Jolly Roger. What's your standard? Find it, and raise it high. The ones who believe are the ones who do.

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Individuals who think they are better than anyone else are insufferable. Companies who think they are better than all their competitors dominate the marketplace.

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# Summary

Humans are far more complicated than the most dazzling piece of technology that you can muster. That's a rather polite way of saying that we can be a complete pain in the posterior on a regular basis. We're emotional, illogical, and often downright

stubborn. While it might seem otherwise when you're dealing with such qualities in another person, they are at the same time the rocket fuel of innovation. It's worth remembering that the propellant that landed Neil Armstrong on the Moon was by its very nature highly explosive. Were it any other way, the Apollo 11 would never have left the ground.

The people and attitudes in the world of technology tend to be very pragmatic and practical. We focus on bits and bytes, casting a doubtful eye on anything that can't be proven by science, that latest and most fashionable deity to which much of modern humanity pledges its allegiance. That makes us uncomfortable when facing things that are fuzzy by nature, and nothing matches that description like the vagaries of human emotion.

Morale, and its much-maligned sister, "people skills," are often relegated to the back of the bus while we talk of more serious and important matters. You can ignore the perils and potential of the human factor if you like, but your competitors won't. However, if they're kind about it, they'll at least buy you a nice violin so that you can fiddle while your company burns. Success is all about people. Learn how to bring yours together, and you'll never need music lessons again.

# CHAPTER
## 13

# Unite!

## Harness the Unstoppable Power of Your People

Other than tech, there's probably not another industry, outside of the entertainment sector, where the participants stare so intently at their shoes while the arrows zip past their ears. We expect actors, musicians, and other strange creatures of the night to be self-absorbed, possessing a great aversion to the world of commerce and the struggles it entails. After all, these are artsy types who take idealism to new heights even as they watch their bank balances hit predictable lows. If they woke up one day with something that resembled business sense, it would doubtless be headline news.

Those of us in the shiny object business have no problem with commerce. We dream of transforming our clever idea into a company we can take public, making us instant Internet millionaires. The fact that this is about as realistic as a singer waiting for that one big break that makes him rich and famous is surely just another one of life's inexplicable little coincidences. There's certainly gold in these hills, but like our creative cousins we expect it to just roll down off the mountaintop into our geeky little laps.

I've often said that actors were created to make musicians look normal. I've come to realize that in a similar fashion, our guitar-playing brethren exist to make us look like serious businesspeople. In truth, we're just another branch of the same family tree, populated by singers, dancers, and the

occasional chimpanzee. We're dreamers and idealists who fantasize about changing the world with our inventions, often forgetting that we still need to pay the bills in the meantime. While our night owl cousins are blinded by the spotlight, we're equally dazzled by the glitter of shiny objects. What we lack in commonsense, we at least make up for in passion.

# The Power of Unity

The marketplace does not suffer fools, whether they're brilliant on stage or clever at the computer. The road to riches is littered with broken dreams. The most unfortunate part about the debris is that so much of it is unnecessary. But then, if everyone had commonsense, there would be no room at the top to park your car. We'd all be there.

If you want success, you have to be more than just an idea person or a clever creative. The finest venture capitalists in the world invest in tech rather than creating it, and for one simple reason. They're money people, not creative creatures. They can't create the future. They can only finance it.

However, money, while important, isn't enough. Whether you need angel investors or have the rather-unconventional notion of generating your own capital through sales of your products and services, you can't build a better tomorrow with clever ideas alone. Business is war, and it's a highly competitive world out there. If you don't know how to fight effectively, your competitors will put you out of business and then strip you for parts.

As the ancient Celtic tribes learned when faced with the strength and discipline of the Roman Legions, this isn't an arena for individual combat. One person will be quickly isolated. A single tribe won't last much longer. To truly be effective in the world of modern commerce, you have to bring

your people together and focus their combined capabilities on your targets.

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The lone-wolf developer or small company faces an uphill fight in today's tech world. Better to unite with others and focus your talents on a common target.

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In unity there is strength. An old story told by many warrior cultures instructs a young man to break a single arrow, which he does with ease. He's then handed a bundle of arrows, which he can't break, at least as long as they're all bound together. (It's worth noting that the chain saw had yet to be invented.)

If wild-eyed barbarians aren't your cup of tea, there's another example of success through unity that you might be more familiar with. Once upon a time, thirteen rebellious little colonies told the King of England to take a long walk off a short pier. The notification was very eloquent and they were ever so polite about it. Even so, the message was clear. In doing so, they had chosen to face down one of the most powerful empires of the day. The only way they survived the experience was by banding together.

Fast forward a hundred years and we had a few more states under our belt. Still not sure of who we were, a collection of individual countries or a single nation, we did what any reasonable group of people would do. We fought a war over it. When the smoke cleared, we remained a very complicated group of people. However, one thing was clear. We were united tribes, giving new life to one of our founding phrases, "E pluribus unum," or "One from many."

Like any good cheeseburger franchise, we now have states from coast to coast. Nonetheless, we're one nation. That comes in handy from time to time. During the Cold War, the

Soviet Union would have had little trouble conquering Alaska. In my mind's eye, I can see a Russian general making his way from the West Coast to the East, clipboard in hand, checking off each state as it was conquered. It would have been just a walk in the park for a huge army like that of the USSR.

Fortunately for those of us who slept through Russian language and history during high school, that's not the way it worked out. Instead of a bunch of squabbling tribes who were constantly at war with each other, like the nations the Europeans encountered a few hundred years ago, we spoke with one voice and said, ever so politely, "Don't even think about it." Sure, we're still a contentious and often dysfunctional lot, constantly bickering with each other about one thing or another, but such is life within any family.

If you're a typical modern-day business, chances are good that you don't have anything resembling such unity among your own groups. It's more likely that your environment is an ongoing political struggle between tribes, with an even larger number of skirmishes going on at the individual level, each person vying for power, territory, and resources. If you should glance out the window and see someone coming up the sidewalk carrying a clipboard, run.

# Nuts and Bolts

If you really want to build the future, you need to get your act together. That means uniting the tribes and speaking with a single loud voice instead of a cacophony of dialects and accents. It won't be easy. The corporate free-for-all is a time-honored tradition in the business world. You can't do it at the tip of a sword, either. You can issue all the unity directives you want and offer as severe a penalty as you like for disobedience, but it'll get you nowhere. Unity at the tip of a sword is

enslavement. Like the ancient Egyptians who came before us, you'll experience more falling stone blocks than willing cooperation.

Empty cheerleading won't work, either, although I'm a big fan of poodle skirts nonetheless. If you want to bring people together and combine their forces for a larger goal, you have to show them why it's in their best interest to do so.

If you think life doesn't have a sense of humor, consider this. The most destructive force at work in your company today is self-interest. That also happens to be the most powerful tool you have to bring people together and achieve stellar results. I'm not sure who thinks up the rules to this game, but I'll have one of whatever they're drinking.

In order for your company to emerge as an industry leader, building the future of technology and making you prosperous in the bargain, you need practical, realistic methods that will bring out the best in your people. While we've considered a number of strategic and organizational tactics, at heart they involve some very simple principles. People are driven by self-interest. By understanding your people and what they want and showing them how following you helps them achieve this, you'll get their support every time.

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Want to build a prosperous future? Show your people why following you will feather their nests in a variety of ways.

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As a leader, it falls to you to be the one with vision. It's your responsibility to be the big thinker, the one who can see what lies just beyond the horizon. Equally important, if you want your people to follow you, it's necessary for you to tell them, in very plain language, why they should care. If you can't convey what's in it for them, you either have the wrong vision or you

don't know them as well as you should. These are your people. You should be their greatest champion.

Having enlisted their support, they'll depend on you to pull out your trusty machete and clear a path for them through all the bureaucracy and red tape. They need your support so that their brilliance is unencumbered by roadblocks and other obstacles.

Once you have them moving, you need to teach them new ways of thinking and responding. Show them how to make the transition from a group of people huddled behind stone walls to a collection of small, fast cavalry units who are flexible and responsive. It'll be new to many of them, which means you have to convey the benefits. Fewer arrows poking out of their posteriors is as good a place to start as any.

Once you have them firing on all cylinders, it's time to take that horsepower and point it at the competition. It's not enough that they show up each day and do their jobs. Even if it were, that's just plain boring, and bored people don't set the world on fire. You have to fan the competitive flames and make a game out of it. Pin the tail on the competitor might not be edgy enough for today's techies, but whatever you come up with, keep the competitive spirit high and pointing in the right direction.

As a leader, it's a given that you understand how to sell your ideas. However, for your people to be effective in their pursuits, there will be countless times their success will depend on the ability they have to promote their own agendas, whether it's for the project or for their careers. If you take the time to teach them these skills, you'll see them achieve objectives with ever-increasing ease.

In addition to their persuasive abilities, you need to teach them the art of strategy, helping them build the pursuit into their daily lives. No matter what the skills, life is an adventure of

constant learning. Get them excited about this greatest of all video games, and show them how to play it well. When you do, the motivation to continually sharpen their abilities will come from their own desires. That's when you know you've done it right.

If you wind them up and let them go, your people will continually surprise you with new ways of looking at the world. They'll offer improvements on existing processes and more than a few radical new ideas. The best thing you can do to keep the ball rolling is to implement those brainstorms. There's no better way of telling them that you take them seriously.

Of course, if your people become innovative, you'll see a lot of change in your environment. Not everyone will be comfortable with that, so it's up to you to help them make the transition. Remember, these are your people. If you don't look out for them, who will?

When you truly care about the well-being of those under your command, you greatly increase your ability to lead. If you take their feelings every bit as seriously as the other aspects of their work, you'll head off a great many problems that never needed to arise in the first place. More importantly, by keeping their spirits high, you'll ensure that your company has the steady supply of the rocket fuel it needs to light up the sky and build the future of your dreams.

The world doesn't owe you anything, and that extends to your company. If you want a seat at the table, you're going to have to fight for it. Look after the nuts and bolts of leadership by thinking first and foremost of your people and you'll ensure that your business is heavily armed. There is no substitute for overwhelming firepower.

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Much of leadership is looking after your people. If you turn around and see a thousand pairs of eyes watching

your back, you're on the right track.

# Power from the People

No matter what your level of leadership, it's all about people. There's nothing wrong with wanting great power, especially if you're driven to accomplish great things. However, absolute power is a myth, one we're told as a cautionary tale. The woman standing at the microphone is not leading the pack because she's endowed with superhuman capabilities to which all must bow in subservience. She's in charge and has great authority because she's convinced all the other powerful forces that she's worth following and is thus worthy of their support.

This means that she's mastered the art of people, as any good leader should. As long as she leads responsibly and the tribes benefit under her command, she'll be in charge for as long as she pleases. The secret to success is really that simple. Help your people get the things in life that they care about and you'll find that they're always receptive to your next great idea.

Don't forget that style counts. When you drive down the street, you can toss out as many gold coins as you like. That won't guarantee loyalty. Even the best-paid people will eventually bite the hand that feeds them if that hand is also prone to slapping them around on a regular basis.

The more power you accumulate, the lighter your touch needs to be, and that's not-at-all an easy thing to accomplish. It's one of the reason that we have so few truly great leaders, in business and among nations.

You can't fake affection for your people. We're stupid, but we're not that stupid. Like any good rags-to-riches story, you have to remember where you and your success came from. Of

course, if you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, the latter will have to suffice.

We don't resent leaders. We just hate bad leadership. Step up to the podium and show us what you've got. If we can believe in you and it looks like you have a good plan to take us to the next level, we're all yours.

# Be a Lightning Rod

There is a place in the world for that lone mad genius, the bushy-haired and wild-eyed inventor who does it all himself, from idea, to execution, to marketing. If that's you, leadership concepts are completely unnecessary. If you don't need anyone, there's no one to lead.

For the rest of us, success is all about gathering forces and redirecting them in a productive manner. From that perspective, your job isn't to sit at the head of the table and give orders. You're a living, breathing lightning rod. Your function is to attract the most powerful sparks you can find and channel them into one single, powerful spark. The fact that you get to hurl that bolt at the competition should make it a little more fun, especially if you've been known to show up at conventions in a Zeus costume.

No matter how qualified they may be, you can't have an entire company full of people wandering about in the marketplace trying to promote the best interests of your company. They'd accomplish about as much as a herd of wayward cows, constantly tripping over each other and eating all the neighbor's daisies.

You're the focal point, the one who gathers all those brilliant ideas your people have and focuses them into a powerful and finely honed implementation. It's not enough to catch the lightning. In the finest tradition of traveling salesmen

everywhere, you have to bottle it. Only then do you have something that you can bring to market.

The future is lined not with streets of gold but rather with the bits and bytes of shiny objects. Technology is the driving force that moves our society forward. It gives us better health, faster transportation, more comfortable living, and a host of other creature comforts. There are innovations just over the horizon that will change our lives in ways we can't yet imagine. That future will be created by leaders like you. Bring your people together and make it a good one.

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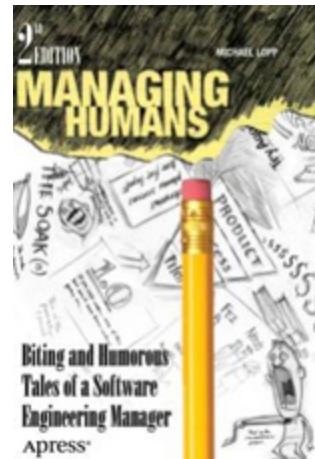
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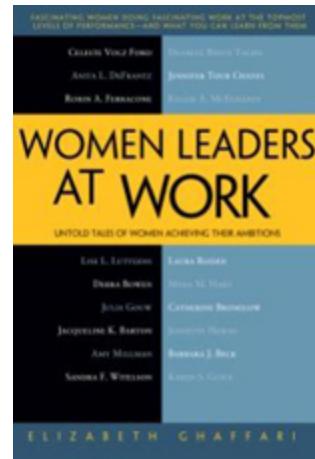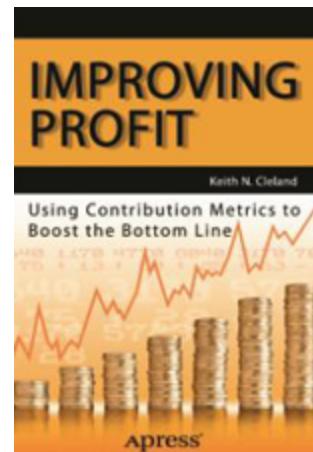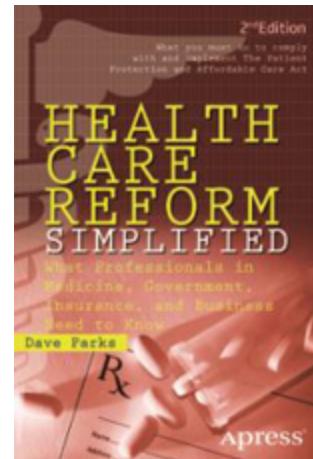
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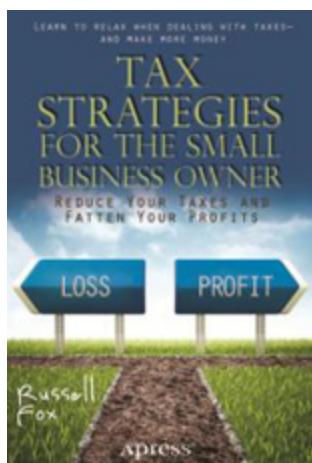
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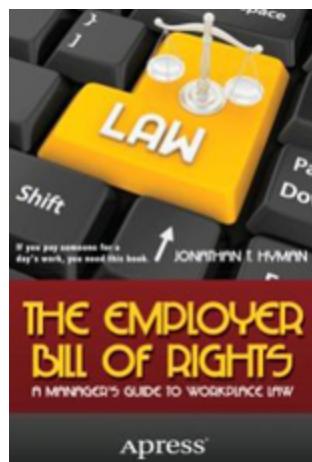
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