

Forward

I wrote *Coach Em Up* because today's CEOs don't need more information, they want to know where to go to get better. They know that "*it's lonely at the top*" and they are "*the TOP*". Leadership turnover is accelerating. Executive tenures are shrinking, they are "burnt out", and don't feel the purpose. Nearly half of new CEOs are hired from outside their own organizations. And more than 80% of upcoming executives are perceived as lacking the leadership capabilities today's environment demands. In an era defined by AI, speed, and relentless competition, this isn't a talent problem, it's a leadership development problem. You don't want to wake up everyday and go to work. You want to go to work everyday on purpose, for a purpose.

Organizations aren't short on intelligence. They're short on leaders who can hold people accountable, inspire high performance, align and develop others in the middle of constant change. The truth is simple: **winning is never accidental**. Winning happens when leaders get intentional about values, about people, and about building a leadership system that solves problems before they become problems.

A great system allows leadership to drive results, which in turn reflects strong leadership, but also and maybe most importantly, allows you the time needed to get away and not have to feel like your whole business is going to fall apart in your short absence. You may carry the title of CEO or Owner, but one of your most important roles is **CAO** or **CRO**, Chief Accountability Officer and Chief Reminding Officer. You set the standard. You reinforce the mission. You model the values. And you remind your people what winning actually looks like, whether you're present or not.

The purpose of *Coach Em Up* is to break the cycle of micro-managing and reactive leadership. This book is a practical prescription for value-driven transformational leadership with a purpose. This is about true value driven transformational leadership that instills coaching, builds trust, transfers ownership, and develops talent. Transformational leadership is not soft; it is a competitive advantage. You will learn how to clarify the values that guide decisions, model them relentlessly from the top, and turn everyday conversations into intentional coaching standards that elevate performance and accountability. You as a leader have CTA's (Calls To Action) first for

yourself, then for your team and ultimately for your customers. It all starts with you, you must look in the mirror before you can call your team to action, keep them aligned and hold them accountable.

The most effective CEOs I work with understand this truth: the fastest way to transform the business is to transform the leader first. I say this to my team all the time, “If you want to fix the team, you fix yourself first.”

Read this book with intention. Apply it with purposeful discipline. Because in leadership, in business, and in life, **WINNING IS NEVER ACCIDENTAL!**

Coach 'Em Up

STEVE HAGEN

Pre-Game

The clock was ticking down.

The crowd was roaring.

Every eye in the stadium was locked on the quarterback.

Fourth quarter. Super Bowl 50. One play could change everything. One play that could rewrite a legacy, shape a city's memories, and send thousands of Broncos fans into either heartbreak or history. This could be the biggest celebration in years.

Peyton Manning stepped up and yelled, “*Omaha! Omaha! Set hut!*”

With one word. “Omaha”, that one audible, everything changed. The entire play switched. The line adjusted. The receivers changed their routes. The running back reset. Same huddle, same 22 players, same field... but a completely new play. Peyton barked out his famous audible against the Carolina Panthers, changed the play, and changed the game. That's the magic of an audible. In pro football, teams often call multiple plays in the huddle, Plan A, Plan B, maybe even Plan C. When Peyton yelled “Omaha!” Everything changed. There was no panic, there was clear defined leadership. That's the power of a trusted voice.

Organizations that are solid, sound and dynamically forward focused, communicate better than their competition. Audibles are a huge part of those communication habits. Audibles are the foundation of every winning strategy. It's far better to call an “audible” than to take a “delay of game”. In business, they call them pivots, reallocations, or decisive leadership moments. Audibles aren't a sign that something went wrong, it's actually the opposite. Great leaders don't wait until the clock runs out. They adjust early, move fast, and create velocity. Clarity adds speed. When a leader makes a decisive call, everyone else can play fast. It removes hesitation, builds trust, and keeps the team moving forward.

Audibles add velocity, you want to create a “*speed is king*” competitive mindset, as fast as they play, we play faster. The ability to audible is proof the leader has created a system that has foresight and sees **clearly**.

One major part of my system is this principle which applies everywhere: **Clarity is Kind**, which means we don't hide from the truth. It means you have a standard and you keep it. Inconsistent is soft, confusion is chaos. Clarity is Kind, sets the ground rules and everyone knows the standard. Just because you say "Clarity is Kind" and you consider yourself a *Value-Driven* leader doesn't mean you're soft.

The best teams and the best companies prepare and anticipate change by developing plans that adapt, because markets shift, customers change and competitors adjust. If you don't have the ability to respond in real time, you don't win on the field, in the boardroom, or in life. It sounds complex, but it's really simple.

One voice. One decision. One direction.

The Master Plan

Audibles only work when they come from a systemic **Master Plan** that permeates the entire culture. In our organization, that Master Plan communicated around five non-negotiable principles, our *Pillars*. These weren't slogans on a wall or buzzwords in an annual meeting. They were the operating system of our organization. Every decision, hirings, firings, discipline, promotions and all evaluations ran through this lens.

1. **The Team comes first** – no silos, no egos, no exceptions.
2. **We're all connected, all the time** – alignment beats autonomy.
3. **W.I.N. (What's Important Now)** – focus drives results.
4. **Own your actions** – accountability is leadership currency.
5. **Never Flinch** – pressure reveals character.

This clarity allowed leaders at all levels to move fast without confusion and adjust without hesitation. If it didn't help us win, we didn't do it. Period.

When we evaluated talent, we used one standard that defined our culture and our expectations. We use physical measurables and other forms of evaluation. We know that numbers matter and we use analytics to form our decisions. Every coach and leader, evaluated every player under this premise, **"Smart, Fast, Physical, Fundamental, Football Player that does whatever it takes to Win and leave no doubt"**

In business terms, this means hiring and developing people who are **smart, driven, disciplined, fundamentally sound, and relentlessly committed to winning the right way**. People who didn't just talk about results, but took ownership of producing them. You don't always win with the best players, you win with the "right players". You've got to get the right players in the right seats on the bus.

When everyone is aligned around the same standards, audibles become powerful, not disruptive. Teams move together. Leaders lead decisively. And organizations win consistently.

I'll break these principles down further in the chapters ahead, but this is the foundation:

Clarity creates confidence. Alignment creates speed. And decisive leadership wins.

Head coaches and CEOs understand this instinctively. Coaches call it an audible. Business leaders might call it adaptive decision-making. Different language, same principle. It all starts with a clear, concise, well-built system (game plan) that allows you to respond when conditions change.

You start the day with a plan, a play call,
a pitch deck,
a growth strategy.

Then the defense shifts.

The market tightens.

The deal collapses.

A key employee walks.

Suddenly, what worked in the morning huddle won't work anymore.

That's the moment value driven leadership shows up. Not with panic. Not with more noise. But with a decisive adjustment. When it counts most, leaders don't cling to the original call, they don't flinch, they *audible* and make the *right* one.

That's when leadership matters.

Most businesses don't fail because they lack more capital or intelligence. They fail because they lack leadership. Teams rarely break down from a lack of talent; they break down because no one is willing to confront the truth in time.

You can't budget your way out of poor leadership. You can't outspend indecision. Money may buy time, but it never buys culture or clarity.

The solution isn't complicated, but it is very personal. Like I tell my team all the time, *"If you want to fix the team, you've got to fix yourself first."*

The leader's main job is to hold the team accountable to their goals, remember, Chief Accountability Officer. I always ask my team what their goals are, personal goals and team goals. My job is to hold them accountable to their goals. Sometimes they don't like it, but that's when I remind them that it's their goal and I'm their number one accountability partner.

I've coached in a business where excuses cost men their jobs. I've coached grown men with HUGE egos, earning a ton of money, and under extremely HIGH pressure. With all that being said, they excel with strong value driven leadership that creates clarity, because clarity produces structure and discipline. And disciplined leadership solves problems that money and strategy never will. Leading with poise, truth, and conviction changes everything.

I've spent more than forty years calling audibles. Football has been my business, my classroom, and my proving ground. That journey has taken me through fourteen states and two countries, from Notre Dame, Cal, and North Carolina, to the NFL with the Cleveland Browns and New York Jets, and eventually overseas to Italy and the U.K.

I've coached at the highest levels, Division I, the NFL, and now internationally at the NFL Academy in Europe, a boarding school where players from nineteen different countries, speaking as many languages, learn to trust one voice and run the same play. I've stood on the sidelines from Notre Dame to every NFL stadium in the league, and I've seen this truth proven again and again:

Accountability and Alignment isn't optional, it's Essential.

Along the way, I've been shaped by some of the best coaches and mentors in the game and crossed paths with Presidents, astronauts, Navy SEALS, international ambassadors, and business leaders from every walk of life. Different fields. Different uniforms. Same truth:

Leadership creates culture and culture beats strategy every time.

I don't share all of this to impress you. I share it to confess something:

Every move I thought was random... wasn't.
Every detour I questioned... mattered.
Every audible God called... was training.
When God moves you, He's molding you.

That realization came into focus overseas, coaching young men from around the world. It reminded me of an old truth that I saw while visiting Leonardo da Vinci's home in Europe. He captured it perfectly: "*Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.*" In the NFL, we said it another way: make the complex simple or you won't last long. "NFL" = Not For Long.

Your system(s) should simplify. Unnecessary complexity doesn't make us smarter, it creates bureaucracy, wastes time and drains resources. Simplifying, on the other hand, clarifies everything. Real clarity isn't found in having more options; it's found in choosing the right one and committing to it. That's transformational leadership.

When the noise gets loud...
When the pressure's up...
When the plan falls apart... You don't need more choices.
You need the right voice.

This book is about value-driven transformational leadership, and no one embodied it more clearly than Jesus, the Master Teacher, the Ultimate Coach. He never positioned Himself as one option among many. He kept leadership simple and unmistakable. Two words captured his leadership style:

"Follow me."

Simple. Clear. Directional.

Now, because I'm a football coach, I tend to see life through the *language* of the game. I see miracles like I see wins, BIG WINS! The Gospel of John records seven miracles, seven "Big Wins" Those moments weren't about impressing crowds.

They were about alignment.

Those seven "Calls To Action" aren't just ancient stories, they're timeless life principles that teach us about purposeful transformational leadership. That's what this book explores: how to lead with clarity, when to adjust, how to simplify, and how to recognize what matters most in business, leadership, and life.

Coach 'Em Up is an invitation to stop spectating and start leading.

To move from emotionally reacting to deciding.
From managing tasks to shaping culture.
From being led by pressure to leading with purpose.

This book will show you how the greatest leader who ever lived modeled principles that still win today, on the field, in the boardroom, and at your home.

Quiet strength. Unshakable clarity. Standards without apology.
When you align your leadership to that kind of example, things simplify.
Lead on purpose, with a purpose.
Raise the bar.

It's time to get in the game.
It's time to Coach 'Em Up.

1

The First Win

“On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them,

“Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water which now had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested His glory. And His disciples believed in Him.”

John 2:1-10

LION Up

After forty years of coaching football, I've never turned water into wine, but I've seen plenty of lives change from a well-timed nudge. That steady, intentional push we call coaching has the power to move people from a life they're stuck in to a LION life: Life I Own Now. It doesn't just happen on the field; it shows up in boardrooms, startups, sales calls, and corner offices. Avoiding hard conversations with yourself and others signals low expectations. Don't ever let low expectations be comfortable. Comfort can kill a team faster than conflict if you let it. At its core, a nudge can move someone from *No* to *Now*. It's courage under pressure.

Most people don't need more information. They already have plenty of that. What they need is clarity, courage and a "Call To Action". They need someone they trust to look them in the eye and say *It's time to step up. It's time to LION up.*

The life you're managing now to the life you're meant to own is never automatic and rarely comfortable. Some are willing to make it. Others hesitate or just won't. But leadership, whether in football or business, is about helping people choose ownership over excuses.

Not long ago one of my players got into a fight at practice. Not a big one. Just enough to bring some attention to his side of the field. He was hot, super emotional, not from just fighting but from all the other "stuff" that had been stacking up in his life that I didn't know about. I kicked him out of practice and told him, "Come back and talk to me when you've cooled down."

He came back the next day. He apologized to me and his teammates but halfway through his apology he just broke down. He started crying quiet tears.

He told me how he felt like he was to blame for losing one of our big games and how he was drowning in his schoolwork. How "*everything felt like it was falling apart all at once.*"

I hear the same story from business owners and CEOs all the time just said in a different language: Missed numbers. Pressure from the board. Fear of letting their people down. Carrying the weight alone.

When I sat down with him, I didn't give a speech. I gave him perspective. "*This is the season you're in, but seasons don't last forever unless you refuse to change*". Where you are today is the result of the choices you've made, or the choices you've avoided. Change your choices, change your life. One decision can turn the page, you are always one choice away from a different future.

That's the nudge.

And that's why I've always loved the story of the wedding at Cana. It was quiet. Only about a handful of people even noticed. It didn't start with a spotlight. It started with a simple statement:

“They have no more wine.”

No announcement. Just a nudge.

Nobody knew it at the time, but Jesus was seconds away from stepping from the life He knew, into His new life. The real beginning. The moment everything changed, not only for Him, but for the entire world! He went from,

Who is this guy?

To, No, REALLY! Who is this guy???

It all started with, “They have no more wine.”

And then this line:

“Do whatever He tells you.”

That's leadership.

Clarity.

Confidence.

The first big Call to Action.

Jesus knew exactly what she was saying. This wasn't about “They're out of wine.” This was about stepping into purpose. That's how it often works in business too. A tough conversation. A follow-up call no one else wants to make. A standard that has to be reinforced. A risk you've been avoiding. Courage under pressure starts with choosing to move.

That's your LION UP moment.

You don't need every answer. You don't need perfect timing. You need the courage to act on what you already know. From fourteen states to two countries and countless locker rooms, I can see it clearly now: every move, every assignment, every uncomfortable season, I was growing as a leader. The shift happens when you stop waiting. When you stop shrinking. When you stop hoping someone else will step in. Ultimately, I had to own it.

Think about it like this, your life, the one you are managing now, is about the choices that you've made. Your new life, the one you want to own now is the one God is handing you.

Own it. Don't apologize for it. You don't need every answer. You just need the courage to do the next right thing. Whether you're coaching a team or leading a company, the principle is the same. So take this as your Call To Action, your "nudge." Step into the moment. One choice at a time.

"They are out of wine."

LION UP!

Men Under Siege

I've been coaching young men for 43 years now. That's crazy for me to even think about. I guess that makes me "experienced", or just old enough to have seen some things. Mostly it means I've seen enough repeated patterns to recognize what's really going on. Here's one thing that I am positive of, men are under siege. Leaders are under siege!

Not just the guys in my locker room, but the ones in corner offices, sales meetings, and startups too. The pressure just looks a little different, but it's the same. For my NFL Academy boys, it shows up as porn on their phones, InstaGram comparisons, chasing scholarship offers and NIL opportunities. For business leaders, it looks like compromised standards, inflated numbers, blurred boundaries, and the quiet temptation to trade character for short-term wins.

Different arenas. Same battle.

Every morning I tell myself and my players the same thing: LION UP. Stand firm. Stand in the gap. Do what's right especially when it costs you something! Because strong leadership always will.

Every young man in our program has his own story: some inspiring, some heartbreaking, all real. At just 16 or 17 years old they leave home to live, go to school and train at the NFL Academy in the UK, a boarding school in the heart of England. Some have no dad. Some have no money. Nearly all face language barriers. Whatever the challenge, we see it here. You name it, we deal with it. While the Academy offers some scholarship support, it falls far short of covering everyone. So the players we have on our roster are the ones that are willing to pay to play football. It's a big dream worth chasing, but it comes at a steep cost. It's a HUGE financial commitment from any family. They're paying to play. They're betting on potential. And every entrepreneur understands that tension. You don't invest because the outcome is guaranteed. You invest because the vision is compelling. Because belief often comes before proof. To the entrepreneur faith looks like writing a check before you see the return.

Every one of my young men are creating their own brand and all are asking the same questions leaders ask at every level: *Who am I? Am I built for this?*

I'll never forget one of my new players from Austria, barely sixteen, a basketball player, never played football before in his life, and he arrived knowing just enough English to pass the visa interview. He wanted to quit football after 48 hours into training camp, his bags were packed and ready to go back to Vienna. Homesick. Lovesick. Way overwhelmed. He was DONE!

I knew that we were going to travel out to the NIKE headquarters in Oregon to play in a Kick-Off Classic in a few weeks, so instead of demanding a long-term commitment, I asked him for something smaller. Meet two more teammates. Stay two more seconds, two more hours, two more days. Just take the next right step. I told him, "*Don't look at how uncomfortable all of this is. Look at how rewarding it can be.*" That's leadership, not forcing the future, but guiding the present.

He stayed. He struggled. He grew. Ultimately, two seconds turned into two years. The kid who wanted to quit after forty-eight hours eventually became a team captain, leading prayers, mentoring younger players, and eventually earning a full scholarship

to the University of Tennessee. From two seconds to the SEC. Courage over comfort changed everything.

I didn't demand a lifetime of commitment, I was just asking for the next right step.

Like I said earlier, the best thing a leader can do is hold people accountable to their *own dreams and goals*. Have them write them down and hold them accountable. I always ask my players what their goal is and then ask them, “*what do you think my job is?*” I tell them that the best thing that I can do for you is to hold you accountable to your own dream. It's not my dream, it's yours. Sometimes we as leaders look more at what we want instead of what they want. We, as leaders, will get what we want/need if we hold them accountable to what they want. True value driven leaders lift their people, leaders lift!

Doing “*hard stuff*” follows you into your office everyday. Comfort will always keep you where you are. But that's not the world we're living in. Our world races fast forward with crazy new technology, ultra fast AI, pressure, noise, opinions, and everything pushing you to do “hard stuff”. You want to react, but it's instead better to lead.

Success doesn't remove stress, and money doesn't silence it. So here's the question, on the field, in the office, or at your home:

Will you choose courage over comfort? Can you have an honest conversation or take the next right step?

Can you get a win today?

Can you move from chaos to clarity? From feeling “***under siege***” to the life and leadership you were meant for?

Wimbledon Win

What's in a win?

After living in England for three years, I finally made it down to Wimbledon. And let me tell you, seeing that place in person . . . WOW! WAY DIFFERENT than I ever imagined!

And for a tennis fan like me, the setting is beautiful, the grass courts are perfect, and the athletic precision is on a completely different level. But what you really feel standing there isn't just tradition or prestige, it's this quiet pressure hanging over the place, that's Wimbledon. And nothing says, "*I've got to get my first win*" like this Grand Slam tournament. That is unmistakably clear!

Wimbledon doesn't care how hard you trained, how far you traveled, or how badly you want it. Lose once and you're done. Single elimination.

Pack your bags.

Shake hands.

Head for Heathrow.

Every head coach and every CEO knows that feeling. You've got to get your first "W" with your team. Not just for the scoreboard or the balance sheet, but because belief follows results. That first win proves the system works, that the plan wasn't crazy, and the hard conversations meant something. That first win fuels velocity, escalates belief and immediately changes the room, because in life, business, or sport *winning is never accidental.*

I think back to when we first implemented winter workouts at the NFL Academy. None of our boys had ever experienced anything like it. Most of the boys complained. Most of them wanted to sleep in. Some wanted to quit.

Five days a week.

No excuses.

They hated it.

But we kept saying the same thing:

Win the day.

Not the season.

Not the championship.

Just win today.

Slowly, they started to believe in themselves. Each day they did something harder than the day before and they won the day. Little by little, something shifted. They started stacking small wins.

One more rep.

One less excuse.

Angela Duckworth, author of *GRIT*, shows that grit is a better predictor of success than IQ or talent. Grit can be built by repeatedly choosing to do difficult tasks.

Those first small wins built momentum for the bigger ones to come. That's how culture changes, through shared struggle and long discipline. That principle holds true everywhere. In sport. In business. In sales. When you take over a team or launch a company, the real work starts long before the "*season*." You're building the system, setting the standard, instilling a philosophy, and establishing habits. You're building belief before the results appear.

New program? Same truth.

Winter workouts? Brutal.

But they set the tone. They build buy-in. You're not just chasing a championship, you're revealing character and building belief.

Momentum follows belief. Suddenly the impossible starts to look possible. That's when you know your culture is changing.

While watching the best in the world at Wimbledon, I saw it again. That Grand Slam tournament is hard to win and nobody wins alone. Everything, winning included, depends on relationships.

Tennis looks like the ultimate individual sport, but it's not. There's a coach somewhere who believed early. A trainer who stayed late. A family who sacrificed. The same is true in business. Behind every "*overnight success*" is a team that carried the load for years before anyone was watching.

Whether it's Wimbledon, the NFL, your business or life. Every win is a team win. No player or coach wins alone. Behind every "*overnight success*" there's a small army of assistant coaches, trainers, parents, players. No one makes it alone.

No one ever has. That's why leadership matters so much, great leadership connects everyone on the team. Winning is always a byproduct of relationships. My second pillar is "We're all connected all the time".

Jesus' first miracle wasn't just about the wine. It was about belief. His mom told them to do "*whatever He tells you to do.*" And Jesus told them to "*fill the jars with water.*" Think about those guys He sent down to the river to fill the jars. They had to be thinking,

What in the world are we doing?

He's going to turn this water into wine? Really?

Most likely none of it made sense to them. But they trusted, they went, they filled the jars and they did what He said.

They obeyed, and they **carried the water before they ever tasted the wine.** He invited people into the process. He let them carry the water without knowing the outcome. And when it happened, they knew. They were part of it. The belief stuck. That's leadership.

Leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about getting people to trust the process before the results show up. Winning is always a byproduct of relationships, of trust, of buy-in, of people believing together.

So here's the question:

Will you carry the water when it doesn't make sense?

Are you willing to do the work before the win?

Winning at Wimbledon is hard and it's big business, and it never happens alone.

There *is* a win at Wimbledon.

And it's always a team win.

WIN - What's Important Now

Steve Jobs, the Apple genius, once said "the key to success "*is a high signal-to-noise ratio: prioritize what matters, minimize distractions.*"

In football, we've always said it more simply: **W.I.N.—What's Important Now.** It became my third pillar of my belief system.

I first heard that “WIN” phrase in 1989, coaching under the legendary Lou Holtz at Notre Dame. It wasn’t a slogan on our wall; it was how we lived every day. Ignore the noise. Prepare with purpose. Out execute our opponents. Always play forward. It was our system for decision-making.

I remember when our starting quarterback went down in the USC game. We could have easily flinched. Instead, our team stayed anchored in, **What’s Important Now?** Step up. Execute and play forward. Trust the process.

We won that game, and that win did more than save a Saturday. It preserved belief, accelerated momentum, and kept our national championship pursuit alive.

In business, some call it the “**Momentum and Belief Flywheel**”. One calm, focused decision under pressure creates a win. That win builds belief. Belief fuels momentum. And momentum changes everything. When I’ve listened to Elon Musk, I think he would call What’s Important Now (WIN) a “*maniacal sense of urgency*”. Elon has said that he has slept in the factory in order to ”focus on what’s most critical”

In business, sales, leadership, and life, there’s always something screaming for your attention. A lost deal. A bad quarter. A competitor’s move. When it hits, and it will, the question shows up fast:

So what? Now what?

The answer is still the same: **What’s Important Now?** “WIN” forces clarity. The same principle applies in business. A bad quarter doesn’t define you. A missed forecast doesn’t end the company. A competitor’s move doesn’t dictate your future. But all of this can easily define you, if you don’t address it with an “**on time and on target**” mentality. WIN pulls leaders out of chaotic reaction mode and into poised calm, directed execution.

Coach Holtz knew that. He drilled it into us every day at Notre Dame. Whether it was summer workouts or the final drive of a championship game, the principle was the same:

W.I.N. fuels focus.

Jesus got him His first win because He knew every moment was important. Jesus lived “What’s Important Now”

Scripture says, “*And His disciples believed.*”

One focused decision and belief is born. Jesus didn’t just WIN that day; He launched a movement that still shapes leaders, teams, and organizations today. The ultimate “Momentum and Belief Flywheel”.

When life has a “*high signal-to-noise ratio*” and feels too chaotic, when your plan feels like it’s falling apart, when the pressure mounts in your business, stop and ask the question that changes everything:

What’s Important Now?

Never Flinch

Back when I was coaching at Notre Dame, Coach Holtz used to stand in front of the team the night before every game and say this: Men you know what we have to do to win this game. We have to:

Win the turnover battle.

Win short yardage.

Win the goal line.

Win the kicking game.

Win the Explosive Plays.

Win the fourth quarter.

And then, after all that situational football, he’d pause, look at the guys, and tell them what mattered most:

“Men... no matter what happens out there...**Never Flinch.**” Our fifth pillar. It’s part of our culture. Culture isn’t just what we value, it’s our habits and process under pressure. We **Never Flinch** under pressure. It’s how we believe, it’s how we’re coached.

Coach Holtz understood something most leaders learn the hard way: preparation and talent mean nothing if composure disappears the moment pressure shows up. You can build the best strategy. Hire the smartest people. Install the right systems. But if leadership tightens up the moment pressure hits, everything unravels. Assigning

accountability to leaders that never flinch is the key to keeping things on time and on target. In football, those coaches are the “Coordinators”. Transferring ownership isn’t just delegation, it is assigning accountability to people who can handle pressure without spreading panic.

Assigning accountability puts a human name on every task, and every process in your business, that’s why it’s so important to assign the tasks to the ones that won’t flinch. Jocko Willink, Navy Seal and co-author of “*Extreme Ownership*” would want less ideas and more extreme ownership. You don’t need a thousand more ideas with no one to own them. You need the right idea owned by the one that will not flinch.

Coach Holz knew what was coming. 85,000 fans in the stands, millions more on TV and the weight of all the National Championship expectations on the line. First and foremost, he knew that all of our talent and tactics meant nothing if our courage ran out the second we got hit in the mouth. That’s what separates champions from spectators, and leaders from pretenders. The question isn’t whether you’re skilled. It’s whether you flinch.

I’ll never forget when we played Colorado in the Orange Bowl. All week long Coach Holtz said, “*Never Flinch. Do your job. Trust the process.*” We won that game. With every game, whether you win or lose, the stakes always get higher and higher. No matter what! Composure becomes the competitive advantage.

This is a powerful leadership principle that translates directly to business. Every CEO recognizes the moment when the boardroom goes quiet, the numbers are on the screen, and all eyes turn to you. Pressure isn’t polite. It arrives unannounced. Leadership is revealed not by how loudly you speak, but by how calmly you respond.

Jesus didn’t panic. He didn’t overexplain. He didn’t delegate it away. He acted with clarity, involved ordinary people, and executed with calm confidence. The result wasn’t just a solution to a problem, it created belief among those watching.

That first win was *everything*.

Water into wine. Doubt into belief.

Jesus had a team, a plan, and poise. He got the win. “*And His disciples believed.*”

The ability to step into the moment without flinching, engaging and bringing others with you. That’s leadership.

Who's on your team? Does your team believe in you? Who do you trust when the pressure rises? What decision are you delaying because you're focused on what you don't have instead of what's possible?

You don't always get to choose your team, sometimes you've got servants instead of starters, chaos instead of chemistry, but you still have to lead. The greatest leaders don't flinch when the moment arrives. They stay grounded, hold the standard, trust their system, act with clarity, and let belief follow execution. That's what real leadership looks like.

Never Flinch!

Chapter 1 Takeaways

- Establish One Trusted Voice in Moments of Pressure
- Build a Simple, Non-Negotiable Operating System (Your Pillars)
- Train Your Team to Ask One Question Under Pressure: W.I.N.
- Create Velocity Through Small, Early Wins
- Lead With Poise - Never Flinch

Huddle Up:

- What's your one takeaway from the first win?
- What was your first win in life or leadership?
- Why is the first win so important?

2

The Second Win

“So Jesus came again to Cana in Galilee, where He had made the water into wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to Him and asked Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.”

John 4:46-54

Niko and Didi

I talk about clear communication on my team, the NFL Academy, all the time because we're from 19 different countries with equally as many languages. Every business has a "language" that they speak at work, which is unique to every organization. If we're not intentional about our "team language", things get lost in translation quickly and confusion shows up fast. Confusion creates doubt, slows us down and costs us time and money.

Now let me tell you about Niko and Didi. They showed up to The Academy training camp last July as rookies, walking straight into the most chaotic huddle you can imagine. Like I said, nineteen different countries with equally as many different languages. I felt like I had to use Google Translate just to run practice.

Niko is a talker. His mom is Spanish, his dad is Greek, they live in Germany, and now he's in England. The kid speaks German, Greek, Spanish, and English, and he uses all of them, all the time

Didi, his new team mate, is the total opposite. Didi's from England. Didi only speaks English, with a "*thick British accent*" type English . . . and that's it. Didi is soft spoken, a man of few words, very few! But because both of their names sound kinda Greek, Niko takes one look at Didi and just assumes, "*Boom, my people, this guy must be Greek too!*" So Niko starts talking to Didi in Greek.

Not just one sentence. Not just one time. Niko talks to Didi for TWO FULL DAYS in Greek. Meanwhile, because Didi doesn't really say much at all anyways, Didi just stands there nodding, smiling, pretending like he understands every word Niko is saying. *Three days* into this craziness, all three of us were standing in line waiting for lunch and Niko started talking to Didi in Greek again. I asked Didi what Niko just said and he looked at me and said, "I don't know Coach, I have no idea, I don't even speak Greek."

Niko just blinks and says, "*Wait—WHAT?! You don't speak Greek?! Bro, why didn't you tell me two days ago?!*" We all just cracked up!!! Talk about lost in translation! Funny story, but a serious lesson.

There's a short line in the Gospels that has always stood out to me from a leadership perspective. A father comes to Jesus desperate for help, and the response he receives isn't emotional or complicated. It's simple.

"Go. Your son will live."

Clear. Concise.

No confusion.

Nothing lost in translation.

Every leader, coach, CEO and entrepreneur should underline that sentence.

In business, sales, and entrepreneurship, assumptions are expensive. We assume alignment. We assume understanding. We assume the other person is hearing what we *think* we're saying.

They're not.

Just because someone nods doesn't mean they agree.

Just because they're quiet doesn't mean they understand, or are convinced.

Just because they "look the part" doesn't mean they are the part.

Great leaders don't assume. They clarify. Nothing gets lost in translation.

That's the quiet leadership lesson embedded in that simple sentence: "*Go. Your son will live.*" Clear direction builds trust. Trust changes outcomes. Whether you're leading a team, selling a vision, closing a deal, or sitting across the dinner table at home, remember this: **Clarity is kind.**

Lost in Translation

One morning I'm in the cafeteria with my players and one of the "lunch ladies" who works there pulls me aside. She's fired up. Apparently, one of my players grabbed four pastries in one trip, that was two too many. I didn't even know that was a rule. She confronted him, loud and hard, and made him apologize on the spot.

He apologized. Then she hit him again with, "Can't you read?"

Without missing a beat, in a strong Finnish accent, he said,

"Yeah, I can read... but I didn't see any sign."

She pointed to a wall about four feet above his head.

“It’s right there.”

She asked, “What does it say?”

He read it slowly in his deep Finnish accent with a question:

“Two Pastries?”

She said, “And what does that mean to you?”

He paused.

“Not sure.”

She repeated it louder, like volume would solve the problem:

“Two. Pastries.”

That’s when Villi lit up and said,

“Ohhh... *kaksi leivonnaista.*” in Finnish.

We just laughed. I shrugged and said,

“Lost in translation.”

End of conversation.

Seems to be the story of my life around here with this European squad!

Never a dull moment!

Now here’s why that matters, for coaches, leaders, business owners, and anyone trying to sell an idea, a product, or a vision.

The sign was clear.

The rule was posted.

But clarity in *your* language doesn’t always mean clarity in *theirs*. In leadership, we assume people understand because we said it once. Or wrote it once. Or put it on a wall. In business, we do the same thing, policies, emails, mission statements. Then we get frustrated when execution doesn’t match intention.

Great leaders don’t just communicate, they confirm comprehension. If you’re leading a team, closing a sale, or casting vision, ask yourself:

Did they *understand* me?

Because execution always reveals communication.

That morning in the cafeteria wasn't about pastries. It was about communication. About slowing down long enough to realize that what seems obvious to you might be completely unclear to someone else.

"Lost in translation!"

Most likely every day!

Average Men Need Not Apply

How often are we, the Coaches, considered the guardian figure? The parents drop their kid off at practice and basically say, fix him, help him.

Unfortunately, now-a-days, too many kids show up to practice without a father figure in their life. Without a positive male role model, teaching how to appropriately handle all the different situations that come at them on a daily basis, it can be very challenging.

Dr. James Dobson wrote a book titled "*Parenting isn't for Cowards.*"

Every coach, leader, and CEO knows the feeling. Leadership isn't for cowards either.

There was a high school assembly down in Raleigh, North Carolina, a few years back where the principal of the school invited three military recruiters to come into the gym and talk to the student body. Air Force, Navy and Marine recruiters were on campus that morning. Each recruiter was told that they had a maximum of five minutes to give their pitch to the students and then it would be the next recruiters turn to speak.

The Air Force recruiter took the stage first, gave his pitch, and ended by inviting every kid in the gym to come visit him at his table before they left. He went on and on and exceeded his time limit by four minutes.

Then the Navy recruiter got up and told the students that he saw Navy potential in every single one of them and to make sure that every one of them met him at his table on their way out. He too talked on and on, going over time by 6 minutes.

Finally, the Marine recruiter marched on to the stage and he stood there in total silence for a full two minutes. You could hear a pin drop. After that long two minutes of dead silence, as he stared out over the crowd of students and said,

“As I look out over this group of young men and women, I only see a few of you that could truly become real Marines. Follow me to the front door on your way to class. By the way, average students need not apply!”

And wouldn’t you know it, he had the longest line of applicants as most of the kids followed him.

That moment captures something every great leader eventually learns:

People don’t rise to comfort.

They rise to challenge.

Whether you’re leading a locker room, a company, or a family, leadership isn’t about appealing to everyone. It’s about setting a standard that calls the right people forward.

When you choose to lead, you’re signing up for more than a role or a title. You’re committing your time, energy, and your emotions into developing people. That means confronting hard truths, setting clear expectations, and refusing to lower the standards when pressure shows up.

Jesus assembled His team with one goal in mind. He was intentional about pouring His heart and soul into His disciples and making leaders out of them.

Sometimes leadership sounds like a Marine standing in complete silence.

Who knows?

Jesus may have even waited in silence for two full minutes before He said,

“Go; Your son will live.”

Situational Awareness

(a.k.a. Knowing What's Up!)

Let me start with a question every leader, entrepreneur, and decision-maker needs to answer:

Who are you?

Even more important, *what do people experience when they interact with you?*

When I was coaching at Fresno, we used to ask our players,

“Who are you, and who do you represent?”

I started asking myself the same thing.

What does my player see when he looks at me?

What does a player, or an employee, see when they look at me? A guy who reacts emotionally? Someone who says one thing and does another? Or a confident, organized, situational master, who understands the moment, reads the room, and never flinches when pressure hits?

In sports, we call this **situational awareness**.

In business, it shows up as **leadership presence**.

Situational Awareness is knowing what's up, reading the room, understanding the moment and your keen ability to respond with clarity instead of emotion.

Do I have it, or not?

Do I exude it, or not?

One of the biggest performance gaps in most organizations lies between executives and frontline employees and it takes situational awareness to recognize this and fix it. One big problem is when the coordinators aren't coaching. They're managing schedules, not developing players. I had a coordinator that thought he was a “*walk-around coach*”, I told him, “you were hired to coach, not *walk around*.” As the leader you have to catch this and fix it on the spot, because you will always get more of what you tolerate. There's a huge difference between *walking around* and developing talent. One is passive, the other is engaged.

And here's the thing: there's nowhere in life where situational awareness *doesn't* matter. Most people go through their life reacting emotionally or totally unorganized. “Situational Masters” are organized and their reactions are not emotional and reflect experience. It's not just a football concept, or a business concept, it's a *life* concept.

Situational awareness is reading the moment. Understanding the stakes. Knowing when to push, when to pause, and when to adjust. On the field, it's down and distance, clock management, personnel, and tendencies all processed in seconds. In the office, it's market shifts, team morale, timing, and trust. Different language, same skill.

When I was the Head Coach at the NFL Academy, We had guys speaking French, German, Finnish, Swedish, Japanese, Spanish, Norwegian, and about a dozen other languages. And then there were all the different versions of *English*, which, honestly, were sometimes harder for me to understand than French! *Ha!*

It was CRAZY! Situational awareness wasn't optional, it was imperative. I have become more of a "Situational Master" than ever before, having been immersed in this experience.

As a leader you have to set standards and expect your people to rise. One of the first standards at the Academy is that we all have to be fluent in English to understand and execute. I can't micromanage every player's life, but I can hold them accountable.

Even though we spoke a bunch of different languages our most common language was football, taught in American English. (And after living in England, I can promise you, there's a big difference!)

Eventually, we all got it but it took a while as you might imagine. But early on? It was chaos.

We had foreign boys trying to survive in math and science classes in a language they barely understood, and then they'd come to the field and try to learn our playbook, also in English. We had to become master teachers. We had to simplify the complex, but still keep the complex simple enough to challenge them. On top of that, we still needed to win games. That meant we had to be situationally aware of everything: their limits and their potential, on the field, in the classroom, and in their lives.

It's no different in business. Your people don't show up as blank slates. Performance at work is often shaped by pressure at home. Production follows clarity, trust, and leadership. You can't lead everyone the same way, just like you can't sell the same way to every client.

We lived in a constant state of "So *What*, Now *What*?" Always asking, "What's Important Now?"

That level of situational awareness was never just about X's and O's. It was about people, *all* of our people, *all* of the time. Because in sports, in business, and in life,

most problems don't start with strategy. They start with people. My second pillar, "*We are all connected all the time.*"

Most business problems are people problems. Even financial challenges or poor system development usually traces back to poor leadership, lack of communication, or weak culture. At the end of the day, how you lead your people determines how many problems you'll be fixing tomorrow.

Every leader knows, performance at work is almost always connected to what's happening at home. Remember, the NFL Academy is a boarding school. All of our boys were away from home. Some of those kids came from stable families. Others, not so much. Some hadn't eaten that day. Some carried burdens no one could see. Some were homesick or lovesick. Some were just trying to figure out where they fit in. That's where situational awareness really matters. You can't coach everybody the same way. You've got to read the moment. You've got to adjust. You've got to be able to call an audible. You've got to *know what's up.*

Jesus' miracle wasn't just about healing someone that wasn't around him. It was about reach. About understanding the moment and seizing it. He drew in a new audience. A new movement. A new understanding of who He was.

That's leadership.

Whether you're calling plays, closing deals, or leading a family, situational awareness isn't optional, it's imperative. It's knowing what's up. Knowing who you are. And responding to the moment with clarity, courage, and purpose. Because the leaders who win aren't just smart. They're aware.

Transformation leaders are Situational Masters.

How Do You Know My Name?

“Our Father who art in heaven, how in the world do you know my name?”

That is what came out of the little guy’s mouth in church when he was asked to recite the Lord’s Prayer.

Don’t you just love that? That kind of raw, innocent honesty that makes every adult stop mid-laugh and go,

“Wow... he’s actually asking a real question.”

“How in the world do you know my name?”

Do you know their name, or is it easier to focus on strategy, metrics, and outcomes. It’s harder, but far more impactful, to notice when someone’s carrying more than they’re showing. To respond with presence instead of impatience.

I saw this firsthand at the NFL Academy with two brothers from Italy, Marco and Mateo. Both quarterbacks. Marco was the senior, the leader. Mateo was a freshman, just figuring things out. Two great kids, smart, polite, funny, and as hardworking as they come.

We were blessed to have them both on our team. But right before we moved to the UK to coach at the Academy, something heartbreakingly happened. The boys’ dad had a sudden heart attack and passed away. Just like that, their world changed. It was a very devastating day for their family. Marco, the oldest, became the man of the house in an instant. Now it was just Marco, Mateo and their mom. Their mom called me a few times over the next few months, asking for help. She was trying to keep everything together, but I could tell, they were all hurting. And they needed someone to walk through this tough time with them. They were all wandering through this new season in all of their lives. Still, they pressed on. They found strength in each other, and in the game.

The summer before our upcoming fall season, Marco, my senior QB, got a blood clot in his throwing arm. His season was over. He had to leave school and go back to Italy to help his mom, but Mateo stayed with the team.

One fall morning, my phone buzzed. A text:

“Coach, we need to talk right now.”

That's never a good text to get.

Immediately, I called back only to learn that Marco and Mateo's mom passed away too. I remember just sitting there, phone in my hand, staring into nothing. My stomach dropped. My heart broke.

I thought, "*This can't be real.*"

I was totally shocked!

Two boys. Two parents, gone. Eighteen and sixteen years old, and suddenly orphans. Their entire world flipped upside down in a second, again! CRAZY situations one right after the other.

Coaching is rarely just about football. It's about *showing up*. It's about crying with your players, praying with them, sitting beside them when words don't work anymore. And that's what we did.

We cried. We prayed. We hugged. We just *sat*.

Nothing about it was easy. Nothing about it made sense. But slowly, painfully, the boys began to move forward. They found a new kind of strength, one you only discover when everything else is gone. The kind that can only come from God, and from the people He sends to hold you up when you can't stand.

"Situational Awareness" isn't just a sports term, it's a life skill. It's not just reading a defense or market conditions. It's about reading people. It's noticing when someone isn't okay. It's choosing not to look away when life hits hard. It's *seeing* the person next to you. It's transformational.

And most of all, it's about remembering that God sees all of us too. Jesus knew Marco and Mateo's names. And He knows yours too. Even when life is lonely, confusing, painful, or unfair, He hasn't forgotten you. He hasn't lost track of you.

And maybe that's why that little boy's question matters so much.

"How do you know my name?"

Because at the end of the day, when people know they matter, they rise up. They trust. They follow.

Great leaders understand something subtle but powerful about this:

People don't follow titles. They follow those who see them.

One of the quiet patterns you see in the life of Jesus is this: He noticed people others overlooked. He didn't reduce people to problems. He spoke directly, clearly, and personally. That's leadership at its highest level.

As leaders, we don't always get to choose the people we're responsible for. But we do choose how intentionally we lead them. Knowing someone's name, means knowing their story, their pressures, their potential. It means slowing down long enough to see the person, not just the performance.

That's situational awareness at its deepest level.

Coach, Can I Go to the Bathroom?

Every youth coach and every leader eventually meets "*that*" person. The one who reminds you that not everyone is cut out for the spotlight, the pressure, or full-speed collision under the Friday night lights. Not everyone is wired for pressure at the same pace.

On my son's Pop Warner team, that kid was Daniel: eleven years old, sweet little kid, polite as can be, but physically hated contact. You know the type, smallest guy on the field, pads two sizes too big. And every time Coach Tom called for tackling drills, Daniel's hand went up like a reflex.

“Coach, can I go to the bathroom?”

Every. Single. Time.

It didn't matter if it was full speed, half speed, or just “tag-off.” The moment bodies were about to bang, Daniel had to go.

Now, Coach Tom could've yelled. Could've shamed him. He could've made him run laps until he begged for mercy. But he didn't. Because Coach Tom knew something the rest of the team didn't: Daniel didn't have a dad, he just left him and his mom to fend for themselves. Life was hard enough for him, but his mom knew it would be best for him to be part of the team. Coach Tom understood something most leaders miss: **timing matters**.

Time and trust would reveal a lot of things.

Football season ended, winter rolled in and so did basketball season. One night Coach Tom was sitting in the bleachers watching his son play when he noticed someone on the other team "*lighting up*" the court.

Swish. Swish. Swish.

He looked closer.

"Wait a second... is that Daniel?!"

He couldn't believe what he was seeing, Daniel was shooting the lights out that night. He was so happy for him. After the game, Coach Tom walked over, smiling from ear to ear.

"Daniel, my man! That was awesome, buddy. I'm so proud of you!"

Daniel glowed, *"Thanks, Coach!"* he said, beaming.

That moment mattered. You could see it in Daniel's face, someone believed in him.

Fast forward to the next summer. Football sign-ups. Coach Tom saw Daniel in line and just smiled. Daniel wasn't much bigger, but his confidence was. He bragged to Coach Tom, *"I'm going to tackle someone this year!"*

"Great!", Coach Tom grinned and pulled him in for a hug. *"I know you will, Daniel."*

Daniel didn't win the "Hitter of the Year" award that year, but he never asked to go to the bathroom when the tackling drills came up either. Progress. Daniel grew in confidence and stature as he matured. Coach Tom had great situational awareness to not force little Daniel into something that he knew he couldn't handle. He knew as he grew and became more comfortable with the game he would become more confident and physical. Tom knew who Daniel was and where he came from. He knew that time and trust would help Daniel become all that God wanted him to be, on and off the field.

Great leaders don't blindly apply pressure. They read the moment. They understand background, timing, and readiness. They know when to push and when to protect. Force too early, and you don't build toughness. You break trust.

Coach Tom coached all his players, even the ones that had to run to the bathroom every day. He knew who Daniel was and he knew who he was going to become too. Tom had situational awareness that allowed him to coach that player at that time of his life. Had he forced Daniel into full speed collisions when he wasn't ready, he could have forced Daniel away from the game immediately and forever. Instead, Coach Tom knew more about what was going on and he coached him through it.

The true test of sound leadership isn't just how we act, it's how we *react*. Coach Tom came to coach all the players on his team, hitters, and non-hitters.

Just like Jesus came to love *all* of us, the brave, the broken, and the ones running off to the bathroom.

CHAPTER 2 TAKEAWAYS

- Eliminate Assumptions - Replace Them with Confirmation
- Make Clarity Your Competitive Advantage
- Raise Standards Without Apologizing
- Lead with Situational Awareness, Not Emotion
- See the Person, Not Just the Performance

Huddle Up:

- What's Your One Take Away?
- Who are you and who do you represent?
- How well do you know your team?
- Write down when you used Situational Awareness.

3

The Third Win

“After this there was a Feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to get well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going, another steps down before me.” Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your mat, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his mat and walked.”

John 5:1-9

WANT

“Do you want to get well?”

It's a simple question. But it may be one of the most penetrating leadership questions ever asked. This may be the ultimate CTA of all time.

Do you want to get well?

This is a question about **ownership**. Because getting well changes everything. When you're healed, expectations rise. Standards change. Excuses disappear. Now you're responsible for what comes next.

You're well now, you can do more now, so now what?!?

That question shows up everywhere leadership exists.

Coaches ask it all the time:

Do you want to get better?

Do you want to win?

Do you want to do what it takes?

Executives ask the same question, whether they realize it or not:

Do you want to grow this company?

Do you want to lead at a higher level?

Do you want to start building?

Not intention. Not talent. Not title.

You don't need a title to be intentional, but if your willingness doesn't match your want, your want isn't real. When your willingness and your want align, you will win.

Are you willing to do whatever it takes?

Do you want to be part of your own breakthrough?

To answer that, you have to define one word: **WANT**.

I was rewatching “Pirates of the Caribbean 2” over the Fourth of July weekend with my youngest son and it hit me like never before. Captain Jack Sparrow pulled out his compass and told Elizabeth that the compass he was holding did not point to “straight north” like all compasses normally do, but rather, “*it points to what you want most?*” The compass points to what you really want the most. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a compass that points to *what you really want the most?* If your life or your business had a compass like that, where would it point?

Want isn’t just desire. It’s sacrifice. It’s commitment.

It’s what you’re willing to give up to become who you say you want to be.

Time, Money, Ego, Comfort? What do you want and what are you willing to sacrifice to get what you want?

Once you define your WANT, the strategy becomes clear. The game plan almost writes itself. Tradeoffs become obvious. Standards become non-negotiable. Execution accelerates. Many CEOs get stuck right here though. There are CEOs who trap themselves between “wanting to be liked” and being most effective. If your deeper WANT is approval, you’ll hesitate on hard conversations. You’ll soften your standards. You’ll delay decisions. You’ll manage around “the mat” instead of calling people up.

You can be both liked and effective though. You also can have excellence, high performance and a championship culture. Yes, you can have it all, be liked, be respected, have excellence and a championship culture, and it’s all based on how you choose to lead. Some CEO’s just can’t stand the thought of being disliked. You don’t need to be a jerk, you just need to have your systems that set the standard for performance in place and hold everyone accountable to the standard. You are the leader, you’re not their friend, that can be very challenging if you haven’t set up the standards beforehand. There are many ways to define your want, but if you want to be liked over being effective, you’re in for a big challenge.

When Elon Musk sent his “*Fork in the Road*” letter after acquiring Twitter, he made this unmistakably clear:

“Only exceptional performance will constitute a passing grade.”

“If you are sure that you want to be part of the new Twitter, click yes.”

“If not, three months of severance.”

He likely didn't gain widespread approval that week. But he clarified the standard, the expectation and the direction real concisely.

Agree or disagree with his style, the leadership principle stands: he defined a system and what winning looked like and aligned the organization around it.

WANT creates clarity.

Clarity creates alignment.

Alignment creates speed.

When you get a total grasp of this principle, that's when you stop waiting on miracles and start stepping into them.

Your role as a leader is to hold people accountable to their dreams and goals. You have to ask questions that expose readiness. That's uncomfortable and demanding, but it must be done consistently well in order to compete at the highest level. A weak culture rewards intention instead of results. That would never survive in a professional sports locker room.

“Do you want to get well?”

Do you want to fix the team?

In other words:

Are you ready to own what comes next?

That question applies just as much in the boardroom as it does on the field.

Do you want a stronger culture?

Do you want growth?

Because real change always requires participation.

Great leaders understand this: when people can't define what they want, they end up stealing from themselves. Undeveloped systems, undeveloped talent. Small goals. Untapped potential. All lost, not because of ability, but because of unwillingness.

I guarantee winning a championship or starting your own business are both God-sized goals that are going to take a major commitment. Both require faith, discipline, and sacrifice. What is it that you really want?

What are you willing to do, willing to commit to, and willing to sacrifice for?

Big goals require faith. They also require discipline and sacrifice. Winning a championship. Building a business. Leading a family well. Winning is never accidental.

When Jesus asks the man, “*Do you want to get well?*” He doesn’t ask him where it hurts, or how long he’s been laying there. Jesus doesn’t ask the man if He can help carry him down to the pool, or should He call a trainer or a doctor to help him. He just simply asks the guy, “*Do you want to get well?*”

Do you really want your life to change?

Do we want to be part of our own miracle? Do we want to change your game, change your business?

This is where true transformational leadership starts. What is it that we are willing to do, willing to commit to or willing to sacrifice to get what we really want?

What do you **WANT**?

EDD's

Every Day Drills. EDD's. That's the language of my business.

Sounds boring, doesn't it? But EDD's are the system or process of every winning program, company, and life. Great coaches and great CEOs know the same truth: success is built on your systems, your process, what you do consistently well **every day**, not what you do occasionally.

In sports, it's the fundamentals, free throws, the driving range and batting practice.

In business, EDD's are the systems that you put into place like managing your lead funnel, creating content for social media, Calls to Action, making the follow-up calls.

Doing the work consistently well, day in day out, that doesn't make headlines but keeps the business alive, those are the EDD's. Don't just add things to "add things". If it doesn't help you win, don't do it! Your EDD's should be concise and on point. They are the system, your process. You should always be looking at how to simplify and improve them. Because "you've always done it this way", doesn't mean that you should always continue to do it that way. Your EDD's should directly reflect and be applicable to WIN (What's Important Now).

When I coached at Nevada we lived by this. We knew when you win the daily work, the scoreboard takes care of itself.

Here's the reality: most people don't enjoy grinding through the fundamentals. But that's where the games are won. It feels boring, but all those small, repetitive, boring drills build greatness. When we execute well and close the deal in business, growth follows. Long discipline is the bridge between where you are and where you say you want to go.

EDD's are a thread that ties our culture together. Without them our culture begins to collapse and erode. We believe that our EDD's (systems) are the reason we can overcome adversity quicker, because they are the disciplined foundation that our business runs on.

Someone once said it like this:

One man feared discipline but did the maximum. Another feared discipline and did the minimum.

The difference between them wasn't luck. It was a daily choice.

You have to stop and ask yourself what do we tolerate that no longer serves the team and our vision well? It may seem monotonous or mundane. But ultimately it's transformational when you only do whatever it takes to win. You're called to *eliminate average* not tolerate it. EDD's are the tool that we use as leaders to *eliminate average*. EDD's are the tracks that the train rolls on every day. Without them, momentum stalls.

EDD's change you and your team one small drill at a time. So whether you're leading a locker room, a boardroom, or a family, the question is the same:

What small, boring, disciplined habit will you commit to today?

What small, boring, disciplined drill are you willing to repeat, over and over, so that tomorrow, you can win the big game?

Because that's how leaders are made. That's how character is formed. That's how teams grow.

Small drills.

Daily faithfulness.

Long discipline.

And one day...

Those fundamentals turn into results that look like miracles.

Literally

Coaching overseas has taught me more about life than I ever imagined. Not just about football, but about people, and especially about communication.

One of the many things is how literal language is in other countries. Take Germany, for example. My German players for instance will admit that they speak very literally, saying exactly what they mean and mean what they say. There's no sarcasm, no reading between the lines. My German players would always tell me how rough and strong their language is, meaning very direct and poignant. They don't mix their words. They used to laugh about it, saying, *“Coach, German is not soft. We do not mix our words.”* And they were right.

There's a certain efficiency in that kind of clarity. You don't waste time decoding. You just know what's being asked, and what's expected.

I see the same thing with players and leaders all the time. They get stuck in explanations. Too tired. Too busy. Too much pressure. Too far behind. And sometimes those reasons are real. Life is heavy. Leadership is hard.

That's when I tell them,

“Don't overcomplicate it. Do What's Important Now.”

I tell my coaches this all the time, *“Be clear. Say less. Do more.”* Talking about it doesn't change anything. More action, less explanations.

Moments like this reveal something powerful about leadership: progress doesn't always require more information, it requires a decision followed by movement.

It's simple, it's clear, and it's everything we need to hear. Literally there is no translation required.

Jesus didn't mix his words when he asked the man, "*Do you want to get well?*" "*Take up your mat and walk.*" Straight to the point.

I'm not saying that the guy could or couldn't walk. Although, I do know that Jesus knew what he could and couldn't do.

The man does what most of us do when we're scared to move, he starts explaining.

"Sir, I have no one to help me... every time I try to get in, someone else goes ahead of me..."

He sounds like he's rehearsed his answer for years. And Jesus doesn't even flinch. He just says, "*Get up. Pick up your mat and walk.*" That's as literal as it gets.

No pep talk. No ten-step healing plan. No guarantees about what's next. Just obedience. And in that one moment of faith, just a man, a mat, and a miracle, everything changed.

My German players would've loved being at that "healing pool", short direct, straight to the point, no confusion.

Tennis Anyone!

When I was coaching football at UNLV, something caught my attention every single morning. Just beyond the end zone of our practice field sat the tennis courts, and out there, before the sun was fully up, was this teenage kid hammering tennis balls like I'd never seen before. While we were setting up drills, he was already drenched in sweat, locked in, chasing something most teenagers never even think about.

That kid was Andre Agassi.

Summers in Las Vegas aren't for the faint of heart. Temperatures climb well past 110 degrees. That's smoking hot, especially on a tennis court! But when we showed up for morning practice, Andre was already out there grinding. Long before breakfast, he was hitting balls. And when we finally left the field at the end of the day, he was still there, sweat-soaked, chasing tennis balls and greatness.

Andre always came into our weight room to stretch and work out at the end of every workout. He worked his butt off to put himself in position to win. He wasn't the typical teenager. While most kids his age were chasing girls, video games, or comfort, Andre was chasing destiny. He sacrificed things others enjoyed because he had a higher goal in mind. He traded his youth for a racket and his dream. His **EDD's** were his **Every Day Decisions**, like getting better at his serves, returns, footwork, bursts, and backhands. Andre wanted to win badly, and he understood the cost.

In his prime he was recognized as one of the game's most dominant players in the world. Andre ended up winning eight Grand Slam titles, and an Olympic gold medal, none of that happened by accident.

His process shaped his habits.

His habits shaped his character.

And his character shaped his future.

That same principle shows up in leadership, business, and faith.

Somewhere between the blisters and the backhands, Andre became great. Not by luck, but by obedience to the grind. He wanted to be great, and his actions proved it.

Now think about the Pool of Bethesda, Jesus meets a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. Thirty-eight years of laying near healing waters. Thirty-eight years of watching others step ahead of him. He could have immediately healed him, but he didn't. Instead, He asks him a question that cuts straight to his heart:

“Do you want to get well?”

It's a leadership question, not a medical one.

Because real change raises expectations. It removes excuses. It requires ownership. Getting better means life doesn't stay the same.

But Jesus knew something deeper:

Not everyone truly wants change if change requires responsibility, effort, or obedience.

The man responds with explanations:

"I have no one to help me."

and

"Someone else always gets there first."

The outcome follows the decision, you become what you think and do.

Now contrast that man with Andre Agassi. I know Andre wasn't sick. He wasn't broken. But like the man at the pool, he was surrounded by opportunity. And opportunity isn't nice. It doesn't sit around waiting for you to take advantage of it.

That's the difference between opportunity and results in business. Courts don't make champions. Pools don't create healing. Access alone doesn't produce outcomes.

What made the difference?

Andre wanted it.

That question, *Do you want to get better?*, shows up in every boardroom, locker room, and living room.

Do you want to grow the business?

Do you want to lead at a higher level?

Do you want things to change at home?

Because wanting without action is just wishing.

Great leaders understand **change always demands participation**. You don't just hope something good will happen, you make it happen. You don't pray for clarity and ignore the next step. You move.

Whether you're leading a team, building a company, or shaping a family, the principle is the same:

Real transformation requires ownership, You don't just pray for a win, you prepare for it. You don't just talk about growth, you practice it. You don't just want better, you act better. discipline, and action.

Change your Choices, Change your life.

Get Up!

Every coach has *that one player*, the one who acts like he's got a permanent address in the training room. It's too hot, too cold, too windy, too Wednesday...it's WHATEVER!

Their favorite piece of equipment isn't a helmet or a ball, it's their mat. He's mastered the art of being hurt and staying hurt. He's more comfortable watching the game than playing in it. He knows where to lay so everyone sees him, checks on him, asks how he's feeling, and quietly lowers the bar on what they expect from him.

And here's the danger, everybody on the team sees him and asks him if he's OK? And what's hurt? They sympathize with him and basically help him stay stuck. As a leader, you are always building culture whether you mean to or not. And culture isn't just what you preach. It's what you permit.

What you tolerate, you eventually condone.

What you condone, you eventually create.

What are you tolerating right now... that's quietly becoming your culture?

That's not just a sports problem. That's a leadership problem.

It shows up in business as the salesperson who blames the market.

The manager who avoids hard conversations.

The entrepreneur who keeps "planning" but never launches.

Former NFL coach, Tony Dungy, often points back to Chuck Noll's championship principle with the Pittsburgh Steelers: "**No excuses. No explanations.**" Not because he lacked compassion, but because he believed in the team standards and he knew ownership creates growth. That's real leadership.

As leaders, we're called to lift expectations, not just for the stars, but for every person around you including the ones that hang on *their mat*. And if leaders aren't careful, we start managing around the mat instead of calling people off it. Passive leadership, and or delayed accountability is a team killer.

I've lost count of how many times I've yelled, "*Get up!*" playing pickup basketball with my boys. Kids go flying around, sliding across the floor, checking to see who noticed. I don't run over with a sympathy speech. I yell, "*Get up! You can't make a play from the floor!*"

The same applies in leadership. You don't help people by letting them stay stuck. You help them by calling them up, sometimes before they believe they can stand on their own.

That's the real lesson in this story. Not just that the man walked, but that he walked *away* from the pool. Away from the identity. Away from the excuse. Away from the thing he'd been depending on for years.

That's what belief does.

That's what standards do.

That's what great leadership does.

I watched a You Tube clip of North Carolina Point Guard, Marcus Paige saying,
"Coach Williams believed in me more than I believed in myself."

That's what great leaders do. They see the champion waiting inside you.

So here's the leadership question, on your team, in your company, in your life:
Who's lying on a mat?

And more importantly, will you help them stay stuck or will you call them up?

Because people are watching how you lead.

Your team is watching what you tolerate.

Don't let them stay down. Call them up to the standard.

They don't need all the answers.

They don't need perfect conditions.

Your players need to know that you believe in them.

Can you coach 'em up?

SACRIFICE

Former Nebraska Coach Tom Osborne, once said something when asked about his strength program and what makes Nebraska's football so different and he answered like this,

“You ask me how important our Weight room and conditioning program is? “Let me explain it like this: the weight room and church are pretty similar. Some kids want to be 400 lb. bench pressers, but aren’t really dedicated to what goes on in our weight room, they’re not willing to make an all-in sacrifice. That’s like only going to Church on Christmas and Easter, it doesn’t work that way! Take pride in Sacrifice! That word sacrifice isn’t exactly popular these days. You won’t find it trending on TikTok. Everybody wants the platform but not the push-ups. They want the reward without the reps. We love victory, but we don’t always love the process that shapes us for it.”

That answer says more about leadership than most playbooks ever could.

Why is sacrifice so vital to any weight room, game plan or team? The answer is really simple, so few people are willing to make them, they won’t make the necessary sacrifices that it takes to win. Coaches, CEOs and all leaders must define what winning looks like. They must define what is acceptable, win or lose, everything matters. We, as coaches, know that hard work beats talent, when talent doesn’t work hard.

Coach Osborne said, *“Sacrifice is supposed to hurt. That’s how you know it’s working”* Sacrifice is the pressure that creates growth. It forces clarity. It answers two simple questions every leader must ask personally and professionally:

- 1)What do you want?
- 2)What are you willing to sacrifice to get what you want?

Two really simple words **“Winners Sacrifice”**

Sacrifice is the separator, because so few people are willing to do it.

Few people that actually set goals, get their goals because it takes a huge sacrifice. There is a huge difference between a “Goal Setter” and a “Goal Getter”. Goal setters talk. Goal getters act. Winners are Goal Getters, they do whatever it takes to win and leave no doubt. Going all in only on Christmas and Easter doesn’t change your life, and neither does dabbling in discipline. Real transformation requires sacrifice. Winners sacrifice!

That moment, between staying down and standing up, is sacrifice. It’s the decision point. The place where excuses lose their power and responsibility begins. Where comfort gets replaced by commitment. It’s the employee who must let go of old habits

to grow. The entrepreneur who must risk comfort to build something real. The parent who must sacrifice ease to model discipline.

Every leader knows this moment.

We all have mats, places we've settled, patterns we've accepted, dreams we've delayed because getting up would cost us something.

Great leaders don't shame people for being on the mat. But they also don't build systems that make it easy to stay there.

That's the quiet power of transformational leadership. Not noise. Not force. Just clarity, belief, and an unmovable standard.

So yeah, Coach Osborn is on it, the weight room and church really are the same. Both demand your effort, your willingness and your heart. And both will change your life if you're willing to get off your mat.

CHAPTER 3 TAKEAWAYS

- Define Your Want
- Align WANT With Willingness, or Lower the Goal
- Translate WANT Into EDDs (Every Day Drills)
- Replace Long Explanations with One Rule: *What's the next step, and who owns it?*
- Stop Managing Around the Mat - Call People Up

Huddle Up

•What's Your One Take Away?

•Define the word WANT?

•Who on your team could be better if you believed in them?

•What is your biggest sacrifice?

4

The Fourth Win

“After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following Him, because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the Feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up His eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward Him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” He said this to test him, for Jesus himself knew what He would do. Philip answered Him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, He told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that He had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

John 6:1-1

Whatever You Have

There's a moment in leadership that shows up more often than we like to admit. There's a big problem, with little resources. And everyone in the room knows it. How do we realign our team around the newest challenge? First we need to break this big problem into executable actions. That's a What's Important Now problem to solve first. Once we start that process confidence multiplies.

How many times have we asked our people for something and they've got nothing for us? In actuality we probably already have the answer, we're just checking to see if they might be willing to help out a little with the process. And what do we get back? Nothing!!!

This story reminds me of my coaching days at the Cleveland Browns. We'd be in a staff meeting and our head coach would ask a question and suddenly the whole room would go silent. Just crickets. After about thirty seconds of that painful quiet, he would look up and say, "Fellas, we're trying to win a Super Bowl here. Does anyone want to help?" He got nothing!

That's what great leaders listen for.

That's what we want our team to do; think their way out of trouble, take ownership and find a way to win. The best leaders don't need you to solve everything. They need you to **step into the problem with them**.

You may have a culture problem because you first have a coaching problem.

You don't win games as a coach alone.

You don't grow companies as a CEO alone.

One big question was:

"Where should we buy bread for these people to eat?"

It wasn't a logistics question. It was a leadership test.

Jesus was just testing Phillip to see what kind of answer he'd come up with, just like you might do. Philip did what many managers do under pressure, he ran the numbers. "This would take half a year's wages." In other words: *This is impossible. We don't have the resources. This isn't realistic.*

That response shows up in boardrooms every day. We don't have the budget. We're understaffed. We don't have enough time.

Jesus isn't asking for a business plan. He wasn't looking for a spreadsheet. He was revealing a mindset. The moment everything shifts is when Andrew said, "*Here's a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will that go among so many?*"

Andrew didn't solve the problem. He didn't pretend the resources were enough. He just refused to say *nothing*. He brought an idea, he brought *something*.

Leadership isn't about having all the answers, it's about drawing out what's already in the room.

Too often, teams default to the "Philip" response "I can't, I don't have enough, That's not my role."

But great cultures are built with "Andrew" *vision* type people. Those willing to say, "It's not much, but here's what I've got." Momentum starts with willingness that points towards the vision.

Jesus took what was offered, gave thanks, and the outcome changed. Not because the resources were impressive, but because someone was **willing** to put what they had into play.

That's the leadership lesson.

Breakthrough doesn't begin with more resources.
It begins with **willingness** and **availability**.

You don't need everyone to be fully ready. You need someone willing to step forward.

And here's the real truth leaders need to hear: The major problem isn't that people have nothing. It's that they're afraid to bring what they have, they don't want to be held accountable to a failed outcome. Better to be silent, than to be blamed. So here's the question for the CEO and the coach: When the moment comes, do you let your team and vision default to *what they lack* or do you bring them up to *what they have*?

Because when people stop saying *nothing* and start offering *something* leaders can do more with less.

How do you get your people to turn their *not enough* into *more than enough*?

That's where winning starts!

Can or Can't. Will or Won't

When I coached with Lou Holtz at Notre Dame, he stripped leadership down to its essentials. Whenever we evaluated a recruit or talked about someone on our roster, we had all our measurables and analytics but most importantly coach would ask two questions:

“Can he or can’t he?”

And just as important: **“Will he or won’t he?”**

That was it.

He had no patience for what he called the “diva mentality”. He knew one selfish player, one inconsistent ego, could poison an entire culture. The real question was: *“Will he help us consistently win?”* Period.

Divas kill culture.

Most CEOs don't lack smart people, they lack reliable high performers. Some might say, We have great resumes, but we don't consistently execute. That's like having a first round draft pick that doesn't produce.

I've coached a lot of really good players over the years. When you get to the NFL there aren't many “bad” players. You don't accidentally stumble into that league hoping something good will happen. Almost everyone there *can* and *will*. But every once in a while you see a guy who should be great but just won't go there.

And then there's the other guy. The one who may not look the part. The one people doubt. The one who maybe *can't* on paper, but his *willingness* and *want* quotient is **SUPER HIGH!** Those are the players who change teams. They elevate everyone around them.

There's a big difference between ***can and can't and will and won't***.

I've seen this same principle play out countless times in football and in business. The walk-on nobody noticed and the employee who raised their hand and said, "This is all I've got, but I'm in." Even though it doesn't feel like enough. It's enough!

Great leaders unlock what people are willing to give.

Talent helps. Resources help. Experience helps.

But willingness eliminates the "DIVA Mentality" and helps the team play forward.

I've watched teams turn around, companies grow, families heal, not because circumstances improved, but because someone stopped saying ***I can't*** and started saying ***I will***.

Jesus is standing in front of a massive crowd and the first thing He does is asks His team a question. Because great leaders reveal what's already inside the room. He found out who *could* and *would* real quick.

Philip said, "It can't be done." Andrew said, "Here's what we have."

One focused on limitations. The other focused on contribution.

Andrew had the willingness.

The boy had what he could offer.

And Jesus brought it all together.

When I think back to Coach Holtz's questions, "*Can he or can't he? Will he or won't he?*" Those defining questions weren't just about football. They are questions every leader should ask daily. Because this is where winning actually starts.

Organizations change when leaders ask the right questions. That's transformational leadership. And that's how you win.

Feed ‘Em

When my wife, Amy, and I first got over to the NFL Academy, we felt this quiet nudge that we needed to start something small. Nothing fancy. Just a simple gathering that we called our team “Huddle.” No pressure. No obligation. Just an open door.

Faith over in Europe and the UK isn’t like it is back home. In the States we’ve got FCA, team chapels, youth groups and all kinds of structure. I used to work with FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes), so I know how it works in schools. In the UK, not so much. Faith tends to be quieter. So when we opened the door and said, “*Whoever wants to come, come,*” we honestly had no idea what would happen or who would even show up.

That first night we had kids from eleven different countries sitting in the same room. We read the first eleven verses of John and heard eleven different accents reading the same Word. Eleven backgrounds. Eleven different countries: German, Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish, English, Nigerian, Irish, Scottish, French . . . !

I remember looking around thinking, “*This is either going to be really special . . . or really awkward.*” Turns out, it was both. Some of them struggled to read English. Most of them had never heard the story before. Long pauses. Mispronounced words. Nervous laughter. I would define it as AWKWARDLY AMAZING! And over time, it turns out, it was SUPER SPECIAL. And over time, it became something truly special.

One of the players who kept showing up was Gabe, a defensive back from Portugal who grew up in the UK. Cool kid. Smart. Observant. Quiet. But over time, you could see his confidence growing. Gabe didn’t just listen, he leaned in. He started asking questions. Then he started opening his Bible in the dorms at night, inviting guys to sit with him. No pressure. No preaching. Just, “*Hey, I’m reading, wanna join?*” He’d text me and say, “Coach, nine guys were in my room last night.”

Before long he found a church in town. One Monday after practice he came up to me and said, “*Coach, I invited some of the boys to church last night.*”

I said, “Awesome! How’d that go?”

He said, “Thirty-one!”

Gabe wanted to feed his teammates, literally. Like every team of 16–18 year-old boys I've ever coached, they are always hungry. He didn't have the money. He didn't have the resources but he had an idea. He found out the church had a potluck and invited the boys. They went. They ate. They talked. They laughed. And they learned a little more about Jesus.

Thirty-one guys! On a team of 68! Nineteen different nationalities! Nearly half the team walked into a church together because one kid was willing to speak up. I told him, "*Gabe, you're basically creating world peace over here. Let's GO!*" He laughed, but I meant it.

Here's the leadership principle hiding in plain sight:
Great leaders don't wait for ideal conditions. They work with what's available.

When Amy and I started that Huddle, all we really had was a quiet nudge and an open door. We didn't know who would come or what would grow from it. That small beginning turned into a table big enough for thirty-one hungry hearts.

And that's how impact usually starts. Just willingness.

For leaders in business, on teams, and at home, the question is always the same:
Who's willing to step up? Who's willing to feed people?

Gabe found a way to feed them. Gabe fed his boys, he figured it out. He was willing!

Jesus' miracle of feeding that crowd was never just about the food. It was about someone being willing to bring what they had. It wasn't just compassion. It wasn't even about abundance or obedience. It was about willingness!

"*Who's willing*" will always be the question?
As leaders we look to transfer ownership.

Gabe stepped up like the little kid who was willing to give up his lunch and Andrew the disciple who was willing to help figure out how to feed 5000. Gabe was willing to figure it out even when it didn't seem like much to him.

When Amy and I started that Huddle, all we had was a quiet nudge and an open door. We didn't know who would come. We didn't know what would happen. Turns out, God was just asking us to bring what we had and watch Him do the rest.

That small beginning turned into a table big enough for thirty-one hungry hearts.
And that's still how miracles start. It may seem like not enough, but it's more than enough.
The best is yet to come!
Well done, my man!

Leader or Not, Here I Come

Great leaders don't create more followers.

They create more **leaders**.

I know that may sound odd because leaders need followers to be considered leaders, but this is about turning the follower into a leader. This is about transferring ownership. When people lead, accountability spreads throughout the organization. To follow is to let someone else take ownership; to let someone else be accountable and responsible. True leaders transfer ownership and empower others to own it.

A Marine friend of mine said this one time, "Men don't fail. It's their leader that fails them! They fail to bring the men up to achieve their best!" That statement hits whether you're leading a platoon, a company, a locker room, or a family.

The age old question then is, how do you turn a follower into a leader?

It starts with three ways:

1. Cast a Vision

People want to belong to a purposeful goal.

2. Inspire Effort

Encourage them to work harder than they ever thought they could.

3. Transfer Ownership.

Teach people to own their **decisions**, their **preparation**, and their **results**.

We should always evaluate our team of coordinators and assistant coaches, or what CEO's might call, "Middle Managers" on; Player development, clarity of expectations and consistency of productivity. All this leads to the transferring of ownership and

growing the next leader. Every coordinator needs to ask himself, “Who am I developing?” and “Who’s getting better because of me?” and you as their leader need to ask those questions of yourself and of your coordinators too. That’s how you consistently compete and win.

Inviting participation and creating space for initiative, eventually leads to someone stepping forward with a small, imperfect contribution. Not enough on paper, but enough to begin.

And that’s the moment leadership transfers.

Every confident leader understands this. You don’t win by calling every play yourself. You win by empowering others to think, decide, and act. That’s again the power of the *“Audible.”* When a player suggests a solution, calls an adjustment, or takes responsibility, something changes. Confidence grows. Ownership deepens. Culture strengthens.

The same is true in business and at home.

When leaders invite ideas instead of issuing ultimatums, people rise.

When leaders trust instead of micromanaging, growth accelerates.

When leaders allow others to participate in the solution, commitment follows.

Jesus’ leadership wasn’t loud or controlling. It was intentional. He consistently drew leadership out of people by asking them to step forward rather than stand back.

No excuses. No explanations. Just action. That’s how people discover who they really are.

A little boy steps up with five loaves and two fish. And Jesus doesn’t roll His eyes or mutter, “That’s not nearly enough.” He sees the potential. He sees the opportunity. He invites people to take initiative, and suddenly that tiny offering turns into a miracle.

Leadership works the same way. You ask a team member, “How about you take the lead on this project?” You open the door for ownership, and suddenly your team isn’t just a bunch of followers. They’re a force.

As a leader whenever you let some other ideas surface and they become a reality, whoever suggested it grows. You must create an environment that encourages and inspires action and then watch your team grow. Leaders don't want excuses. You don't want explanations. You want action.

Leaders want to hear a creative idea based on a good plan. You're transferring the ownership so they can be part of their own miracle.

The leader in you, helps discover the next leader you've been looking for. Because "Men don't fail. It's their leader that fails them! The leader fails to bring the men up to achieve their best!"

Great leaders don't create more followers. They create more **leaders**.

Be Like Mike

Sometimes I only get a player for six months. Not because of talent. Not because of effort. But because that's all the time or money they have.

And those six months matter more than most people realize. For some of these young men, it's the only real shot in football that they'll ever get to change the trajectory of their life.

Rene was one of those players. He's from Finland. Tough kid. Very confident. When we first met at the combine in Finland, he only asked for one thing, all he asked for was a chance. His parents were honest with him. They said, "*We can't pay for this. If you want it, you'll have to figure it out.*"

So he did. He worked two jobs. Took on extra hours. Extra sacrifice.

He said, "*Coach, hold my roster spot and I promise I'll make it happen, no matter what.*" And he did. Rene played for us one fall season and when our season ended, we all went our separate ways for the Holidays. While we were away, Rene sent me a text. I'll get to that in a minute. But first, Rene made me think of another kid, and another coach.

Coach Mike.

Coach Mike was a high school football coach in Raleigh for seventeen years. He loved his boys and his boys loved him. He didn't just coach football, he coached boys into men. Every player had a place in his heart, some for their talent, some for their grit, some just for showing up. His house was always full, he had players over all the time. He knew which kids were the *stars* and the *studs* and the ones that needed more of a nudge. Every player mattered to him like one of his own kids.

After Coach Mike retired from coaching, he still was close to all his former players. One of his all-time favorites was Jack. Jack had it all going for him. Three-year varsity starter. All-conference. Two state championships. Full-ride Division I scholarship. Then college happened. Drinking. Partying. Bad decisions. Coach Mike followed every step of it from a distance, hurting as he watched Jack drift further away. After one semester Jack's scholarship got pulled. Jack came back home, and unfortunately his habits came with him.

Coach Mike would search for him, sometimes in the park, sometimes at the bars, sometimes just knocking on doors, always bringing a cup of coffee, always ready to listen. He'd sit with Jack, listen, counsel, always the same invitation: "Why don't you come with me?" Jack would drink the coffee and listen to Coach Mike, but that was it. Week after week. Month after month. Same park. Same friends. Same habits. Jack never said yes.

Until one Saturday night, Coach Mike couldn't find him anywhere. Not the park. Not the bar. Not home. His heart sank. So he went to church alone. While he was sitting near the rear entrance he heard a person stumbling in the back door late. Jack was hammered. He collapsed into the back row. Coach Mike didn't know if he should move closer to him, speak, or just stay and pray silently.

Jack slumped over the chair in front of him, barely propping himself up. As the message went on, the speaker said something simple and direct: "*You don't have to stay where you are. You can make a change right now! If you want to be more like Jesus, come up to the front.*"

The preacher invited the congregation again, "*You don't have to stay where you are, you can make a change right now!*" He said it again, "*If you want to make a change and would like to be more like Jesus, come up to the front!*"

Before Coach Mike could stop him, Jack was staggering down the middle aisle. Mike didn't want to make more of a scene than what was already happening, so he let him go. When Jack got to the front of the church, the preacher looked at him and asked him, "*Would you like to be more like Jesus?*"

Jack slurred,

"*I want to be more like Coach Mike*", as he pointed over to his coach sitting in the back.

The preacher asked Jack again, "*Now listen to me, would you like to be more like Jesus?*"

Jack's voice dropped. Trembling and honest. "*I'm not sure... but if Jesus is anything like Coach Mike, I do.*"

Coach Mike just sat there. Didn't say a word. The tears he'd been holding back all these months finally slipped. And in that moment he realized something: This boy, this lost kid was stepping into a life he didn't yet understand, but he trusted the coach who had never given up on him. Someone who showed him week after week what consistency, patience, and love looked like.

That's leadership.

Most people won't understand your values before they understand *you*. They may never read the books you read or believe what you believe, but they watch how you live, how you treat people, how you respond under pressure.

That's exactly how the greatest leader who ever lived operated.

You can be a Coach Mike to all your players.

You don't have to fix everyone or have all the answers.

Your presence, your patience, and your consistency will be enough.

Which brings me back to Rene.

Here's what his text to me said:

"Hi, Coach! I just wanted to thank you for these past 6 months. It has been an absolute pleasure playing for you. You have made me a better football player, helped me on my walk with Christ and also taught me how to be a better man. You've been

*there for me when I had problems at home and that means the world to me. If I ever end up coaching a team after my career is done, I aspire to be like you!
Love you, Coach!"*

That's transformational impact and influence.
And that's the quiet power of transformational leadership.

Rene is an "Academy Man" for life!

CHAPTER 4 TAKEAWAYS

- Ban Phrases Like "we don't have the budget," or "we're understaffed,"
- Promote Willingness Faster Than Talent
- Ask Questions That Force Ownership - Not Explanations
- Eliminate the "Philip Response" From Your Culture
- Measure Leaders by What They Draw Out of Others

Huddle Up:

- What's Your One Take Away?
- Where do you turn for support?
- Who can you trust on your team and staff?
- Who do you know that takes ownership?

H

Half Time

At this point in the game, you don't need a new playbook.

You need sharper execution of what already works

From Insight to Action

Win #1: Clarify the Win - Then Demand Alignment

Principle: Teams don't fail from lack of effort; they fail from an unclear definition of success.

- As a leadership team, answer this in one sentence:
“What does winning look like for us in the next 90 days?”
- Write it. Say it. Repeat it.
- Remove or pause any initiative that does not directly serve that definition.

Why It Works:

People can't own what they don't understand. Clear wins eliminate confusion, excuses, and wasted energy. Momentum begins when everyone knows what the scoreboard actually says.

Win #2: Expose Excuses—Replace Them with Ownership

Principle: Excuses are not personality flaws; they're leadership gaps.

- In your next staff meeting, ask: “Where are we defaulting to ‘we can't’ instead of ‘how might we’?”

- Identify one recurring excuse (budget, people, time, authority).
- Assign a leader to bring one action they *can* take with current resources within 48 hours.

Why It Works:

You don't eliminate excuses by calling them out, you eliminate them by replacing them with responsibility. Ownership shifts culture faster than accountability speeches ever will.

Win #3: Stop Solving - Start Drawing Leadership Out

Principle: Leaders who solve everything create followers. Leaders who ask better questions create leaders.

- For the next 30 days, do this consistently:
 - When a problem is brought to you, respond with:
“What do you have, and what are you willing to put into play?”
- Resist the urge to rescue.
- Publicly recognize initiative, not perfection.

Why It Works

This is how ownership transfers. The culture shifts from silence to contribution, from waiting to stepping forward. Execution accelerates when people are allowed and expected to think.

Win #4: Promote Willingness Before Talent

Principle: “Can he?” matters. “Will he?” matters equally as much.

- Review your direct reports through two lenses:
 - Capability (Can)
 - Commitment (Will)
- Invest your time and trust disproportionately in high-will people, even if they aren't the most polished.
- Remove cultural protection from “divas,” regardless of performance.

Why It Works

Willingness compounds. It spreads effort, raises standards, and eliminates entitlement. Teams don't rise to talent, they rise to commitment.

Win #5: Feed the Culture Daily - Not Occasionally

Principle: Culture is built by what leaders consistently provide, not what they occasionally say.

- Ask each leader to answer:
 - “How am I “feeding” my people this week?”
- Examples:
 - Clarity instead of noise
 - Time instead of micromanagement
 - Presence instead of pressure
- Make “feeding the team” a standing leadership expectation, not an optional trait.

Why It Works

People follow leaders who consistently invest in them. When leaders feed clarity, confidence, and connection, execution follows naturally.

5

The Fifth Win

When evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. But He said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.”

John 6:16-21

And Peter answered Him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out His hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Matthew 14:28-33

I've been 18

He looked at me and said,

“You were right, Coach... I need a man in my life.”

He said, *“I need a man in my life that has been down the path that I’m running on.”*

We were sitting down by the outside pool at our hotel on our annual summer tour. He was flying out that day by himself from New Jersey to California for an “Official Visit”. That’s what we call it when a kid gets offered an athletic scholarship. It’s a big deal. The dream trip. But he wasn’t feeling it.

This 18 year old, one of my Austrian players, had talent and drive, but that morning he looked more like a deer in headlights than a Division I recruit. Scared, hesitant, ready to talk himself out of the biggest opportunity of his life. He was up all night, didn’t sleep, and worried about everything.

He said, *“Coach, I’m not sure I’m ready.”*

What he was really saying was, I’m scared to step forward.

I told him, *“Listen, I’ve been 18 before. You’ve never been 61. Trust me on this one.”*

He laughed, but the fear was still there.

So, I walked him right to the Uber driver’s door, not because I didn’t think he’d go, but because sometimes even strong, driven people need someone to take that one next step. I gave him a big hug and told him again, *“It’s all good, trust me.”* He nodded, got in, and drove off. And you know what? That simple phrase. Those few words stuck with him. Months later he told me, *“Coach, I thought about what you said every time I wanted to quit.”*

That’s the thing about leadership: you never know which words will stick, or when they’ll bloom. But it’s our responsibility to plant them anyway. That’s mentorship. That’s coaching. That’s leadership.

And it’s not just true in sports. Can you lead through volatility? Entrepreneurs feel this moment before launching a company, signing with investors, firing someone they care

about, or betting on a new market. Sales leaders feel it before making the call that could change a quarter or a career. CEOs feel it when making a decision that could shift culture or cost them relationships. Growth always demands a step into uncertainty.

That's what Jesus did with Peter. Jesus said one word: "Come." He didn't have to say, "I've been 18 before, you've never been 61, listen to me, or all good, trust me!" Instead He just said, "**COME.**" Just clarity and confidence.

That morning, watching that Uber pull away, I realized that's all I was really doing, standing in the gap telling a young man, "*It's okay to step out of the boat.*" And maybe that's what we're all called to do for someone: to help them take the next brave step toward the miracle waiting just beyond the edge of their fear.

Storms, Storms, Storms

All clear! Isn't that always how it goes? You get a little comfortable, systems are working. Confidence is high. You think you've got things under control, and then, BAM! The wind shifts, the waves rise, and everything you thought was steady gets knocked sideways.

Every leader knows this moment. Can you lead in times of volatility? Good times, bad times, storms and calm. As long as you have people working for you, you're always going to have people problems. Can you be that consistent leader no matter what is happening with your people? Can you be the voice of calm reason and wisdom?

Your team is rolling, and a key performer goes down with a major sickness. Your company is growing, and a trusted executive betrays you. You come home from work and find out your mother has cancer.

Storms don't ask permission. They don't care about timing. And they don't slow down just because you were doing everything right. And when the storm becomes the main event, leadership often disappears. Emotional discipline matters. Calm leaders reduce organizational noise.

I remember Coach Chris Ault at Nevada sitting the team down before the season and saying, *“This year, we’ll face at least three storms. Guaranteed.”*

He wasn’t being negative. He was being honest.

He didn’t say it to scare us, he said it to prepare us. He said it at the start of every season to make us predictable in unpredictable times. To give us certainty in uncertainty. He wanted us to know that no matter what the storm threw at us, if we stayed together, trusted each other, and played for one another, we could weather it. Unfortunately for us, Coach Ault was right.

Our star linebacker was involved in a devastating car wreck one weekend, with a blood alcohol level that far exceeded the legal limit. He wrecked his Jeep, his knee and his hip. It was a storm none of us saw coming, and it left us shaken. But Coach had prepared us for this reality. Storms always happen. Teams, families, communities, none are immune. Great leaders don’t promise calm seas. They prepare people for rough water.

Fear shrinks perspective. It convinces us that the problem is bigger than the plan. Bigger than the mission. Bigger than the leader who sees the entire field. But the greatest leaders don’t manage from a distance. They don’t shout instructions from safety.

That’s what separates real leadership from positional authority.

When the waves rise and pressure pounds, people don’t look for speeches. They look for presence. They want to know: *Is my leader rattled? Or anchored?*

Storms will always come for your business, your team, your marriage, your family. That part is non-negotiable, however, what *is* negotiable is how you *respond*.

You can flinch. You can panic. You can try to crawl back to comfort.

Or you can stay focused on the mission, trust the process, and lead forward, one decision at a time.

Storms are inevitable.

Courage and composure is a choice.

Voice

Amy, my wife, loves dogs. I mean, really loves dogs. So while we're out in the European villages, whenever we'd see someone out walking one, she'd stop, smile, and ask, "*Can I take your dog's picture?*" So we get to meet the dog and their owner. Now, we speak English. The dog, on the other hand, speaks Italian... or German... or Norwegian depending on the country. Amy would kneel down and start talking sweetly, "*Oh, such a good dog!*" and the dog would just stare at her. But the moment the owner speaks, the ears perk right up and the tail wags. They know their master's voice and who is calling.

The same thing showed up with one of my defensive backs from Germany. I tried to thank him in German, "*Danke schön.*" Or at least, that's what I thought I was saying.

He laughed, "*Coach... that doesn't sound right.*"

I tried again. And again. Five different inflections. Finally, he smiled and said, "*'Yep, that's better. That sounds more like German.'*"

We both laughed. It was all in my accent and how I pronounced it. He said German is a "*rough language and it comes from the back of your throat.*" Then he added, "*You know one of our coaches tries to speak German to me too, but I tell him, "Please... just say it in English! I have no idea what the heck you're trying to tell me."*" We all just cracked up laughing, but the lesson stuck.

Communication isn't about getting the words perfect. It's about clarity, consistency, and trust.

"Come"

One word was enough to make a fisherman step out of the only safe thing floating on the sea. In a moment of uncertainty, Peter asked for clarity not a strategy or a guarantee. Just confirmation.

Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water. No explanation. No persuasion. No contingency plan.

Just a calm, confident directive, spoken by Someone who already knew the outcome.

That's the power of a trusted voice.

Later on, Jesus says, *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”* They recognize the voice, not because they understand every instruction. I totally get that now in a way I never really understood until we lived in Europe for over four years. We lived in Italy and England, but traveled throughout much of Europe.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

Before Peter stepped out of the boat, he didn't hesitate to say, *“Is that really You? Can you repeat that in my accent?”* No, he just knew the voice. The tone. The trust. The authority. He didn't do it because conditions improved. It was still dark. Still stormy. Still chaotic. He moved because he recognized the voice.

That's how real leadership works.

People don't follow titles. They follow clarity. They follow consistency. They follow leaders whose voice they've learned to trust over time. When you've built that kind of credibility at work, you don't need long explanations in critical moments. Your people don't need a full power-point presentation. They just need direction from a leader they trust.

The best leaders don't shout.

They don't over-explain.

They don't flinch.

They speak with calm authority and the right people move.

So when things feel unstable, when pressure rises, when the next step feels risky, remember this:

You don't always need perfect visibility. You need a trusted voice.

And when the voice you trust says, *“Come”* you Go!

Sandy

Hurricane Sandy, one of history's nastiest storms, blasted New Jersey in 2012. Sandy literally ripped the whole northern part of New Jersey apart. Tearing through homes, streets, and lives.

My good friends, Tom and Lisa, were at home the night of Hurricane Sandy. They sat anxiously comfortable at home thinking about how lucky they were to still have power. Then their life changed in a blink of an eye. An explosion-like crack shook the house as a 60-foot oak tree nearly two feet in diameter ripped straight through their home. That massive tree ripped right through their son's bedroom. Luckily he had ran to his parents room just in time!

Hurricane Sandy whipped and whirled on for four days chasing them from their house and every possession they had, except the clothes on their backs and the phone in their hand. Everything was left behind. They made a mad dash for safety. Ran to a friend's house for shelter out of the pelting rain. Four days later, when the rain stopped, they checked their family of four into the nearest hotel along with the hundreds of others that had been displaced. It was survival.

Some storms come with wind and rain. Others show up as financial collapse, public failure, betrayal, illness, or sustained losing seasons. The form changes. The impact doesn't.

In those moments, people don't need noise. They don't need speeches. They need something steady.

Storms are inevitable, but flinching is optional.

Come

Great leaders don't overwhelm people with information. They create clarity, which invites action. In this case, one word changed everything because it required ownership, "Come.". That's a leadership principle every executive should recognize: Breakthrough never happens while *staying in the boat*.

That's true in business.

It's true in coaching.

You don't build a company by watching others take risks.

You don't win championships from the locker room.

As a coach, I've seen this over and over. The great ones aren't always the most talented. They're the ones who recognize the moment and move. They understand that opportunity is not nice and they take advantage of their time. They trust the leader who sees farther than they do.

Elite transformational leadership calls people forward while understanding the depth of the water and the strength of the wind.

And here's the *uncomfortable truth* for every leader and follower, choosing not to move is still a decision. Average only exists if you let it. Culture doesn't drift toward excellence. It follows action. The Hall of Fame is not full of players that have stayed in the locker room or sat on the bench.

Your team will only go where you're willing to go first. You can't ask people to take risks you refuse to take. You can't demand courage while modeling caution. Leadership isn't just calling people out of the boat. It's stepping out there first.

Great leaders don't just issue invitations, they demonstrate them.

Mark Dantonio, the former head coach at Michigan State, totally got all of this. He had his team on their National Playoff hunt in 2015. They were packed into the tunnel at Penn State, shoulder to shoulder and hearts pounding out of their chests, ready to run out. The noise was deafening. The pressure was up. He knew exactly what waited on the other side. Chaos. Conflict. An epic battle.

He called them up. He yelled, “Remember what Psalm 91 says, **”you will trample the great lion! Let’s hunt!”**

Leaders prepare people for the battle and then lead them through it. He knew it was going to get real uncomfortable real quick. He yelled words of inspiration and encouragement out to his boys. Coach Dantonio called them out and called them up. Because every coach knows your team will only go where you’re willing to lead them. And great leadership, always involves calling people out of their boat.

“*Come*” or in Coach Mark’s case, “*Let’s Hunt*” changes the story. Not “Sit.” Not “Wait.” Not “Play it safe.” Miracles don’t happen in the locker room. They happen when your cleats hit the grass.

When Peter saw Jesus out there walking on the water he probably thought, “*What’s going on?*” So he called out, **“Lord, if it’s You, tell me to come!”** When the Voice of Truth invites you to listen, listen. When He says, “*Come!*” You GO! That one word can change your life if you’ve got the guts to obey it: “*Come.*”

And maybe that’s the real question for every leader reading this: Are you standing in the boat knowing full well it’s time to step out? Because the moment you move, your story changes.

eli'TE

When I was coaching Tight Ends (TE) in the NFL, I would always give my position group an identity, a nickname. Not a job description, but more like a standard. One year, I handed out T-shirts with a phrase across the back:

“eli“TE.”

Catch and run like a receiver, Block like a Beast

The expectation was clear. My players loved wearing that shirt around the locker room. It made them feel different. It made them feel special. Almost like the “S” on

Superman's chest. That little nickname "eli"TE" gave each one of them a sense of pride, ownership and direction.

That's a leadership principle every business owner should understand: **identity drives behavior**. Titles don't inspire performance. Expectations do. When people know the standard they're called to, they'll either rise to it or remove themselves from it.

My Tight Ends loved it. It wasn't arrogance; it was ownership. That word *eliTE* made them want to live up to something bigger. It told them: *You belong to something special*. It made them feel different, it made them feel "**ELITE**".

That's the power of a name. A good name can pull a man toward the best version of himself. It can turn an ordinary day into game day. It can turn an ordinary player into someone who plays with purpose.

I've seen the same principle work far from the NFL. My buddy Coach Tom gets this better than just about anyone. He coached my son, Soren's youth basketball team, and Coach Tom gave every kid a nickname. Not just random names either. I love him because he chooses crazy, on point nicknames for the boys and when he does, it not only lights up their face it lights up their life.

I'll never forget when little James walked into the gym the first night of basketball practice- shy, skinny kid, shoulders slumped, eyes stuck to the floor like he was trying to disappear. On the very first night of practice without missing a beat, Coach Tom shouts across the gym, "*Hey Kobe! Grab a ball and start shooting!*" . James looked at him like, "*Are you talking to me Coach?*"

"Yep, you're Kobe! Kobe retired tonight. You're up."

James lit up like a Christmas Tree! "*I got you Coach!*"

When Coach nicknamed James, Kobe, after the former Los Angeles Laker great, Kobe Bryant, he bounced all the way down the court. Believe me when I tell you this, James "Kobe" didn't have near the skills of half the boys on the team but something in him changed that night! From that moment on, James *was* Kobe. He ran faster, played harder, smiled bigger, and dove for every loose ball. He didn't make all his shots, but I think he actually started to believe he could *be* what he was called.

Leaders know that belief changes effort. Effort changes outcomes.

That crazy nickname changed the way he saw himself and the way everyone else saw him too. I think I saw James grow two inches in three seconds that first practice. He had a bounce in his stride that wasn't there when he first walked in the gym. That name pulled something out of that kid that discipline never could.

That's leadership!

By the third practice I didn't even know his real name. Nobody did. The whole team called him *Kobe*. Even his dad slipped up once yelling, “*Go Kobe!*” from the bleachers before catching himself and laughing. “*Go Kobe!*” Wait! What? Hilarious!!! My wife asked me, “*What the heck is Kobe's real name?*” I had forgotten it and I'm not even sure his team mates remembered it either. To the team he was “*Kobe*.”

A nickname can do that. It creates identity... and identity creates action.

Transformational leaders, Coaches, CEOs and Founders don't manage people where they are. They **name the standard** and they **call them up to where they need them to be**.

James “*Kobe*” grew as a basketball player with every practice. According to his dad, he played harder than he ever played before in his life. His dad told me, “I had to drag him to show up to the first practice. Now, all he talks about is basketball.” Coach Tom changed the way young James played by renaming him, nicknaming him and lifting him up.

That's what great leaders do. If you want elite performance, you must create elite identity. Not hype. Clear belief. Clear language. People rise or fall to the level of their leader's standards.

Jesus understood this better than anyone, and he did it quietly. No speeches. No hype. Just clarity. Elite transformational leaders don't wait for people to earn belief. They extend belief first and then demand responsibility and accountability to match it.

That's how solid cultures are built.

That's how teams elevate.

If you want elite performance in your organization, start talking about values and **naming standards**. If you want people to act differently, help them **see themselves differently**.

From the second James walked into the gym that first night, Coach Tom lifted him up to a new level and made James feel ELITE! Coach Tom wasn't just coaching basketball. He was coaching *identity*. He saw something in that boy before the boy saw it in himself. Most people don't rise to goals. They rise to identity. A good Coach calls out who you really are and not who you've settled into being.

My Tight Ends, "Kobe," and Simon Peter got a new name, new identity, new purpose, and a new future. That's what transformational leaders do. They rename, redefine, and remind us who we are not by what we have *done*, but by what we are being called to *do*.

That's eli'TE leadership.

Coach Says

Have you ever looked back on your life and realized how just a couple words changed everything? Not a whole speech. Not a lecture. Just maybe *two words* spoken at the right moment by someone you trusted. I've been thinking about that a lot lately. How the right voice can steady you, call you out, call you up ... and sometimes even save you. Certain voices linger longer. How the right words don't just *inform* us... they *form* us.

Some phrases echo long after the noise fades. Coaches know this even if we don't always say it out loud. There is something almost tribal about coaching. It does not matter if a kid is twelve or twenty-two, when a coach speaks, something in him straightens up. Words land differently. There's weight there. Authority. Trust. Whether we mean to or not, what we say sticks more than we realize. And sometimes, they can stick long after the season ends.

I have had more than a few moms pull me aside after practice and say, "Coach, my son won't do his homework. Can you tell him to do it? He'll listen if *Coach says*." Somewhere along the way, "Coach says" became more powerful than "Mom says." I don't know how that happened, but I've seen it work miracles. Coach says, "*clean*

your room,” or “be respectful to your mom,” or “get your grades up or you don’t play Saturday.” It works! I’ve heard many parents tell me, “Coach, I can tell my boy to do his homework until I’m blue in the face, but when the Coach says do it, it changes everything.”

Those two words, “*Coach says*,” give kids rails to run on. They give parents hope. And sometimes, they give a young man a reason to believe he can rise a little higher than he thought possible.

I’ve seen it firsthand many times too. Years ago, Aaron, one of my former players messaged me out of the blue on instagram.. He wrote, “*Remember when you used to say, ‘Champion Bullriders hang on for eight seconds. You’re tougher than you think’? Thanks, Coach.*” That message stopped me cold. Because you never really know what sticks. You never know which sentence becomes an anchor when life gets rough... or a compass when someone’s lost.

Jesus coached the same way.

Just two words. “*Follow Me.*” That was it.

That’s the principle every CEO should understand: People don’t follow titles. They follow a **clear vision spoken with conviction**.

God-hardwires part of us to want to be called into a bigger story. We want to know our life matters. “*I will make you fishers of men.*” Whether you’re leading a company, a team, or a family, your words carry more weight than you realize. One sentence, spoken at the right time, can echo for decades.

That’s the part that gets me. He said *two words* that still echo through history: “Follow Me.”

So here’s the real question for leaders:

What “*two words*” did you say today that might still be playing in someone’s head ten years from now? And are you pointing them toward comfort, or calling them forward into growth?

Water Walker

If I ever walked on water, I'd call that a HUGE WIN! I mean, if I could row a boat four miles offshore, step out, and just stroll back across the lake like no big deal, that would instantly go on the Instagram hi-light reel. Who needs a boat at that point? Bass Pro Shops would probably take a hit, especially my son Wil's favorite aisle.

But here's what I've learned over the years, most miracles don't look like walking on water. Truth is, we're wading through miracles every day and doing our best to ignore them. A healthy baby? Miracle. A heart that beats over a hundred thousand times a day without you reminding it? Miracle. One of our players making it to class on time? Let's call it a minor miracle, but I'll take it. Everyday there are so many miracles that we take for granted, because we've turned the extraordinary into ordinary because that's what we expect. But walking on water would not be one of them, that's only happened once.

But I don't think that this story is just about "*the walking*". To me this miracle is about "*the first step*".

Picture Peter. The storm is raging. Wind howling. Waves crashing. Jesus shows up, calmly walking on top of the chaos.

Jesus says, "*Come.*"

Jesus doesn't give him a safety plan. He doesn't calm the storm first.

He just says one word:

"*Come.*"

That's it!

Somewhere between the edge of the boat and the surface of the water, Peter probably thought, "*What the heck am I doing out here stepping off this boat?*" His brain said *nope*, but his heart said *trust*. He probably thought, *I shouldn't do this*, but Peter did what his Coach said, and he did something that no man has ever done before or after. He listened, he obeyed and ultimately he stepped out of the boat.

Maybe that's the real miracle, not just the walking part, but the *trusting enough to take "the step" part.*

Because let's be honest, even when we feel like we are "stepping" and doing everything we know how to do. We talk about faith and we think about faith, but we still stay stuck. What's the deal?

Most of us struggle with belief. Which makes us struggle with **movement**. We think. We plan. We talk. We analyze. And then we stay exactly where we are.

We become predictable. We stay stuck, paralysis through analysis.

Peter didn't stay up, he sank. We all know that part. But we sometimes forget the most important detail, he **stepped out**, he **walked**. And the only reason he did is because he trusted his Coach enough to take one step. That's it.

That's how trust is built.

Maybe you can't stop the storm, but maybe you can help someone stand up in it.

Maybe you give someone a nice nickname that makes him feel eliTE. Maybe you nudge him out of his comfort zone. Maybe you say, "Come," when everyone else says, "Stay there."

Your people don't need to be fearless. They don't need to be superheroes. Most of them are just willing, willing enough to take one shaky step because their Coach said it was possible. Maybe that's why Jesus didn't stop the storm first. Maybe faith was never meant to be learned in still water. Faith is built when someone hears a trusted voice and steps out anyway.

I think that's where this whole story started. Not with walking on water, but with a voice worth trusting. Every day, you get a chance to be that trusted voice, practice after practice, meeting after meeting, conversation after conversation. Calling someone to take one step. Stay two more seconds, meet two more friends.

Because when you do, Who knows?

You might build a team full of Water Walkers.

CHAPTER 5 TAKEAWAYS

- Identify one person on your team hesitating on a big decision.
- Decide in Advance How You'll Respond
- Replace Long Explanations With **One Clear Directive**.
- Take One Visible Risk
- Define One Identity Statement for Your Team

Huddle Up:

- What's Your One Take Away?
- Has a storm changed you?
- What's your favorite nickname?
- Why is "Coach Says" so different?

6

The Sixth Win

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works

of him who sent Me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” So he went and washed and came back seeing.

John 9:1-11

Blame Game

Do you ever notice how fast we reach for the “*blame hammer*” the second something goes sideways? Lose the game. Sales miss the target. A deal falls apart. Instinctively, we start looking for someone to swing the “*hammer*” at. I was in football for years, so for obvious reasons, the “*Hammer*” always got swung at the Head Coach. This man has been blind since his birth. Everyone that knew him, knew that about him but still wanted to “*hammer*” him.

“*Who sinned, this man or his family, that he was born blind?*”

Classic.

Who messed this up?

Who's responsible?

Blame feels productive. It's not. It's just loud and destructive.

Whenever something goes wrong, immediately we want someone to blame. That reaction hasn't changed much over the centuries.

High-level leaders understand something most organizations forget:

Blame consumes energy, but ownership creates momentum.

Yes, sometimes cause and effect matter. But many times, things simply *are* market shifts, inherited systems, structural challenges, human limitations. And when leaders fixate on blame, they delay progress.

Whenever you take over a new team or a new job, the easiest thing in the world is to blame whoever came before you. “*Look at this mess! No wonder they're gone.*” You may feel good for five or six seconds then . . . It seems that whenever things don't go our way, we default to the blame game.

We've all heard every version of it:

“It's the last leadership team.”

“It's the economy.”

“It's the clients.”

“It's the competition.”

“*It's the refs.*”

“*It's the parents.*”

On and On and ON!

You know how it goes. Blame is easy, it makes us feel better for a period, then poisons everything it touches.

If we're being honest, there's something in human nature that wants to point out what's wrong with someone else's work so ours looks better by comparison.

Pointing fingers never built a winning program though. It might make you feel taller for a minute, but it doesn't move the ball down the field. You know how this works, step on someone else's head to get above the crowd.

I've been there. I've done it.

And every single time, blame didn't give me energy, it took it.

When I was the Head Coach at Wartburg College, I learned quickly that you can't build culture by pointing fingers. You can't build trust by throwing people under the bus. And you sure can't build winners by tearing teammates down. I had guiding rule that shaped everything we did:

“If it doesn’t help us win, we’re not doing it.”

Blame didn't help us win, so it was off the table.

I still live by that principle today.

I flipped the blame script and after practices, meetings, or any tough time, we would spotlight someone doing something right. I would call the team together and have a teammate publicly recognize another teammate.

We called them *Put-Ups*.

A sentence. A compliment. Shined a light on him instead of casting a shadow on someone else.

The impact was undeniable. You should've seen the way guys lit up when they heard their name spoken with honor! It was like watching the blind man's eyes open. You could see something come alive in them, confidence, courage. People started playing freer, working harder, owning more. Not because they were protected from accountability, but because they felt *seen*.

That's what transformational leaders do. They don't ignore problems. They **redirect focus** from criticism to capability. When Jesus saw what was going on He shut the whole circus down real fast: "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned. This happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.*"

Boom!

Case closed.

That's elite leadership.

He didn't waste time diagnosing guilt. He moved immediately to restoring sight. The message was clear:

We don't fix blame. We fix what's broken. Leaders lift, leaders create opportunities for excellence to show up and show off.

The power of the spoken word of a peer lifting another peer is unparalleled.

That principle applies everywhere, business, sports, and family.

When leaders allow gossip, snark, or “blame culture” to take root, they don't stay neutral, they silently endorse it. You're either leading it or allowing it to happen. And the cost shows up in execution, retention, and trust.

Elite leaders understand their real job is to hold people accountable to their dreams and to help people see value in themselves and in each other. That doesn't mean lowering standards. It means raising belief.

Leaders shape behavior and behavior drives performance.

Transformational Leaders Lift.

No blame in the game. Only ownership. Keep playing forward.

Can you “*lift*” like no one else?

Rub some Dirt on It

There's a moment in leadership that every coach, CEO recognizes instantly. When something breaks, someone struggles, or your team misses the mark.

In business, sports, and life, this is where most leaders get it wrong. You try to fix everything yourselves and you abandon your people entirely. You try to do it all. A transformational leader doesn't do that. A real leader will **initiate clarity, put a name on the task and require ownership.**

Think about it, coaches can't run the routes, just like CEOs can't close every deal. We, as leaders, can't do any of the above, but what we can do is equally, if not more important, we can give vision. We can open our team's eyes to what needs to be seen. We can open their eyes to what's been there all along.

Leaders know that movement is required to fix what's broken. And that's transferring ownership. That's when responsibility and accountability shifts. The individual must walk, sometimes with muddy eyes toward the solution themselves. That's how growth works.

The message underneath the method is powerful:
"I'll give you what you need, but I trust you to finish."

Sometimes our job as the leader isn't to fix anything right then and there, it's simply to reveal something. Leaders get the team to move and fix it. They get them to "walk to the water". They get them to wash out their own eyes. This is where real development happens. Not in rescue, but in transferring ownership. Not in comfort, but in commitment.

Obviously, being blind since birth is on a completely different planet than a tweaked knee, or a missed sale opportunity, but still, you get the heart of it. Jesus took what he had and kept it simple, He spat in the dirt, made some mud, and put it on the guy's eyes.

But here's the part that I love the most:
After smearing mud on the guy's eyes, He tells him, "*Go wash in the pool.*"

He doesn't walk him "*to the water*". He doesn't guide him by the elbow like, "*Easy now, careful step here.*" Nothing!

He just says "*Go, wash*"

There's a lesson in here that not every challenge requires a shutdown.

There's something even bigger to all of this though, Jesus invites the man to be part of his own miracle. He not only let him be a part of it, he made him be a part of it! It's like He's saying, "*I'll start it. But you're going to walk it out and finish it.*"

That's faith in action. That's "*blind obedience*."

There's no free ride. He could've easily put his hand on the man's eyes and rubbed them once or twice and healed the guy right then and there, but that's not it. He wants us to take part in our own miracle.

He started the process, but challenged him to finish it.

Maybe that's why I like this story, because I've walked this walk myself. Sometimes you've got to rub some dirt on it. Sometimes you've got to "*walk to the water*" with muddy eyes. Sometimes you've got to wash the mess off yourself before you can see the miracle.

But when you do, when you take those first shaky steps, you become part of your own miracle and your life changes right in front of your newly opened eyes. Do "*tough*" stuff and you get "*tougher*". You don't just see better, you *become* better.

"Rub some dirt on it and keep moving."

MAGIC

There's an old coaching acronym that I've always loved from a legendary coach named Frosty Westering:

M.A.G.I.C. – Make A Greater Individual Commitment.

It sounds inspirational, but it's actually operational. Because very little in life happens by accident. Frosty had a way of turning simple truths into lifelong lessons. And this one stuck on me, because very few things in life come easy. If they did, we'd all be playing on Sundays in the NFL.

Anything and everything of any value comes through sacrifice and hard work. When you Make A Greater Individual Commitment it may feel like something magical is happening, but it's not magic, it's just the payoff of sweat, persistence, and faith showing up in the results and your stubborn refusal to quit.

Making a greater individual commitment might *feel* magical, but it's not really magic. It's smart disciplined systems showing up, day after day, trusting the process. And when you do it consistently well, you start to notice something wild: you're different. You *play* and you *see* differently.

Change doesn't happen in the moment you score a touchdown or close a big deal, it happened in all the steps leading up to it. We never stay the same, we either get better or worse. The transformation doesn't happen on game day or in the boardroom. It happens in the thousands of unseen decisions that led you there. Transformational leaders build systems that require long discipline that demand daily ownership.

MAGIC asks you to take your game to the next level. Jesus could've healed the man right there on the spot. But instead, He told him, "*Go wash in the pool.*" He transferred the ownership. He made him take those steps, mud still dripping from his eyes, through a crowded street, feeling his way to the water. That man had to *move* to receive his miracle. That's MAGIC in motion. The breakthrough doesn't come until the man moves. Until effort meets belief. Until responsibility is accepted. That's when your life changes from the inside out.

In business, you can't outsource ownership. In coaching, you can't run the reps for your players. You prepare people for environments they've never been in before. Bigger stages. Brighter lights. Higher pressure. You see the terrain ahead even when they don't, and you train them for it. Great leaders intentionally put people in situations that **require** a greater individual commitment. Not to *break* them, but to **build** them.

That's how confidence is forged. That's how culture forms. That's how teams win. Talent matters, and timing helps.

But sustained success demands MAGIC.

Every area of life that improves does so because someone decided to Make A Greater Individual Commitment.

You have to coach your team, you have to guide them and teach them, day in and day out. Yessir, you've got to '*Coach 'em up!*'! You need to make it hard on them so that they each have to Make A Greater Individual Commitment.

You want to win?

Then you're going to need talent and some luck. But more than all of it, you'll need MAGIC!

Long Discipline

When I was coaching at Notre Dame, Coach Holtz would always talk to our team about

“LONG DISCIPLINE”.

Now I hear myself talking about it to my players all the time too. What is it? Long Discipline is that stubborn courage to keep doing the right thing over and over, long before and after the excitement has worn off. Human nature is not filled with long discipline for the most part.

Coach Holtz drilled that into our heads, and now I hear myself passing it down to my own boys.

He would say,

“when we do this consistently well enough for long enough it's going to show up in a game and it's going to pay off.”

Anybody can do anything one or two times, when it feels fresh and exciting, but real growth, and real character is revealed when we do the right thing over and over, especially when no one's cheering. Anybody can follow a practice plan for a day. That's why what's painted on the walls in Michigan still holds true:

“Those who stay will become Champions!”

Champions are built in the grind, through day-in, day-out long discipline.

They choose consistency over convenience, purpose over pressure.

In business, you don't build trust with one good quarter. In leadership, you don't build culture with one speech. The greatest leaders understand this intuitively. They prepare long before anyone notices. They operate with patience, restraint, and obedience to principles, not emotions.

Long Discipline is:

Showing up when it's boring.

Staying late and being uncomfortable.

Leading when it's costly.

And here's the uncomfortable truth:

Most people don't fail because they're incapable. They fail because they quit too early.

Long Discipline is what separates those who look promising from those who are dependable.

So whether you're leading a company, a team, or a household, the standard is the same:

- Build the system
- Stick to the process
- Execute when it's not exciting
- Stay when it would be easier to leave

Because when you do the right things consistently well, long enough, something inevitable happens:

The results show up.

The culture changes.

The leader emerges.

That's **Long Discipline**.

And it's what matters most.

See More, Know More, Know More, See More

The more you see, the more you know. The more you know, the more you see.

I remember standing on the sideline of a New York Jets pregame with a young youth football coach. He looked at the players flying down the field and said,

“Wow, they’re fast!”

I looked at the same exact, players and thought,
“We’ll never make a play at this speed.”

Two people. Same players. Same moment. Two completely different perspectives. Two completely different conclusions. Different eyes will always see things differently, but knowing eyes will always see what needs to be seen. That’s how sight works, two sets of eyes, two different worlds. And I’ve learned that knowing eyes don’t just *see* more, they see what matters. Experience doesn’t just help you see more, it helps you see **what matters**. Two people can look at the same situation and walk away with two entirely different strategies.

Leaders don’t win by seeing more information. They win by seeing the right information. While most people panic when things feel chaotic, great leaders operate differently. They’re calm not because the situation is easy, but because they’ve been to this “rodeo” before.

I have a great friend named Sam who I kiddingly labeled him as my Rabbi because he doesn’t just give advice, he gives **clarity**. I love Coach Sam and honor him because we have both coached in the NFL. Coach Sam has done some of the same things that I have done and seen a lot of the same things that I have seen, however, because we have done these things separately together, and he is twenty-five years my senior, he also has seen things I’ve never seen and done things I’ve never done. I’ve been able to learn a tremendous amount from Coach Sam and have found him to be a huge blessing for me and my family. Watching him, listening to him, learning from him, it’s opened my eyes in ways I didn’t even know I was blind. He’s challenged me, pushed me, nudged me toward things I couldn’t see for myself. He has opened my eyes. And that’s what real mentors do. They don’t take the walk for you, they help you see where to walk. They point out blind spots you didn’t know you had. They nudge you toward decisions you weren’t ready to make on your own.

In leadership, growth often requires two things:

- A willingness to admit you don’t see everything yet
- The humility to move anyway

The blind man walked. He washed. He saw. And in that simple act, his life changed. Just like that, the world that had been dark opened up in color. Sometimes, we need to step like that too. Mud on our eyes. Blind faith in our hearts. Walking toward

something we can't see yet. But when we do? Maybe, just maybe, we learn to see more than we ever imagined. Most of us don't need a bigger sign or a louder miracle. We just need a little more faith, a little more obedience and a little more MAGIC woven into our everyday life.

As a coach, I see this every day. Players don't grow by staying comfortable, nor do I. Sometimes they need a push. Sometimes they need a challenge. Sometimes they need a voice that says, "Let's Go!" And when they take that step, when effort meets belief, real change happens. It's when trial creates transformation.

Most people are waiting for clarity before they act. Great leaders act on principle, trusting the process, knowing clarity will follow. Most people *see more* clearly **after** movement, not before it.

The sequence matters.

Because when we finally dare to step, we start to KNOW MORE... because we finally SEE MORE.

CHAPTER 6 TAKEAWAYS

- Eliminate Blame as a Tool - Replace It with Forward Ownership
- Transfer Responsibility, Not Rescue
- Build Cultural Momentum Through Public Recognition of Right Behavior
- Demand Greater Individual Commitment
- Win the Long Game with Relentless Consistency

Huddle Up:

- What's Your One Take Away?
- Who on your team needs to rub some mud on it?
- Who's your teacher?
- How would a little MAGIC change your life, your team

7

The Seventh Win

Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for Lazarus has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

John 11:32-44

Undefeated

The strongest leaders face hard realities directly and lead people forward anyway. Coaches are often called to do the impossible, to resurrect what seems lost, to rebuild what has failed. I can't exactly say that was the case when I got a call to move to the UK to coach the NFL Academy, but it was a "*version*" of this. That's the gig. Stand in the gap. Hold the line. Believe when nobody else will. And keep a strong *turn this thing around* mindset.

That's why the documentary "*Undefeated*" hit me the way it did.. Coach Bill Courtney walks into a North Memphis high school and was called on to resurrect the team and community from the dead. He was called to *turn this thing around!* The kids were broken in more ways than one. Coach Bill didn't arrive with miracles or a motivational speech. He just showed up. Day after day. Because the first miracle he needed wasn't on the field, it was rebuilding trust. Before plays could work, relationships had to be fixed. Before wins, there had to be belief. He rebuilt the program by rebuilding the bond between a coach and his players. He proved to his boys that he wasn't going anywhere.

That's transformational leadership.

However, he thought he knew what he was signing up for. Turns out, he didn't. It was harder than he imagined. More heartbreaking, and somehow more beautiful, than he imagined. He knew the microscope would be unforgiving, every decision questioned, every loss magnified. He didn't pretend to have all the answers. He was getting into something far more difficult, far more demanding and far more rewarding than he ever dreamed. He committed to staying long enough to earn the right to lead.

He thought he was being called to coach football. What he was really being called to do was love kids who weren't easy to love. Coach Bill knew that he was not going to leave his boys hanging, like so many other coaches had done in their past. His players didn't make it easy.

One player tested him early.

"Man, you're just another "Turkey Man."

Coach Bill had no idea what that meant. The kid explained that a *Turkey Man* is the guy who drives through the hood on Thanksgiving to drop off a frozen bird, waves, then disappears till next year. "*We'll take your turkey,*" the kid said, "*but we ain't*

trusting no Turkey Man.” He feels good because that’s what he signed up to do at his local church. He’s doing that stuff to make himself feel good!”

Good intentions. No commitment.

Coach Bill completely understood who the “*Turkey Man*” was from that day on, and he wasn’t going to be a “*Turkey Man*.” He volunteered at Manassas High to serve, not to be a “drive by Turkey Man”. Bill decided then and there he wasn’t going to be a drive-by do-gooder. He was staying. He was investing. He was going to be part of their story, not a cameo in it.

Coach Bill reached his players by teaching them that the “*team comes first*”. He didn’t hand the team a miracle. He walked them toward one. He challenged them to see themselves differently, to live up to standards they’d never been held to before. He asked them to shed an old identity and step into a new one. And slowly, something began to shift. There’s an old line that says,

“*Want more faith? Do more stuff.*”

I’m not sure Coach Bill was looking for “*more faith*” or to even to “*do more stuff*” when he volunteered as the Head Coach of the Manassas Tigers, he already owned a lumber company in town, he had enough “*stuff*” to do. But he volunteered anyway. And what he got in return?

Not money.

Not trophies.

He got headaches, sure, but also respect. Brotherhood. Love, and a community resurrected one relationship at a time. He served his team, and in turn changed the entire culture of the team, which in turn flipped the entire community.

If you were to go down to Memphis and talk to Coach Bill, he would tell you about how he challenged his team to dream big. More importantly, he challenged them to think of themselves differently than they ever thought of themselves before. He didn’t hand his boys a miracle; he walked them toward one. He dared them to dream bigger. Basically, he asked them to throw off their old grave clothes and live like men who were made for more.

That’s how transformation actually works.

Not through powerpoints and speeches.

Through consistency.

Through service.

Through leadership that shows up when it’s inconvenient.

In order to change a dream into a life, you have to put your plan into action. Be part of your own miracle, activate God's power in your life!

Kemmons Wilson, the man who started the Holiday Inn Hotel chain, once said, *"it's easy to be successful, you only have to work half a day, yep, it doesn't matter if it's the first twelve hours or the second twelve hours, you only have to work half a day!"*

In other words add a little MAGIC to your game.

Coach Bill might also share with you how the most important quality in changing his team around would come through Servant Leadership. Yes, he as the Head Coach was the leader, but he did it by serving his team. He would also tell you,

"Leadership is not a baseball bat, it's a loving hand. A hand that lifts one of your players up off the ground, a hand that pats them on the back or hugs them up, that's the hand of leadership."

Leadership is genuine service. When you lead like that, your team starts believing your dream right along with you. When you genuinely serve you are not a "Turkey Man." It has been said,

"what you do for yourself in this world dies with you, what you do for others lives on forever."

Coach Bill raised Manassas from the dead, not with shortcuts, but with love, service, and dedication.

And in the eyes of those boys, that community, that city...

They went undefeated.

Senior Rules

One of the most dangerous moments in leadership is when values get tested.

I listened to former Air Force Head Football Coach Fisher DeBerry speak at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes breakfast about building his team culture. He said, *"We had one rule at Air Force, the team comes first."* That principle is my first and the most important pillar in our organization.

He told the crowd of coaches,

"The senior class actually was the one that came up with that rule."

They said, “*if you embarrass the team with your actions on or off the field, you should be dealt with accordingly.*”

On the inside coach said, “I was “*shaking my head with a grin knowing what was coming. Strong rule. Sounds noble, all good until it's not so good.*”

Everything was fine but then the season got rolling... and some of the seniors weren't playing as much as they thought they should and started to complain. They thought it was unfair that the underclassmen got to start ahead of them in games. Funny how quickly the value of the rule,

“*the team comes first*” doesn't fit so well anymore.

That's when Coach reminded them of *their rule* that they created and endorsed, “*Hey, listen up men, remember how y'all came up with 'the team comes first'?*”

Coach Deberry said,

“*we never agreed that the Seniors come first, y'all agreed that the team comes first!*”

This is a critical lesson for leaders and CEOs: ***culture isn't about convenience or personal comfort. It's about adherence to the mission, values, and the rules that define your organization.*** And remember, you asked them what they wanted as a team and your job as the leader is to hold them accountable to their goals.

Great leaders don't rewrite the rules mid-season to keep people comfortable. They call people back to the standards they agreed to live by.

And that brings me to Lazarus, the story says that Lazarus was dead for four days. Everyone knew this wasn't a “maybe he'll snap out of it” situation. Dead is dead, four days or fourteen years, it doesn't really matter. Once you're dead you're dead. As a matter of fact, Jesus actually waited four days to make sure that everyone else knew that Lazarus was dead.

Jesus wasn't late.

He was intentional.

He waited until no one could argue or rationalize it away. And then He walked over to the tomb, calm as ever, and called out,

“*Lazarus, come out!*”

Jesus didn't pull Lazarus out of the tomb so he could keep living like a dead man.

He raised him so he could live again.

Coach DeBerry put it plainly: “we love “***Team First***” until it doesn't favor us personally.” Your role is to call them out of their tombs, their comfort, pride, self-protection and guide them into a new way of working, aligned with the mission

and vision. That often means confronting old behaviors, removing outdated systems, and creating accountability structures.

When your team steps out of their ‘*version*’ of dead and into that new life, engaged, aligned, and living the rules they’ve set, they will thrive. What initially feels restrictive will actually **unlock creativity, performance, and growth**. The rules that may have felt rigid are often the very ones that bring the organization back to life.

Lead decisively. Call your team to rise and watch them come to life.

Thanks Coach DeBerry!

Called Out

Culture doesn’t change with speeches.

It changes the moment a leader says, “*We’re not doing that anymore.*” Just because you are “**Value-Driven**” doesn’t mean you’re soft. You have a system, a process and you have to take a stance and set the pace. It’s not soft, it’s clear and concise.

I remember when my friend Bill took over a really bad high school football team in Southern California. I was with him on his very first day when he called his new team up to the center of the field before their first practice. He blew his whistle and they all came running up super excited and chanting their old fight song, one tied to years and years of losing! It was loud, but not good.

Coach Bill shouted,

“*whoa, Whoa, WHOA! Wait a minute!*”

Waving his hands to stop them he said.

“*What the heck was that all about?*”

“That’s our fight song, Coach!” They all shouted proudly.

Coach Bill looked them straight in the face and said, “*Well we’re not doing that anymore. That song didn’t help us win too many fights.*”

It was quiet for a few seconds.

Then he added,

“We’re changing things around here and we’re starting with that song.”

The kids were like, *“Wait, What?”*

I swear, the whole system shifted right then. You could feel it. From that moment on, that team started changing everything. The way they trained in the weight room. The way they practiced. The way they talked to each other. The way they carried themselves. They even changed the way they walked onto the field.

They were called out of an old identity.

New life requires new habits, new systems, a new process, and a new mindset.

Funny thing, they changed the way they sang! Ultimately, changing the system, the process and their mindset affected the way they played the game. It was like Bill had stood at the mouth of a tomb and said, *Come out.*

Coach Bill called his team out from the grave, had them shake off their old grave clothes, gave them new life, new hope and changed the way they played.

New life requires new habits, new rhythms, new identity. I can’t remember when or where I heard this but it’s so on point,

“You can’t walk in resurrection while you’re still dressed for the funeral.”

That’s exactly what happened with Bill’s team. They didn’t just get a new coach, they got called out of the grave. Out of old habits. Out of old excuses. Out of an old identity that said,

“This is just who we are.”

And Bill didn’t do it with some crazy miracle “pep talk”. He did it by starting with realigning, calling a few things out and holding them accountable. It was new, different and simple.

It all started with one clear line in the sand.

“We’re not doing that anymore.”

Ignore the Noise

One of the first things you better learn as a leader is how to “**Ignore the Noise**”. You’ll have to make bold decisions as the leader and one of the first and most important ones will be to Ignore the Noise. I mean all the voices, All the opinions.

Choices that not everyone will like or agree with will come at you from all sides all the time, the press, the employees, all the time.

You can’t listen to the critics, you can’t listen to the naysayers. At some point you’ll have to realize:

If you listen to all that noise, you’ll go crazy. And your team will suffer because of it. You have to Ignore the Noise and do what you know is best for your team. I’ve thought a lot about that lately, because coaching, real leading, requires the same kind of focus. If your players listen to every tweet, every rumor, every voice in the bleachers, they’ll lose themselves.

Noise doesn’t have to be loud to be destructive. It just has to be constant. As their leader you must train your people to Ignore the Noise, good or bad. Because noise isn’t going anywhere. The critics won’t shut up. The cheap seats will always be full. The question is whether your people will develop the long discipline, and the faith, to tune it all out.

As long as you’re leading, you’ll always be surrounded by “know it alls” that are far, far away from the action and don’t understand what is really going on, they will always have an opinion, and more often than not, it will be nothing more than noise. However, their noise can distract, discourage, and even destroy your team if you let it. Jesus heard everything the crowd said. He just didn’t let it steer Him. He stayed locked in. He knew what He was doing, even when nobody else did.

Jesus had to ignore the noise. Right after Lazarus died, four days dead, the people around Him start whispering. Loudly. Like they wanted Him to hear it.

“Couldn’t He who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Basically, they were saying,

“Jesus blew it.”

They were stirring the pot, looking for cracks in His leadership.

A lot of NOISE!

That’s what happens in your office if you let it.

So what do you do?

Encourage your team to stay focused, stay faithful, and stay true to the plan.

Ignore the Noise... so you can hear the TRUTH.

Twain on Frogs

Mark Twain once said,

“Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day”?

Every leader knows their “frog”.

Mark Twain is one of my favorite American authors because he keeps it simple and almost everybody can understand what he's saying, especially if you grew up in the country. *Eat the Frog*, means do the worst thing first, Don't dance around it, don't schedule it for your next quarter. Don't form a committee. Don't pray about it for eight weeks hoping something good happens, just do it. Right now!

In business, it's the tough conversation you keep pushing off. The underperformer you need to confront. The client you've avoided calling. The decision you know is right but uncomfortable.

I'll be honest with you, every time I've put off “*the frog*,” it's never gotten smaller. It grows bigger, croaks louder, and jumps into everything else.

When you get the worst thing done right now, then everything is easier the rest of your day. Stop waiting to talk to that player, that parent or that employee. Eat the Frog! Do it right now, don't wait, don't procrastinate, Eat the Frog!

Clarity follows courage.

There's a powerful line in the book of Ezekiel where God says,

“I searched for a man that would stand in the gap and I found no one” This verse hits differently when you coach or lead. He's looking for a Coach to do the right thing,

right now! It's the power to step forward and take charge. Standing in the gap always costs you something. But it also always saves you something.

God's looking for the man who will eat the live frog! He's not looking for the guy that will take the path of least resistance, He's "*searching for a man that will stand in the gap*".

Sometimes, something really drastic needs to happen to create change, something may have to die like an old habit or a tolerated behavior before something better can live. Maybe something a little less severe like one of us has to "*Eat a Live Frog*" first thing in the morning.

Real leadership requires decisive action.

Change doesn't happen through wishful thinking. It happens when someone finally says,

"Enough!"

That's why the story of Coach Bill at Manassas in Memphis matters. He could've stayed in his lumber yard and minded his own business. Instead, he stepped into a dead program and a community that needed leadership. He didn't have to eat that frog, but if not now when? And if not him, who? He saw the gap and he filled it. And because he did, he changed lives. I mean really changed lives.

Here's what people often miss:

Resurrection doesn't only happen in churches or Bible stories.

Sometimes it happens on beat-up practice fields behind old brick schools. Sometimes it happens in the UK with teenage boys from nineteen different countries, sometimes it happens in the corner office on main street, but know this, bringing something back to life requires decisive leadership.

So if you're staring at something that feels dead, your business, your culture, your confidence, your season, don't wait for someone else to fix it. Don't pray for a lighter load when God may be trying to build stronger shoulders.

I always tell my boys and coaches,

"If you want to fix the team, fix yourself first!"

So Ignore the Noise, Stand in the gap. Roll the stone away. Eat the frog.

And maybe, just maybe, bring somebody back to life.

CHAPTER 7 TAKEAWAYS

- Audit Where Leadership Presence is Inconsistent
- Culture Changes the Moment You Say “We’re Not Doing That Anymore”
- Ignore Noise. Execute the Plan.
- Eat the Frog Early
- Call People Forward - Don’t Rescue Them

Huddle Up

- What’s your One Take Away?
- Have you raised a program from the dead?
- Have you ever felt like a “Turkey Man”?
- When was the last time you ate a “live frog?”

2:00

TWO MINUTE WARNING

After Action Report (AAR)

As a football staff we always filled out an (AAR- After Action Report) after every game. We asked ourselves what we did well, what we did poorly, and what we need to do better before we compete again. This is one of the tools that we can continually use to make our team better. No emotion. Just the truth.

This part of our process is one of the most powerful tools we use to build winning teams, because progress happens when leaders are willing to evaluate themselves with discipline and honesty.

All great businesses do the same thing. The best entrepreneurs don't just grind, they reflect. They record and review sales calls, client meetings, product launches, missed opportunities. An AAR isn't about blame, it's about ownership.

As you read through “Coach em Up” what are your take-aways?

- What did you learn that will help make you a stronger Leader/Coach?
- What's important to you as a Leader/Coach?
- Is there one Miracle that stuck out to you more than any other and why?
- How will you be a more effective leader based on these Servant Leader principles?

OT

OVER TIME

We're All Connected All the Time

I've seen some wild things on a football field, but nothing, and I mean nothing prepared me for this. It's July. First practice of the season. New year, new faces. Our quarterback starts yelling out our cadence and he's one-hundred percent Italian. Full-speed, fast talking Italian. I'm standing about six feet behind him, where I always stand, he's yelling so fast so chaotic and so Italian!

Nobody understood what he was saying, not even me, and I'm with him all day.

Right then in the middle of the cadence, our center, who speaks Arabic and German, turns around and yells in his thick German accent,

"What the s&t, Carlos, speak English!"*

I completely lost it.

Honestly, I fell to my knees cracking up. I thought,

"What the heck! You can barely speak English yourself!"

Hilarious!!!

I said to my assistant coach, *"this is gonna be a long season."*

I thought. How in the wide world of sports did I end up right here? In the middle of this chaos, coaching a bunch of kids from every corner of the planet? Italian quarterback. Egyptian-Austrian center. Japanese nose guard. And me, the American coach standing there trying to keep a straight face.

It was hysterical!

I couldn't have scripted that.

Totally CRAZY and COOL all at the same time.

Because as wild as it looked, something deeper was happening. I always tell my boys, *"We're all connected all the time."* and this totally proved how disconnected we were and we needed to get it fixed, in a hurry?

Languages didn't matter. Accents didn't matter. Passports didn't matter.

No excuses. No explanations.

We were there for a reason. Something far bigger than any of us had stitched us all together and we had to make it work.

The sound of an Italian quarterback calling cadence to an Egyptian-Arabic-German center is challenging enough, but we were installing an RPO, (Run Pass Option), for

that practice. Sounds simple on paper, not so simple in real life. The quarterback had to read the defense and react in a split second to either hand it to our Swedish RB or throw it to our Austrian TE.

We had an:

Italian QB.

Egyptian-German center.

Swedish RB.

Austrian TE.

Nineteen countries.

Nineteen languages. One play.

Wait, WHAT? I remember standing there thinking, “*This is insane. We’ve got nineteen different ways to call this one play, and somehow we’re all expected to move at the exact same time.*” But here’s the thing, there wasn’t any other option. We *had* to make it work.

Eventually, we did. Not because we all suddenly spoke the same language, but because we trusted the same voice. One call. One standard. One purpose.

You can have the best talent in the world, the smartest people, the most diverse backgrounds and experiences, but if everyone is running their own play, or in the business world sitting in a silo, or has their own agenda, nothing works. Alignment beats brilliance and clarity beats complexity. One clear voice, one shared standard, one unified direction.

We didn’t speak the same language, but we succeeded because we committed to the same call. We trusted the same voice and all moved at the same time.

That’s leadership.

Leadership doesn’t mean eliminating all differences, but aligning them. If we can’t make that happen, then we “audible”.

We all need to know that we are more connected than we think. Every word we speak, every decision we make, every signal we send either brings people together or pulls them apart.

Nineteen languages.

One play.

One moment. And it worked because it was the only option.

Your Only Option

Coaching in Europe these past few years, with kids from nineteen different countries, I kept having the same quiet realization:

Leaders must make the complex simple.

Different languages. Different cultures. Different stories. But when the play is called and the whistle blows, there's no discussion. No debate. Everyone has to move in the same direction, or nothing works.

One play.

One voice.

One option.

That's leadership. And that's where this book began, **pregame**, with vision and identity and where it now ends, **in overtime**, when the plan changes, the pressure peaks, and you find out who you really are and what you really believe in.

All of this reminded me of a story one of my coaching buddies told me about a player he coached named Mark Stonebreaker. Mark was the guy that every coach wants. Natural athlete. Could play anything. Football, baseball, golf, basketball, you name it. If there was a ball involved, he'd dominate. He was the kind of kid you assume life will always work out for.

Then life rewrote his script.

Mark went off to serve our country in Iraq and came home missing his right arm from his shoulder down. No warning. No gradual adjustment. Just a few seconds that changed everything. When he came home he felt lost, he wasn't searching for applause or sympathy. He was just trying to answer the hardest question there is:

Who am I now?

What do you do when everything you were great at suddenly feels impossible? One day, his old high school coach challenged him to try handball.

Handball?

With one arm?

Mark laughed at the irony... eventually he bought in.

Mark took on the challenge with a great attitude.

He practiced.

He worked.

He adjusted.

And before long, he wasn't just playing, he was crushing it. Not in a "special" division. Not with modified rules. He played anyone, anywhere, anytime. And he beat them. Big matches. State tournaments. Guys would walk off the court just shaking their heads.

After dominating one of his opponents for the State Championship, someone asked him how he could beat someone so bad with only one hand.

Mark didn't hesitate.

"My opponents have two options, right hand or left hand," he said. *"I only have one."*

That line has never left me.

We think more options make leadership or life easier. In reality, they usually make us distracted, divided, and soft. The best leaders, coaches, CEOs and entrepreneurs win because they **simplify**. They eliminate noise. They understand "What's Important Now" and they commit to what matters most.

And that's the thread that's been running through every story in this book.

From **pregame** to **overtime**.

From locker room to boardroom.

One Option.

Turning water into wine.

Healing the Roman official's son.

Healing the paralytic.

Feeding the five thousand.

Walking on water.

Healing the blind.

Raising Lazarus from the dead.

Seven miracles. One message. None of them were meant to impress crowds. They were meant to point hearts. Every miracle whispered the same truth:

When you see Me... you see The Father. And, *When you follow Me, you find life.*

Every miracle was meant to move them.

Every miracle was an invitation to become part of your own miracle.

Seven miracles. One purpose.

Two words:

Follow Me.

That's it.

Jesus never positioned Himself as *one* option among many. He didn't say, "Try this and see how it works out."

He said, "I am the way."
One option.

It's true in coaching.
It's true in leadership.
It's true in parenting.
It's true in life.

Stephen Covey asks the question:

"Are we so busy climbing the ladder of success that we don't realize it's leaning against the wrong wall?"

I'd ask it this way:
Who is your ladder leaning on?

Because when everything gets stripped away, when the crowd fades, the market turns, when the noise dies down and the excuses run out, you don't need more options.
You need the right one.

When I think about Mark winning with one arm...

When I think about kids from nineteen countries running the same play...
When I think about a Savior who kept performing miracle after miracle...

It all comes back to this: stop complicating it.
No excuses.
No explanations.
Just move forward.

I'll be honest, I've climbed the wrong ladders.
I've coached games for the wrong reasons.
I've chased approval instead of purpose.
I've worried about opinions that never mattered.
I've stood at the top of ladders that looked successful, only to realize they were leaning against the wrong wall.

And maybe that's the lesson. No matter where you're from. No matter how chaotic life feels, you're not disconnected. You're just leaning somewhere.
Who is your ladder leaning on?

So here's the challenge. What do you want your life to look like?

Remember LION? *Life I Own Now*

Not the life you talk about someday.

Not the life you're waiting for when perfect conditions start.

The life you choose. The life you stand up and own right now.

Decide who you're going to lean your ladder on. Decide whose voice you're trusting.

Decide what playbook you're running when it actually matters.

Because transformational leadership in business, sports, and life all come down to the same decision:

One option.

One life you're willing to own.

One Name that never fails.

Jesus isn't just the best option.

He's the only one.

And He's calling you, not tomorrow, not when it's easier, but **now**, to believe, to lead, and to own it.

And like my good chaplain friend Ken Smith says,

“And that's what The BOOK says and The BOOK never lies!”

**Go
COACH 'EM UP**