

# THE SEARCH FOR WORK HAPPINESS

Helping leaders keep themselves and their people happy and mentally healthy.



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## A Note From the Author

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This book was originally released in print and audio a few years back. It is rooted in my personal experience running a creative business and learning, sometimes the hard way, how to lead with more empathy and build something that lasts.

Since then, a lot has changed. But the ideas here? Still close to my heart. Still relevant. Still something I come back to when I get stuck or need to recalibrate.

I hope it does the same for you: helps you reset your perspective, helps encourage you to consider how the humans around you are treated, and helps make the world a kinder place.

Thanks for taking the time. I hope it serves you well.

*David Lubofsky*

# Nothing truly different happens alone. Nothing.

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Anyone who knows me knows I despise doing things the way they have always been done. So, why would this book be any different?

First thing to *not* do as directed will be this “Thank you” section. Traditionally, this is supposed to stick to a single page and not distract the reader from the book.

Well, no thank you. Warning—there are multiple pages of “acknowledgement and appreciation” to sift through. Even QR codes to distract you from reading along further. It’s worth it. These people rock.

The second dramatically different thing is the actual book. Most business and self-betterment books typically have more words and lead with seriousness, which usually manifests in less art and even less humor. So, I decided to blow that shit up as well.



**To fulfill my business-book-breaking vision, this book had to:**

- Be composed of solidly-told, for-good storytelling
- Be a jaw-dropping art piece
- Make people smile and laugh WHILE making them rethink crazy business practices and/or bad human treatment happening around them
- Provide multiple ways for people to experience it, digitally and audibly

**“Well, this is going to take a flawless selection of individuals to pull off.”**

**The biggest thanks here goes out to my mother and brother. Without you, there are no for-good stories to tell.**

Mom, you helped me define so many of the morals driving every word in this book. And brother, you helped me refine what she taught me, learning to turn her moral teachings into in-the-moment life decisions and applications. Every story told in this book, every action I urge people to take in treating humans better...all of that came from you two. No one else. You get all the credit for creating the nice merp-monster. *I love you both dearly.*

**The for-good stories can't be told properly without being written properly. Thank you wifey for making the words not "so dumb".**

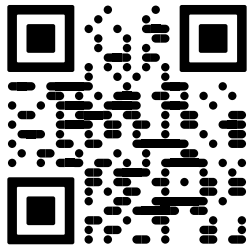
For years, you listened to me complain about the bad in our industry. *And you helped me document it.* Then, for years, you watched me work tirelessly with my business partner to try to fix those problems by creating a company that lived by our solutions. *And you helped me document it.* Now, my push is to share these thoughts with the world. *And you helped me document it.* I find it to be a pretty awesome piece of writing, and you were key in that. *Love!*

**But once the northerner added her touch, it lost a tad of the southern twang. Thank you, Audrey Mason, for sprinkling your southern charm into this piece.**

For over a decade, you have supported me with the kindness I miss from back home. For the last few years, you supported me in the formulating of so many thoughts found sprinkled through this book. And your infusion of fun into the storytelling is a gift from above. *Thank you for sharing that gift with me.*

**Once the content was done, how the hell would all of these insane business situations get visualized? Thank you Aaron Yeo for being THE most thoughtful, attentive, and creative illustrator I have met in my life.**

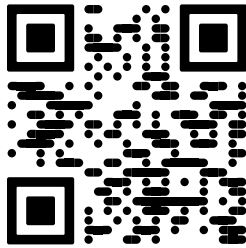
Everyone, run over to his Behance and look at the work. It is so unbelievable. From children's books to large scale art displays, the work is just always breathtaking. And the human experience is awesome as well. QR code to his Behance below!



Scan or [CLICK HERE](#)

**The final challenge was to turn this elaborate art piece + written and spoken word into a digital masterpiece. Thank you Bryan James for being the best digital designer I have met since birth.**

Like all great digital pieces, the print and digital aspects were conceived together. Bryan, you helped drive the layout of the book cover and digital experience in concert together, and have helped architect what I consider to be the most unique web-based experience ever created. QR code to his unbelievable portfolio below!



Scan or [CLICK HERE](#)

**And lastly, a big thanks to everyone else in my life who has supported me from the very first day that I met them.**

To David Brungard, for helping start a wave of solutions to address tons of the issues discussed in this book. To the entire y'all crew for putting those solutions into action and killing it. To Andrew and the entire Giant crew, thank you for rolling the dice on me (more on that within). To Dan Cap for making sure what I put out into the world was in a perfect production state. Bex. Kevin. Glenn. Danny. Foster. Dom. Just too many people to name, but each of you knows I love you. Dearly.

Enjoy!

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# INTRODUCTION



# Introduction

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I never set out to be a leader. I've worked a lot of jobs for a lot of people, and along the way I noticed the types of people I loved to work for—and the ones I didn't.

As a teenager, I worked anywhere I could make money. In local restaurants. From fast food delivery to ice cream shops. From road work to tech support, I basically would work anywhere that gave me a chance. When I got my first job offer in Chicago, I was just a twenty-something kid from the swamps of Louisiana hoping to make it.

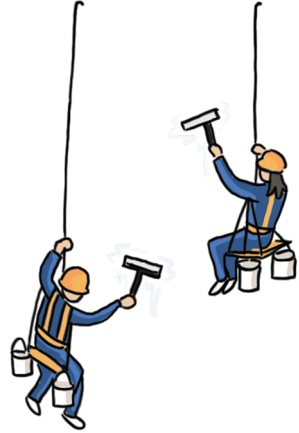
Did I buy a one-way ticket to the coldest place I'd ever been? Hell yes, I did.

The only thing I knew for certain was that if I wanted a better life, I had to leave home to build it. So I picked up and left home for the promise of a better future, open to wherever that would lead me. I swapped sweltering Louisiana sunshine for frigid temps of north Chicago, then the predictability of San Francisco's foggy mornings (and afternoons... and evenings... and—well, you get it), and, later, New York City's gritty, fast-paced vibe.

I seized every single opportunity I could to learn, to try to get myself ahead of the game. I tried to emulate the qualities I admired most about my managers: the ones that felt most like the Southern kindness fed to me just as often as my mother's gumbo back home.

It wasn't quite as tasty, but it sure was soothing to the soul.

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After a few years, I started finding myself in mentoring and managerial roles. I did my best to marry business acumen with kindness, and soon learned just how unorthodox that was. In general, the examples I was *supposed* to learn from just showed me how to treat employees like the money-makers they are. I heard so many people with C-level titles blab about how we should create better “work-life balance,” but I soon learned they were the same people who consistently asked their teams to stay late or make impossible sacrifices.

Out of one corner of their mouth (and on social media), they'd proclaim how important mental health is, and how employees should take allllll the time they need to heal. Out of the other corner of their mouth, they'd demand that those same employees submit their timesheets to reflect the exact amount of time it took them to heal—by 5PM on Friday.

In quarter-hour increments.

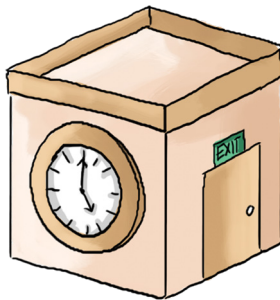
No exceptions.

So that's what this book is:

A collection of some of my learnings on how leaders can chill out about productivity and profit—and start treating their employees like the living, breathing humans they are (novel concept, I know).

# This isn't an all-or-nothing endeavor.

Tiny changes make a big impact over time. If one pitch is postponed until after the holidays so John can spend his Christmas with his newborn daughter instead of zoning into his computer screen, that's a huge win. If we can invest in our employees' side hustles, we acknowledge that they have other passions outside of work (*Spoiler alert:* my former business partner and I made this a habit, and it laid the foundation for some incredible professional relationships).



**According to the nerdy business articles I read,<sup>1</sup> the average full-time, salaried worker spends an estimated 115,000 hours of their lifetime working. We might as well be happy doing it.**

Implementing just one of the guiding principles in this book will lead you down the road to becoming a better leader, one your employees *actually* want to work for. And when people want to work for you, they work harder and better. Because they're happier.

You can be happy at work. Your employees can be happy at work. If we accept that the people who are working with us are, in fact, human beings with personal lives, and we act with kindness as our leading light, it is possible to change the way things have traditionally been done.



This book is about helping you  
find that work happiness, and  
creating that experience for your  
employees as well. I only ask that  
you read it with an open mind  
and a willingness to be kind.

# CHAPTER ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

# **Don't look too hard for red flags – you'll miss green ones**

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“He has ZERO experience in our industry” is one of those red flags that could have really halted my career growth. After working in Chicago for a while, I found myself at an impasse in my career and desperately needed someone to take a chance on me as a leader—or at least give me the opportunity to try to be one. I was doing what I felt was great work, and was having what felt to be a solid impact on those around me...but it wasn't translating into roles even remotely on the path of upward growth.

I began spraying emails across the country, like women using Aqua Net with reckless abandon in the 80s. I begged and pleaded with the recipients to give me a chance to show what I was made of, especially in areas other than art and code.

One of those emails landed in the inbox of an executive at a pharmaceutical ad agency in San Francisco—a city I had never even thought of going to, for an industry I had no experience in. This opportunity should have been swallowed up in the water like an escaped prisoner trying to make that insane swim from Alcatraz, which sat just a few thousand yards away.

There are some extremely rad people on earth, and this agency had quite the collection of them. This crew of digitally-focused unicorns humans looked past the naïve nature of my email (which, in retrospect, must have seemed so spammy) and noticed enough important green flags that they ignored the glaring red one.

Not only did my future boss (and the badass bosses above him) look beyond my lack of experience and give the green light to bring me across the country, but they built a team of kind, accepting humans around me to ensure my success. It turned out that coming from a different industry allowed me to offer a different perspective. Our group went on to deliver some amazing work and make some unforgettable memories together.

Years later, as I tied the knot 2000 miles away in the much chillier Connecticut climate, half of my groomsmen comprised people from this group. Hell, half of “my side” at the wedding came from this company, and they flew in from all areas of the country to be there. Those strong, solid friendships and relationships are just as strong now more than a decade later—all because of this simple twist in perspective by a few great people, focusing on what could work instead of what might not.



That said, some things just can't be taught, and sometimes experience in a certain field is a must. You definitely don't want to hire a surgeon for a heart transplant who has never done actual hands-on surgery.

**By no means am I suggesting to be blind to important red flags. I simply mean: don't be blinded by them.**

The area where I grew up was so rooted in close-mindedness that it drove the language and behaviors of almost everyone I knew (save for my mother and my brother). The tiny, intolerant town taught me to accept only people of my own race, and to look at the “not godly enough” or “not straight enough” people with a discerning side eye.



At a young age, the tiny bubble I existed in—the only world I had access to (no internet in those days!)—had groomed me to treat people that didn't fall into this crazy country criteria as red flags. Yet inside the safety of my home, my mother and brother tried to instill the virtues of treating everyone with kindness and respect. Life threw *quite* the mixed messaging at a young kid just trying to figure out the world.

I feel blessed to not have fallen victim to this brainwashed way of thinking. I was lucky enough to get constant, stern chats from my older brother that held me over until I got the key ingredient I was missing: actual exposure. I had never really been exposed to different walks of life, just told about them.

When I first moved north to a bigger city and was actually exposed to a melting pot of humans, I quickly learned that most of these “red-flagged people” were lacking actual red flags. It was all a lie.

It was the most eye-opening experience of my life.



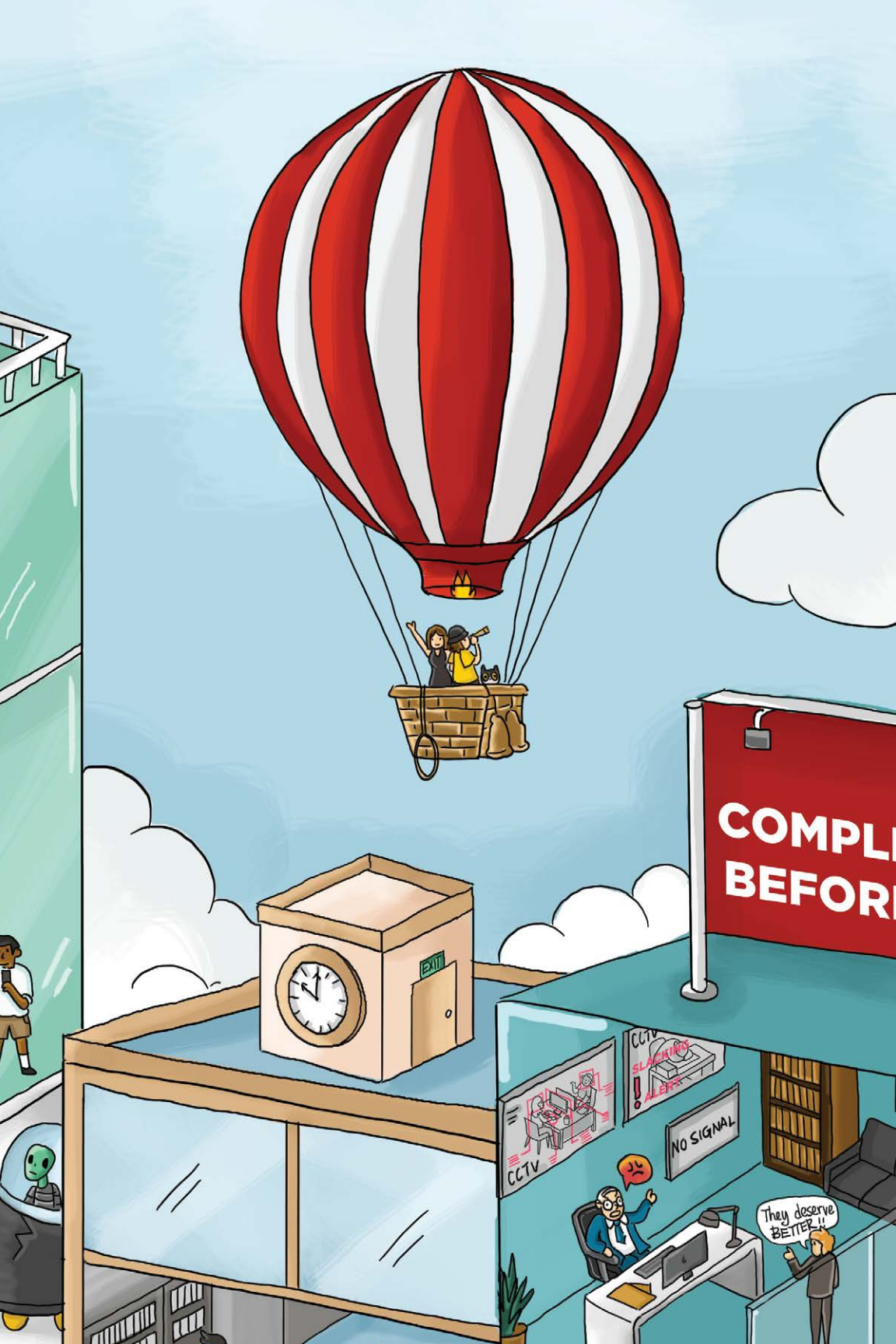
I'd be remiss to not address this: some red flags are downright dangerous and need to be removed from business—hell, earth—entirely. Race, gender, religion, and sexual preference (and this is certainly not a complete list) being considered red flags is at the core of why we have diversity and inclusion problems in the workplace. I know firsthand how it feels to be coerced into holding false beliefs based on these (and other) defining characteristics, and how eye-opening it is to realize that they simply aren't true. And though policy changes are nice, this way of thinking has to be stopped at the root for real progress to be made.

And boy, did that realization prepare me for business and leadership. Having eliminated those faux red flags from my visual vocabulary cleared up my vision to be better at spotting legit warning signs—and even better, at spotting signs of potential rock stars.



Don't let close-mindedness rob you  
of opportunities where you can  
positively change the trajectory of  
someone's entire life. See the red  
flags—just don't be blinded by them.

# CHAPTER TWO



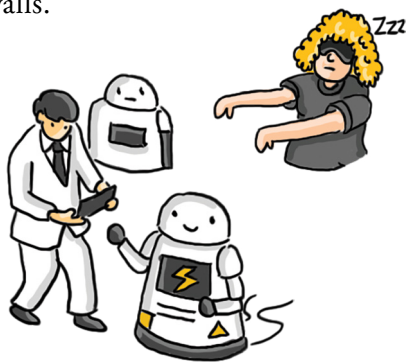
## CHAPTER TWO

# Build the place *they* pictured – not the place you did

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Picture this: On their first day of work, the employees at my company walk into our office with utter amazement. In what has to be the most colorful office in the Northeast, elaborate murals stretch from idea-filled whiteboards onto bright-colored walls.

To the left, rooms with floor-to-ceiling glass walls accommodate groups of pajama-wearing innovators, collaborating to solve earth's most pressing problems, using the latest in emerging technology and robotics.



To the right, people huddle around an expansive conference table, in ergonomic chairs that literally have their backs, as they review user research in the most thoughtful way.

Straight ahead, the stunning communal kitchen offers the most exclusive, hard-to-get-your-hands-on craft beer, and exotic coffee stations emanating the most luxurious aromas wafting through the air.

And because the city's stellar sports records seem to have taken everyone by storm, the hallways are lined with memorabilia showcasing some of the most iconic moments in sports. EVERYONE is a Boston Red Sox fan!

Once they walk through those custom-made double doors, it's as if each employee enters an amusement park heaven built especially for creative geeks. The true definition of work happiness.

...or is it? When I set out to build my own company, that's what I pictured the office would resemble someday. It turned out that was my vision of work happiness. But everyone has their own vision.

I had to learn quickly that it didn't matter what I envisioned. Once you agree to be a leader—a manager, a mentor, a business owner—you have to stop trying to create the space that you dreamed up and start creating a world that the people working with you actually want to be part of. When you're the one cutting the paychecks, your people depend on you for their personal livelihood, yes. But they also depend on you to make their working lives bearable and (dare I say it?) *better*. Chances are, your vision and theirs are not even remotely similar.



When a close friend and I started giving each other that look over cubicle walls (you know the one: the “we could do this a hell of a lot better” look), we took the leap and started our own digital agency.

This would be the place where we could implement our vision. Where we could run our business with kindness and integrity. Where our employees would find joy in their work and their workplace because the leaders treated them with dignity. Where Red Sox memorabilia would hang on every wall. (Hey, a guy can still hope.) Because we knew better.



But of course, what my first company actually ended up becoming was the opposite of the Red Sox shrine I had pictured in my head. As we grew, the folks we hired turned out to be pretty sports-averse.

Instead, the culture flourished on a company-wide love for pets (not me!), balloon riding (not me!), bird watching (not me!), unconventional/underground music concerts (not me!), and fine wines (also not me!). But everyone was so happy with the culture that developed, and that *is* me: wanting the humans around me to feel seen, heard, and appreciated.

Looks like the most important part of my vision **did** come true.

How'd it happen? Pretty simple, honestly. My business partner and I made sure there were opportunities and time for people to connect, and then we stepped back and let it happen. They figured out common grounds on their own, made their own spaces that they were extremely comfortable in, and forged the connections we hoped we'd see. Watching the culture develop as a result of the people, rather than what we wanted, was beautiful. During a time where the phrase “toxic workplaces” was trending, we were helping to facilitate the opposite.



Years later, when it was time to leave my company, I was able to do so very comfortably knowing my employees had found their way to creating their own work happiness—whether it aligned with my vision or not.

Creating the perfect space for those around you goes far beyond having a voice internally—you have to give them a voice externally, as well. My first experience with this happened when I moved to the frigid air of Chicago to work under mostly-frigid management. Living and working there was quite the departure from what I was used to in the South—in more ways than one. Big companies in big cities are, as you'd expect, more cutthroat, and unless you're willing to play that game, you get left in the dust.

This would prove to be growth-inhibiting for my career when I was first starting out (and I am 6'7", so growing has never been a problem for me). But I didn't understand the rules of the game at that time, and now I know, it wasn't a game I ever wanted to play.



If you walk into any client presentation, chances are the upper-level folks are the ones presenting and defending the work—work that, all too often, they were not responsible for creating. It's one of those things that we have accepted without question because it's the way things have always been done: junior-level employees get the grunt work, and the senior-level employees get the credit.

However, amidst a lot of things that just never felt right was one thing that did: the introduction to an amazing human, a part-owner at one of the Chicago agencies I worked for, and someone I could quickly tell

was special. And though I was completely disconnected from this partner in discipline, I watched like a hawk from afar. Though he definitely had some traits and methods I was not as aligned with, the way he approached team leadership was so refreshingly different. Why? He was adamant that everyone had a voice.



What really caught my hawk-eye was how he enforced this extremely novel concept of presenting your own work, *regardless of your career level or job title*. If I remember any one thing he said, it's this: "We don't sell great presentations. We sell great work." It blew my mind, because it was contradictory to everything I had ever heard managers say or seen managers do.

### **Side note:**

This may or may not come as a surprise, but no single person is perfect. Everyone has their redeeming qualities, the ones you most seek to emulate, and those same people will have qualities that you just don't jive with. Cherry-pick from what you see and hear with precision. Separate and analyze those redeeming qualities as best you can to concoct your own formula for the type of leader you want to be. It's different for everyone. Just be sure to pick the ones that feel closest to kindness, and don't be an asshole.

# “You’re too junior!”



It’s a phrase that beginner-level employees commonly hear, but it was one that he adamantly refused to say.

If a junior employee created the work, the junior employee presented it—to any internal team or any external client, at any level. And this leader would have a front-row seat every time, ready to defend the hell out of it.

Needless to say, these are rare opportunities for junior-level employees. I look back now and think about the glow on the faces of people who would get the opportunity to learn how to present their own work, early on in their career. I could see the pride, regardless of how they performed. I watched them learn, stumble over their words, and ultimately figure out how to present in a way Don Draper would envy. Mostly because it was their own work that they were given the chance to put on display.

It was infectious, invigorating to watch, and I personally never saw it go poorly. Did that partner deal with some tough behind-the-scenes conversations about why the client presentations weren’t pristine? More than likely. But if that’s the worst thing that happened, I’d still consider it a win. We never lost the work because of it. And those juniors became powerful, confident leaders themselves.

It was a clear indicator to me at the time: file this idea away for the day you have the power to do the same. This was a management technique that definitely needed to be in my arsenal. I’ve shared this story so many times during the course of my career, encouraging others to just give it a try.

# So simple, yet so genius: give the credit where it's due.

Allow people to learn early in their careers. If it's their idea, they've earned it. When you recognize a person's efforts, you show that you care about them and the trajectory of their career.

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With all of that said, arming everyone with opportunities to have their voice heard is noble and ethically correct—but we don't shove them in front of a room with a “Good luck, buddy!” and let that be that. It's still our job to help mold their voice to be refined, powerful, and thoughtful. If you are at all good at your craft, chances are someone helped mold the way you speak, present, and come across.

### **An easy first step:**

Start heavily investing in the development of your teams' foundational skills. Studies by the Harvard Business Review<sup>7</sup> tell us that 94% of employees say they would stay longer at a company if it offered learning and development opportunities (and I'm betting that means more than a library of videos that people have to find free, unbillable time to watch). When employees lack those opportunities, one of two things will happen: they'll become stagnant, getting used to a less-than-stellar way of doing things, or they'll immediately start to look elsewhere to find their work happiness in places more invested in their people.

Opportunities for growth are more important than putting on a show for a client. And opportunities for voices to be heard shouldn't be determined by seniority.

# CHAPTER THREE





### CHAPTER THREE

## **Support their dreams – or they’ll dream of leaving**

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What’s the difference between Emily, who has a part-time, growing pottery business, and Eric, who seems to clam up every time hobbies and side hustles come up in conversation?

You know one of them has a side hustle.

Emily felt comfortable enough to share that information with you, so how do you repay that trust? You support her side hustle.

Let’s face it: she’s thinking about it anyway. (And there’s a good chance Eric is thinking about his, too, if he has one.)

There’s no such thing as a perfect job—leaders, don’t lie to yourselves—and that fact alone leaves a void for creative fulfillment. That’s how hobbies and hustles on the side came to exist.

I know from experience that working in advertising, as grand and glorious as it may sound from the outside, often stunts the growth of creatives who are forced to adhere to strict brand guidelines and crazy client demands.

I've felt my creative muscles stymied in that exact same way many times before. So when it came time to be a leader, I wanted to use it as fuel to create an atmosphere where people could share what they love to do. Whereas some leaders tend to be bitter and even discouraging about people's endeavors outside the office, I saw it as an opportunity to foster a better working environment.

I genuinely wanted the people I worked with every day to find space and time for things that set their souls on fire. When you become a spark plug for the dreams of those working for you, you ignite passion and confidence in those people. How do they return that kindness? In the form of hard, dedicated work.

Research supports this as well. In the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Kevin J. Eschleman and crew linked people having side hobbies to better performance at work.<sup>3</sup> Eschleman's team coined it "non-work creative activity," and found that employees who engaged in this type of activity were better able to relax and recover from the demands of their roles. In turn, this had effects on how well employees performed at work.

In other words, it's all a cycle, and it's up to us as leaders to start spinning those wheels.

**Pro tip:**

If you find yourself in a position where you can, let's say, buy your employee's pottery as holiday gifts for the company, DO IT!

You're supporting who they are and what they dream of. That employee feels recognized. You've just created the foundation for a great working relationship.

And if that isn't the most important part of leadership, then what are we even talking about!



Now, here's the elephant in the proverbial room:

**There's a fine line between showing up for your people and getting too involved in their personal lives.**

I will admit it: I have needed help finding where that fine line is. I want to be everyone's friend, help each human through every wall they run into, and support everyone quite blindly. But just because that's what I want doesn't mean I'm entitled to it. Maybe an employee doesn't feel comfortable being friendly with their manager; maybe they need to break through those walls on their own; and maybe my blind support isn't what they need.

Ultimately, get to know as much about your people as they're willing to share. Tread lightly on that line until you find your footing. If we think back to Eric in the example, maybe he's new and isn't as willing to share his outside hobbies yet. Maybe he's still looking for a place to fit in. Maybe he just doesn't want to. And that is okay—as long as he knows that the door is open and the invitation is there to share if and when he ever wants to.

And when it comes to Emily, become an innovative problem-solver when she asks to scale back on her hours to focus on her growing business. Create an atmosphere where people like Emily feel comfortable sharing as much or little of their lives as they choose. Use that information as creatively, carefully, and kindly as possible.

Doing this not only encourages Emily to invest time in herself, but it also feeds back into the “create an environment built for them” approach mentioned in Chapter 2. It's only a matter of time until this philosophy starts catching on in other workplaces. If you don't give your employees the space to express themselves, it's only a matter of time until you lose a good employee to a company that's willing to let them do so.

**If you don't give your people the support and time to follow their dreams before and after work, they're less likely to focus on the work in front of them during the workday. And, who knows, maybe something special happens, and your support helps fuel the success of their future business.**

**What a proud moment that would be, huh?**

**Here's how to chill out and put this in action today.**

Find out what your employees' hobbies are: set up five-minute meetings with everyone—or at the very least, do a company-wide survey—but make the effort to find out. Then, find ways to support every single one of them over the course of the next year. Every single one.

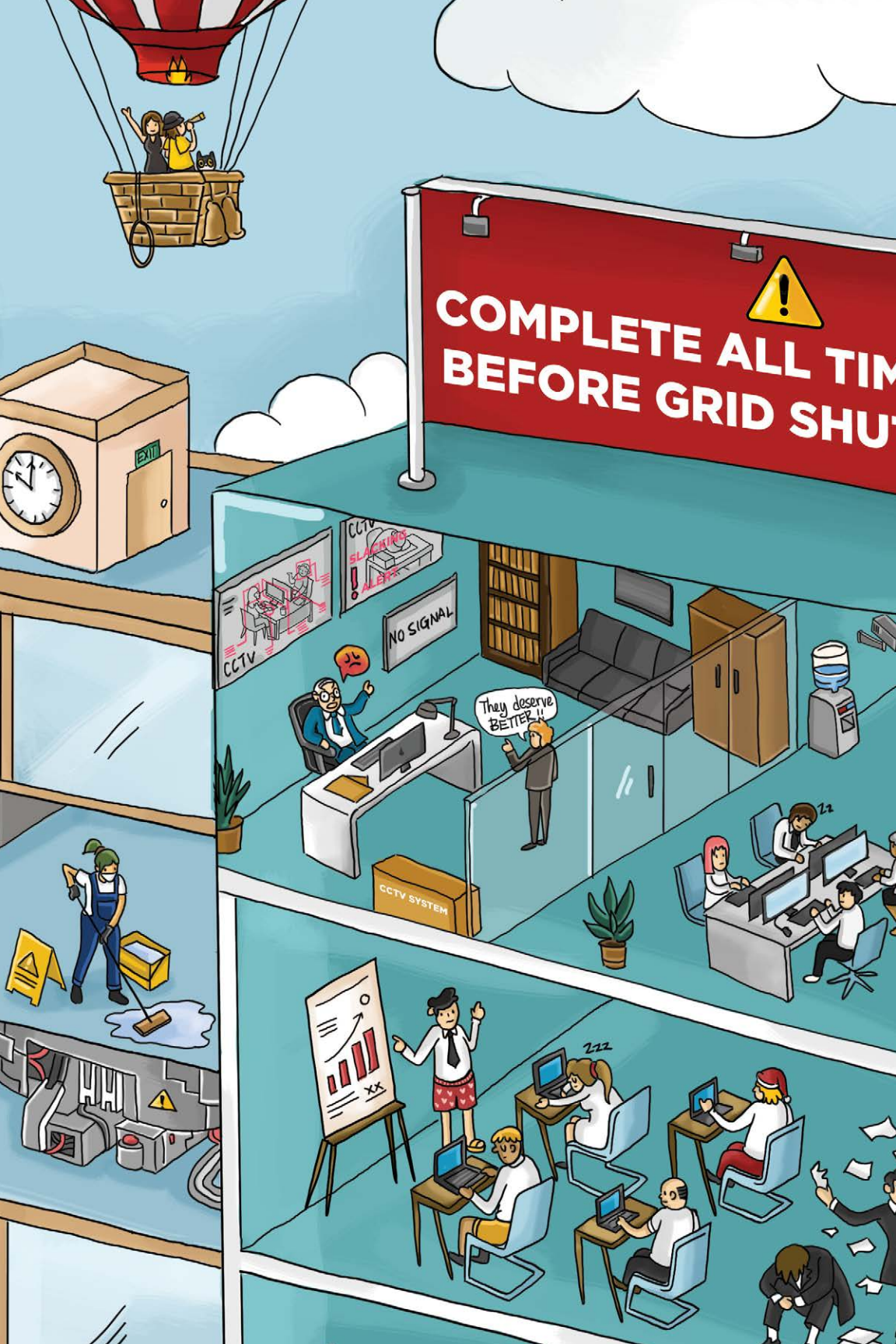
If you have an employee that could die happily in a vat of coffee, first ensure death by caffeine is not upon them, then host a craft coffee day at work. If you have an employee who makes beaded bracelets, commission them to make pieces for the entire company. If you have an employee who's deeply passionate about a certain cause, match their donation or help host a fundraiser.

Our employee holiday gifts at my last company were always done this way, and it creates connections and community across the whole company. Everyone gets to experience a more personal side of the folks they work with every day.

Find ways to support their ideas,  
their dreams, for their gain. You  
want them to be better, not bitter.  
If you don't support them, someone  
else will.



# CHAPTER FOUR



## CHAPTER FOUR

# **Know when to stand up for your team – and when to step back**

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Before we begin, I want to make one thing clear: I am not condoning childhood fighting.

But when you grow up in the 1980s looking like Paul Pfeiffer from *The Wonder Years*, being able to stand up for yourself is quite crucial. And lucky for me, I have an older brother who understood, at a really young age, how to prepare me to do that.

We were a small family in a small town. My brother always drove home this concept of going all-in on protecting those closest to you. Although time somewhat alters memories as the decades pass, I am certain my brother got suspended from taking the school bus hundreds of times for standing up to kids who were picking on me. It was a dorky kid's dream: the childhood equivalent of a Vin Diesel-esque brother in grade school. No one would lay a finger on me...except the times he let them.

I'm not sure how he learned this, but somehow he inherently knew that there are times you need to step in, and times you need to step back and let someone learn through experience. And man, my brother had the uncanny ability, even at a young age, to understand when to do which.

Over time, he let me handle those situations on my own more and more often. One very proud day (for me, although my mother expressed quite a different emotion), *I* was the one getting suspended off the bus! When he went to high school and it was time for me to fend for myself, I was very prepared—thanks to great leadership from someone way too young to understand the impact he had made.

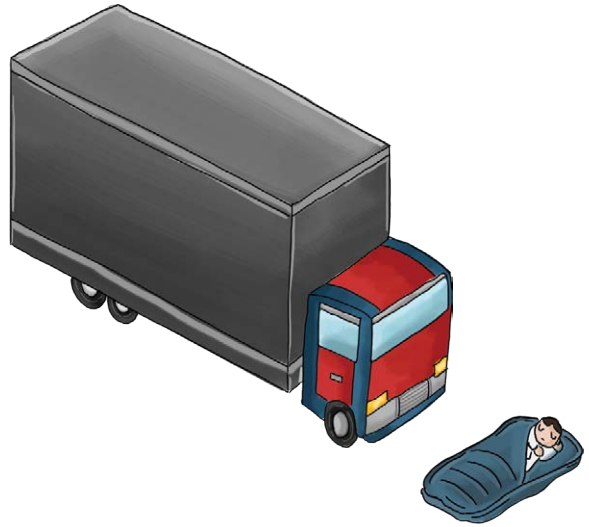
**Proud brother note:**

My big brother is wrapping up 20+ years of military leadership. I am forever indebted to him for this lesson he taught me, though he didn't stop there. He taught me how to grow up with a good head on my shoulders, treat people right, and lead with kindness.

He is a big part of the reason I'm even able to write this book.

It should come as no surprise that I will now lay in front of oncoming traffic for my people. (Figuratively, of course.) And yes, I get run over sometimes, or maybe I just didn't see what he went through to defend me.

I probably don't have that same uncanny know-how that my brother possesses, but I definitely understand the true meaning of loyalty and the impact it has on your people. And have tried my very best to put it into practice, especially when I was in a "big brother" mode leading an agency.



When we were a teeny tiny agency, the concept of sticking up for my team whenever they weren't treated right felt very brave and...almost thrilling. That is, until I actually had to do it. The first time I was faced with a step-up-or-step-back scenario, it was with our first BIG-named brand. *Really?*

Having this client's name on our roster would have propelled us upward in ways that make me queasy to think about now. But we quickly learned that flying long-term on this path would result in a turbulent cultural and moral descent. They demanded concessions from us that we weren't prepared for or willing to make. We hung on as best we could, thinking that maybe these were just growing pains; surely our scrappy young agency would face those in getting to know our new, polished, high-profile clients.

But I had to draw the line when a member of their IT staff gave us the middle finger during one of our Zoom calls. Beyond unprofessional, it was downright disrespectful. It was clear that they were not interested in partnering with us. It was clear they thought we were "less than" them, not worthy of being treated like humans. They knew they had the upper hand and used it to their advantage.

I, however, will not point fingers, but what I will say is that we quickly found ourselves backed into a corner of the ring and had to make a decision fast. The prospect of standing up to a Big Client felt eerily like those times I had been punched in the gut as a kid, when my brother stepped back to let me learn. Standing our ground and sticking up for our team against BIG names and BIG dollars could leave us with nothing to show for our efforts.

And that was the case. We chose to stand up for our people. We chose to part ways with the client. And it left us holding neither the BIG name, nor the BIG dollars.

Those came later; the universe usually has a funny way of repaying great decisions. We stood our ground before the plane plummeted to it, and the relationship ended in a less-spectacular type of crash. We were transparent about what had happened with our people, and it was extraordinarily clear that our decision was one that changed the future of our company and their employment at it.

**Sometimes, the right thing to do  
is plant your feet into the ground.  
Don't budge a damn inch.**

**Pro:** When doing this, your team will feel insanely supported. We may have taken a step back in terms of profitable work, but we took a huge step forward in building trust with our team. And you will experience fulfillment from the courage and appreciation from your team.

**Con:** It's quite easy to come across wrong when "*standing firm*". It's a risky move, and often a very emotional one. And even if you do it with grace, do it too often and "quitting" can become your image.

Zero employees left our company, despite the external treatment we experienced, and all were left smiling from the outcome. BUT, had we not stood firm and continued to allow that treatment to steamroll us, I have no doubt there would have been an exodus of great humans with superior talent. This was a clear case where it was time to stand up for the people the way they hadn't experienced at their previous places of employment—it is why they left them, after all!

And man...when you execute the application of past lessons into new situations and it works great, you feel like you are on top of the world. Everyone does.

That said, things don't always fall into place like it did for us. Be very careful of when and how you employ that technique. Sometimes standing up for small positive things can have larger negative consequences.

For example, your employees trust you to create a safe working space, but they also trust you to deliver their paycheck. We were in the fortunate situation where we were able to stand our ground with no negative impact to our employees or their paychecks.

**Sometimes, the right thing to do is remove yourself from the situation to ensure no one else is impacted.**

**Pro:** When doing this, it teaches those around you an important lesson that some battles just don't need to be fought. And it most likely prevents some drama!

**Con:** You don't want your team feeling like you don't have their backs, so be careful in making sure they understand the reason you stepped away from the situation.



Years later, I actually had to execute this approach of “remove yourself”. And as much of a bummer as it was, it allowed me to “move onto high school” — and let my team handle the “bus ride” themselves. 😊

**Lastly, there are sometimes  
that you have no idea what  
the right thing to do is.**

**Pro:** It's a learning experience. In these cases, have honest conversations with everyone directly impacted. Be completely transparent with them (see *Chapter 9 on Transparency* 😊) and ask for their input. Then mix their input with your gut<sup>4</sup> and learn to live with the results of your informed decisions.

**Con:** It's a learning experience, and you have a 50/50 shot of things going very, very wrong. But that's what a learning experience is. And at least you know that if it does go wrong, you put your people first.

Regardless of which approach you take, remember that as a leader, your people come first. Not your clients, not other partners, or vendors. If you aren't willing to stand up for them, who will?

And yes, you should do this even if the result isn't financially beneficial to you.

# CHAPTER FIVE



## CHAPTER FIVE

# **Passion over profit – mix in projects that have real value**

---

I once worked at a company that held a *Shark Tank*-like “pitch your passion project” initiative. I sat and watched so many of my coworkers—from the bold and brave to the shy and silent—bring projects to senior leadership that we would never normally work on. Some had family members suffering from a disease they wanted to address; others wanted to bulk up their portfolios with work they could actually brag about; and many of them wanted to flex their creative muscles outside the bounds of client demands.

The thing that still sticks out in my mind today was how passionate these people were about things that had nothing to do with their assigned work. I learned so much about each of them just listening to their presentations, things I’d never have known otherwise. When you get stuck in the cycle of client demands, it’s easy to recycle the same tired ideas over and over again. But this initiative lit a creative fire in those presenting these ideas unlike anything I’d seen up until then.

I think sometimes, as employees, we feel like we have to check our identities at the door and embody what we're working on. We tend to lose our voices, our passions, and our outside interests inside the office confines.

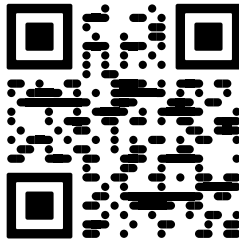
This initiative was supposed to give employees back that voice. But lo and behold, not one of those projects ever saw the light of day.

Not. One.

The bottom line: the company would have landed in the red from sacrificing too much green, so every single one was scrapped. I was furious. I understood that initiatives like the ones we heard are not cheap to make a reality. But they *asked* for impactful ideas—what did they expect? Not to mention, this company spent a fortune on so-called “culture” initiatives like free alcohol and snacks. Wouldn't that money be better spent on creating a culture where people not only felt heard, but like their voice went toward something that was bigger than themselves?

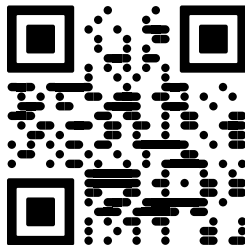
**I vowed to myself that if I was ever in the position, I would give people the space to pursue their passions, even if it cut into the company's profit. And that is precisely what I did.**

My wife's family has been affected by Alzheimer's disease three times during the last six years. The first passion project we did at y'all (the agency I co-created) was to partner with her to build a website that presented Alzheimer's educational material in a health literacy-friendly way, using some creative techniques to allow users to adjust their reading level. *100% passion, \$0 profit.*



Scan or [CLICK HERE](#)

When we grew a little larger, it was clear that many of our employees were passionate about climate change. We developed “Are y’all green?”, a website resource that combines the forces of our developers, artists, copy, editorial, and social media teams to provide new and relevant facts about our planet. *100% passion, \$0 profit.*



Scan or [CLICK HERE](#)



These weren't the only projects we did, but you get the idea: we don't have to turn a financial profit for every single thing we do. We can profit in other ways: enhanced creativity, better working relationships, happiness in the workplace. We can do great things that empower our people to pursue their passions at *work* (gasp!). Not only do acts of charity have an impact on the person(s) receiving the giving, but it will make a profound imprint on everyone involved.

### **How to start making changes today:**

- Poll your employees about what they're passionate about. Truly and honestly listen to their answers. Then, start a list of potential ideas and initiatives to work on. Include other for-good and/or not-for-profits to donate to, fundraise for, or partner with.
- During the hiring process, ask potential employees about what for-good initiatives drive them to get out of bed in the morning. How do they want to affect change? And then add that to the list of potentials for future donations or not-for-profit collaborations/partnerships.
- Offer incentives to your people when their ideas create revenue. And not just desk plaques. Real incentives.
- Support their ideas even when there is no ROI for the agency. Don't be greedy. Your sole intention should be to foster creativity, confidence, and camaraderie; no cents makes sense.

## **The result?**

**We got to produce some pretty awesome work, making an impact on many in need, and our people felt like their voices had finally been heard.**

Each person we lead is trying to find happiness and purpose in what they do. Studies show that giving and charitable acts of kindness do just that: instill purpose and worth in one's life.<sup>5</sup>

# CHAPTER SIX



## CHAPTER SIX

# **Don't beat your team down – especially to pitch new clients**

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Online dating is all the rage. It can land you around some pretty sketchy people, but it also can lead you to the love of your life. Dating is a brutal game. One way to approach it? Go all-in on the first date.

I mean it. Rent a helicopter, empty your bank account to book the entire restaurant, tell all of your best stories, have all the important people you know “pop in”, and only order the most expensive bottles of wine. Show the other person how unbelievable a life with you can be. Make them feel special, and make them feel that you are special.



Except there's one problem with this approach: it isn't who you are, and that is not even remotely what life with you will be like. When you lie to make a great first impression, you're not only fooling the other person, but you're setting an impossibly high standard to live up to.

Getting a “yes” to a second date would actually be awful, because the display you just put on can't be repeated. The relationship hasn't started honestly, and now you have to either hit the Powerball or have a very awkward conversation when you bring that person to a *regular* restaurant in your *regular* car. The love of your life might turn down that third date because they've been bamboozled into believing you're someone you aren't.

Why is it any different with a future client?

**Way too often in business, we roll out an unsustainable red carpet for our potential clients.**

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The pitch process usually goes something like this:



1. Client spends countless hours developing an insanely long (*and—sorry, clients, but—tedious*) written request for proposal.
2. Agency burns the midnight oil, as well as tens of thousands of dollars, while putting their employees' brains through a meat grinder (not to mention, shifting their focus away from *existing* clients)—all for a shot in the dark.
3. Agency sends the “A” team to present all of that hard work to clients—a team who has participated in very little of the work and will not touch any future work if they, in fact, win the pitch.

If you are one of the lucky agencies to financially, mentally, and physically survive the pitch process AND you actually win the business, then this usually follows:

1. The new clients and the “A” team meet, shake hands, and hammer out the financial details and high-level (read: vague) ideas for what they'll work on together.
2. Once on board, clients are passed over to **strangers** the team that actually does the work. The “A” team that sold the work is on to...well, to sell more work that they won't work on.
3. Something gets lost in translation, most likely because the “A” team promised something that's not actually possible (helicopter, anyone?).

...continued on next page

4. The subsequent work produced is **NOTHING** like anyone had hoped.
5. The clients begin to blame their working team for the lies they were made to believe, sometimes resulting in awful treatment by the clients toward the team handling the day-to-day work.
6. The relationship between clients and the agency drastically deteriorates.
7. Client waits 1-2 years and restarts the process with a new agency.

What did either side expect? This process leaves agencies with tired, frustrated clients. Can you blame them? They were sold something completely different.

Pitching new work is an insanely destructive process for both sides really: the agency in the short term, and the clients in the long run. Yet we continue to repeat it over and over, year after year.

(And if you are a client who's reading this, what did you expect? *We all* know better by now than to buy tickets to the dog-and-pony show that agencies are forced to perform in.)

No project will actually run the way it's presented in that conference room. Like any over-the-top, dress-to-impress first date, it isn't real. Guesswork replacing client involvement? No regard for thousands of dollars spent on a chance for a chance?

Yeah, right.

So why do we participate in starting business relationships this way? Why rent the helicopter in the first place? Shouldn't we be showing up to that first date as...ourselves?

Clients and agencies alike, if you take nothing else away from this book, please take this:

## **There is a better way.**

It starts with us all agreeing to go back to being human beings who converse with each other.

---

## **Clients pitching out work:**

Think about the types of people you want to work with on a daily basis. Think about the actual type of work you'll be asking for. Do you want partners who will work their asses off to produce their best work for you? Or are you looking for a scapegoat to blame things on when your higher-ups aren't happy? (You won't have to answer "yes" to the second question if you answer "yes" to the first.)

Don't make potential partners jump through hoops. Ask for a capabilities intro and a conversation. Talk honestly with each other instead (do you even *want* to sit through hours of hundred-page slide decks?). Determine if you can work with the HUMANS in front of you. Try to find financial alignment, and then go!

## Companies pitching for work:

When you agree to pitch, you agree to flush your sanity and your hard-earned dollars down the toilet. Plus, you're saying yes on behalf of your team—are they already booked solid with existing client work? Will they be forced to finish up their mandatory 8 billable hours, then put in another 8 on this pitch? Are you putting your team's mental health at risk?

Before you balk at the idea of turning down pitches, go down the rabbit hole with me for a minute here. Let's say you'd typically invest \$10,000 into a pitch to *maybe* get some new business and/or expand your client roster. What else could you do with that time and money?

You could invest it into efforts for your own clients, fostering organic growth. Show them the depth of your creative genius beyond the borders of a creative brief. Bonus points if you can create something that you can do for your client *and* add to your portfolio (I know those NDAs can severely limit what companies and employees can put in their portfolios.)

You could do something good for the world (*see Chapter 5*). Show the world what interests the people in your company, and let clients come to you. You'd get to work with your employees on something that truly matters to them, and at the same time, show the world what happens when you downright refuse to make every hour billable. Great work gets noticed. Put great work out into the world, while doing something for a great cause. Smiles and opportunities will follow.

You could invest that time into personal development for yourself and your teammates, coming up with wild ideas to recklessly abandon the pitch process, and see if it attracts the type of client you're looking to partner with. (Spoiler alert: I did it, and it worked.)

Word will spread that you and/or your company are awesome, and people will want to work with you. And *for* you. Treat your current clients and other agency partners with kindness, do great work, and work will come your way. Burnout-free.

---

**Even at the end of this chapter,  
I can feel your skepticism.**

**“David, it’s just the way things are  
done, we can’t fight the way the  
big giants do things.”**

**I hear you. So here’s a little  
research to prove my point.**

**In 2022, Gallup, Inc. conducted one of the largest studies regarding employee frustration and burnout to date. It found that the five largest drivers of employees being “over it” were<sup>1</sup>:**

- Unfair treatment at work
- Unmanageable workload
- Unclear communication from managers
- Lack of manager support
- Unreasonable time-based expectation

## **What do new business pitches require? All 5 of the above. 🤔**

In order for things to be different, we don't just have to think differently—we have to act differently, too, and that can be pretty jarring. Refusing a business pitch more or less tops the list, because you are risking thousands or millions of dollars that would go to a competing agency.

But things will never change if we do things the way they've always been done. And starting off a client-vendor relationship with a lie is setting ourselves (and our clients, partners, and employees) up to fail in so many different ways.











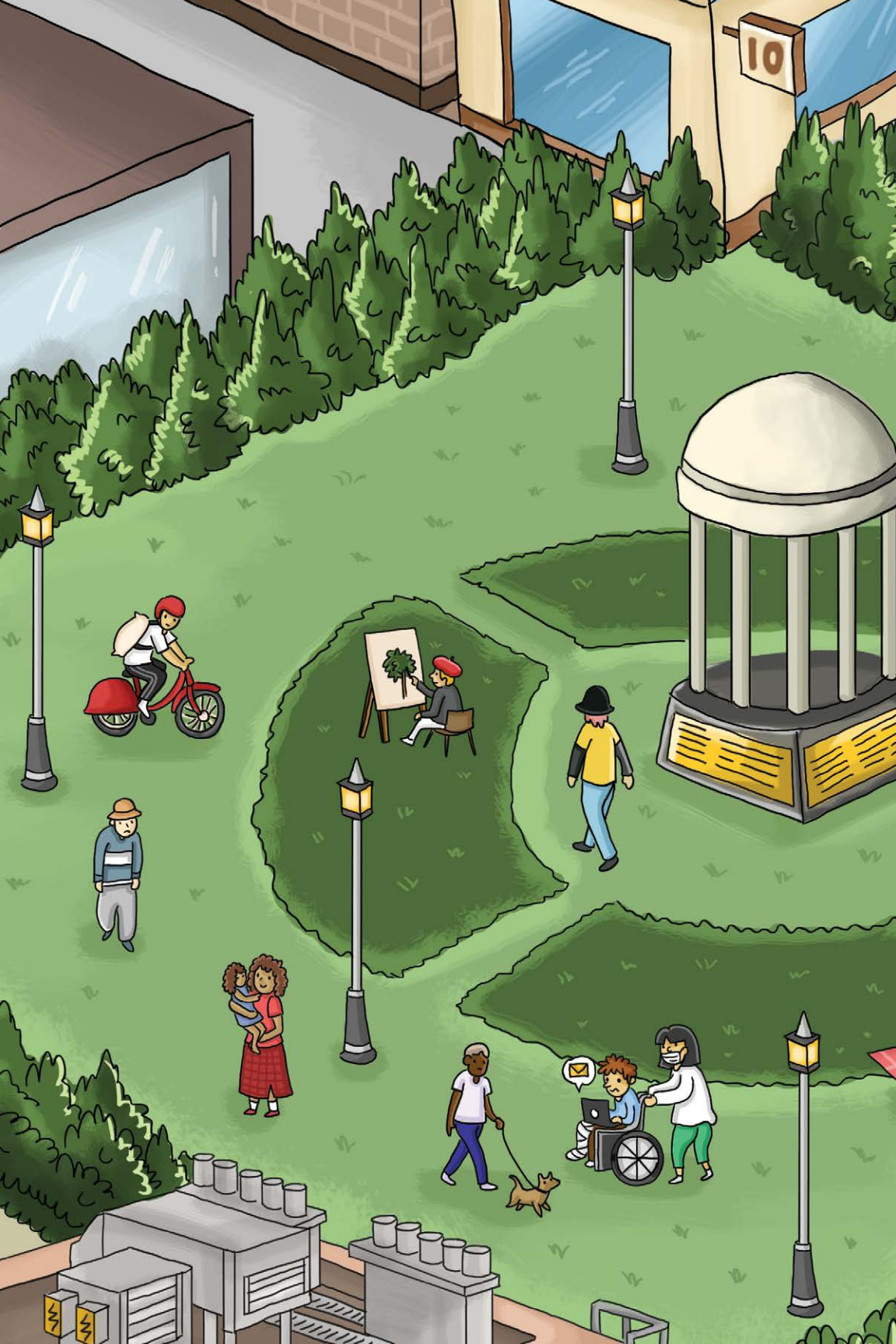






# CHAPTER SEVEN





## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Promote talented employees – without forcing them into leadership

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A few years back, I shared an office with two great humans who I still consider close friends today, both of whom are legendary talents and just all-around nice dudes. The two of them were key drivers behind most of the solid campaign work that was coming out of the building. As the “digital” guy in the room, I had always been kept pretty separate from their arena of work. It was *quite* an experience to have a front-row seat, watching it come to life each time—from banter to sketch to color to a final jaw-dropping product. Their process amazed me every single time. I would have loved to apprentice under them.

However, they are probably the last people on that massive team who I would have wanted supervising a large group of people. However, to make the kind of money they deserve, and have the career growth that they’ve earned, they have to take those management duties on. And *living* working in the same office with them, I noticed how much of their time was spent on mundane tasks, like signing off on timesheets or being required to have one-on-ones with their direct reports. These two creative geniuses were saddled with scholars waiting to learn from them,

when it was clear that their time would have been *way* better spent doing the things they were clearly the best at.

It's this really odd corporate habit that demands you either take on management skills or stop growing upwards—whether or not you are good at managing. And as much as I love those two people, both the people under them AND the work probably suffered a little as they juggled their love with their forced responsibilities. Some people should just be left alone to do sick work.

In corporate America, we seem to have accepted this business practice without question. No one talks about it.

**The rule is, if you want to grow in and above your role, you have to be responsible for the growth of others.**

**...or do we?**

It's what I'm dubbing the ladder pyramid.

(Two great terms in corporate jargon, now combined into one mega-jargon. Two for the price of one! I digress.)

Here's what I mean: once folks start on a career path, they climb that slippery corporate ladder from junior to middle manager to supervisor and so on. There are so many juniors taking that first step, but as they

advance into the next new role, the rails of the ladder narrow, and only a few can climb to the next level.

At some point mid-ladder, these folks—many of whom are ill-equipped to manage young talent, or simply don't want to—are handed new junior employees with the directive, “Groom them!” And that becomes their next challenge; not more advanced work, or something that might fit more in line with their skillset, but *human* beings. And they can now only advance if those junior employees succeed.

**Side note:**

There are some seriously talented managers on the ladder pyramid. We're not talking about those unicorns. (And hey, while we're at it, if you know one, go congratulate them on their innate management prowess! It is a true gift.)

Then things get *really* nutty. Great talent who aren't great supervisors hit a ceiling early in their careers. They're penalized either for not being great team managers or for not wanting to be managers at all—they just want to focus on their craft and don't really have a taste for group leadership.

We're talking about humans in perpetual limbo. While slightly-above-mediocre managers slip by under the radar for simply following the ladder pyramid, the folks who are extremely talented at their craft (but aren't cut out for management for whatever reason) get left in the proverbial dust.



Promotion of great talent shouldn't have to equal forced leadership responsibilities. Elevate leaders into leadership roles and put everyone else in the places that make them the happiest and most successful.

And conversely, don't promote incompetent lifers into leadership roles just because they're lifers—only put people into leadership positions who are or have the interest/capacity to be actual leaders (the aforementioned unicorns, for instance). The ones who tell you they want to lead, and at the very least, those who show extreme promise.

Great managers are more than just time-wasting time cops (*see next chapter*)—they are leaders who flawlessly handle the larger-scale operational side of leading teams, like resource management, growing each employee through trade-specific learning, career development, and human betterment development.

Studies<sup>6</sup> show that 70% of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager role(s). It is clear that these management positions are not just important, they are the MOST important. So, why are we using so little caution when choosing this role? Why is it a rite of passage instead of the right choice?

Great managers are found by looking at the success of their team, not the success of their product.

**Don't blur the lines between legendary  
talent and legendary leadership.**

# CHAPTER EIGHT



ATTENTION:  
YOU HAVE  
**ONLY**  
LOGGED  
67 HOURS  
THIS WEEK

TIME TO  
WORK

10

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# **Employee time tracking – designed around mental health**

---

How did our expectations of a “normal” workday evolve?

On August 20, 1866, the National Labor Union attempted to pass the idea of an eight-hour workday through Congress—and failed. On May 1, 1867, the Illinois government passed a law mandating an eight-hour workday, and a massive strike resulted when employers refused to cooperate (known as “May Day”).

Two years later, President Ulysses S. Grant guaranteed a stable wage and an eight-hour workday for government employees. During the following decades, labor unions clashed with employers regarding this concept of an eight-hour workday. And it’s no wonder: in 1890, when the government started tracking people’s hours, they found those working in manufacturing were working an average of (please sit down for this) 100 hours per week. For context, there are only 168 hours in one week.

Things picked up speed in the next century: In 1914, Henry Ford decided to shorten his male employees' work days from nine hours to eight, and simultaneously double their pay. In 1916, he applied this to his female workers (Equal pay? What. a. Concept.<sup>8</sup>)

1916 was a big year, because interstate railroad workers were granted an 8-hour workday as well.<sup>7</sup> A decade later, on May 1, 1926, (interestingly enough, on the anniversary of May Day) Ford made another shocking move: he shortened his employees' workweek to five days, rather than six, for a total of 40 working hours per week.

His son (and Ford president at the time), Edsel Ford, spoke out as well: "Every man needs more than one day a week for rest and recreation... We believe that in order to live properly every man should have more time to spend with his family."<sup>8</sup> Despite the sexist vibe this quote gives off, it does admit that they knew back then what we fight for now: a work-life balance.

It wasn't just some noble pursuit by the Ford Motor Company. Counterintuitively to all those non-believers, Ford's business positively boomed as a result of shorter working hours and better pay. Workers were happier, healthier, safer, and more efficient because they were working fewer hours. Imagine that.

Ford was, obviously, not the originator of this revolutionary concept, but he certainly made an impact. It wasn't long before others in the manufacturing industry followed suit. In 1938, Congress introduced the Fair Labor Standards Act, limiting a workweek to 44 hours. Two years later, they amended it to the 40-hour workweek that became our standard.<sup>7</sup>

## **Yet somehow, we got here.\***



These days, most employers are so aware of their employees working less than they should and are quick to take action to remedy the low billings—but those same employers quickly turn a blind eye to their people working *more* than they should. Company profit and employee well-being aren't usually balanced on an equal scale, but both are crucial for a business to survive AND to have a reputation for treating humans right. Check the numbers around burnout and industry-specific overworking as of late. It is up to us to fix it.

The concept of employer-driven time tracking is so rigid and so prone to—and, dare I say, intended for—micromanagement that it focuses only on the employee putting in enough hours. If an employee is salaried, blowing past that 40 hours means virtually nothing; if anything, most employers I've encountered still seem to believe that more hours = more productive work output.

Time tracking tells us nothing about the context of those hours. Those quarter-hour increments give employers no data on how their employees are faring mentally.

I will always believe that if your business can handle it, abandoning time tracking completely is the smart choice—timesheets breed an insane amount of anxiety and distrust. Let's be honest - employees who have to bill to specific clients or tasks are most likely not using a timer. They're guessing. They're trying not to over-bill or under-bill, trying to capture exactly what they went through on any given day. And managers signing off on these timesheets tend to go one of two ways: they take a magnifying glass to every 15-minute increment of time, or they can't find the time to look (or, even worse, they just don't care).

But for companies that cannot pull off tossing timesheets out the window, time tracking should be done in a way that is fair to the employee and supportive of all situations. “But how, David, in an industry where timesheets are ingrained in its DNA?”



**How to slow down on time tracking and actually do it right:**

- Well-being should be tracked along with time. Think about the “alarms” that go off in a manager’s workflow if employees were to enter too few hours for the week. Working TOO much “alarms” equally need to be put in place for when a salaried employee enters 45+ hours in their timesheet.
- Hold managers accountable for their reports’ mental health. Don’t allow managers to enter their own time until any employee “well-being warnings” are dealt with.
- The way the data is collected is important. Don’t allow managers to stand at the edge of the employee’s cubicle, tapping their watch like a time warlord, making threats if time isn’t entered immediately. It creates fear and, from personal experience, leads to inaccuracy, if not downright lies. If you want data that is truthful, you have to strip the fear from time management.

continued...

### **How to slow down on time tracking and actually do it right: (cont'd)**

- Time tracking shouldn't take time. If you're going to force employees to do it, remove the barriers of use. Get simple, non-archaic software (after all, you're spending money either way—whether it's on the software itself, or the amount of time it takes for employees to enter their time. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard "Is there a job code for doing my timesheet?", I'd be rich). And lean on conversations, not timesheet commenting, for minutiae.

I'm not saying the 40-hour work week is perfect (*see Chapter 11*), or that pre-WWII working conditions were perfectly happy-go-lucky. That would be blind to the many systemic issues in the US and the world at that time. The point here is simply that we've lost sight of simple (and proven) common sense: trapping workers at work doesn't help anybody.

# CHAPTER NINE



## CHAPTER NINE

# **Transparency breeds trust – and causes people to give a shit**

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In 2016, I moved to New York City to work at this umbrella company downtown that had multiple ad agencies under the same roof, but on different floors.

I was supposed to be primarily dedicated to one, but had some temporary responsibilities overseeing UX and innovation projects at the other agency on another floor.

**One thing was for sure:  
I wasn't in Louisiana anymore, Toto.  
It felt more like I was in outer space.**

I had already experienced working life in a handful of different states, but none on the east coast. Southern kindness was ingrained in my DNA, and that seemed to set me apart from the fast-talking New Yawkers (if you know, you know) who had no time for pleasantries and wanted to get straight to the point.

As a kid from the Louisiana swamps, I was already intimidated to work in New York City—after a week, I questioned why I had even made the move. Playing ping-pong between two floors only made my anxiety skyrocket. After a few days, two of the highly regarded office admins, who sat by the front door at my primary agency, began to notice my frequent trips to the elevator bank. And I noticed them noticing me.

They were heads-down hard at work, and every time I walked through the doors (multiple times a day), it was disruptive. It probably started to look like I wasn't really working. I was never at my desk. Neither company had been transparent about what was going on with the two-floor gig, so no one really knew who I was, what I was doing, or why I was playing elevator games. And if you leave people to make their own assumptions, they will.

So you can imagine, after about three or four days into my new job, I started hearing whispers of, "Does he even work?" And I didn't blame them. It sure didn't look like it.

If you're a leader—or are aspiring to be one—you know you have to keep a keen eye on the optics of things you do. And the more leadership responsibilities you take on, the more eyeballs on you. Nobody likes the feeling of people chattering about you, but part of being a leader is paying attention to it and using it as data.

**Sidebar here:** Let me stop to say that the emotional tornado of wondering what people think of you or are saying about you is dangerous and full of flying debris. Watch out! But I am human and it happens; not all lessons come from the “right” decisions or feelings.

If you do think optics are compromised, like I did here, it’s time to address it head on. So I took a deep breath, cranked up the Southern tone juuust a notch, and introduced myself to the admins. During the course of the conversation, I managed to shimmy in my role at both companies on the different floors. And once I revealed that I wasn’t just wandering around the building or going outside for 19 smoke breaks per day, it felt like the admins shifted their perspective of me. I wasn’t that disruptive new guy anymore. I was a team lead with a tough job to juggle. Instead of the whispers, they’d greet me and ask how my day was going.

I didn’t tell this story to pat myself on the back. Sure, it was a learning lesson on a personal level to be open with my coworkers from the start. But it’s also a lesson for companies.

As companies, and as leaders within those companies, we need to be extremely transparent with our teams. Invoke more transparency around leadership decisions, business ups and downs, and all of the twists and turns with the clients—both good and bad.

It’s natural to want to protect your people, so it’s natural to want to keep certain things from your employees or sugarcoat it so they don’t worry about the bad things. But if you’ve established a line of communication and a foundation of trust with your employees, this kind of radical



honesty builds on those relationships. It sets clearer expectations across all levels. And ultimately, everyone feels more included because they were trusted with sensitive information.

**A few badass ways you can start adding some transparency to the mix:**

- Before taking on new clients, talk to your team. Yes, be inclusive of all of them. Include them in the decisions of who to work with—and who not to work with. *Especially* because they'll likely be the ones dealing with the clients on a day-to-day basis.
- Be open with your teams about the ups and downs of the company. If you lose a big piece of business, your employees deserve to know why.
- As individual leaders, share vulnerabilities like struggles with mental health or areas in which you are trying to grow. The concept that you must be a bulletproof leader of nonstop strength is archaic and toxic, and it makes employees feel like they have to hold themselves to impossible standards.
- When media/press or external creative opportunities arise, share them with others on your team—and not just with those on the same level. Pass some of those opportunities around to others on your team. And when doing them yourself, remember that you're representing a whole company, and they deserve some credit, too.

When folks feel included, they feel  
a sense of ownership—underpinned  
with a hefty dose of loyalty and hard work.  
Give your people a reason to give a shit.

# CHAPTER TEN



## CHAPTER TEN

# Don't make distrust your default – or it's your fault

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It exists for every person at some point, in every industry or business: the rollercoaster of feelings whenever you call out sick.

*“What if people think I’m faking?”*

*“I feel like shit.”*

*“Will my team think I’m not dependable?”*

*“Should I just go in and see how I feel?”*

*“If I leave them hanging, they’ll hate me.”*

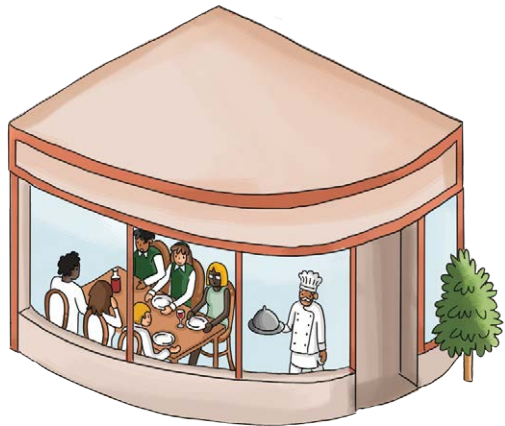
*“Can I get through the meeting without vomiting on my keyboard?”*

We all have the legal right to call out sick. But there’s something that lurks in the corporate culture that feels a bit sinister, that uneasiness when people take sick days, as if it’s frowned upon. They’re not being gladiatorial enough. Or they’re not being truthful. So that rollercoaster of self-conscious thoughts stems from a real place.

As leaders, we must trust our employees and treat them like humans, especially when they aren't feeling well. Think back to the last time you felt sick. I'm betting you felt pretty crappy, huh?

**A sick note:** I *feel* like we should have all learned this lesson during the pandemic, but one more time for the people in the back: if you're sick, Stay. The. Heck. Home. It is the *literal basis* of self-care: taking care of yourself at your worst. And even if you don't believe in self-care, then practice caring about others: if you go to work feeling like death, and you pass that on to Isabella, then Isabella risks passing it on to her six-year-old, Neli. If Neli goes to school before feeling sick, she risks spreading it to her classmates, her teachers, their families, and so on. Let's treat each other better than that. Sometimes, staying home sick isn't about you; it's about prioritizing the health of those around you, too.

Now imagine what your employees might be up against: the guilt, intrusive thoughts, and other awful, sinking feelings of wondering if their manager or coworkers think they're really sick or if they've taken too many sick days. Everyone is human.



At my first company, we vowed to take the opposite approach to sick days. Instead of reluctantly approving time off, we held ourselves accountable for sending people comforting items like soup baskets when they were sick.

Now, I'm not saying we're supposed to ignore patterns, or let it become the Wild, Wild West of Sick Days. (Yeehaw! Sorry. My Southern is showing.) But we have to find a way to really trust in our people. We put the trust ball in their court, and it's theirs to make or break. We will get burnt sometimes, but that's part of learning to be a leader.

Those rare instances aside, this is simple. If your employees say they're sick with the flu, trust them. If your employees are having mental health struggles, give them time off.

## Mental health is health, too.

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One thing that makes this constant situation of “downward distrust” unique is that the distrust is going upwards as well.

Recent *Harvard Business Reviews* point to nearly 60% of employees trusting a stranger more than their own boss.<sup>9</sup> And when humans start losing trust in those above them, thoughts and actions start to become more driven by self-interest than the greater good.

Quite often, this is a way bigger problem than just potentially not-so-real sick days. Employees that don't trust their leaders start to disengage at a pretty enormous rate.

**A recent Gallup study of over 10,000 people shows that only 1 out of every 12 employees are engaged when they don't trust those above them, versus 1 out of every 2 do when they actually trust those leading them.<sup>10</sup>**



**Is it possible you're one of the leaders that 60% of employees trust less than a random stranger? There are some ways you can start tipping the scales of trust—for both sides:**

- Just be kind. Take a few minutes and write a thoughtful email the next time someone requests time off. Don't demand details; genuine concern should lead.
- Give out a small spot bonus or token of appreciation the next time they do something stellar, and make it clear why.
- Use services like Spoonfuls of Comfort to deliver good-for-the-soul goods to those calling out sick.
- If you suspect someone is sneakily involved in other projects away from work, read *Chapter 3*.
- Give scheduled reviews the relaxed-yet-focused attention they need. Discuss together about a great place to do the review **away from the office** (e.g., sushi bar, coffee shop—somewhere they would feel comfortable, even if it's out of your comfort zone) and don't be a robot. This might be one of many tasks for you that day, but it's important to them.
- Don't depend on annual reviews to deliver feedback. Have more frequent conversations and fewer scheduled, formal meetings.

Ultimately, it is up to us as leaders  
to establish a two-way trust with  
our teams. An impenetrable trust.  
One that is...family-like.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN



## **Building the perfect "work week" – personalized to each individual**

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Silicon Valley is known as a global center of innovation and technology. A land where everyone either works at a startup or at Google. And a land where everything is available and plentiful, except sleep and free time.

And although so many wonderful new technologies have emerged from the Valley, we wound up with an unexpected result: the undoing of the 40-hour workweek.

In the early 80s, when people like Tom Peters<sup>11</sup> showed up on the scene preaching their version of success at work—a twisted version where people's passion was determined by insane hours and dedication meant living and breathing their job—it caught on because...well, because HP and Apple were doing it.

Around the same time, there was a massive shift to associating a company's profit with their production. It seemed simple enough: more hours meant more production. Right? Wrong.

Work and life were suddenly no longer separate entities. Instead, work had to become your life. By elevating those companies and their “live and breathe your company” approach, dedication soon became judged by the quantity of hours, not the quality of them. As technologies advanced, people had to be always on, always available. And concept bled its way into other industries.

The guiding principle that determined a company’s success and ability to keep up with the times was rewarding the “dedicated” and “passionate” employees—those

who never left their desks. And this was the only way that employees would be happy at work: to dedicate themselves to it entirely.

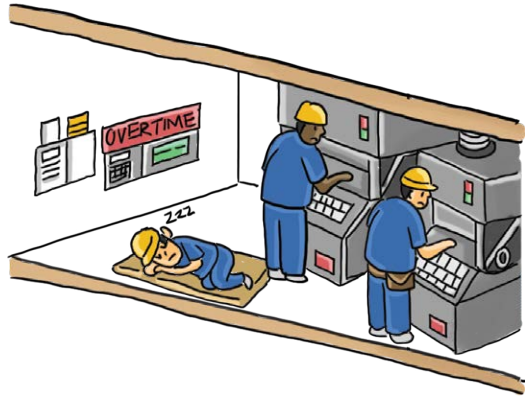


# Turns out, there are a couple problems with that.

First, Peters forgot what his predecessor, Ford, taught him based on years of research and the resulting successes: any more than 40 hours meant you’d get less-than-stellar output from your employees. If you have ever worked an 80-hour workweek, and I have, I can tell you I turn into complete mush by the end of it. How can we expect our employees to live up to a standard we know we can’t?

Second, this version of “success” forgets to take into account that humans are, in fact, not machines. They can’t keep going and going. Our brains and bodies are fragile, and they need time to rest and recover. We have emotions we need the time and space to feel and express. We have lives that we need to live—beyond the boundaries of an office.

Third, it doesn’t take into account how differently people work. It becomes a big problem if you are able to complete your work fast: you are essentially punished by having to hit a certain number of hours *just* because.



Working quickly and efficiently, without wasting time, is a great thing for those who are capable. But the pressure to prove yourself passionate by staying for 10 to 12 hours per day, every day—a punishment in itself—increases if you know that you can get your work done in half that time, but have to stay for the other half just to prove a point. Furthermore, and I have always thought this quirk is a massive oversight of demanding a certain number of hours from your employees: if you thought you could leave as soon as you were finished, isn’t that an

incentive to get it done quickly? Instead, if you feel the pressure to stay at work for double-digit hours per day because that's what's expected, where is the incentive to finish your work in a timely manner?

Gone are the days of sticking with one company for the long haul, because companies' priorities have shifted from valuing the person to valuing the profit. The way we have accepted the idea of work as we know it today has drastically changed the way we live both our personal and working lives.

The irony of all this? Before the institution of the 40-hour workweek (*see Chapter 8*), work required long hours and brutal working conditions. It's what led to all those years of research, and subsequently, all those drastic changes to the way we work. When Peters came along and added emotion to it—claiming that to be a passionate, dedicated employee, you must ignore the number of hours you spend at work—he took us full circle back to the way things were.

Except this time, we knew better, and we did it anyway. You know when you see that "Speed limit: 50 MPH" sign, and you think to yourself... "It's okay if I push it a *teeny* bit." And that teeny bit becomes 5, 10, 15 miles over the speed limit? Well, our speed limit sign was 40 hours for a reason, and we have blown past that like we don't have years of research proving we should slow down.

Just because technology makes it easier to communicate at any time does not mean you should. I'm the first to admit that this is one of my biggest weaknesses at work, and I'm on a mission to shift it. It's not that easy to put that phone down or close our laptops knowing that there are other employees depending on our work to get their own done, or that clients may drunkenly text us from Friday night happy hour at 7:43 PM with their latest and greatest idea. The pull and pressure will always be there.



**So how do we combat this?  
We recognize our employees as—  
you guessed it—human beings.  
It involves introducing a lot of the  
concepts we’ve already gone over,  
like not running your teams into  
the ground.**

Those of us in leadership roles adapt the work to the employee, not the other way around. I (admittedly) keep weird work hours; I work best between the hours of 4 AM and 2 PM, but I also know that sending out an email at 4:52 AM on a Monday before my coworkers have even opened their eyes might convey really negative optics.

I usually try to take care of any work that does not involve reaching out to other people until at least 8 AM. I use the “Schedule send” feature available in GMail so that I can fire off any pressing emails while my brain works the best, while not disturbing anyone before they’re ready.

If I don’t use that feature, I convey in my emails that I know it’s early, and that I don’t expect a response until the day officially starts. By now, the people I work with know my patterns, so they know I have zero expectations that they’ll respond to me until they’re sitting down at their desk and ready to work.

### **How to slow down and take some good steps:**

- Use the tools available to you. For me, it means taking care of any work that does not involve reaching out to other people until at least 8 AM. When I need to, I use the "Schedule send" feature so I can fire off any pressing emails while my brain works the best, while not disturbing anyone before they're ready.
- Draw a line in the sand with how you spend your working hours. My brain functions best in the morning; I've tried to change this, but it's just how I'm built. By the afternoon, my brain is shutting off. I know that my work schedule doesn't match the "standard" or even what many people prefer. I'm available to my coworkers when they need me, and I never turn down meetings within working hours just because I don't work best at that time. When I'm needed, I show up. But when possible, I work with colleagues and clients to front-load my day and take advantage of when my brain works the best.
- Set boundaries and stick to them. From the very beginning of every working relationship, I am very clear that I turn into a pumpkin after 5 PM. I won't answer calls, texts, or emails regarding work after then. Why? Because if you don't set the boundary, people won't know it exists. Is it unorthodox? Sure. Did I set that boundary in the very beginning? Yes. Do I understand that emergencies sometimes arise and I may need to shift a little bit? Also yes, but that's for true emergencies only.

Of course there needs to be some guardrails, but not everyone is a lifer and has other dreams. Evolve the schedules of those people. You'd be shocked at what you get back from them in return.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



## CHAPTER TWELVE

# **Treat your external vendors like partners – and like humans**

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Picture this: you open the door to your office, and step directly into two inches of water. You can hear the hissing of the pipe leak, see the lights flickering, smell the stagnation of the water building up. CODE RED. If this isn't an emergency, what is?

If you're smart, you have a trusted team to call for help during this exact scenario, and they show up pronto, capes flapping in the wind and ready to help.

When you get that awful phone call from a client—the one during which they use the word *emergency*—it can feel an awful lot like a real-life emergency.

And if you're smart, you have trusted partners and vendors who will leap into action when everything goes south. These miracle-working experts swoop in fast, assess the damage thoroughly and efficiently, and gently guide you and your client to safety. Hoots and hollers follow as everyone finally breathes a collective sigh of relief.

Later on, the vendor's team lead stops by the billing office to drop off the bill. *"Here's the total. We only billed for the hours worked, not the hours we originally thought it might take. Appreciate your business, take care!"*

*"Sure thing",* the head of finance responds. *"We will pay you when we get paid. Few months, max. See ya!"*

## **Wait, what? They can't pay for work that has already been completed until they've been paid by their clients? What in the name of Bernie Madoff is this?**

Think about this: if you go to a restaurant and eat a meal, you expect to pay for it before you get up from the table. Not when your employer pays you; that's not the restaurant's responsibility. You and the restaurant both expect payment to be rendered at the time of service.

If you go bowling, you pay for the lane and the shoe rentals upfront. You don't leave the bowling alley and ask to come back later to pay them when you get paid. You know you need to pay for it then and there if you want to whoop your friends with a turkey. (Gobble, gobble.)

I could go on listing the ways this is put into practice. Unfortunately, in many industries in corporate America, larger companies don't operate this way. After those miracle-working experts saved the day, they're served with a 30-day wait—or more—for compensation. And it seems to be getting worse: in 2022, Keurig Dr Pepper sent the industry into a tizzy when it became public that they were demanding a net-360 payment contract. That means from the day those hard-working creatives delivered their miracles, the company had to wait 5 days short of an entire year to see compensation for it.<sup>12</sup>

Sequential liability schedules (big-money babble for “we will pay you when we get paid”) and insane net-90+ terms are just the tip of the Titanic-sized iceberg. It shocked me to learn the hard way how these companies consistently (and legally, mind you) operate. There are often no options to change the net-schedule, even though the giant companies begging for help know very well that their smaller, less-suited-to-sue contractors both can’t afford to turn down the work and can’t really do anything about how they get paid.

Why is it like this? The answer is simple: they don’t see non-employees as equals. As people who worked their butts off for that money. The companies asking for help often offload the grunt work or the work they’re not technically capable of handling to their “contracting partners.” But in doing so, they bastardize the use of the word “partner.”

What they don’t realize? If that vendor ever pushed back or said no, the big companies can’t deliver the work to their clients.

Let that sink in.

If the people they rely on to help in their time of crisis ever refuse to show up in shining armor, they can’t fix their client’s emergency.

At my last company, we instituted a strict policy on paying talent immediately. (Credit to DB for spearheading that!) The first few times we did it, we received the most gracious emails from our partners thanking us for breaking the mold and daring to be different. Sure, it put a financial strain on us sometimes—but treating people right was our guiding light, and we stuck to it.



I continue to employ those same tactics in my solo consulting world. The reaction and appreciation that comes from each vendor makes it clear that they are not used to being treated like a partner. Or like a human. Come on, *people!*

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Nothing will teach you like being on both sides of a situation. I clearly remember several cases where I was the vendor getting treated like crap, or getting treated wonderfully. The former can sink you, and the latter can change your day. For me, it ultimately helped mold how I grew to treat others.

And just to be clear: although the above situations all revolve around dollars, it is more about what makes sense. During a major hip surgery a few years back, it meant the world receiving a sweet cookie delivery (Thanks, Broth!). I've had family emergencies where my clients worked with my situation and schedule because they understood that life exists outside of work.

**Ultimately, the issue is bigger than these examples. Definitely shift how vendors receive payment. Definitely vow to give more thoughtful gestures like the super hip way mentioned above 😂. Those are great and should not be discounted, but there are a ton of other, major ways to treat your vendors and partners as equals. Figure out your way, and follow through.**

**Here's how to chill out and put this in action today:**

- Pay freelancers and contractors immediately. Not Net60 or Net30. Pay them on receipt of their invoice.
- Include the consistent ones in company announcements.
- Thank your vendors publicly—the holidays are a great time to do this!
- Send them thoughtful gifts at random.
- If your freelancers or contractors have a child, send them something!
- Try to do everything you possibly can to make freelancers feel included. When you do, it leaves behind a mind-bending trail of thanks, happiness, and hard work.

Put good out there and you will mostly  
get good back. Start reshaping your  
policies around how you take care  
of your external help better.

# OUTRODUCTION



# Outroduction

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Remember: this isn't an all-or-nothing endeavor.

Throughout this entire book, you've seen a collection of uncommon approaches to helping yourself and your team find clearer paths to work happiness. Many of these I learned from the legendary humans I've had the pleasure of either being kin to or working with. And many others I developed on my own out of a sheer reaction to something royally f'd up (either of my own making or that I witnessed).

The ultimate ingredient that makes it all fall into place is **effort**. If people around you see you are acting with kindness and trying everything in your power to create the perfect space for them, the results will be glaringly positive and your impact will be tremendous. Bust your butt to do right by people, whether it works or not, and it will create smiles all around. Happiness for them starts with support from you. In whatever form that comes.

## **It's not only the thought that counts; it's how you put it into action.**

What this newfound work happiness does, for you and for them, is foster success. Studies surveying hundreds of thousands of people have attempted to answer the eternal debate: *does happiness equal success, or is it the other way around?* These studies overwhelmingly show that the happiest people owe their success, in part, to optimism, a positive outlook, and being happy in the work that they do.<sup>13</sup> So, whether you lead by example, direction, supervision, operational management, or pure accident, do it with a smile.

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The twelve ways to help create work happiness demonstrated in this book are the ones that came up time and time again, and I felt deserved to be shoved to the forefront. But there were a few “honorable mentions” I’d be remiss not to...well, mention:

## **It's ok to say that you're wonderful – even if you aren't**



Now, I am not trying to go all hippie on you, but science *literally* supports that happiness can lead to success. There is a stockpile of research<sup>14</sup> linking positivity and happiness to success and well-being. If you are passing someone in the hallway and they give you the good ol' "Hey, how's it going?", why burden them with your bad day? Give them a smile, appreciate that they're asking in the first place, and say it's going fine.

If you stop someone in their tracks to say "it sucks"...please, please ask yourself why you think they need to know. Are they a trusted friend or colleague? Are they capable of helping you out of your misery? If you need a vent session, that's one thing. Don't keep your bad day bottled up just to be polite—but make sure that you're talking to someone you trust in an appropriate environment. *However*, if you're exchanging pleasantries in the hallway with the finance guy, there is no need to whine about your train being late, your kids being sick, or your client being a jerk. Pleasantries should be just that: pleasant.<sup>15</sup>

**Take on crappy tasks—it can prevent your team from feeling crappy**

I have no formal research to prove this theory, but experience has been one heck of a teacher. My former business partner and I made the decision to do this, often taking on the likes of print clean up (for him) and email development (for me) to prevent our teams from having to do “the worst tasks” all on their own. The results?

- It made everyone feel more supported.
- It set the tone that no one is above any specific task.
- It taught us to identify flaws in our process by completing so-called simple tasks.
- It made us aware of “barriers to accomplishing” that we had no idea existed.
- It kept us grounded.

**Side note:**

You can’t let this become too much of a habit, so use it wisely. Leaders, by default, have more responsibilities than the junior-level employees. It’s great to take on grunt work *some* of the time, for the reasons listed above, but it shouldn’t be the default. Your employees will never learn and grow otherwise. This approach is more about finding a great balance of sharing the work that people moan and groan about.

## **Surround yourself with weirdos – or you'll end up becoming normal**

My greatest achievement in life was accepting that I am weird as hell. Normal is boring. And I surrounded myself with people who are the same. Allowing yourself to be weird means you are comfortable with being yourself. Weird causes laughter, sparks curiosity, and helps diffuse anxiety in those around you. Doing things differently is how we make a real impact on the world.

It's not just my experience. I DIDN'T MAKE THIS UP! Yale did.<sup>16</sup>

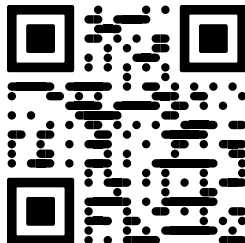
## About the author

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My name is David Lubofsky. Along with this intense fire I have to reform business to be a bit kinder and healthier is a passion to build really killer web products. From disease learning platforms to highly-interactive reading experiences, bringing the browser to life is a big love of mine.

My goal in life is to leave a legacy of goodwill and dope products. You can check out some of my work by scanning the QR code below. Have a great day and thanks for reading!

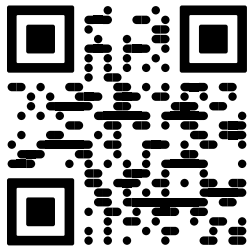
*David Lubofsky*



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\*My wife made me do it.

**Are you a leader-owner, manager, mentor-in business (or want to be one) and you really want to make a major impact on those around you?**

**Or maybe you know a good-hearted leader who wants to elevate their leadership game and could use a nice paperback gift of guidance?**

The traditional business model prioritizes profit and productivity. The mental health of the folks who do the work? It's simply collateral damage. But there's a better way.

In this easy-to-read, visually (and audibly) captivating book, creative entrepreneur David Lubofsky shares his keys to the novel concept of prioritizing happiness above all else at work. Lubofsky's personal stories and thoughtful examples inspire readers to find their own work happiness, while creating it for those around them.

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This book is your guide in the search for work happiness, with 12 compact chapters chock full of:

Untraditional ways managers and mentors can help themselves, and their teams, find happiness and well-being in the "workplace" your employees and partners want to work for.

Guiding principles that will illuminate the path to becoming the leader your employees actually want to work for those under you to create healthier environments for their team(s).

Unique approaches for business owners to start treating their people better, while empowering those working for and with them to create healthy environments

Engaging stories and examples supported by intricate art pieces that will leave you smiling, laughing, and—let's be honest—probably shaking your head

Tiny changes make a big impact over time. Creating workplace change isn't an all-or-nothing endeavor. But readers can guarantee they'll find a tip, trick, or tweak in the way they approach work that will get them one step closer in the search for work happiness.

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David Lubofsky is a creative technologist and former agency owner who is determined to ignite widespread, drastic change in human treatment across business. His goal is to leave a legacy of good will and dope work.