BOOK SUMMARY

Leading What Matters Most
By Phil Geldart

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Leading people should be your greatest asset, not your biggest problem. That's what this book introduces as a central concept. *Leading What Matters Most: A Business Parable on Unlocking Human Potential* is a compelling business parable for leaders – offering practical lessons and takeaways for organizations at every stage.

Author Phil Geldart, founder and CEO of Eagle's Flight, is a recognized authority on transforming organizational culture, leadership development, and experiential training solutions. His expertise and passion for unlocking human potential have earned him the respect of Fortune 500 global organizations.

Because of these characteristics and the author's expertise, *Leading What Matters Most* has been named the book from which "all business leaders can learn a lot about embracing a paradigm shift for the sake of long-term success."

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Learn how to begin a leadership transformation.

- It's essential to move from "what to do" to "how to do it."

- What problems and successes do managers face along the way?

- What are the best ways to resolve organizational issues for the sake of everyone involved?

Introduction

As leaders, we often receive valuable advice about what actions to take but not how to implement them. Understanding the "what" without the "how" is seldom as beneficial as we hoped it would be!

I want to introduce you to Bridget, my fictional CEO. She oversees a large and highly successful tech company and is currently facing challenges related to her employees. Although Bridget excels as an operational executive, she struggles to unlock her workforce's full potential. As a result, both performance and employee engagement have declined. Her board is frustrated, her employees are disengaged, and her leadership team lacks more people skills than she does.

By following Bridget on her journey, we experience her frustrations and challenges alongside her successes. More importantly, we observe how she confronts and ultimately resolves these issues for the benefit of everyone involved.

You might resonate with some of Bridget's challenges and seek insights on how to address them. As you accompany her progress, you'll discover the practical steps to change behaviors and enhance engagement with the correct support performance.

Chapter 1: It's No Longer Working

Bridget took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. The board meeting had been brutal. How had things changed so drastically in what seemed like just a few short months?

Turning back to her desk, she picked up the GCG (Good Corporate Governance) report, scanning the list of deficiencies once again. "Underdeveloped staff, low employee engagement, poor leadership competence, and ineffective corporate communication," she whispered to herself. She had dragged her feet on this report—trying to deny its necessity, thinking she still had everything under control, but she knew the board was right. Something was no longer working.

It felt like a sink-or-swim moment for her, both personally and professionally. In fact, the board chair had made that clear.

When Bridget arrived at her ELO meeting the following week, she felt a bit embarrassed to share the challenges Talon Tech was facing. Well, not so much the challenges themselves, but rather that she was the reason they existed.

The following two weeks were a blur as Bridget and her leadership team hunkered down to create and implement new policies and strategies for employee engagement and communication based on GCG's recommendations.

Regardless of the new initiatives, however, Bridget and the leadership team continued to receive reports about various issues. Sales kept pushing back, claiming that their current methods were working fine—the company just needed to find a way to fill their orders faster. Operations

complained that they didn't have time to implement these new procedures while maintaining their production levels. Customer service grumbled about customer complaints taking up too much of their time, preventing them from keeping up with new orders. Why couldn't leadership focus on fixing those problems instead of giving them a measly $200 bonus, and since when was it their responsibility to interview candidates? Bridget wanted to scream. That was the moment Bridget decided to reach out to a business consultant named Ray Ortiz.

Chapter 2: Moving from What to How

Bridget and Ray arranged a meeting at a restaurant. During their conversation, it became evident that Ray had no intention of addressing the leadership problem. Instead, he aimed to show Bridget how her team could achieve the results they were seeking.

Next, Bridget outlined the issues at Talon Tech as she perceived them.

"The truth is, just a week ago, I was still hesitant to take this step. I think it's because Talon Tech has performed so well—we're at the top of our industry, and we continue, at least for now, to generate a healthy profit—that it's made me blind to some very real problems. These are problems that I should have tackled sooner, but now, months after the initial signs of potential trouble, I'm finally taking the actions I hope will help me right the ship before it's too late."

Before she could formulate her next thought, Ray interjected, "I think what's happened is that you don't know how to harness the potential of your workforce. You and your leaders understand how to run the business, but you don't know how to lead your people effectively."

Bridget felt validated. Ray had just confirmed what she had begun to suspect was the root cause of Talon Tech's problem.

Chapter 3: The Leap of Faith

"Trust the process," Bridget said softly to herself.

It was time to introduce Ray to the team.

Upon entering the meeting room, Ray greeted everyone who had gathered.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all," said Ray. "What you have all accomplished here at Talon Tech is incredibly impressive. The reason I'm here is that Talon Tech has been wrestling with problems. I know you have tried to identify the origin of the problems and ways to address them, but those efforts have failed. But I assure you, there is a path forward—a path that will lead to the outcomes Talon Tech needs and you all want to achieve to continue your impressive successes." Ray met everyone's eyes before continuing.

"Bridget has made it clear to me that the approach I'm about to lay out for you is the path that Talon Tech will follow. Its success requires the commitment of every leader in this room. Now, I know you don't yet understand this approach or your role in it, and I respect that, but everyone at Talon Tech must be committed to the path."

Having everyone's undivided attention, Ray set the following priorities:

- We provide new behaviors at every level.

- It will be leader-led.

- We'll align all our HR practices.

- We put everything you show/teach us into practice.

- You and your team provide guidance and support.

He also outlined the main areas of focus:

- Leadership: Each of us must own the outcome of this initiative

- Communication: Let everyone know continually and consistently how we are doing things differently and why

- Alignment: Align all the human resource practices

- Training: Experiential training. First, train leaders at all levels, then train all employees

- Reinforcement: Provide support and activities to ensure that the training sticks

- Metrics: Continuous measurement of progress/outcomes

Chapter 4: The Transformation Begins

Next in line was introducing Bridget's team to the transformation about to happen at Talon Tech. Addressing all her coworkers, Bridget delivered an uplifting message.

"What I promise you today is that everyone is wholly committed to providing each and every one of you with the support, tools, and training needed to be the best you can be and to elevate Talon Tech to the next level."

The following week flew by for Bridget as she coordinated the company-wide communications around the initiative and managed the daily operations of Talon Tech.

She was also getting excited for the experiential aspects of the transformation that Ray had suggested and that she was about to introduce over the coming weeks.

Chapter 5: Crossing the Vast and Perilous Desert

The day of the final training session arrived, and Dishant, the company's CFO who had led the first two sessions, wanted the honor of starting the last one.

"Good morning! You are about to race across the vast and perilous desert, so I hope you're feeling rested and energized!"

While everyone responded enthusiastically, Dishant continued, "I warn you, it's not as easy as it may seem, but the lessons and insights you gain from this experience will ignite your passion! And that collective fire is what will enable us to unleash our full potential, everyone."

Chapter 6: A Potential Derailing

The next day, Bridget had Ray meet her early due to the technical setbacks that had been identified. She was worried about the numerous angry messages and voicemails she'd received and wanted to communicate the information to the consultant, adjusting their strategy accordingly.

"Ray, I have a serious technical issue for which I haven't identified the source, and customer service complaints have seemingly skyrocketed overnight."

"And?" Ray asked.

"And? I don't see how I can stand in front of the entire company and discuss our initial improvements and how we're going to move into the next round of company training when all this is happening."

"I understand that it feels like a significant setback, and I'm not downplaying its seriousness or the headaches it's causing, but as you agreed, you need to stay on course. In this situation, we have an opportunity to tailor the training to address this immediate issue, which is positive because the team won't be learning new behaviors in the abstract – they'll be learning them based on a real situation scenario." Inspired yet slightly anxious, Bridget used the time after the meeting to check her notes and review the conclusions she'd reached after meeting Ray:

- Trust the process – changing behaviors requires consistency and time

- Support the decision-making process

- Training is best when tailored to real-time issues

The next day, Bridget, Roy, and the rest of the leadership team met to pinpoint what was needed to empower those members of the team tasked with getting things done. Roy used the whiteboard to mark the main cornerstones of effective support:

- Leadership

- Unanimous focus on a common goal

- Clearly defined roles for subgroups

- Shared resources

Chapter 7: The Seven Cornerstones

In the next exercise, Jason and Gloria from the managerial team introduced the concept of the Seven Cornerstones of Teamwork. They walked the group through the first four cornerstones – leadership, unanimous focus on a common goal, clearly defined roles for subgroups, and shared resources – in much the same way that Ray had walked the executive leadership team through them the week before.

Effective and frequent message delivery was identified as one of the next pillars. Furthermore, the team learned more about the significance of being consistent, united, and enthusiastic effort.

"It's important for every team member to contribute a consistent and enthusiastic mindset to the team's commitment to achieving outcomes. This not only maintains a focus on performance excellence but also prevents one team member's negative attitude from affecting the rest." else.

The seventh and final cornerstone was described as periodic and temporary suppression of the ego.

It's important to reiterate the periodic and temporary aspects of this cornerstone. It's not about permanently suppressing one's ego; it's about knowing when to suppress it and when not to.

Each one of the seven cornerstones is critical to a team's success and should set the standard for every team's behavior.

Based on the information and the week's exercise, a lively discussion ensued. Everyone within the organization agreed that to solve a problem, the following need to be prioritized:

- Everyone should contribute whenever possible

- Everyone should encourage their teammates to contribute

- Every team must remain focused on the results they are trying to produce

- A common language must be agreed upon and shared upfront

- The opportunity to tap in whenever possible must be encouraged

Chapter 8: The Proof of the Pudding

Following the work done over the previous weeks, Bridget and the leadership team sat down to review the results of a survey carried out among the employees who participated. Four questions were asked:

- Do you feel that you are more engaged at Talon Tech than you were six months ago?

- Do you feel you're better able to make a difference at Talon Tech?

- Do you feel that your leaders encourage you to speak up and add value?

- Do you feel that you're better able to do your work now than you were three to five months ago?

Bridget revealed the final and most impressive result after presenting all the other information. In response to the question, "Do you feel the problem you had was addressed to your satisfaction?" the positive response rate was 100 percent.

Additionally, 93 percent of employees reported that they were given clarity on the issue, 95 percent said their concerns were handled courteously and professionally, and 98 percent indicated they would continue to honor Talon Tech with their business in the future.

"As excited as I am about the metrics," Bridget said, "I'm even more thrilled by the changes in behavior I'm observing across the organization. I noticed the beginnings of these changes when the subgroups for the chip problem came together in the configurations training."

Bridget leaned back in her chair. "I have to admit I was still somewhat skeptical about whether the tools and behaviors we were all learning would actually be applied outside the controlled atmosphere of the training, but, as you both know, Ray's training programs aren't typical—they're infectious."

She continued, saying, "Of course, challenges continue to arise. I'm pleased to report our teams are taking control and resolving situations quickly.

Chapter 9: Weathering the Storm

In the weeks following the positive results, Bridget faced several challenges. Angela, Talon Tech's CIO, left the company abruptly. Bridget blamed herself for overlooking the red flags and taking appropriate action.

She briefed the leadership team on everything that had transpired regarding Angela's departure and the consequences of that sudden event.

"I take full responsibility for the situation," Bridget stated. "Clearly, I was not paying the level of attention I should have. While we have made tremendous progress in the past seven months, there is still work to do. And as always, the work begins with everyone in this room."

After the meeting concluded and everyone had left, Bridget took advantage of a few moments to write in her Transformation Notebook:

Remember the six areas of focus:

- **Leadership:** We must each own the outcome of this initiative and hold people accountable for modeling the new behaviors.

- **Communication:** We must continually and consistently communicate to everyone how we are doing things and why. This must be intentional and planned.

- **Alignment:** Align all human resource practices. This shift in how we lead our people must affect every aspect of HR's responsibility.

- **Training:** Experiential training. First, train leaders at all levels; then train all employees. Be sure the training links to our real-world issues.

- **Reinforcement:** Provide support and activities to ensure that the training sticks. Our line managers must lead these.

- **Metrics:** Continuous measurement of progress/outcomes. Share these with everyone.

Chapter 10: Are We There Yet?

Eventually, Bridget and the leadership team found a replacement for Antonia. Everyone was excited about Grace's acceptance of the CIO position.

The position remained vacant for 10 weeks, but the entire team agreed not to rush the decision, patiently waiting for the right person to come along. "Honestly, this decision has given us the time we needed to ensure that everyone on the technology side was fully committed to the people-first initiative and that there were no remaining Andrea holdouts."

The news that Talon Tech would have a new CIO by the end of next month was the perfect conclusion to Bridget's day. We've got this; she thought as she pulled out of Talon Tech's parking lot.

Chapter 11: India Ink

Soon, Bridget and Ray scheduled a meeting to catch up and discuss the events that had unfolded since the start of their partnership.

"Okay," Ray began. "I'm standing in a meeting room, holding a glass of water, and I accidentally spill it on the carpet. It leaves a dark stain. The cleaning crew came to clean that night as usual, but the stain had disappeared. So much so that unless someone informed them, they had spilled water on it, they wouldn't know. The water has evaporated.

"The next day, I'm in the meeting room, and I spill a bottle of Indian ink on the carpet. It leaves a dark stain. That night, when the cleaning crew arrives, the stain is still there. The crew tries to remove it, but they're never going to get it out because Indian ink embeds itself so deeply in the material that it cannot be removed.

"So, why am I sharing this story? When people undergo a cultural transformation and reach the eight-to ten-month mark, they begin to see a significant impact. But the big dark splotch of impact they perceive is merely a water stain. A water stain that will evaporate if they do not stay the course and reinforce it while ensuring that everyone understands this is the new way of behaving.

"For that impact to become India ink and to become part of the organization's DNA, they must motivate everyone in the organization to apply the behaviors for two to three years consistently. If the organization stops when it's still a water stain, complacency will set in, and the transformational culture will not take hold.

Turning a water stain into Indian ink is dependent on the following process:

- Our executives are trained to model, coach, and require the new behavior

- Our leaders are trained to model, coach, and require the new behavior

- Our employees are trained on the new behavior and understand that their leader is there to coach them on those behaviors

- We employ the Accountable Leader Loop consistently:

- Commit to putting the new behaviors into practice in every applicable circumstance

- Test it regularly to make sure the loop is reaching every level

- Our human resources processes and policies are tied to our people-first initiative:

- We promote people who demonstrate new behavior

- We hire people who are inclined toward the new behavior

- All our communications reinforce that new behavior is the way to go

- We share our metrics that result from consistently practicing the new behavior

- If we consistently and continually follow this process, we will achieve ten bars of gold every time.

Chapter 12: Line Managers Take the Stage

Almost a year into Talon Tech's people-first initiative, Bridget had fully regained her confidence as the CEO of a Fortune 100 global technology company. She felt fortunate, and while her confidence may have faltered for a brief period, she never lost her incredible passion and abilities for advancing technologies. Now, coupled with a deep understanding of how to harness the potential of her people, she felt unstoppable.

Conclusion

When implementing a leadership change, don't forget the importance of the following equation:

Lead + Train + Implement + Practice = Success

Work on embedding a people-first culture in the fabric of the organization. To do so, focus on the following:

- Recognize that leadership behaviors and employee behaviors need to be different from what they currently are. It's not about different HR policies and procedures.

- Equip all leaders to demonstrate "true" leadership that allows and encourages people to perform to their full potential:

- Encourage input into decisions

- Provide additional new tools and skills to help them do their job brilliantly

- Communicate the people-first initiative consistently to all employees. Let them know where the organization is going with respect to enabling them to contribute to their full potential and their importance to our future

- Define this priority and stick to it

- Provide training and practice

- As a leader, remember the following:

- The power of investing in everyone, based on respect for the individual regardless of rank

- The positive example of setting the pace by example

- A determination not to confuse early wins with the ultimate success

- The importance of giving the entire team the complete picture

Finally, remember that changing behaviors requires consistency and time. Trust the process, support effective decision-making, and tailor training to real-time issues, and you'll soon notice the sustainable, positive behavioral change that started this entire journey.

This summary is not intended to replace the original book; all quotes are credited to the above-mentioned author and publisher.