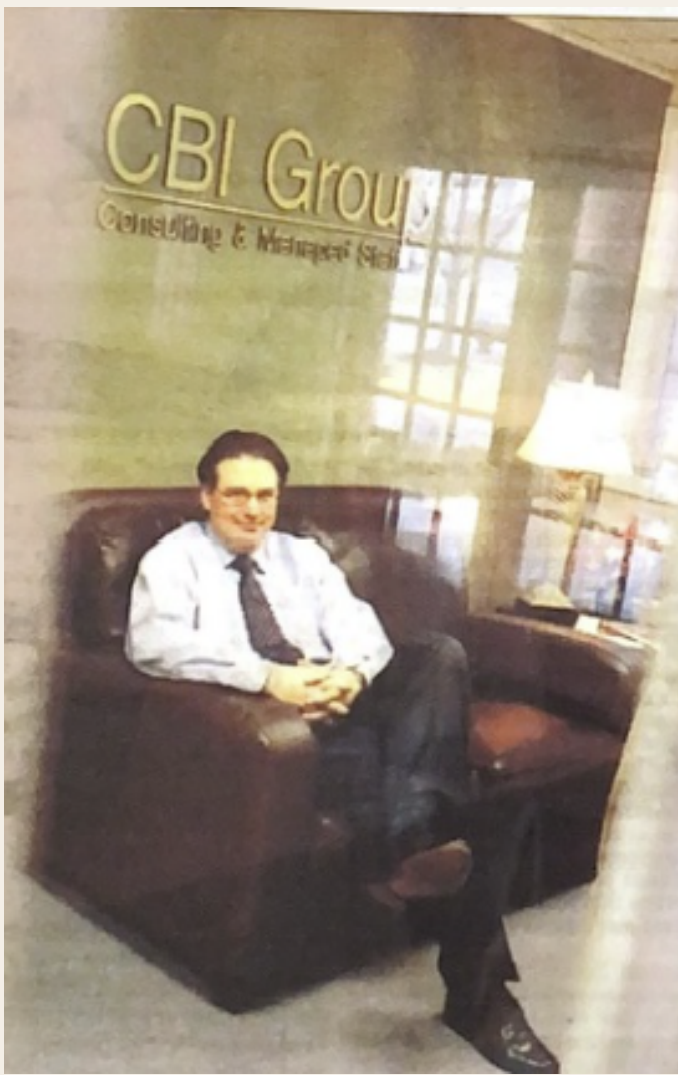




25 YEARS LATER

*Hard-Fought Lessons on
Work, Leadership & Life*

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25 Years of Entrepreneurship | 2001-2026



A Note About This Book

Twenty-five years ago, I sat down at a desk with an 88-page business plan, a flip phone, and no idea what the next quarter century would hold.

For the 25 days leading up to this anniversary, I've been sharing some of the lessons that came from what happened next. Somewhere along the way, I realized they weren't really 25 separate lessons. They were pieces of one story.

This is that story.

It's about building businesses, but it's also about relationships, family, health, mistakes, change, leadership, and figuring out what success means when you've had enough time to change your definition of it a few times.

I don't have all of this figured out. Some of the lessons in these pages are things I'm still actively working on. Some came from things that went right. Quite a few came from getting something wrong first.

These are my hard-fought lessons from 25 years of entrepreneurship and, maybe more importantly, 25 years of becoming someone different from the guy who first sat down at that desk.

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Opening

25 Years at One Desk

A close friend recently told me that one of the most impressive things about my career is that I've run a business for 25 straight years.

How boring, right?

On paper, I've basically had the same job for a quarter of a century. The title hasn't changed all that much. I may not have moved very far from the desk, but almost everything else has changed.

I started with an 88-page business plan and a flip phone. There were no employees yet when I was putting the plan together. No real customer base. No big company behind me. Eventually there would be thousands of W-2 employees, millions in revenue, different versions of the business, different teams, different markets, and more change than I ever could have imagined when I was sitting there writing that plan.

And thankfully, I changed too.

Opening

25 Years at One Desk

My dad, Alan, spent his career teaching, coaching, and thinking about how people and organizations work, and many of the ideas he passed down to me have shaped how I think about business and life.

When you start a business, you spend a lot of time thinking about what you're going to build. I certainly did. You think about customers, revenue, employees, and growth. You make projections and plans and convince yourself you have a pretty good idea of where it's all going.

What you don't really think about is how much you are going to have to change along the way.

I didn't know that some of the things that made me good at starting a company would eventually become things I had to unlearn. I didn't know how much the people around me would shape the business, or how much the business would shape me. I didn't know there would be a point when going to work would sometimes feel like the easy part of life, and I definitely didn't know how many times my definition of success would change.

Opening

25 Years at One Desk

There were years when success meant survival. Then it meant growth. Then scale. There were Inc. lists, revenue goals, small business and best place to work awards, and all kinds of ways to keep score. I still like goals. Probably too much. I'm not pretending I've evolved past that.

But over time, my definition of success changed. The things I was measuring weren't necessarily the only things that mattered.

I've gotten some of that right, and I've gotten plenty wrong. There were years when I was so focused on building the company that I didn't pay enough attention to what it cost me elsewhere. I worried about things that never happened, reached goals that weren't quite what I thought they would be, and made decisions I would absolutely make differently today.

There were also relationships I never could have planned for, people who taught me things I didn't know I needed to learn, and moments that seemed completely ordinary at the time but mean much more to me now.

Opening

25 Years at One Desk

That may be the biggest advantage of having 25 years to look back on. You get enough distance to see which things actually mattered.

For the 25 days leading up to this anniversary, I've been sharing one lesson each day from those years. Some are about business and leadership. Others are about careers, health, relationships, change, and figuring out who you are when the version of success you've been chasing no longer fits quite as well as it used to.

A lot of these lessons came from getting something wrong first.

Maybe most of them did.

I'm still working on several.

I'm a reformed busyholic who still likes being busy. I tell people to slow down and think before they act, even though my instinct is still usually to start doing something.

Opening

25 Years at One Desk

Apparently 25 years doesn't eliminate contradictions. It just gives you more time to notice them.

This isn't meant to be a victory lap or a list of everything I think I know after 25 years. I don't think that would be particularly useful, and it definitely wouldn't be accurate.

It's a look at what changed, what didn't, what I learned the hard way, and what I'm still trying to figure out.

The guy who sat down at that desk in 2001 and the guy writing this today have a lot in common.

We are definitely not the same person.

I'm glad we're not.

Chapter 1

You Don't Get to Choose the Conditions

I formally started CBI Group at 8:30 in the morning on September 11, 2001.

That was the time of our first employee orientation. I was 33 years old. My kids were three and five. My wife Kim had supported me in making the leap, and I had spent months (even years) preparing for it. I had an 88-page business plan, a lot of confidence and, looking back, probably a healthy amount of naivete.

Then the world changed.

There is no clever business lesson to pull from what happened that morning. September 11 was a human tragedy on a scale much larger than anything happening in my little company. But it became the backdrop to the first day of my entrepreneurial life, and it taught me something about business that I would relearn many times over the next 25 years.

You don't get to choose the conditions.

Chapter 1

You Don't Get to Choose the Conditions

You can prepare. You can plan. You can build spreadsheets, study the market, and convince yourself you know what the next year is going to look like. I certainly did. But eventually reality gets a vote, and reality is undefeated.

Over the years, we faced recessions, a pandemic, a fire, a flood, and plenty of smaller crises that felt huge while we were living through them. There would be customers we thought we could count on who disappeared, plans that didn't work, people who left, and moments when the path forward wasn't obvious.

I wish I could tell you I handled every one of those moments calmly and strategically.

I did not.

Entrepreneurs tend to have an unreasonable amount of optimism. You probably need it. Starting a company is a little like falling in love. You see the possibilities before you see all the problems. In the early days, that optimism was rocket fuel.

But rocket fuel doesn't last forever.

Chapter 1

You Don't Get to Choose the Conditions

At some point you need customers, cash flow, systems, a team, and enough structure to keep the thing moving when optimism alone isn't enough. I had to learn that. Sometimes more than once.

We bootstrapped the business. I worked without paying myself for more than two years. My wife, Kim, did the bookkeeping without getting paid. There was no giant pool of capital waiting for us if we got something wrong.

Back then, time felt almost unlimited. If something didn't work, I would work longer. If we needed more revenue, I would make more calls. If there was a problem, my instinct was to attack it with effort.

And to be fair, that worked pretty well for a while.

But resilience isn't just the ability to work harder. I used to think it was. Over time, I learned resilience is more about what you do when what you planned for isn't what happens.

Chapter 1

You Don't Get to Choose the Conditions

Do you freeze? Do you complain? Do you keep trying to force the old plan to work because you already invested so much in it? Or can you look at what is actually happening, accept it, and decide what to do next?

Looking back, what comes to mind is how many times I needed to start over. How humbling that was. Sometimes, how humiliating. But there was something important in learning to face failure, start again and realize I could survive it. Once I took action, I was usually fine.

Change doesn't ask whether you're ready. It doesn't particularly care about your business plan, your timeline, or how much effort you already put into getting somewhere. It just shows up.

The business I started in 2001 would eventually become something very different. Then it would change again. So would the workforce. So would our customers. So would technology. So would I.

Chapter 1

You Don't Get to Choose the Conditions

If I could go back and tell the guy sitting there with his 88-page plan one thing, I don't think I'd tell him to make a better plan.

I'd tell him to get comfortable changing it.

The conditions were never yours to choose.

Chapter 2

You Don't Build Anything Alone

For the first five years of the business, I almost never ate lunch alone.

Breakfast either. Dinner wasn't safe.

Part of that was necessity. I needed customers, and I needed to understand the market better than I did. The fastest way I knew to do that was to talk to people. So I had breakfast with people, lunch with people, coffee with people, and dinner with people. I asked questions. I listened. I learned how their businesses worked, what they worried about, and what problems they were actually trying to solve.

Some of those meals turned into business. A lot of them didn't.

What they did turn into were relationships.

There were nights when my kids ate dinner in the office bullpen because I was still working. They were little, and at the time it didn't feel like some meaningful entrepreneurial memory. It was just Tuesday. We were trying to build a company and raise a family at the same time, and sometimes those two things happened in the same room.

Chapter 2

You Don't Build Anything Alone

Those ordinary Tuesdays mean more to me now than they did then.

I think entrepreneurship gets remembered in milestones. The first big customer. The first million in revenue. The new office. The award. The year you finally hit the goal you had been chasing.

But most of the building doesn't happen in those moments. It happens on ordinary Tuesdays. It happens over lunch, in conversations, during problems nobody will remember, and around people you may not realize are becoming an important part of your life while it's happening.

One of the practices I developed over the years was keeping what I call my Top 20, essentially a personal board of advisors. These are the people I trust enough to call when I need perspective, advice, an introduction, or occasionally someone to tell me I'm being an idiot.

That last category is important.

Chapter 2

You Don't Build Anything Alone

After 35 years in the workforce business, and after coaching, interviewing, representing, hiring, or employing more than 126,000 people, I've become pretty convinced that careers are not built alone either. You need mentors. You need connectors. You need people who know something you don't know, who will open a door for you or tell you when you're walking toward the wrong one.

You also need to recognize those people when they show up in your life and make an effort to keep them there. That doesn't mean treating relationships like transactions. People can tell when you're only calling because you need something. Some of the best relationships in my life started through business, but they stopped being about business a long time ago.

I've said for years that the best definition of rich is helping more people. I picked that up from *The Go-Giver* years ago, and it has stayed with me ever since.

When I was younger, I probably would have measured the success of the company more traditionally. Revenue mattered. Growth mattered. Winning mattered. Those things still matter to me, but they aren't enough anymore.

Chapter 2

You Don't Build Anything Alone

The longer I've done this, the more I've realized that people were the business all along.

Customers trusted us with problems that mattered to them. Employees took chances on companies I was building. Candidates trusted us with decisions that affected their families and careers. Mentors gave me advice they didn't have to give. Friends listened to ideas, challenged me, and occasionally talked me out of things.

And my family lived in the business right alongside me. Kim supported the leap before there was much evidence that it was going to work. My kids grew up around the company. My dad shaped the way I think about work, change, and leadership in ways I probably understand better now than I did when he was teaching me.

There is a temptation in entrepreneurship to tell the story as if the entrepreneur did all of it.

Nobody is self-made.

Chapter 2

You Don't Build Anything Alone

You may have taken the risk. You may have signed the checks, lost sleep, made the calls, and lived with the decisions. But if you build something for long enough, eventually you can see the fingerprints of a lot of other people all over it.

That's certainly true of anything I've built.

The younger version of me went to all those breakfasts and lunches because I thought I was building a business. I was.

I just didn't realize I was also building the thing that would eventually make the business worth having.

The relationships.

Chapter 3

What Gets You Here Eventually Stops Working

The kind of people you need when you start a company are not always the same people you need as the company grows.

That was one of the harder things for me to understand because in the beginning, you need people who will do almost anything. Generalists. Risk-takers. People who are comfortable figuring things out without a lot of structure because, frankly, there isn't much structure yet.

Everyone wears multiple hats. Job descriptions are suggestions. Problems belong to whoever is standing closest to them.

That works when you're small.

As the company grows, the work changes. You need specialists. You need people who want clearer roles, stronger systems, and more stability. You need processes that don't exist entirely inside someone's head. What feels entrepreneurial at ten people can feel like chaos at fifty.

The employee profile evolves with the company.

Chapter 3

What Gets You Here Eventually Stops Working

What took me longer to realize was that the founder's profile has to evolve too.

In the early years, my value came from doing. I could sell. Recruit. Solve a customer problem. Jump into an issue. Make a decision quickly. If something needed to happen, I could usually make it happen.

Doing feels productive, especially when you've built your identity around being the person who gets things done. But eventually, being the person who does everything becomes a problem.

As the company grew, my job had to become less about doing the work and more about making sure the right work was getting done. That meant decisions, resources, strategy, and culture. It meant learning to delegate without abdicating responsibility, which sounds obvious until you're the person who has been involved in almost every decision since the beginning.

There is a difference between delegating and disappearing. I had to learn that too.

Chapter 3

What Gets You Here Eventually Stops Working

One of the things that helped was our Daily Huddle. It gave teams a place to align, argue, solve problems, and know what everyone else was working on. It created accountability without requiring me to be standing in the middle of every conversation. I did not invent the huddle; shout-out to Verne and Mastering the Rockefeller Habits for that.

It also reduced a lot of unnecessary drama and miscommunication, which is never a bad thing.

The bigger lesson was that leadership eventually becomes less about having your hands on everything and more about creating the conditions for other people to do great work.

That transition isn't always comfortable for a founder.

There is a strange satisfaction in being needed. When you are the person everyone calls, it can feel like proof that you're valuable. You know the history. You know the customers. You know why something is done the way it is. You can solve the problem faster than explaining it to someone else.

And sometimes you probably can.

Chapter 3

What Gets You Here Eventually Stops Working

But if every important decision still needs to run through you, you haven't built a company. You've built a very complicated job for yourself.

Growth also changes the deal for the people around you. Someone can be exactly the right person for one stage of a company and struggle in the next one. That doesn't mean they failed, and it doesn't mean the company failed them. Sometimes the work simply becomes different.

Those are hard conversations because you remember who was there when there wasn't much to be there for.

I've had employees who took chances on us early, when we didn't have the brand, systems, or stability we eventually built. You don't forget that. Loyalty matters to me. But leadership also means being honest about what the company needs now.

That applies to the founder too.

I've had to ask myself that question more than once over the years: What does the company need from me now?

Chapter 3

What Gets You Here Eventually Stops Working

Not what it needed from me five years ago, or what I'm most comfortable doing, or even what I'm best at. What does it need from me now?

Sometimes the answer has required me to step forward. Sometimes it has required me to get out of the way.

Both can be difficult.

One of the biggest transitions in my own leadership was realizing that my job was becoming a thinking job. That didn't come naturally to me. I'm action-oriented. Give me a problem and my instinct is to start doing something about it.

But the bigger the company became, the more expensive that instinct could get.

A quick decision when you're small might affect three people. The same kind of decision later can affect hundreds. So I had to get better at slowing down, looking at the facts, thinking through the consequences, and making sure I was solving the right problem by involving the right people before I started solving it.

Chapter 3

What Gets You Here Eventually Stops Working

My dad taught me: **See. Think. Act.** I'll get into that more later, but it became increasingly important as my role changed.

The hardest part of growth may be accepting that some of the things that made you successful are eventually the exact things you have to change.

The willingness to do everything helped me start the company. It could not be how I continued to lead it.

The instinct to make every decision helped us move quickly. Eventually, other people needed the knowledge, authority, and confidence to make those decisions without me. Now I ask leaders: What does the business need from me now?

Being indispensable can feel like success when you're building something.

Eventually, it becomes the thing standing in the way.

That's why I keep coming back to a lesson I've had to learn more than once over the last 25 years:

What got you here won't get you there. Thanks, Marshall Goldsmith, for the quote/book.

Chapter 4

I Am a Reformed Busyholic

I am a reformed busyholic.

I say reformed because it sounds better than saying I still have to work at it.

For a long time, being busy was part of my identity. I liked being the person who could handle a lot. I could work longer, move faster, take on more, and outwork a problem if I needed to.

And for a while, that worked.

There are seasons in entrepreneurship when sheer effort matters. When you're starting something, there are things that simply have to get done, and sometimes you are the person who has to do them. I don't regret working hard.

What I didn't understand was the difference between working hard and building a life around being busy.

Chapter 4

I Am a Reformed Busyholic

At 36, I was about 40 pounds heavier than I was at 33. I had spent years trading time and health for equity in the business. I could justify almost all of it because the company was growing and there was always something important that needed my attention.

I had no idea what self-care was. I'm not sure I would have taken it seriously if someone had explained it to me.

My answer to almost everything was to work harder.

The problem is that work was sometimes the easy part.

At work, there were scorecards. Revenue. Consulting work. Placements. Customers. Goals. Problems had owners. You could make a plan, take action, and measure whether something improved.

There was no quarterly dashboard telling me how I was doing as a husband, dad, son, or friend.

You don't get an award because you were really present at dinner this quarter.

Working and growing a company is addictive. Until it's not.

Chapter 4

I Am a Reformed Busyholic

Eventually, I had to admit that I was getting some parts of my life right at the expense of others. I could hit a business goal and still know something else was off. Health. Family. Time. Sometimes all three.

That realization didn't happen all at once, and I definitely didn't fix it all at once.

Over time, I started changing the way I thought about my life. Many years later, I began doing what I call a Life Plan Review, looking beyond the business plan and asking what I actually wanted the rest of my life to look like.

Not just the company.

My life.

I made changes to my health that have now stuck for almost 20 years. I started paying more attention to where my time was going and whether the things taking the most of it actually deserved it.

That sounds obvious to me now. It wasn't obvious to me then.

Chapter 4

I Am a Reformed Busyholic

Time is one of the assets entrepreneurs talk about constantly while simultaneously acting like we have an unlimited supply of it.

When I started the company, I remember thinking, I have nothing to lose but time.

At 33, that felt true.

At 58, I read that sentence very differently.

Time was the thing I was spending. I just didn't understand how valuable it was yet.

That doesn't mean I wish I had worked less every single day or that building the company wasn't worth the sacrifice. Life is more complicated than that. There were seasons when the business needed a lot from me, and I'm proud of what we built.

I just wish I had understood sooner that busy and productive are not the same thing.

Sometimes being busy means you're doing important work.

Chapter 4

I Am a Reformed Busyholic

Sometimes it's to avoid wearing business casual.

I still like action. I still like momentum. I still have days when sitting quietly and thinking feels suspiciously like not working.

That's why I've become such a believer in what I call the velocity of silence. Some of the best decisions I make now come when I stop moving long enough to actually think. That took me years to learn.

I have the life I want now. It took many years to get there. There were wrong turns and dead ends, and plenty of years when I achieved a personal or business goal at the expense of another part of my life.

Having it all takes time, luck, good goal setting, and discipline. Even then, I'm not sure "having it all" is the right way to describe it.

I'm better at that now. Not perfect.

Remember, I said reformed busyholic.

Maybe a little emphasis on busyholic too.

Chapter 5

You Have to Learn to Lead Yourself Too

My dad, Alan, taught me something years ago that I still use all the time: **See. Think. Act.**

It sounds almost too simple to be useful. See what's actually happening. Think about it. Then act. In that order.

I've always been an action person, so you can probably guess which part of that sequence has caused me the most trouble. Give me a problem and my instinct is to start doing something about it. Make the call, solve the problem, move on to the next thing. That can be useful when something really does require an immediate response, but it's less useful when I haven't taken enough time to understand whether I'm solving the right problem in the first place.

My dad was much better at slowing things down. He taught me to start with the facts. What do you actually know? What are you assuming? What are you reacting to because it's true, and what are you reacting to because you've already created an entire story in your head about what might happen next? Learn to back it up.

Then think about what those facts mean. Only then do you decide what you're going to do.

Chapter 5

You Have to Learn to Lead Yourself Too

I've used **See. Think. Act.** in business for years, particularly when a decision feels urgent or complicated. Sometimes I'll literally start over when I realize I'm moving too quickly. What do I see? What do I think it means? Now, what am I going to do?

The older I've gotten, though, the more I've realized this isn't really a business framework. It's a framework for managing yourself.

We spend a lot of time teaching leaders how to lead other people. How do you give feedback? How do you delegate? How do you communicate? How do you set goals, manage performance and build a team? All useful things, and I've spent a lot of my career working on them.

Eventually I realized there was another person I was responsible for managing.

Me.

Chapter 5

You Have to Learn to Lead Yourself Too

That turned out to be a much less convenient assignment.

You bring yourself into every decision you make. Your mood, assumptions, ego, fears, habits and whatever happened before you walked into the room that morning all come with you. You can have a perfectly good decision-making process and still make a bad decision because you're tired, angry, impatient or convinced you already know the answer.

I've managed to demonstrate all of those personally.

As my role changed over the years and more of my job became about making decisions instead of simply doing things, paying attention to the person making those decisions became more important too. That's part of why reflection eventually became a bigger part of my life.

For years, when I reviewed my day, I mostly reviewed the work. What did I get done? What's still open? What's on the calendar tomorrow? What needs my attention? I could review the to-do list, look at the business plan and decide whether it had been a productive day.

Chapter 5

You Have to Learn to Lead Yourself Too

Eventually I realized I was reviewing my productivity, but not necessarily reviewing myself.

I started thinking about the day differently. How did I actually show up? Was I the CEO I wanted to be that day? What about the husband, dad, son or friend? Did I handle something well? Did I handle something poorly? What did I learn that I should carry into tomorrow?

And one question I've come back to again and again is: What value did I create for someone else today? That's a very different question from whether I cleared my inbox.

I don't conduct a formal performance review on myself every night, and I don't think anyone needs another elaborate routine to feel guilty about not following. But I do believe there's value in putting yourself up for review every once in a while.

Sometimes the answer is that you had a good day. Great. Take the win. Sometimes you look back and realize you weren't particularly proud of how you handled something. Take that too. The point isn't to beat yourself up about it. The point is to notice it and decide what you're going to do differently.

Chapter 5

You Have to Learn to Lead Yourself Too

Which brings me back to **See. Think. Act.**, because one of the things I've had to notice about myself is how much time I can spend reacting to things that haven't actually happened.

I worry.

I've spent a lot of my life worrying about events that either never happened or didn't happen anything like the version I had already created in my head.

This can happen very quickly in business. A customer is unhappy and suddenly you're imagining losing the account. Then you're calculating what losing the account might do to the quarter. Pretty soon you've mentally reorganized half the company because of a quarter that hasn't happened because of a customer you haven't actually lost.

I've done versions of that in my personal life too. A conversation you're dreading, a decision someone else is going to make, something involving one of your kids, a health concern. Give your brain a small amount of incomplete information and it can create a remarkably detailed version of the future.

Chapter 5

You Have to Learn to Lead Yourself Too

Mine certainly can.

I've read a lot of Stoic philosophy over the years, and one of the ideas I've carried with me is the difference between what is actually happening and the suffering we create around what we imagine might happen. When I think about it, that isn't terribly far from what my dad was teaching me with **See. Think. Act.**

Come back to what you know. Deal with what's real. Then decide what deserves your energy.

I want to be careful with that because I don't believe the answer is to stop thinking about the future. I'm a planner. Clearly.

Good leaders anticipate problems. You think through scenarios, understand risk and prepare for what might happen so you aren't surprised by every bump in the road. But preparing for something and suffering it before it happens are two very different things.

I wish I had understood that distinction earlier.

Chapter 5

You Have to Learn to Lead Yourself Too

Most of the things I've worried myself sick over didn't happen the way I imagined they would. Some never happened at all. And when genuinely hard things did happen, we dealt with what was real.

There's something useful in that. The imaginary version of a problem has no boundaries. It can keep growing because there are no facts to contain it. The real problem eventually gives you something concrete to work with. You can see it, think about what it means and then decide what to do.

There's another phrase I've come back to during difficult seasons: **this too shall pass**. The older I get, the more useful that becomes because I've now lived long enough to have watched it happen over and over again.

Good seasons pass. Hard seasons pass. Businesses change. Kids grow up. People come into your life and leave it. Problems that once consumed your attention eventually become something you barely remember.

I don't find that depressing. I find it clarifying.

Chapter 5

You Have to Learn to Lead Yourself Too

If something is good, appreciate it while you're in it. If something is hard, remember you're probably not going to live inside that exact moment forever. And if you're worrying about something that hasn't actually happened yet, maybe don't give it three days of your life before it earns them.

I'm still working on that one.

Twenty-five years of making decisions hasn't made me immune to bad decisions. Reading philosophy hasn't stopped me from worrying. Having a framework doesn't mean I always remember to use it.

But I'm better at catching myself than I used to be.

See what's actually happening. Think about what it means. Act on what's real. And every once in a while, take a look at the person doing all that seeing, thinking and acting.

Sometimes the plan isn't the thing that needs adjustment.

Sometimes it's you.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

I've spent most of my career helping people make decisions about work.

Should I take this job? Should I leave this company? Should I ask for more money? Should I change careers? Should I start a business? Should I stay where I am and try to make it better?

After 35 years of hearing different versions of those questions, I've become convinced that we sometimes start in the wrong place.

Before you decide what you want to do, you need to have some idea of who you are.

I call that your **Culture of One**.

The idea came from something we talk about constantly in business. Every company has a culture, whether it has intentionally created one or not. There are values, behaviors, priorities and ways decisions get made. When those things are clear, people have something to come back to when the answer isn't obvious.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

Why wouldn't a person need the same thing?

For years I've watched people make major career and life decisions based on the opportunity immediately in front of them. More money. Better title. Bigger company. Interesting offer. Somebody else appears to be doing something exciting, so maybe I should be doing that too. I've done my own versions of this.

The problem is that something can be a genuinely great opportunity and still be completely wrong for you. If you don't know what matters to you, every shiny object gets a vote.

The Shiny Objects Are Everywhere

There will always be someone making more money than you.

Someone will have a bigger company, better title, nicer house, more impressive vacation or career that looks much more interesting from the outside. Today you don't even have to go looking for these people. Your phone will happily introduce you to hundreds of them before breakfast.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

Comparison can make you question a perfectly good life. I think this happens in business too. You see another company raising money, entering a new market, launching something or growing faster, and suddenly you wonder whether you should be doing the same thing.

Maybe.

But maybe not.

One of the benefits of knowing yourself is being able to look at a good idea and say, “That's a good idea for somebody else.”

That has taken me some time to learn.

I've always had ideas, and I'm interested in a lot of things. I like learning. I like building. I like the next challenge. Those qualities have served me well, but they also mean I can become interested in something simply because it's interesting.

Interesting and important are not the same thing.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

Knowing your **Culture of One** gives you something to test those opportunities against. Does this fit the life I'm trying to build? Does it line up with what I say matters to me? Am I moving toward something I genuinely want, or am I reacting to what everyone around me seems to want?

Those aren't questions someone else can answer for you.

Values Have to Be Useful

I've been thinking about personal values for a long time. My own values of integrity, authenticity, teaching, open-mindedness, fortitude and kindness have been with me since I was 24. I've revisited them plenty of times, but the words themselves have held up remarkably well.

What has changed is my understanding of what they're for.

It's easy to write values down. Companies do this all the time. Put five nice words on a wall and call it culture. People can do the same thing.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

The real test is whether those values help you make a decision when the answer isn't obvious. Do they tell you something about how you want to behave when you're under pressure? Do they help you decide which opportunities deserve a yes and which ones deserve a no? Do they still apply when using them is inconvenient?

My dad has always been a good example of this for me. He's a very direct, information-based person, and that isn't something he turns on when he walks into a business meeting. It's who he is. I've watched him apply that same approach to difficult parts of his personal life, including chronic pain. He studies the problem, names it, tries to understand it and works with the facts in front of him.

That's living from your values rather than just being able to list them.

I've gotten better at that over time, although I still have moments when one of my supposed values apparently needs to tap me on the shoulder and remind me that it exists.

Again, work in progress.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

Your Career Is Part of Your Life

This may be the biggest reason I care about this idea.

We tend to talk about career planning as if we're designing a career and then figuring out where to fit the rest of life around it.

I think that's backwards.

Your career is part of your life. Your life isn't supposed to be built around your career.

I wish I had understood that distinction more clearly when I was younger.

It doesn't mean work shouldn't matter. Mine matters enormously to me. Work can give us purpose, relationships, financial security, challenge and a place to use whatever gifts we happen to have. I've spent almost my entire adult life thinking about work, so I'm certainly not going to tell anyone it doesn't matter.

But it isn't the whole thing.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

You're also deciding what kind of relationships you want, where you want to live, what role health plays in your life, what you want to do with your money and how much time you want with family. You're deciding what interests you outside of work, what kind of friend you want to be and what you want an ordinary Wednesday to feel like.

That last one matters more than we think because a lot of life is ordinary Wednesdays.

When I started doing more intentional life planning, I began looking at all of those areas together instead of treating them as separate projects. Family, friends, career, finances, health, interests, personal growth, whatever the categories are for you. The point isn't to have every area perfectly balanced. Mine certainly haven't been.

The point is to actually look at the whole picture.

You may discover that you're winning according to one scorecard and losing according to another one you care about more.

Better to know.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

Success Has to Be Yours

I've hit goals and discovered they weren't quite what I thought they would be. I've wanted things because I thought I was supposed to want them. I've spent time chasing things that looked important and then realized they weren't particularly important to me.

I don't think that's unusual.

Part of getting older is discovering that some of the things you were absolutely certain would make you happy don't have quite the effect you expected.

The answer isn't to stop setting goals. You already know I'm not going to say that.

The bigger the decision, the more useful it is to understand whether the life on the other side actually looks like yours.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

I've come to believe that confidence has something to do with this too. People often think confidence comes from having all the answers. I think some of it comes from knowing yourself well enough that you don't need everybody else to agree with the answer you've chosen.

That doesn't mean you stop listening. My Top 20 still matters. My family matters. Good advice matters.

But eventually you have to live the life that results from the decision.

They don't.

Closing the Gap

A lot of what I've built through Outside Insights, the Life Plan Review and **Culture of One** comes back to a pretty simple idea: there is the life you're living, and there is the life you say you want.

There's usually a gap between the two.

There is one in mine too.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

The goal isn't to eliminate every gap and arrive at some perfectly optimized life where every category gets a ten out of ten. I don't know anyone living that life, and I would probably find them exhausting.

The goal is to notice the gaps that matter and do something about them. Sometimes that means changing jobs. Sometimes it means staying in the job and changing something else. Sometimes the career isn't the problem at all.

That's why I think we have to be careful about asking, “What should I do next?” before we've spent any time asking, “What actually matters to me?”

I've watched thousands of people navigate careers. I've built companies. I've changed my own definition of success more than once.

And the older I get, the more convinced I am that there isn't one right version of a successful life.

Chapter 6

Know Who You Are Before You Decide What You Want

There is only the version that fits the person living it.
Figure out who that person is.

Then you have a much better chance of figuring out what he or she should do next.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

There are parts of leadership that are fun.

Starting something is fun. Growing it is fun. Hiring someone great is fun. Winning a big customer, hitting a goal, watching someone on your team develop into a leader, those are the parts people tend to talk about when they talk about building a company.

Then there are the other parts.

I've had to make decisions over the last 25 years that affected people's jobs, their income, their families and their futures. I've had to make decisions I knew would disappoint people I cared about. I've had conversations I dreaded having and made calls where there wasn't a version of the outcome that felt particularly good.

That's part of the job too. You can't be a leader without managing through a downturn or recession. Anybody can lead when times are good.

I don't think I understood that fully when I started the company. Leadership felt much more connected to building something. Set the direction, get people excited about it, work hard, take care of customers and keep moving.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

Eventually you learn that leadership is also what happens when there is no good option and everybody is looking at you anyway.

When the Numbers Became People

COVID was one of those moments.

Like every business owner, I remember the uncertainty at the beginning of the pandemic. Nobody knew how long it was going to last, what the economic impact would ultimately be or what businesses were supposed to prepare for. Information changed constantly, and decisions that normally would have taken weeks or months suddenly had to be made very quickly.

For us, that eventually meant furloughs.

There is no clever leadership framework that makes a decision like that feel good. You can look at the numbers, understand what the business can sustain and make the most responsible decision available to you, but the numbers on the spreadsheet are still attached to people.

That's the part you live with.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

What happened next is something I've never forgotten.

Members of our team voluntarily stepped aside so that other people could keep working. They looked around at coworkers and friends and decided someone else might need the paycheck more than they did. Nobody could have required that kind of response, and I don't think you can manufacture it with a company value written on a wall.

That comes from people caring about one another.

I've thought about that moment a lot because I was supposed to be the leader making the hard decisions, but the people around me were showing me something about leadership too. Twenty-five years has taught me that those two things happen more often than we admit.

The person with the title isn't always the person teaching the lesson.

There Isn't Always a Right Answer

I like decisions when I can gather the facts, think through the options and arrive at an answer I feel confident about.
See. Think. Act.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

Unfortunately, leadership does not promise you complete information.

Sometimes you have 60 percent of what you wish you knew and 100 percent of the responsibility for deciding anyway.

I've had to become more comfortable with that. You gather the facts that are available, listen to people you trust, think through the consequences, make the best decision you can and move forward. Then you live with it.

That's important because I think we sometimes evaluate leadership decisions with information that wasn't available when the decision was made. Once you know what happened, the path can look obvious. It rarely looks that obvious while you're standing at the fork in the road.

That doesn't mean leaders get a free pass because something was difficult. You still have to own the outcome. If you get it wrong, you need to say you got it wrong. If new information changes the situation, change the decision.

I've made good decisions, not-so-good ones and probably a few that I still haven't completely decided how to classify. That's 25 years of leadership.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

People Make It Harder

Businesses would be much easier to run if they didn't have people.

They also wouldn't be worth running.

The hardest decisions I've made have almost always been difficult because there was a person on the other side of them. Sometimes that person was an employee. Sometimes it was a customer, a partner, a friend or someone who had been part of the company for a long time.

That's when all the clean leadership language gets messy.

You can care deeply about someone and still have to make a decision they aren't going to like. You can appreciate everything someone has contributed and still recognize that something needs to change. You can understand someone's perspective and still disagree with it.

It took me time to understand that empathy and accountability aren't opposites.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

Being a caring leader doesn't mean avoiding hard decisions. In fact, sometimes avoiding the decision because you don't want to hurt someone simply moves the pain somewhere else. The rest of the team carries it. The customer feels it. The business absorbs it. Or the person you're trying to protect spends another six months in a situation that isn't really working for them either.

I've waited too long on decisions because I wanted things to work out, and I've also moved too quickly at times because I thought I knew the answer. Neither feels particularly good when you realize it afterward.

You learn.

The Decision Follows You Home

One of the biggest differences between being responsible for a task and being responsible for an organization is that the hard decisions don't necessarily end when the meeting does.

They follow you home.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

I've replayed conversations in my head. I've wondered whether I could have handled something differently. I've worried about the impact a decision was going to have on someone. I've had moments when I knew intellectually that something was the right business decision and still felt terrible about making it.

I don't think that's a weakness. I'm probably more concerned about the leader who stops feeling any of it.

At the same time, you can't lead an organization if every difficult decision destroys you. That's where some of the things I've learned about reflection, values and imagined truths start becoming practical rather than philosophical.

What are the facts? What was within my control? Did I make the decision for the right reasons? Did I treat people with respect? Is there something I need to fix? Is there something I need to learn?

And then, eventually, you have to let yourself move forward.

That's easier to write than it is to do.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

Leadership Is Making Decisions

When I wrote my original notes for this book, I put down a sentence that I've kept coming back to:

Leadership is making decisions. And living with them.

I still think that's about as close as I can get.

Leadership isn't the title. It isn't being the smartest person in the room or having the answer before everyone else. It certainly isn't getting every decision right.

It's accepting responsibility for making the call when a call has to be made, listening when somebody else knows more than you do, being willing to change your mind when the facts change, admitting when you got something wrong and resisting the temptation to take all the credit when something goes right.

And sometimes it's sitting with the fact that you made the best decision you could and someone was still hurt by it. I wish there were a cleaner version of leadership than that.

There isn't.

Chapter 7

Leadership Isn't Always the Fun Part

Twenty-five years ago, I thought leadership was mostly about getting people somewhere. I think about it differently now. You're responsible for the people while you're getting there.

That makes the journey better.

It also makes some of the decisions a hell of a lot harder.

But I wouldn't want to lead any other way.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

When I started the company in 2001, the dot-com era was still reshaping business. The internet was changing how companies operated, how people communicated and eventually how people looked for work. There were plenty of people who thought the internet was overhyped, plenty who didn't understand what it was going to mean for their industry and plenty who assumed they had more time to figure it out.

Sound familiar?

Today we're having many of the same conversations about AI.

The technology is different. The questions are surprisingly similar.

Is this really going to change my job? Is it going to change my industry? Do I need to understand this now? Can I wait and see what happens? Is everybody making too big a deal about it?

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

I don't know exactly what AI is going to do for every job or every industry, and I'm immediately suspicious of anyone who tells me they do. But I have been running businesses long enough to know that waiting for change to become completely clear before you respond to it usually means you're already late.

I've watched that movie before.

You Get Three Choices

Over the years, I've come to think there are basically three ways you can respond to meaningful change.

You can ignore it. You can tolerate it. Or you can become a change agent.

Ignoring change is pretty straightforward. You keep doing what you've always done and hope whatever is happening around you either goes away or doesn't affect you.

Sometimes that works for a while, which is what makes it dangerous.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

Tolerating change is a little better. You recognize something is happening and make whatever adjustments are necessary to keep up. You learn the new system because the company requires it. You change the process because the old one stopped working. You adapt because you have to.

Most of us spend some time here. I certainly have.

Being a change agent is different. Instead of waiting until change forces your hand, you start looking for it. What's happening in the market? What is technology making possible that wasn't possible before? What are customers doing differently? What are employees asking for? Where is something beginning to shift before everyone agrees that it has shifted?

Then you ask the more important question: What can I do with that?

That doesn't mean chasing every trend. If anything, 25 years in business has made me more skeptical of shiny objects, not less. We've already established that I can generate enough of those myself.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

It means developing the habit of paying attention.

There's a big difference between being fascinated by the new thing and understanding whether the new thing actually changes anything that matters.

Change Usually Feels Bad Before It Feels Useful

I've written before that change often feels like bad now and good later.

I think that's one reason we resist it even when we know something needs to change.

The status quo is comfortable because we understand it. Even when it isn't particularly good, at least it's familiar. We know how our job works. We know how the company operates. We know the people, the systems and the rules.

Then something changes and suddenly we're beginners again.

Nobody particularly enjoys feeling incompetent.

I don't.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

You learn a new technology and you're slower than you were with the old one. You change a business process and productivity drops before it improves. You take a new role and things that used to be automatic suddenly require thought. You make a change in your personal life and for a while the new routine feels harder than the bad habit you were trying to replace.

That uncomfortable middle is where a lot of people turn around.

I've done it too.

The mistake is assuming discomfort means the change is wrong.

Sometimes it is. Not every change is progress, and I've made changes that I later changed back. But discomfort by itself doesn't tell you very much. It may simply mean you're doing something you haven't learned how to do yet.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

I've tried to get better at staying curious a little longer.

What is this change actually telling me? What becomes possible if it works? What am I protecting by resisting it? Am I making a thoughtful decision that the old way is better, or do I just miss being good at the old way?

That last question can be annoying.

It's also useful.

I've Been Behind Change Too

It would be easy for me to write this chapter as the entrepreneur who has spent 25 years charging toward the future while everyone else resisted it.

That's not what happened.

I've been ahead of change. I've been right on top of it. And I've absolutely had moments when change was dragging me behind it while I complained.

I think most of us move between those positions depending on what is changing.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

There are changes I naturally enjoy. New business ideas, new ways to solve customer problems, new markets and technologies tend to get my attention pretty quickly.

Then there are changes I didn't ask for.

Those are somehow less exciting.

That's why I don't think being a change agent is a personality type. It's a practice. You can be incredibly innovative in one area of your life and stubbornly attached to the status quo in another.

The question my dad has asked for years is: Where are you in relation to change? Are you behind it, even with it or ahead of it?

I like that because it forces you to assess the situation rather than simply declare yourself “good at change.”

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

Maybe you're ahead in your career but behind in the way you're taking care of your health. Maybe your company is ahead technologically but hasn't adjusted to what its employees need. Maybe you're embracing AI at work while refusing to learn how to use whatever new app your family insists is now the only acceptable way to communicate.

I reserve the right to complain about that last category indefinitely.

The point is that you don't become a change agent once and receive a certificate.

You keep practicing.

Twenty-Five Years Is a Lot of Change

Sometimes I think about how absurd it would be if I tried to run today's businesses using what I knew in 2001.

The tools are different. The workforce is different. Customers are different. The way people find jobs is different. The way companies find talent is different. Expectations about where, when and how people work have changed. The businesses themselves have changed.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

CBI Group became Placers 2.0. Today there are two separate companies where there was once one.

Those changes weren't all part of some master plan I wrote at the beginning. Some were deliberate. Some came from opportunity. Some came from mistakes. Some were responses to things happening around us.

That's what 25 years looks like.

The only way you get to remain in business for a long time is by being willing to stop doing some of the things that once made you successful.

That applies to careers too.

I've told people for years that careers are getting longer. If you're going to work for 50 or 60 years, think about how many times the world around your career is going to change. Technology will change. Industries will change. Skills that are valuable today may become less valuable, and things nobody has a job title for yet may become entire professions.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

You cannot build a 60-year career around the assumption that the world is going to hold still for you.

It won't.

The better strategy is to get good at learning, adapting and understanding what value you can create as the conditions change.

That doesn't mean abandoning everything you've learned every time something new comes along. Experience matters. Judgment matters. Knowing what doesn't change can be just as valuable as spotting what does.

People still want to be treated well. Customers still want their problems solved. Employers still need people who create value. Trust still matters. Relationships still matter. Technology changes the tools, but it doesn't necessarily change the reason we're using them.

I'd Rather Be Driving the Bus

When I was younger, I probably thought being a change agent meant moving faster.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

Now I think it has more to do with paying attention.

You notice what's changing before you're forced to. You get curious instead of immediately defensive. You experiment. You ask better questions. You keep what works and let go of what doesn't.

And sometimes you decide not to change something at all. That's important too.

Being ahead of change doesn't mean being controlled by it. If you chase every new technology, management idea, business model or cultural trend, you're not leading change. You're just following a different crowd.

The goal is to understand what's happening well enough to make your own decision about it.

My dad was right. I've spent 25 years watching that play out in business, technology, work, family and myself.

I don't think the pace is going to slow down from here.

Probably the opposite.

Chapter 8

Change Is Coming Whether You Like It or Not

So when I look at something like AI, I don't spend much time wondering whether change is coming.

It's already here.

The question is what we're going to do with it.

We can ignore it for as long as that remains possible, tolerate it when we no longer have a choice, or get curious, learn what we can, decide where it matters and help shape what happens next.

Change is coming either way.

I'd rather be driving the bus.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

Twenty-five years is a long time to run a business.

Long enough to have some good stories. Long enough to make plenty of mistakes. Long enough to hit goals that once seemed enormous and then discover that life continues approximately five minutes after you hit them.

I've had milestones I'm incredibly proud of. We've grown companies, made lists, survived things I wasn't sure we would survive and helped a lot of people along the way. But I don't want the biggest thing we've ever done to be behind us.

That's an interesting thing to admit 25 years in.

There is a version of this story where 25 years becomes a finish line. You look backward, celebrate what you've built, tell some stories, maybe give yourself permission to slow down and spend a little more time appreciating what you've accomplished.

I plan to do some of that.

I'm just not done.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

The Next Big, Hairy Goal

I've always liked big goals. Sometimes more than is probably reasonable.

Jim Collins gave us the term BHAG, Big Hairy Audacious Goal, and I've always liked what it represents. A real BHAG should be big enough that you don't completely know how you're going to accomplish it when you set it. If the entire path is obvious, it may be a good goal, but it probably isn't particularly audacious.

Our current one is pretty simple to say:

Help 500,000 people by 2032.

The path to getting there is not simple at all.

When we first started talking about the goal, it would have been easy to make it about placements. We're in the workforce business, after all. Count the people we put to work, keep adding to the number and eventually arrive at 500,000.

But that started to feel too small.

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Not the number. Half a million is plenty.

The definition of helping.

Over the years, the way we can help someone has expanded. Sometimes it's finding a job. Sometimes it's helping someone understand the job market, make a better career decision, develop a skill, get access to information or see an opportunity they couldn't see before.

Technology creates new ways to do that. Content creates new ways to do that. The businesses we're building today create possibilities that didn't exist when I started CBI Group.

So the goal became less about counting transactions and more about asking a bigger question.

How many people can we genuinely help?

That brings me right back to something I said earlier in this book: the best definition of rich is helping more people.

Apparently I wasn't done with that idea.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

Goals Change When You Ask Why

I've been setting goals for most of my adult life, and I'm still learning how to do it.

That's slightly embarrassing considering how much time I spend talking about them.

For years, I was pretty good at mechanics. Pick the goal. Put a number on it. Set the deadline. Build the plan. Measure progress. Work hard.

There is nothing wrong with any of that. Goals need structure or they remain wishes.

But I've also hit goals and discovered they weren't actually what I wanted.

That's a strange experience. You spend months or years climbing toward something, get there and realize the view isn't quite what you expected. The goal worked exactly as designed. You just designed the wrong goal.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

Over time, I've gotten more interested in the question that comes before the plan.

Why?

I've been using the Five Whys (Thanks Jon) more in my own planning and with people in our Life Plan Review. The concept originally came from manufacturing and root-cause problem solving: keep asking why until you get beneath the obvious answer. I've found it works remarkably well on goals too.

Why do you want the promotion?

Why do you want to make that amount of money?

Why do you want the company to reach that size?

Why do you want to lose weight?

Why do you want to retire at that age?

The first answer is usually pretty easy. The second gets more interesting. Keep going and sometimes you discover the goal you started with isn't really the goal at all.

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I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

Maybe the promotion is about proving something to yourself. Maybe money is about freedom. Maybe the fitness goal is really about being healthy enough to participate in your kids' lives. Maybe the company goal is about how many people you can help.

Or maybe you get to the fifth why and realize you don't care nearly as much about the thing as you thought you did.

That's useful too.

I've become much more willing to change a goal when the why doesn't hold up. I don't see that as quitting. I see it as paying attention.

The younger version of me probably would have been more inclined to finish the climb simply because I had announced that I was climbing the mountain.

I've climbed a few wrong mountains that way.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

You Move Pebbles

There's another thing I've learned about enormous goals. You don't accomplish them by waking up every morning and moving the mountain.

You move a pebble.

Then another one.

Earlier this year, we put our next six-year vision into a time capsule. I love the symbolism of that because there is something wonderfully strange about making a commitment to people you haven't become yet. We know what we're trying to accomplish by 2032. We have no idea exactly what the world, the workforce or our businesses will look like when we open that capsule.

That's okay.

The goal gives us direction. The work happens much closer to the ground.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

One person helped. One customer problem was solved. One process improved. One person on the team is developing a new capability. One decision that moves us slightly closer to where we're trying to go.

Pebbles.

I've spent enough of my career being impatient to appreciate this more than I used to.

When the goal is enormous, the distance between where you are and where you want to be can become discouraging. You can stare at the mountain and convince yourself you're not making enough progress because it still looks enormous.

Of course it does.

It's a mountain.

The better question is whether you moved something today.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

This is one of the reasons I've become more interested in daily intentions and reviews as I've gotten older. A six-year vision is useful. So is asking what you're going to do on a random Thursday that has anything to do with it.

The big goal gives the small action meaning.

The small actions are what eventually make the big goal real.

Your WHY Gets to Change Too

One of the things I wouldn't have understood when I started is that your WHY can change.

I used to think purpose was something you discovered and then carried around forever.

I'm not sure I believe that anymore.

When I started the company, part of my WHY was simply that I wanted to build something of my own. I wanted independence. I wanted to test myself. I wanted to create the kind of company I believed should exist.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

There was probably some ego mixed in there too.

Actually, there was definitely some ego mixed in there.

As the company grew, the WHY grew with it. Employees were depending on us. Customers were trusting us. We had the opportunity to affect people's careers and families. The work became about more than whether I could build a successful company.

Then my kids grew up. My own priorities changed. I got healthier. I started thinking differently about time. I became more interested in the life around the business and eventually in helping other people think about theirs. The person asking “Why am I doing this?” at 58 shouldn't necessarily have the same answer he had at 33. If he does, I hope he's at least checked.

That's why I think your WHY deserves a periodic review just like everything else. Does this still matter to me? Is the reason I started still the reason I'm continuing? If it isn't, is there a better reason now?

Sometimes the answer will tell you to keep going.

Chapter 9

I Don't Want Our Biggest Goal to Be Behind Us

Sometimes it may tell you to stop.

Both can be progress.

I'm Still Setting Goals

I know there is a school of thought that says at some point you should stop chasing the next thing and simply be satisfied.

I understand the sentiment.

I am grateful for what I have. I have the life I want now, and it took me a long time to be able to say that.

But gratitude and ambition don't feel like opposites to me. I can appreciate what we've built and still be curious about what else we can build. I can be proud of the people we've helped and want to help more of them. I can value my time differently than I did when I started and still decide that some of that time is worth investing in a very big goal.

The difference now is that I want the goal to earn my time, my attention, the team's energy and the opportunity cost of all the other things we could choose to do instead.

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That's a much higher standard than whether we can put an impressive number on a slide.

Five hundred thousand people by 2032 will pass that test for me.

Not because I need another number.

Because I want to know what kind of company we have to become to help that many people.

And if I'm being completely truthful, I want to know what kind of person I still have to become to help build it.

That's what I like most about a BHAG now. The destination matters, but the goal starts changing you long before you arrive. The point isn't only where you end up. It's also who you become on the way there.

Twenty-five years ago, I had an 88-page plan for a company that didn't exist yet.

Today I have a six-year goal for a future I can't completely see.

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Apparently some things don't change.

I'm still making plans. I'm still setting goals that are a little unreasonable. I'm still trying to figure out how to get from here to there.

I'm just asking why a lot more often now.

And I'm much more comfortable knowing that I don't have to move the whole mountain today.

One pebble will do.

Tomorrow, we'll move to another.

Chapter 10

Going Opposite the Crowd

My dad and I wrote a book together called *Opposite the Crowd*.

The title probably makes us sound more rebellious than either one of us actually is.

The idea was never that the crowd is always wrong. Sometimes the crowd is right. There have also been plenty of occasions when I've gone my own way and discovered that perhaps the crowd knew something I didn't. The point wasn't to automatically reject whatever everyone else was doing. It was learning to think for yourself.

The book grew out of conversations between my dad and me that had really been happening for most of my life. Alan has always been a maverick thinker. He has his own operating philosophies about work, leadership, risk, relationships and life, and growing up around him meant I was exposed to those ideas long before I understood that other people might consider some of them unconventional.

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Going Opposite the Crowd

I remember learning what it meant to be opposite the crowd when I was a kid playing with cars on the floor of the original Placers office, the company my dad had started years before I would start my own. Years later, when Dad and I started recording conversations for what eventually became the book, we realized we had been talking about different versions of the same ideas for decades. Some of his philosophies had become mine along the way, but not simply because my dad told me they should.

I had enough opportunities to test them for myself. That's an important distinction because going opposite the crowd isn't about rejecting conventional wisdom simply because it's conventional. It's about learning to think for yourself.

I've spent much of this book talking about how important other people have been in my life, so I don't want this chapter to accidentally suggest that I think we should stop listening to them.

Quite the opposite.

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Going Opposite the Crowd

I have a Top 20 because I want smart people around me. I've had mentors throughout my career. I've read hundreds of books because I want access to the way other people think. I've learned from employees, customers, friends and certainly my family. Some of the best decisions I've made started with somebody telling me something I hadn't considered.

But eventually, all of that advice has to come back to the person who has to live with the decision.

That's where knowing yourself becomes useful.

Listen Without Outsourcing the Decision

There is comfort in doing what everyone else is doing. If it works, great. If it doesn't, at least you have company. Making a decision that runs against conventional wisdom feels different because you give up some of that protection. If you're going to choose the less obvious path, it helps to understand why you're choosing it.

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Going Opposite the Crowd

I've done that plenty of times in business. Bootstrapping was a choice. Starting my own company was a choice. There have been decisions about growth, people, markets and how we operate that didn't necessarily look like the obvious answer from the outside. Some worked and some didn't, which is important because going opposite the crowd doesn't automatically make you right.

Being unconventional for the sake of being unconventional is still allowing the crowd to make your decision. You're just automatically choosing the opposite of whatever everyone else chose, and that's not independent thinking either.

Independent thinking means gathering information, listening to people you trust, understanding the facts and then deciding what makes sense based on who you are, what you're trying to accomplish and what you believe. Sometimes you'll end up opposite the crowd and sometimes you'll be standing right in the middle of it. Either is fine if you got there on purpose.

I think that may actually be harder now than it was when I started my career.

Chapter 10

Going Opposite the Crowd

We have access to more information than I could have imagined at 21, which is enormously useful. It also means we have access to everybody else's opinion about what our lives are supposed to look like.

You can spend five minutes online and discover that you're apparently behind in your career, retirement savings, fitness, parenting, travel, morning routine and whatever else the algorithm has decided you're failing at today. That's a lot of outside input before you've even had coffee.

Business isn't much different. There is always a new management philosophy, technology, growth strategy or company everyone suddenly believes you should be copying. I've fallen into that trap too. If you're not careful, you can spend so much time watching what everyone else is building that you stop asking whether any of it has anything to do with the company you're trying to build.

The shiny objects we talked about earlier aren't always objects. Sometimes they're other people's definitions of success.

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Going Opposite the Crowd

Confidence Needs Humility

There is another part of independent thinking that took me longer to appreciate. You need enough confidence to make your own decision, but you also need enough humility to change it.

Those two things can be difficult to hold at the same time. Entrepreneurs tend to get praised for conviction. Believe in the vision, ignore the doubters, never quit and keep going when everybody tells you it won't work. I've benefited enormously from that mindset. I'm not sure I would have started a company without some version of it.

The danger comes when confidence in your ability to make a decision becomes attachment to the decision itself. At that point, you can find yourself defending a choice because it was yours rather than because the facts still support it.

I've done that too.

Chapter 10

Going Opposite the Crowd

This is another place where Dad's **See. Think. Act.** philosophy keeps showing up. You make the best decision you can with the information you have, but then you keep paying attention. If the facts change, your thinking may need to change. If you learn something you didn't know before, use it. If somebody makes a better argument, listen to them.

Changing your mind isn't evidence that you weren't thinking independently before. Sometimes it's evidence that you still are.

Twenty-five years has made me more comfortable saying both, “I think this is the right decision” and “I was wrong.” I'd like to think I'm getting better at knowing when each one is required.

Eventually It Has to Be Your Life

When Dad and I started working on *Opposite the Crowd*, we were capturing conversations and philosophies that had passed between us over decades. Eventually those conversations became something we thought might help other people, but I still think about the book as something very personal between us.

Chapter 10

Going Opposite the Crowd

Underneath all of the business language and frameworks is a pretty simple idea. Eventually, the decision has to belong to you.

I can give someone career advice based on 35 years of experience. A mentor can tell you what happened when they made a similar decision. Your family can tell you what they hope you'll choose, and your friends can tell you what they would do. Listen to all of them. I certainly do.

But eventually you have to remember that you're the one who wakes up inside the life the decision creates, and that means the final decision has to belong to you.

That has made me more thoughtful about giving advice as I've gotten older. I still give plenty of it.

Probably more than some people ask for.

Chapter 10

Going Opposite the Crowd

But I try to remember that what worked for me may not be what works for someone else. My path doesn't have to become anybody else's blueprint, and neither does my dad's. The value is in learning how other people think, taking what is useful, testing it against your own values and circumstances and then building a way of thinking that belongs to you.

That's what *Opposite the Crowd* means to me now. It isn't rebellion or automatically choosing the unusual path, and it certainly isn't believing you're smarter than everybody standing in the crowd. It's being willing to stand somewhere by yourself when you've thought it through and believe that's where you belong, while still having enough humility to walk back over when you discover you were wrong.

After 25 years, I'm less interested in whether a decision looks conventional or unconventional. I want to know whether we understand why we're making it, whether it fits who we are and where we're trying to go, and whether we're willing to take responsibility for what happens after we make it.

Because eventually the thinking has to turn into doing.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

I've had a lot of ideas over 25 years.

Some were good. Some became good because we worked on them long enough, and some probably should have been put out of their misery much sooner.

One of the things I believe deeply about business is that ideas are cheap. I love ideas, so I say that as someone who generates more than his fair share of them. Give me a problem, a whiteboard and a few people willing to play along and I can happily spend hours imagining what we could build.

That's the fun part. Then somebody has to build it.

I've watched companies with brilliant strategies fail to execute them, and I've watched people take fairly ordinary ideas and turn them into successful businesses because they were willing to do the work consistently for a very long time. I've experienced both sides of that myself.

The idea matters. The strategy matters. The plan matters.

But eventually somebody has to execute.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

Culture Is What Happens When You're Not Looking

I've always cared a lot about culture.

Like most leaders, I probably understood it differently at different stages of the company. Early on, culture was mostly the people in the room. There weren't enough of us for it to be terribly complicated. We knew each other. We worked together. Everybody could see what everybody else was doing.

As the organization grew, culture became something we had to be much more intentional about.

I don't think culture is the words on the wall, although having clear values certainly helps. Culture is what people actually do with those values when there isn't a leader standing next to them telling them what to do.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

That's why I've always liked the idea of taking culture to the **Nth Degree**. The goal is to give people enough knowledge about the business, enough authority to make decisions and enough understanding of the purpose behind the work that they can act without waiting for somebody above them to approve every move.

That's harder than writing a mission statement.

It requires trust and communication. It requires leaders who are willing to give up some control, and it requires people who are willing to accept the responsibility that comes with having it.

I've learned that you can't say you want people to think like owners and then become angry every time they make a decision differently than you would have.

I may have needed to learn that more than once.

Culture also shows itself when things aren't going well. The COVID furlough story earlier in this book remains one of the clearest examples I've ever seen.

You find out what the culture really is when it costs something.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

Then You Have to Do the Work

I have made bad ideas work because I refused to quit. That's a sentence from my original notes for this book, and I laughed a little when I reread it because it is both something I'm proud of and something I should probably be more concerned about.

Persistence has been one of my greatest strengths.

I believe in showing up. I believe in doing what you said you were going to do. I believe in staying with something when the first attempt doesn't work and the second one doesn't either. Most meaningful things I've accomplished took longer than I wanted them to and required more effort than I expected.

There have been plenty of moments when quitting would have been easier.

I'm glad I didn't.

But somewhere along the way, I had to admit that persistence and wisdom are not always the same thing.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

Sometimes I kept going because the idea was worth fighting for. Sometimes I kept going because I didn't want to admit the idea wasn't working.

Those can feel remarkably similar when you're in the middle of them.

That's where execution gets interesting. We love the stories where someone believed in an idea nobody else understood, refused to quit and eventually proved everyone wrong. Those stories are inspiring because we already know the ending.

Nobody writes as many stories about the entrepreneur who stubbornly worked on the wrong thing for six years. There are a lot of those too.

The question I've gotten better at asking is not simply, “Can we make this work?”

Given enough effort, money and stubbornness, you can make a surprising number of things work.

The better question is, “Is this still worth making work?”

I wish I had asked that sooner in a few situations.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

Saying No Is Part of Execution

One of the strange things about building a company is that success eventually creates more opportunities than you can pursue.

In the beginning, you say yes because you need something to happen. Yes to the customer. Yes to the project. Yes to the introduction. Yes to the opportunity that isn't exactly what you planned but might lead somewhere useful.

That openness can be enormously valuable.

Then eventually all those yeses start competing with one another.

Every new idea consumes time, money, attention or people, usually some combination of all four. And every hour the team spends pursuing one thing is an hour they aren't spending on something else.

I've had to learn that execution isn't only about doing things well. It's also about deciding what not to do.

That's much harder for me.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

I can get excited about the possibility in almost anything, which means I've needed people around me who are willing to ask questions like, “Chris, which of the other 14 priorities would you like us to stop doing so we can work on this one?”

Very annoying people.

Very valuable people.

Over time we've gotten more deliberate about having a process for saying no. Does this fit the strategy? Does it move us toward the big goal? Is this actually a customer problem worth solving? Do we have the resources to do it well? What are we choosing not to do if we choose this?

Those questions don't eliminate bad decisions.

They do make it slightly harder for me to accidentally create a new business before lunch.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

Build With the End in Mind

I also think differently now about what it means to build something that lasts.

When I was younger, lasting probably meant the company surviving and continuing to grow. That's still important. You don't get to talk about a 25-year business if the business doesn't make it to 25 years.

But longevity by itself isn't enough.

If the company can only function when the founder is in the middle of everything, you haven't really built something durable. If the culture only works when the original group of people is still in the room, it isn't much of a culture. If the strategy exists only in the CEO's head, it's not particularly useful to everyone else trying to execute it.

This takes me all the way back to Chapter 3 and the realization that my job had to change as the company changed.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

The goal is not to make yourself indispensable forever. It's to help build something capable of continuing without needing you to personally push every pebble.

I'm actually glad there are things in this book I haven't solved.

Twenty-five years shouldn't turn into a story where the older guy looks back and explains everything the younger guy got wrong. That would be convenient, but it wouldn't be true.

The younger version of me had some things right too. He was optimistic. He was willing to take a risk. He believed he could build something before there was much evidence to support that belief. He worked like hell. He didn't quit when quitting would have been understandable.

I needed those parts of him.

That's probably what these 25 years have been more than anything else. Not replacing who I was, but learning which parts to keep, which parts to temper and which parts had served their purpose and needed to change.

Chapter 11

Culture, Execution & Things I'm Still Figuring Out

I still believe culture matters enormously. I still believe execution separates ideas from businesses. I still believe persistence can carry you through things talent and strategy alone cannot.

I also believe culture requires constant attention, execution includes saying no and persistence occasionally needs somebody brave enough to tell you to stop.

Apparently 25 years is enough time to become certain about a few things and much less certain about a lot of others.

I'm okay with that.

The goal was never to finish learning.

It was to keep becoming someone capable of handling whatever came next.

Closing

25 Years Later

I've spent a lot of time lately thinking about the guy who sat down at that desk in 2001.

I have a picture of him now. He's young. Much younger than I remember feeling at the time. He's sitting in a leather chair in the CBI Group office, looking pretty comfortable for someone who has absolutely no idea what's coming.

I look at that picture differently now because I know things about him that he doesn't know yet.

I know the 88-page business plan isn't going to survive contact with reality exactly as written. I know he's going to work for free for more than two years and worry about money more than he expected. There will be recessions, a pandemic, a fire, a flood and more changes to the business than he could possibly have planned for. There will be employees who become friends, friends who become advisors and people who come into the story for a season and end up changing its direction.

Closing

25 Years Later

There will be really good years and some heartbreaking ones. His kids are going to grow up much faster than he thinks they will. He's going to spend years believing he can outwork almost any problem and eventually discover that some things don't get better because you work harder.

I know he's going to learn how to take better care of himself, although he'll remain a work in progress there. His definition of success is going to change more than once, and some of the goals he thinks will matter forever eventually won't matter very much at all.

I also know some things about him that I'm glad he doesn't know yet.

If you could show someone every difficult thing they're going to experience before they begin, I'm not sure any of us would start anything.

Maybe a little naivete is useful.

It certainly was for me.

Closing

25 Years Later

I had confidence then that wasn't entirely supported by evidence. I believed I could figure things out. I was willing to take risks because I didn't yet understand all the ways they could go wrong, and I thought time was something I had plenty of.

There are things I would tell that guy if I could. I'd tell him working harder isn't always the answer and that he should pay attention to his health sooner. I'd tell him some of the ordinary nights with his kids in the bullpen are going to mean more to him someday than a lot of the business milestones he's chasing.

I'd definitely tell him to worry less.

He wouldn't listen.

I know this because people told me versions of these things at the time and I didn't listen to them either. Some lessons apparently have to become yours before you understand them.

Closing 25 Years Later

I Needed That Guy

The funny thing about looking backward is that it's easy to turn reflection into revision. If I knew then what I know now, what would I change?

Plenty.

But I'm not sure I'd want to hand the 33-year-old me everything I've learned over the last 25 years.

He needed to be impatient. He needed the unreasonable optimism we talked about at the beginning of this book. He needed to believe he could build something before he knew exactly how, and he needed enough stubbornness to keep going when there were very good reasons not to.

Those qualities caused some problems later.

They also got the company started.

That's what I meant when I said I needed that guy. I just wouldn't let him run the company by himself anymore.

Closing

25 Years Later

The goal wasn't to become somebody completely different. It was to keep the parts of myself that served me, learn how to manage the parts that didn't and remain open to the possibility that something I believed about myself at 33 might not need to be true at 58.

I spent years thinking about change mostly in terms of changing markets, technology, customers and businesses. But when I look at the entire 25 years now, the biggest change in the story wasn't any of them. It was me.

The Scorecard Got Bigger

When you're building a business, there are obvious ways to keep score. Revenue, growth, employees, customers, awards and goals give you something concrete to measure.

I still care about those things. I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to win, and nobody who knows me is going to believe I've suddenly stopped keeping score.

My scorecard just got bigger.

Closing 25 Years Later

I care whether the work matters and whether we're actually helping people. I care about showing up for my family and the people I love, and whether I'm healthy enough to enjoy the life I've worked so hard to build. I care about whether I'm still learning and whether the things consuming my time are worthy of it.

That doesn't mean I always get the allocation right.

Reformed busyholic, remember?

But I notice it now in a way I didn't when I was younger. I said earlier that the best definition of rich is helping more people. After 35 years in the workforce business and more than 126,000 careers crossing our path in some way, I believe that more strongly than I did when I first wrote it down. It's one reason our goal of helping 500,000 people by 2032 matters so much to me.

The People Became the Story

When I was younger, I probably thought the story was the company.

Closing

25 Years Later

That makes sense. I was building something, so naturally I measured the journey by what happened to the thing I was building.

Twenty-five years later, I'm not sure that's the biggest story anymore.

The people are.

Kim took the leap with me before there was much evidence that taking the leap was a particularly good idea. She worked for free when the business couldn't afford to pay us and raised little kids alongside a husband who was trying to build a company. She has lived through every version of this story with me, including some versions I'm sure neither of us would particularly like to repeat.

And now my son Josh, who grew up around the business and ate dinner in that bullpen as a kid, is back in it as a leader in the business.

My dad's fingerprints are everywhere in these pages. **See. Think. Act.** *Opposite the Crowd*. Some of the things Alan taught me took decades before I really understood what he meant, which I suspect he finds amusing.

Closing

25 Years Later

And then there are all the employees who took chances on us, customers who trusted us, mentors who challenged me, friends who listened and people who showed up at exactly the moment I needed them. Some stayed for years. Others were part of the story for a much shorter time.

They all count.

Maybe that's one of the things I understand better now than I did then. When you're young and ambitious, it's easy to believe the story is the thing you're building. Somewhere along the way, I realized the people you build it with are a pretty big part of what makes it worth building in the first place.

I'm Not Done

A close friend recently told me that one of the most impressive things about my career is that I've run a business for 25 straight years.

I still think that sounds a little boring.

But I understand what he meant now.

Closing

25 Years Later

The accomplishment isn't that I've essentially had the same title for a quarter of a century. Almost nothing about the job is actually the same. The companies changed, the work changed, the people changed, the world changed and I changed along with all of it.

Maybe the accomplishment is simply that I kept showing up long enough to see what all of those changes would become.

I got some things right and plenty wrong. I helped a lot of people, and a lot of people helped me. Somewhere along the way, I also built a life I actually want.

That last one matters to me more than I could have understood when I started.

I don't know exactly what the next chapter looks like, and I'm much more comfortable with that now. I know what matters to me now. I know why I'm still doing the work and who I want around me while I'm doing it. I also know that whatever plan we make is going to change anyway.

That's okay.

Closing 25 Years Later

So will I.

Twenty-five years ago, I sat down at a desk and started building a company.

I thought that was the story.

It turns out the company was building me too.

I'm grateful for both.

And I'm not done yet.

A handwritten signature in brown ink that reads "Chris Burkhard". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end of the last name.