



Executive Book Summaries[®]

From Tailspin to Tailwind

Leadership Lessons for Turning Crisis into Clarity

by **Buddy Teaster**



Contents

Getting Up to Speed

Page 2

Surviving Self-Inflicted Wounds and Unforeseen Loss

Page 3

Clarifying the Mission and Setting a Vision

Page 4

Building a Strong Team

Page 5

Powering Change and Growth

Page 6

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Organizations – whether for-profit or nonprofit – often face moments of deep turbulence: reputational damage, leadership voids, and operational breakdowns. What matters is finding the strength and resources to overcome these challenges and turn adversity into opportunity for growth.

In *From Tailspin to Tailwind: Leadership Lessons for Turning Crisis into Clarity*, Buddy Teaster, President and CEO of Soles4Souls, shares how his nonprofit navigated just such a crisis and emerged stronger. Teaster recounts Soles4Souls's transformation from a troubled charity into a high-performing social enterprise. Drawing on firsthand experience, he outlines a practical, values-driven playbook that helped rebuild trust, restructure operations, and scale impact.

The book offers real-world strategies for leaders grappling with dysfunction, showing how transparency, entrepreneurial thinking, and collaborative leadership can turn chaos into sustained growth. Whether you're leading through upheaval or proactively working to strengthen your organization, this book offers actionable guidance to move from crisis toward clarity and resilience.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Learn how to stabilize your organization by clearly defining and living out your mission and values.
- Discover how to implement strong operating systems to improve accountability and efficiency.
- Understand the importance of building aligned teams and an engaged board of directors.
- Explore how strategic partnerships can unlock new growth opportunities.
- See how business discipline and social impact can coexist to drive meaningful, measurable outcomes.

Introduction: Navigating the Storm

It looked so good at the beginning. A new approach to a problem, industry enthusiasm, millions of dollars in funding, good PR. And it took off like a rocket ship. Success led to success.

I'm talking about the founding of Soles4Souls (S4S), a 501(C)3 nonprofit organization, creating opportunities for people through shoes and clothing. S4S was launched with a simple vision and a noble purpose. But five years after S4S was officially founded in 2006, the organization seemed to have lost its way. Things didn't seem simple or, frankly, noble.

S4S was in a tailspin.

When I arrived as S4S's new CEO in October 2012, our reputation was in the tank, and bankruptcy appeared imminent. With a glass-half-full mindset, I saw the opportunity to change anything and everything.

This book details far more than how we went about transforming S4S's reputation. This book examines how a struggling organization overcame significant challenges through innovative approaches, strong values, and effective partnerships.

Chapter 1: Getting Up to Speed

By 2018, not only had we finally climbed out of crisis management mode; we had evolved our mission from "Changing the World One Pair at a Time" to "Wearing Out Poverty," and we were back in the black financially. We were focused on the entire organization living by the values represented in the acronym we had settled on to explain how we wanted to approach our work and treat everyone in our ecosystem: TEAM.

Transparent

Entrepreneurial

Accountable

Meaningful

The goal of this book is to chronicle how we became more adaptive, collaborative, and innovative.

From Natural Disasters to Manmade Calamities

The beginning of Soles4Souls is rooted in the events that occurred on December 26, 2004, in the Indian Ocean. A 9.2-9.3 magnitude earthquake spawned a tsunami that

slammed into the west coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, killing nearly 230,000 people and displacing more than 1.7 million in fourteen countries around the region. Wanting to help those whose lives were torn apart by the tsunami, the three founders of S4S, one of whom – Wayne Elsey – came from footwear, organized a shoe drive. They collected a couple of hundred thousand pairs of shoes, shipped them to Indonesia, and succeeded in getting them distributed to those in need.

Parallel to its disaster relief efforts, S4S gradually evolved to include providing microentrepreneurs in low-income countries with shoes and clothes – products that are always in demand – to create small businesses that could help them and their communities escape the grip of poverty.

We have not only transformed this microentrepreneurship model but renamed it 4Opportunity – a name that goes to heart of how the program works, by creating *opportunity* for people to improve their standard of living.

When S4S began its shift toward supporting microenterprise in developing countries, it did so without fully informing its stakeholders: the shoe donors, volunteers, and even staff who coordinated shoe drives to secure donations. But a 2009 investigative report in *The Tennessean* told everyone – describing the much-loved charity as “a middleman “and raising concerns about Elsey's salary and close ties to the shoe industry. Sixteen months later, *The Tennessean* published another exposé, this one focused on the practice of selling shoes to microentrepreneurs and implying that donations were not going to charity.

S4S's failure to put its house in order in between these reports dealt a devastating blow to the public perception of the organization's work. Less than a year after *The Tennessean*'s second investigation, Elsey resigned, and a national search for his replacement began. Enter me.

In any business, including nonprofits, perception is everything. People who give time and money to causes they care about deserve to know, and we are responsible for showing them, that the people to whom they entrust these resources are good stewards.

Turnaround

By 2018, we'd pulled out of the tailspin. We listened to smart, experienced people. We took careful notes on what worked and what didn't as we tried new strategies. Not only were we fully transparent about how and why entrepreneurs selling shoes worked; we also found that this openness forced us to improve the process.

Success can feel so good.
I think that's a universal human reality. Yet, success can
lead to a mistaken self-satisfaction.

In 2019, we “rebranded” microenterprise as 4Opportunity and our disaster relief efforts as 4Relief. Changing the names of these programs was far more than simply altering their titles. We had spent years learning what was required to accomplish our mission and to maximize our impact, setting us on a path of realistic, intentional growth.

Chapter 2: Surviving Self-Inflicted Wounds and Unforeseen Loss

While COVID-19 definitely slowed progress in reducing global poverty, generally speaking, millions of people moved out of extreme poverty in places such as India, China, and South America in the last twenty-five years. In 2024, most international organizations agreed that the standard for measuring extreme poverty stood at less than \$2.15 per day, up only slightly from just under \$2.00 a day in 2017. The only place in the world where extreme poverty was worsening was Sub-Saharan Africa.

Our COO David Graben and I shared the same attitude: If Sub-Saharan Africa was where the need was the greatest, then S4S needed to be there.

David received a call from a contact who told him that his father was living in Sierra Leone and working with the local people to improve cassava production rates. David's contact had told his father about 4Opportunity, and the father, John, was all in. We were so excited about the chance to work in Africa that we didn't do sufficient homework.

We got caught up in the moment and ignored the warning signs. John didn't have the cultural and economic expertise our typical partners possessed.

It worked for a while but then we sent a shipping container of really valuable shoes to John's warehouse in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Despite having a guard at the warehouse, someone stole the *entire* shipment. John owed us approximately \$150,000, and he had nothing to his name and no shoes to sell. The loss broke John, and not just financially. His team disbanded in acrimony and blame. His health was so bad that he needed to leave Sierra Leone for a while. Just

as we thought we were gaining some altitude, this felt like the beginning of another tailspin.

We'd fallen into a trap that is common to organizations like ours that are sincerely driven by mission: Success can feel so good. I think that's a universal human reality. Yet, success can lead to a mistaken self-satisfaction.

Chapter 3: Strategy and Results

The abilities to be resilient and adaptable were at the core of what helped us survive 2020, just as they had been key to success in the first three or four years following 2012. To resilience and adaptability, I'll add collaboration as a central tenet for what allowed us to move from crisis to success. I see eight key strategies that allowed us to complete a turnaround:

- establishing core values
- clarifying mission and setting a vision
- implementing a robust operating system
- building a strong team
- engaging a committed board
- developing strategic partnerships that fuel growth
- powering change and growth
- identifying and activating a north star

Your organization probably looks different from ours. Your objectives are unique. The characteristics of your crisis are likely distinct. But if you want to take a strategic approach to surviving crisis – either one already playing out or the possibility of one on the horizon – you don't have a chance if you haven't defined, and learned to live by, shared core values.

Chapter 4: Core Values = Culture

When it came to decision-making, the organizational culture I stepped into at S4S in 2012 seemed to value behaviors such as “stay in your lane,” “bigger is better,” and “story matters more than facts.” This led to a narrow

understanding of responsibilities, little collaboration, and a lot of passing the buck.

We didn't approach the values-defining process by forming a committee. Most of the decisions about culture emerged from the context of problem-solving in specific, real-time circumstances and then stopping to talk about the positive things that occurred once we reached solutions.

Soles4Souls' Core Values

- **Transparent:** We tell the truth to ourselves, each other, and everyone else. That goes for everything from financials to programs to team members.
- **Entrepreneurial:** If we're going to serve entrepreneurs, we need to act like entrepreneurs! We take calculated risks, learn from failure, and act like an owner.
- **Accountable:** We deliver on our promises to each other and those we serve.
- **Meaningful:** The work we do matters to us at Soles4Soul *and* to those we serve. S4S is more than a job; it's an opportunity to make a difference in the world.

It Starts with Honesty

My one nonnegotiable was transparency. But I didn't start by articulating transparency as a core value. I didn't have to. All I had to do was remind us how we arrived at a crisis. On more than one occasion, I said, "Folks, we must earn everyone's trust again. We're in the hole, but we can regain trust by being honest about what happened, where we are, and where we're going."

"STEPS" YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- Your organization has values, even if they're not written down. As a leader, one of your jobs is to make them visible and to be sure they are the ones you want to uphold.
- It is a leader's job to help shape values, not just name them. Listen and question, but have the courage to talk about what you think your organization's values should be and why.
- An organization has to find multiple ways to reinforce its values.
- Never pass up an opportunity to use your values to talk about how to get better or celebrate someone's example. Values are something that we live by, not something we can wear out.

Chapter 5: Clarifying the Mission and Setting a Vision

How you frame your mission matters. It gives those outside of the organization a sense of who you are, and it serves as a compass for those on the inside. You can't fake it. If it's just a slogan, it's like a compass with no needle—it won't help you get where you want to go.

Carrying a Compass

A combination of big dreams and practical approaches can have value in any organization. It lets you make rapid decisions with clear guardrails. It keeps you on task. The concept of mission doesn't have to be front and center every moment of the workday when you're busy doing the work, but it provides a direction when we reach a fork in the trail.

"STEPS" YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- Your mission is a compass, not a map. It's critical in making decisions but not usually a day-to-day tool.
- Visions don't change very often; your mission might.
- Mission is a team sport. Creating one should reflect input from important stakeholders and be relatable to your entire organization.
- Missions should both close doors (what you won't do) and open them (what's possible and acceptable to do).
- Vision is critical, but it won't get you there.

Chapter 6: Implementing a Robust Operating System

When it became clear how bad things were with S4S's systems, finances, and people, I knew we had to find and implement a different way to organize our thinking immediately. We challenged ourselves to start the reorganization by asking, "Why are we doing this? What are our targets?"

In 2012, only a few people knew much about what was really happening financially, programmatically, or managerially. This is not true at S4S today. We post our financials every morning. There's no place to hide. My personal priorities are visible to the whole organization, as are those of our team member who answers the phones. This level of accountability and transparency courses throughout the organization.

Just keep in mind that an operating system that fits your organization perfectly will still be useless without a quality team that knows how to use it to the greatest advantage.

How you frame your mission matters. It gives those outside of the organization a sense of who you are, and it serves as a compass for those on the inside. You can't fake it.

“STEPS” YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- There is not one right operating system. What can seem magical is finding one that fits your organization.
- Talk with leaders at other organizations that either have similar needs or similar values, or that are of similar size.
- No one works well in a vacuum.
- Good operating systems have accountability built in.

Chapter 7: Building a Strong Team

On my arrival in 2012, we had sixty-two employees. Over the next two years, through attrition and asking some people to leave, we shrank to thirty-seven. Those who stayed on learned how to be lean and to step up in unfamiliar roles when a teammate needed help. The only incentive we could offer was togetherness; the feeling that came with everyone pitching in to save something we knew could do good.

We would fail or succeed as a team. We focused on creating an environment that supported people who wanted to work there.

“STEPS” YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- Treat people like people – not as resources or assets.
- If you need to be right all the time, you probably shouldn't be in charge of people.
- Don't assume that the “perks” of doing mission-driven work can be compensation on their own.
- Thinking that diversity is some “woke” trend is shortsighted.
- Mostly. Work is serious – it can be demanding, and among many nonprofit organizations emotionally overwhelming – but there's joy and fun as well.
- Different people find different rewards in their work.

Chapter 8: Our Secret Weapon: A Committed Board

In 2012, it wasn't just our team that felt emotionally thrashed. So did our board members. All that was left were

the two board members who had helped found S4S, and they were tired. During the interview process, I shared with them that I saw an engaged board as key to S4S's success. So, after the first six months, and with their support, we began to rebuild what I think of today as our secret strategic advantage: a world-class board.

I believe every organization and business would benefit from a committed, engaged board. Board members can provide invaluable oversight, open doors, and question assumptions that you might not even know you're making.

“STEPS” YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- Surround yourself with smart people.
- Seek diversity – in background, gender, race, age, expertise, and industry.
- Be honest with yourself.
- Leverage them.
- Recruit from their networks.

Chapter 9: Cultivating Great Partnerships

At S4S, we have lots of partners acting in lots of different capacities. We are interdependent with them. Without partners and a partnership mindset, we would be stuck on the runway—with wings but no fuel for the engines. I don't think any organization can be successful without trusted partners. Why not turn to those who excel at things that you don't? We're fooling ourselves if we think we can be the best at everything.

“STEPS” YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- Thinking about what it means to be a partner, internally and externally, can change every interaction. Looking for what is mutually beneficial usually leads to better outcomes.
- Not everyone wants to be a partner ... but you can still treat them like one.
- Partnership is long term.

- Sometimes, being a partner means you take one for the team.
- It's just better. I'd rather run the risk of being too trusting and open than playing defense all the time.

Chapter 10: Powering Change and Growth

By 2019, we had spent more than a decade improving how we managed 4Relief and a half-dozen years learning how to generate growing, sustainable economic impact through 4Opportunity. We were financially stable. We had defined our Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG) and had embraced our north star. The flight path felt steady. But it was also a time marked by the change and uncertainty that came with losing our beloved colleague David Graben. Late 2019 also marks the moment when we began having discussions among the team and the board about expanding our programming. Those discussions eventually led to the formation of 4EveryKid—a program that aspires to provide a pair of new athletic shoes to each kid experiencing homelessness in the US.

Why did we add a new program that would totally change how we worked, during a pandemic and while dealing with the death of a key executive? The obvious thing would have been to play it safe and focus on stability. But we made the opposite argument. The entrepreneurial answer when discovering a problem is to find a way to solve it – to run toward it, not from it.

“STEPS” YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- It's a cliché, but good ideas can come from anywhere. The main thing is to be open to hearing the ideas.
- “Clear on why, flexible on how” has served us well. Do all you can to have as many options as you can manage.
- I think people who use the phrase “We're building the plane as we're flying it” are nuts. It's okay not to have all the details worked out, but people need to know they can count on you for the promises you make.

Chapter 11: Following a North Star

In 2017, David Graben and I sat down and, after many months and numerous approaches to gathering data, determined that by 2030 S4S could reach an economic impact

of a billion dollars—our BHAG. Our billion-dollar impact target was audacious and just this side of impossible. But to tie it all together, we needed to connect that target with how we could use it in making strategic and operational decisions. We wanted a north star worthy of the name.

Choosing Your North Star

For some organizations, identifying a north star or a BHAG can be a “check the box” exercise. They set it in place and perhaps revisit it once a year during their annual report. It's more a vanity metric than integrated into their work. That's not what we wanted.

Our north star might not apply to anybody else; but beyond the literal, having the means to track your progress toward an achievable, audacious goal should matter to every organization. Our north star isn't just a measurement—it drives our overall strategy. Having the right north star is powerful; almost magical.

“STEPS” YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- The north star or BHAG is a ten-/fifteen-year time horizon. Take your time and make sure it's one you want in front of you for the long haul.
- Your north star should fit your unique goals and strategies.
- For any strategy planning, usually in a three-to-five-year timeframe, it really helps to start with your north star.
- The best BHAG keeps one eye on the distant future and the other on the day-to-day.

Conclusion: Finding the Updrafts

It's easier to recognize the tailspin than the tailwind. When the lights are flashing red on the financial situation or your team's turnover rate, you know. But as the indicators move from red to yellow to green, it doesn't always feel as though you're pulling out of it.

Take the “W.” One thing I know I would do differently is taking time to celebrate the wins more often. There's a difference between thanking people, which I do, and pausing to call out the progress and success along the way, which I do less well. I think you need both.

There is a time to let it go. The tailspin seems like it's in S4S's DNA, but it's not. There is certainly value in knowing

where we came from, but, as the saying goes, you can't navigate the future looking in the rearview mirror. Hanging on to that story, those playbooks, can blind you to the opportunities ahead.

“Everyone has a plan till they get punched in the face.” This is one of my favorite quotations, which I try to put into practice in two ways. The first is that plans don't usually survive contact with reality. The second is that you think you know what's important, but until choosing the “right” thing costs you, you don't really know how you'll respond.

Doing it alone is a choice. There's a whole network of people and institutions around each of us that both holds us back and enables us to do great things. Putting too much focus on just one person, the entrepreneur, leads to some dangerous side effects at best, and to some truly deranged beliefs at worst.

I cannot thank you enough for investing your time in our tailspin to tailwind story. But what matters most to me is that you found something worthwhile here, something that will help you when your own tailspin moment arrives, as it always does. And that a few of these ideas can be a part of you finding your tailwind. Onward and upward!



Buddy Teaster is the president and CEO of Soles4Souls, a global nonprofit that provides aid and supports sustainable microenterprise through the distribution of over 107 million pairs of shoes and garments in 140 countries. He is the author of *Shoestrings: How Your Donated Shoes and Clothes Help People Pull Themselves Out of Poverty*, and has been recognized as a YPO Global Impact Award Finalist and included in the Footwear News 2019 Power List. Under his leadership, Soles4Souls has been named one of *The Nonprofit Times's* “Best Nonprofits to Work For” three years in a row. In his free time, Buddy enjoys endurance sports, storytelling, and time with his family.

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