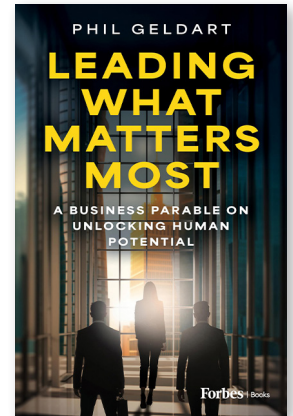


Leading What Matters Most

A Business Parable on Unlocking Human Potential

by **Phil Geldart**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

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

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

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

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Learn how to begin a leadership transformation.
- The essential of moving from “what to do” to “how to do it.”
- What problems and successes do managers face along the way?
- What are the best ways to resolve organizational issues for the sake of everyone involved?

Introduction

Very often, we as leaders receive great advice about what to do but not how to do it, and knowing the “what” without the “how” is rarely as helpful as we hoped it would be!

With that in mind, I thought I’d introduce you to Bridget, my fictional CEO running a large and highly successful tech company that is now encountering problems on the people side. While Bridget is brilliant as an operational executive, her expertise in truly releasing all the potential within her workforce is seriously lacking. This has led to declining results in both performance and employee engagement. Her board is unhappy, her people are disengaged, and her leadership team is no more people-savvy than she is.

By taking Bridget’s journey with her, we share in her frustrations and problems as well as her successes. More importantly, we see how she tackles, and ultimately resolves, these issues to the benefit of everyone involved.

You may perhaps identify with some of Bridget’s challenges and be looking for insight about how to tackle them. As you follow her progress, you learn with her the practicalities of how, with the right help, you can change behaviors to improve performance.

Chapter 1: It’s No Longer Working

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

Turning back to her desk, she picked up the GCG (Good Corporate Governance) report, once again scanning the list of deficiencies. “Underdeveloped staff, low employee engagement, poor leadership competence, and ineffective corporate communication,” she whispered to herself. She had dragged her heels getting this report—tried to deny the need for it, thinking she still had it under control, but she knew the board was right. Something was no longer working.

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

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

The next two weeks were a blur as Bridget and her leadership team hunkered down, creating and implementing

new policies and strategies for employee engagement and communication based on GCG’s recommendations.

Regardless of the new initiatives, however, Bridget and the leadership team continued getting reports about various problems. Sales continued to push back, saying the way they had been doing things was working fine—the company just needed to figure out how to fill their orders faster. Operations complained that they didn’t have time to implement these new procedures and keep up their current production levels. Customer service grumbled about customer complaints taking up too much of their time, which meant they couldn’t keep up with new orders. Why couldn’t leadership work on fixing those issues instead of throwing them a measly \$200 bonus, and since when was it their job to interview people? Bridget wanted to scream.

That was the moment when Bridget made the conscious decision to get in touch with a business consultant named Ray Ortiz.

Chapter 2: Moving from What to How

Bridget and Ray set up a meeting at a restaurant.

During the conversation, it became clear that Ray had no intention of fixing the leadership problem. Instead, he was going to show Bridget how her team could achieve the results they were looking for.

Next, Bridget outlined the problems at Talon Tech, as she was perceiving them.

“The truth is, as recently as a week ago I was still resistant to taking this step. I think because Talon Tech has done so well—we’re at the top of our industry, and we continue, at least until now, to turn a healthy profit—it’s blinded me to some very real issues. Issues that I should have addressed sooner, but now, months after there were initial indications of potential trouble, I’m finally taking the steps that I hope will help me right the ship before it’s too late.”

Before she could formulate her next thought, Ray said, “I think what’s happened is you don’t know how to harness the potential of your workforce. You and your leaders know how to lead the business, but you don’t know how to effectively lead your people.”

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

Dishant continued: “I warn you, it’s not as easy as it may appear, but the lessons and insights you take away from this experience will fire you up! And that collective fire is what will empower us to release the full potential of everyone.”

Chapter 3: The Leap of Faith

“Trust the process,” Bridget said softly to herself.

It was time to introduce Ray to the team.

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

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

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

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

- “We provide new behaviors at every level.
- It will be leader led.
- We’ll align all our HR practices.
- We put everything you show/teach us into practice.
- You and your team provide guidance and support.”

He also outlined the main areas of focus:

- Leadership: Each of us must own the outcome for this initiative
- Communication: Let everyone know continually and consistently how we are doing things differently and why
- Alignment: Align all the human resource practices

- Training: Experiential training. First train leaders at all levels, then train all employees
- Reinforcement: Provide support and activities to ensure that the training sticks
- Metrics: Continuous measurement of progress/outcomes

Chapter 4: The Transformation Begins

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

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

The following week went by in a blur for Bridget – coordinating the company-wide communications around the initiative, as well as the daily running of Talon Tech.

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

Chapter 5: Crossing the Vast and Perilous Desert

The day of the final training session arrived, and Dishant (the company’s CFO), who had kicked off the first two sessions, wanted the honors of kicking off the final one.

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

While everyone responded enthusiastically, Dishant continued:

“I warn you, it’s not as easy as it may appear, but the lessons and insights you take away from this experience will fire

you up! And that collective fire is what will empower us to release the full potential of everyone.”

Chapter 6: A Potential Derailing

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

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

“And?” Ray asked.

“And?” I don't see how I can go out in front of the entire company and talk about our initial improvements and how we're going to head into the next round of company training when all this is going on.”

“I get that it feels like a huge setback, and I'm not minimizing the seriousness of it or the headaches it will cause, but as you agreed, you must stay on course. In this case, it provides us an opportunity to focus the application of the training to this immediate issue, which is a good thing, because then they won't be learning new behaviors in the abstract – they'll be learning them based on a true scenario.”

Inspired yet slightly anxious, Bridget used the time after the meeting to check her notes and review the conclusions she'd reached after meeting Ray:

- Trust the process – changing behaviors requires consistency and time
- Support the decision-making process
- Training is best when tailored to real-time issues

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

- Leadership
- Unanimous focus on a common goal
- Clearly defined roles for subgroups
- Shared resources

Chapter 7: The Seven Cornerstones

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

Effective and frequent message delivery was described as one of the next pillars. Next, the team learned more about the importance of consistent, united, and enthusiastic effort.

“It's important that every member of the team bring to the team's commitment outcome a consistent and enthusiastic mindset. This not only keeps the focus on performance excellence but also means that one team member's poor attitude won't negatively influence everyone else.

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

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

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

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

- Everyone should contribute whenever possible
- Everyone should encourage their teammates to contribute
- Every team must remain focused on the results they are trying to produce
- A common language must be agreed upon and shared up front
- The opportunity to tap in whenever possible must be encouraged

Chapter 8: The Proof of the Pudding

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

“As excited as I am about the metrics,” Bridget said, “I’m more thrilled by the changes in behaviors I’m seeing across the organization.”

- Do you feel that you are more engaged at Talon Tech than you were six months ago?
- Do you feel you’re better able to make a difference at Talon Tech?
- Do you feel that your leaders encourage you to speak up and add value?
- Do you feel that you’re better able to do your work now than you were three to five months ago?

The positive answers for each of the questions were 76, 52, 64, and 73 percent respectively.

Bridget revealed the final and most impressive result after presenting all of the other information. To the question “do you feel the problem you had was addressed to your satisfaction,” the positive response rate was 100 percent.

Additionally, 93 percent of the employees reported they were given clarity on the issue, 95 percent said their concern was handled courteously and professionally, and 98 percent responded they were going to continue honoring Talon Tech with their business in the future.

“As excited as I am about the metrics,” Bridget said, “I’m more thrilled by the changes in behaviors I’m seeing across the organization. I saw the beginnings of the changes when the subgroups for the chip problem came together in the configurations training.”

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

She continued by saying “Of course, challenges continue to occur. I’m pleased to say our teams are taking control and resolving situations quickly.

Chapter 9: Weathering the Storm

In the weeks after the positive results, Bridget had to face

some challenges. Angela, Talon Tech’s CIO left the company abruptly. Bridget blamed herself for a failure to notice the red flags and take action accordingly.

She briefed the leadership team on everything that had happened in relationship to Angela’s departure and the aftermath of that abrupt event.

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

After the meeting had ended and they had all left, Bridget took the advantage of having a few moments to write in her Transformation Notebook:

Remember the six areas of focus:

- **Leadership:** Each of us must own the outcome for this initiative and hold people accountable for modeling the new behaviors.
- **Communication:** Let everyone know continually and consistently how we are doing things and why. This must be intentional and planned for.
- **Alignment:** Align all the human resource practices. This shift in how we are leading our people must touch every aspect of what HR is responsible for.
- **Training:** Experiential training. First train leaders at all levels; then train all employees. Be sure the training links to our real-world issues.
- **Reinforcement:** Provide support and activities to ensure that the training sticks. These must be led by our line managers.
- **Metrics:** Continuous measurement of progress/outcomes. Share these with everyone.

Chapter 10: Are We There Yet?

In due time, Bridget and the leadership team found a replacement for Antonia. Everyone felt excited and enthusi-

astic about Grace accepting the CIO role.

The position remained vacant for 10 weeks but everyone on the team agreed not to rush the decision, waiting for the right person to come along. “Honestly, this decision has provided us with the time we needed to make sure everyone on the technology side was fully committed to the people-first initiative and there were no remaining Andrea holdouts.”

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

Chapter 11: India Ink

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

“Okay,” Ray began. “I’m standing in a meeting room, holding a glass of water, and I spill the water on the carpet. It leaves a dark stain. The cleaning crew comes to clean that night as usual, but the stain has vanished. So much so that unless someone told them they had spilled water on it, they would not know it. The water has evaporated.”

“The next day, I’m in the meeting room and I spill a bottle of India ink on the carpet. It leaves a dark stain. That night when the cleaning crew comes in, the stain is still there. The crew attempts to remove it, but they’re never going to get it out, because India ink embeds itself so thoroughly in the material that it cannot be removed.”

“So, why am I telling you this story? When people go through a culture transformation and they reach the eight-to-ten-month mark, they begin to see a meaningful impact. But the big dark splotch of impact they see is merely a water stain. A water stain that will evaporate if they do not stay the course and reinforce it and make sure everybody understands that this is the new way of behaving.”

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

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

- Our executives are trained to model, coach, and require the new behavior
- Our leaders are trained to model, coach, and require the new behavior
- Our employees are trained on the new behavior and understand that their leader is there to coach them on those behaviors
- We employ the Accountable Leader Loop consistently:
- Commit to putting the new behaviors into practice in every applicable circumstance
- Test it regularly to make sure the loop is reaching every level
- Our human resources processes and policies are tied to our people-first initiative:
- We promote people who demonstrate the new behavior
- We hire people who have an inclination towards the new behavior
- All our communications reinforce that new behavior is the way to go
- We share our metrics that result from consistently practicing the new behavior
- If we consistently and continually follow this process, we will achieve ten bars of gold every time.

Chapter 12: Line Managers Take the Stage

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

Conclusion

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

Lead + Train + Implement + Practice = Success

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

- Recognize that leadership behaviors and employee behaviors need to be different from what they currently are. It's not about different HR policies and procedures.
- Equip all leaders to demonstrate “true” leadership that allows and encourages people to perform to their full potential:
- Encourage input into decisions
- Provide additional new tools and skills to help them do their job brilliantly
- Consistently communicate the people-first initiative to all employees. Let them know where the organization is going with respect to enabling them to contribute to their full potential and their importance to our future
- Define this priority and stick to it
- Provide training and practice
- As a leader, remember the following:
- The power of investing in everyone, based on respect for the individual regardless of rank
- The positive example of setting the pace by example
- A determination not to confuse early wins with the ultimate success
- The importance of giving the entire team the full picture

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



Phil Geldart is the founder and C.E.O. of Eagle's Flight, a Canadian company focused on improving individual and team productivity. Eagle's Flight is presently represented in over twenty countries and enjoys an enviable reputation for customer service, product effectiveness, and having fun!. Prior to founding Eagle's Flight, Phil was with Nestlé Canada, where he worked for 18 years, the last five of which he served as a member of the Executive team in the capacity of Senior Vice President of Human Resources.

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