

PRAISE FOR *GET A GRIP*

“Gino Wickman’s first book, *Traction*, describing his Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS), is already one of the great improvement game plans for business owners in America. Here, in his new brainstorm with coauthor Mike Paton, he takes entrepreneurial readers through a single story to show how every advantage of implementing EOS can actually become a practical reality in their own businesses. I would absolutely read both books together.”

—DAN SULLIVAN, Founder of Strategic Coach®

“Over the years I’ve heard countless testimonials from entrepreneurs who swear by Gino Wickman’s first book, *Traction*, but only after reading *Get A Grip* did I see clearly how implementing his Entrepreneurial Operating System could truly transform a business and put it on the road to greatness. This book will change your company—and your life.”

—BO BURLINGHAM, Editor-at-Large of *Inc.* magazine,
Author of *Small Giants: Companies That Choose to Be Great Instead of Big*

GET A GRIP

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL FABLE...

YOUR JOURNEY TO GET REAL,
GET SIMPLE, AND GET RESULTS

GIND WICKMAN • MIKE PATON



BENBELLA BOOKS, INC.
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To my mom, Linda Wickman, the strongest person I know.
—*Gino Wickman*

To “Pop,” Art Pfeil, the storyteller and teacher in me.
—*Mike Paton*

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A BUSINESS FABLE, but it's not like any business fable you've read before. Though fictional, *Get A Grip* is a gritty, real-world story about an entrepreneurial company that has hit the ceiling. Tired and frustrated, its leaders respond by implementing a practical, proven system that dramatically improves the performance of their business and the quality of their lives.

That system is called EOS, the Entrepreneurial Operating System. It's not theory. It's not full of abstract concepts. It's not about one big idea. Rather, it's a complete system full of simple, practical tools that has helped thousands of entrepreneurs worldwide get what they want from their businesses.

We've personally taken hundreds of companies through this process. If the details ring true it's because we really didn't make up anything. Any similarities to issues you face with your organization, leadership team, or people are pure coincidence. This book isn't based on a true story; it's actually based on hundreds of true stories. There isn't one situation you will read about that we haven't experienced at least twenty times with various clients.

We hope these realistic characters and familiar situations help you see how to solve the most important and common issues you face as a leader. These practical tools will help you simplify, clarify, and achieve your vision. We're confident they will because—over and over again—we've seen that the results of implementing EOS are

truly remarkable. But don't take our word for it. We'll let the business owners who've implemented it speak for themselves:

“In the ten years prior to implementing EOS, our company experienced substantial and consistent revenue growth year after year. But we hit a ceiling. Our leaders weren't on the same page, there was confusion about direction and roles, finger pointing, and turf protecting—profit dropped considerably. It wasn't fun. EOS has helped us develop a trusting, engaged, focused, and empowered leadership team. We're growing again, expanding our facilities, acquiring companies, and delivering more consistently to our customers. Best of all, we've been profitable, even through the tough years, and I am able to truly strategize our long-term path instead of concentrating on present-day issues. On a one-to-ten scale, I give the whole experience a ten (and I don't give many tens).”

JOE CEKOLA

President, Imperial Beverage

“Prior to beginning our EOS journey, issues small and large often got in the way of our growth. Implementing EOS has helped us see these issues and resolve them. We now have a phenomenal (and very clear) vision for our firm, the right structure to take us to the next level, and are hiring strategically based on our Core Values so that we have the right people in the right seats. We've grown 25 percent or more in each of the last three years and, perhaps more importantly, are enjoying the ride. We look forward to working hard with a great team, but are increasingly able to disengage at the end of the day and spend quality time with our families. It doesn't get much better.”

DAVE KOLB

CEO, Global Tax Network

“After twenty-seven years of business, a downturn in the economy, and a new management team, adopting EOS was exactly what we needed at Brogan & Partners. Through the process, we have expedited our decision making, enabling us to get far more done in a shorter period of time. Simply, the process has helped us make the

hard decisions that are right for our business. Not only has EOS helped us uncover our true culture, it has helped our company live by those values. Brogan & Partners is stronger, the management team is more accountable, and we are seeing the results with an influx of new clients, more income, and a better bottom line.”

ELLYN DAVIDSON

Managing Partner, Brogan & Partners

“Five years ago we ended the year at \$5 million in revenue and a 3 percent net loss. Things weren’t awful, but we definitely wanted to do better, so we implemented EOS. It felt a little awkward at first, but as we began to master the system, things became simpler and everything began to work better. As a result, we ended the next year at \$7,500,000 with a 6 percent net profit! The whole leadership team is so much more confident about the future now, and we’ve never been so unified as a team. I guess the big ‘WOW!’ in all of this is knowing that our dreams are attainable. We’re on pace to close out this year at \$18 million with a nice profit. EOS works.”

STEVE SPIECH

Spiech Farms

“Though growing quickly, profitable, and entirely self-funded after three years in business, my partner and I realized things weren’t perfect. We had a murky vision, plenty of stress, and a strained partnership. Implementing EOS changed all that. For the first time we had clarity and accountability. We began managing our growth in a way that wouldn’t cost us our friendship or financial stability. Two short years after seriously doubting the future of our business, it is stronger and growing faster than ever. The results speak for themselves. Sales have grown from \$2.2 million to more than \$7 million in two short years, and we are #258 on the Inc. 500. Best of all, we run a stable, profitable business and we’re still having fun.”

ANDREW DUNEMAN

Owner, Bulk Reef Supply

“Dietz Property Group (DPG) has been implementing EOS for just over two years coming out of the Great Recession. During this

period, we grew 44 percent by picking up six new third-party engagements and acquiring three new properties—after being stagnant for a couple of years. EOS has also helped position us for future growth. We are a much stronger, clearer, simpler, more cohesive organization than before we started with EOS.”

BRIAN DIETZ

President, Dietz Property Group

“Lowry Computer Products is celebrating our one-year anniversary of being engaged in the EOS process and have committed to the process for our future. The process has helped us solidify our vision and streamlined the execution of our vision. As a result, our company has accomplished major milestones in propelling growth and employee satisfaction, and reaching all of our goals successfully. We grew three times the rate of our industry average this year.”

MIKE LOWRY

President/CEO, Lowry Computer Products

“Our business had enjoyed sixty-plus years of success prior to implementing EOS with a ‘shoot from the hip’ way of doing business. As we grew, however, that approach created inconsistency and inefficiencies as each of our locations developed their own way of doing things and each became like separate businesses. We realized that would make it very difficult for us to continue growing profitably. EOS has given us the structure, discipline, and accountability to get everyone in the organization on the same page and working hard to achieve a common vision. We waste less time, identify and resolve issues as a healthy, cohesive team, and we get more done.”

TOM BOHLS

Vice President, Buckeye Power Sales

“EOS was the catalyst for one of the most remarkable changes in my company. My leadership team has integrated the EOS tools into our everyday work habits. Our vision is clear, and strategies are well-executed and communicated to all. EOS taught my leadership team how to plan, act, and communicate in a system that is easy for all to adopt and follow. Within the first year of

integrating EOS, my company was able to achieve a record revenue growth of 87 percent over the prior year.”

RANDY PRUITT

President, Randall Industries, Inc.

Get A Grip is not designed to just give you something to think about. It's thorough enough to help you and your leadership team fully implement the tools described in this fable and achieve results like those of the companies above. We could have written this book as a straightforward description of EOS (in fact, its companion book, *Traction*, does exactly that). But we believe that for many readers, observing a company actually implementing EOS will make the process easier to follow and apply. It also provides greater insights into the realities of implementation.

When we decided to write this book, it was a true passion project. As we started to write, the words and situations flowed out of us like water. The reason is that this is what we do. Every day we are in the real world, helping entrepreneurial leadership teams of small to mid-sized companies achieve the results you will read about. Nothing is made up. There is not one ounce of theory. Together we have delivered almost two thousand full-day sessions with almost two hundred companies.

Our passion and obsession is you, the entrepreneurial leader. You take risks, you build remarkable things, and you suffer. Helping you get everything you want from your business is why we exist. We are here to help you permanently resolve the root cause of your issues, to build something greater, and live the life you want and deserve. EOS was created for you by someone just like you. You are real, raw, and lay it on the line every day with no safety nets and no BS. We feel you deserve a solution worthy of who you are and how you operate.

We believe *Get A Grip* will give you everything you need to transform the performance of your business. But if you need more resources, like free downloadable tools and an entrepreneurial community to access, or you want to find a Certified EOS Implementer in your area, you can access them at www.eosworldwide.com. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Turn the page, start reading, and begin the process of truly getting a grip on your business.

CHAPTER 1

THE INCIDENT

SITTING IN HER CAR, Eileen Sharp stared intently at Vic's SUV parked across the lot. For a brief moment, she envisioned gunning the engine and ramming it. The hint of a smile appeared at the corners of her mouth.

Eileen was angry and frustrated with Vic. For the first time, she thought of ending the partnership with her childhood friend. After a few moments, she gathered herself and regained some resolve.

"I'm not walking away from what we've built these last ten years," Eileen said under her breath. "You don't just turn your back on a \$7 million company and thirty-five employees."

Still, what her business partner had done in the meeting was a new low. The fact that he had said it in front of the other leaders was unforgivable. She couldn't just let it go.

Suddenly Eileen realized she was late for the Business Roundtable reception. She took a deep breath and checked herself in the rear-view mirror. As she pulled out of the parking lot, she muttered, "That son of a bitch."

Four hours earlier, at 1:00 P.M., Eileen had rushed into the conference room carrying her laptop and a mound of paperwork. Determined to begin Swan Services' quarterly executive committee meeting on time for once, she had scurried around all morning and skipped lunch to prepare the presentation and numerous reports that would tell the story of the last eighteen months.

This had been the first tough stretch in Swan Services' history. Until the last year and a half, the company had been profitable and had grown quickly. Swan was still doing well, but the steady growth had stopped. Everything seemed to be getting more difficult: winning new customers, keeping them happy, operating profitably—you name it. She had always taken pride in her work ethic, but recently the demands of her business required so much attention that she regularly missed important events with her husband and two children. For the first time, Eileen was frustrated, and she could tell that other members of the team were frustrated, too.

Eileen burst through the conference room door ready to apologize, once again, for being late. Instead, she found only two of her five colleagues. Sue Meecham, Swan's vice president of sales, was reviewing the latest pipeline numbers. Eileen's longtime friend and business associate and the acting director of marketing, Art Pearson, was stowing his overcoat and briefcase in the corner of the conference room.

"Hello, Sue. Hi, Art. Any sign of the others?" she asked.

"No," replied Sue. "Unless you count Evan racing by a minute ago and looking relieved to see he wasn't the only one late."

Eileen rolled her eyes, dropped her materials at the front of the table, and asked Art to help connect her laptop to the LCD projector. In walked Carol Henning, Swan's controller. Eileen distributed presentation folders to the three executives and began bringing up the PowerPoint presentation she had prepared. Vice President of Operations Evan McCullough entered looking rushed and disheveled. And then the team waited.

Vic finally strolled through the door at 1:14, still in the middle of an animated phone conversation with what sounded like a prospective client. He made a few exaggerated gestures to the rest of the team, making it clear he was attempting to end the call. Eventually he hung up, sat down, and apologized as only Vic could.

"Sorry, guys. That was the procurement guy at Shoreline Industries," he said. "I've been trying to pry that deal out of his hands and back under the control of our buyer for so long, I think we used a slide rule to put the bid together."

The entire team laughed—even Eileen. She tossed her founding partner and CEO a folder, strode to the front of the room, grabbed

the remote control, and launched into her presentation. Over the next sixty minutes, she detailed the troubling signs that had developed in the five quarters since the company's breakout year:

- In Swan's eighth full year, revenues grew at a record pace and exceeded \$7 million for the first time. However, the company hadn't managed to hit its quarterly revenue goals since. Against projected growth of 14 percent, revenue had grown only 1.5 percent in the previous year and was flat in Q1 this year.
- Profitability had taken a beating. On the heels of a great year, the team had invested heavily in a foundation for further growth. Those investments had not yet paid off.
- Pinpointing the cause of these problems had been difficult. Eileen had been studying the issue for three quarters and now felt comfortable sharing her findings with the team:
 - Swan's sales team had missed its new revenue goal in three of the last five quarters.
 - Existing customers had begun leaving—a new phenomenon. At first the occasional defections seemed trivial, but the trend was disconcerting.
 - Labor costs had increased significantly. Swan had begun adding people and upgrading talent last year in an effort to ramp up to its five-year goal of \$20 million in revenue.
 - Despite the company's paying more for talent, a couple key employees had resigned abruptly in recent months. Neither cited internal issues in exit interviews, but Eileen had come to believe that Swan's once great culture—one devoted to being a genuinely fun place to work hard and get great results—had begun eroding.

None of these issues was new. The team had discussed each one at some length in prior quarterly meetings, often staying late into the night and ordering pizza, but rarely reaching agreement on anything, much less a plan of action. The prevailing sense was that the primary cause of all of these issues was somehow outside of their control.

One quarter, the economy was to blame. The next, it was the software conversion. Last quarter, Vic had actually used the terms “bad

mojo” and “funk” in an attempt to quantify the problem, suggesting that the company had lost its “Midas touch.”

“Dwelling on all this bad news drags us down,” he had said, staring directly at Eileen. “We’ve lost our swagger, and—while I know some of you will dismiss this as metaphysical mumbo jumbo—I’m convinced that we have to get that swagger back at all costs.”

At the time Eileen had taken Vic’s observation in stride. She had learned long before to ignore his constant baiting and avoid getting sucked into titanic battles over trivial matters. Instead, Eileen had analyzed the situation thoroughly and carefully prepared her plan of attack for today’s meeting. She had entered the conference room intent on staying positive and focusing on solutions to the thirteen things she believed the executive committee actually *could* control. But first, she needed to present her mountain of evidence to convince them that Swan had a right to expect more.

Eileen methodically made her case; the data was irrefutable. Despite a larger budget, Swan’s marketing efforts had produced fewer qualified leads. The sales team’s close ratio had declined, and it had more frequently offered discounted pricing on the deals it *had* won. In operations, revenues per employee had fallen, while errors and missed deadlines were up.

As she walked through the troubling details, Eileen saw the mood in the conference room change. Arms were uncrossed. Heads began to nod. Notes were taken. Near the end of her presentation, Vic pushed himself away from the conference table and held his hands up dramatically, as though he had eaten too much at Thanksgiving dinner.

“No mas, boss,” he said with a smile. “We get it.”

When the laughter subsided, Eileen suggested the team take a quick break and return ready to start solving problems. In high spirits, she headed for the ladies’ room. That’s where a nightmare scenario began to unravel.

Eileen heard someone slide quickly into the restroom before the swinging door closed behind her.

“Um, Eileen?”

“Yes, Sue—what is it?” said the startled leader.

“I don’t know exactly how to say this,” she began. “So I’ll just spit it out. I think it would be best for all concerned if I left Swan, effective immediately.”

Eileen was floored. She considered Sue a shining star—and an integral part of Swan’s future. Since joining the company two years before, after a successful stint selling for a competitor, the young VP of sales had been a tireless and skilled asset. She consistently worked harder and got better results than anyone else in the organization and had recently been rewarded with a promotion.

“Wha—I mean, *why*?” Eileen stammered.

“It’s clear to me that I’m the problem,” Sue said, straining. “You and Vic promoted me nine months ago. Since then our team hasn’t hit a single sales goal. I haven’t even hit my *own* sales goals! On the rare occasion that we *do* win a deal, we seem to be screwing that up, too.” She turned and splashed cold water on her face.

“What in the world do you *mean*, Sue?” she cried. “Of all the people in that room, you’re the *least* of my worries!”

“I don’t know how you can say that, Eileen. Every slide in your presentation hit me like a ton of bricks! We’re not selling enough, margins are down, and the customers we do sell seem to be putting undue stress on the ops team. What’s more, all of this seemed to start about the same time I was promoted! If the sales team and I aren’t to blame, who is?” she asked.

Eileen started to sweat. Was she about to drive away her most promising ally—the young leader she believed Swan could least afford to lose?

“Sue,” she said gently. “I appreciate the way you take responsibility for everything you do. Candidly, I wish the other members of the executive committee felt the same way. But . . .” she trailed off, unsure of what to say next.

After an awkward pause, Eileen continued. “Please, Sue, give me a week or so to sort things out,” she said. “I just *can’t* let you resign.”

“Well, um . . .” Sue seemed surprised that Swan’s capable leader was at a loss for answers. “Okay, thank you. I’m grateful for your confidence in me.”

“You have nothing to say ‘thank you’ for,” Eileen replied. “I feel terrible about making you doubt your value to this team.”

Before exiting the restroom, Eileen thought about how best to proceed. She had originally planned to focus first on marketing and sales performance but decided to switch gears.

“Let’s discuss client retention first,” Eileen said as the meeting resumed, distributing a large Excel spreadsheet. Vic stared at the endless rows of numbers and sighed audibly. Undaunted, Eileen walked the team through a detailed accounting of the spending habits and life cycles of every client in Swan’s history. Eileen explained the conclusions she had drawn: Two years ago, Swan’s average client had engaged the firm for 2.5 projects and spent an average of \$174,000 over its life cycle. Today, both of those numbers had dropped. Two of the largest clients on the spreadsheet had decreased their spending by more than 10 percent, and one of those clients hadn’t spent a dime with Swan for over a year.

Evan began to sweat as all eyes turned his way. He glanced nervously at his colleagues—the passionate founder with a short attention span; a young, hard-charging sales leader; an annoying marketing guy; a curmudgeon from accounting; and the other founder waving an incriminating spreadsheet. By all accounts, the day had taken a nasty turn.

“Hold on here, guys,” he stammered. “This is the first I’ve seen of this information. I’ll admit it sounds pretty bad, but until I look into the numbers and talk to my people, I have no idea where to even begin.”

“Relax, Evan,” said Vic. “Weren’t you paying attention to Eileen’s feel-good movie of the year? Every one of us is sucking wind right now!”

Evan chuckled halfheartedly. The rest of the group stared at their spreadsheets, waiting to see how Eileen would respond to Vic’s attempt to lighten the mood.

“He’s right, Evan,” she said coolly. “This isn’t a witch hunt. I just hoped we could work together this afternoon to figure out how to get these numbers headed back in the other direction. Perhaps I should have shared this data with you before our meeting today. You’re so busy already that I didn’t want to bother you.”

“But I’m not even sure the numbers are accurate,” he protested.

“The numbers *are* accurate,” said Carol abruptly. “I put the spreadsheet together myself. And isn’t it your *job* to know what the numbers mean?”

As usual, a cutting remark from Carol brought the discussion to a standstill. A capable and dedicated resource, Swan’s controller had

never been admired for her interpersonal communication skills. Even when accurate, her blunt feedback often drove others away and shut down meetings—which was just fine by Carol.

The room was uncomfortably silent. Eileen's blood pressure began to rise. The executive committee's discussions had been derailed too many times by petty bickering, and she wasn't about to let that happen today.

"Just a minute, Carol," she said sternly. "Remember, today is about staying positive and working through our problems together, not arguing or casting blame."

Eileen turned back to her VP of operations. "Evan," she said, "I'm guessing the whole team supports your desire for more information, but we need to spend a few minutes brainstorming today to see if we can identify any obvious opportunities to improve. We should also talk about the best way to quickly get more reliable information on why our clients seem to be leaving faster and spending less than they did before."

"Right," said Art. "Great idea, Chief. Maybe my firm can conduct a focus group with some clients whose spending has declined or stopped?"

Eileen shot glances at both Art and Sue. The two had been arguing a lot recently about marketing priorities and Art's enthusiasm for costly new marketing projects. Before Eileen could say something, Evan interjected.

"Sorry, Eileen, I didn't mean to be so defensive," he said. "I've just been swamped lately with my own projects and babysitting my staff. There's hardly any time to come up for air as it is, and then to be confronted with this..." his voice trailed off.

"I get it, Evan," said Eileen gently, suddenly feeling very tired. Despite the lack of progress, she decided to take another short break. This dead end with Evan had sucked the energy out of the room. She needed to get him (and the rest of the team) reengaged. "Let's take ten. We'll reconvene at four."

Eileen made eye contact with Vic as she broke the meeting. She cocked her head in the direction of their offices, and he nodded his understanding. Vic ducked into the restroom and then quickly headed back to Eileen's office, where he found his talented, driven partner

leaning back in her chair with eyes closed and arms crossed behind her head. Through the years he had rarely seen Eileen stand still, much less meditate.

“Hey, Vic,” she said dejectedly.

“What’s up, Eileen?” he replied.

“Well,” she began, “I know you’re going to say, ‘I told you so,’ but I’m really worried this team wasn’t prepared for what I shared with them today.”

“You mean Evan?” asked Vic. “He’s just being a defensive control freak, like always. Don’t let it—”

“Not just Evan,” Eileen interjected. “Sue tried to resign in the restroom during the last break.”

“What?” cried Vic. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t *she* tell me? What the hell is going on here?”

Eileen responded wearily, “Slow down, Vic. It just happened an hour ago—there was no time to tell you. Besides, I talked her out of it, at least for a week.”

“Well that’s just *great*,” said Vic sarcastically. “At least one of our best young minds is happy here for another *week*! Great job, Eileen.”

The more Vic thought about it, the angrier he got.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t involve me in this conversation!” he shouted. “We’re *partners*, for one thing. And Sue works for *me* in sales. She’s my only direct report, for God’s sake. Why on earth would she resign to *you*?”

Listening to Vic’s histrionics, Eileen regretted her decision to put glass walls and doors on all the executive offices. Anyone from the rows of cubicles outside her office would know the two partners were arguing yet again.

“Vic, please sit down. I called you back here to bring you into the loop and get your help. I couldn’t have called you into our impromptu conference in the *ladies’ room*! Please?” she pleaded, her tone softening.

Vic quickly checked the office behind him and sat down.

“Okay,” Vic replied more calmly. “But shouldn’t we go get her and work this out?”

“I don’t think so,” said Eileen. “I’ve been watching Sue since the last break, and it looks like she’s calmed down a bit. If we stop the

meeting to rehash our conversation, we'll just reopen the wound. Let's give her some time to rethink things and speak with her again later in the week."

"I guess that makes sense," said Vic.

"I'd really like to finish this meeting, Vic," said Eileen. "We've got to respond to these challenges we face, and we have to do it *together*. That said, I underestimated how personally the team would take my matter-of-fact approach."

"Is that what you call it?" asked Vic. "How about hair-on-fire approach?"

"Stop it," she said with a smile.

"I'm with you, partner," said Vic, getting serious. "But I'm begging you to ease up a little. Sue and Evan responded the way they did because it sometimes seems nothing is ever good enough for you."

"I know," Eileen acknowledged. "But we can't just sweep these problems under the rug."

"Agreed," replied Vic as they left the office. "But let's focus on forming a plan rather than dwelling on problems."

Later, when she looked back, Eileen would remember that conversation with Vic as the only bright spot in easily the worst day of her professional career. From there, it took less than twenty minutes to drive the bus off a cliff.

Back in the conference room, she asked the executives to jot down five to ten potential solutions to the client retention problem. Then she stepped to the whiteboard and asked the executives to share their lists, beginning with Carol.

"Better quality control," she began. Eileen recorded the idea.

"Make fewer mistakes. Manage projects better. Quit making up stuff during the sales process. Sell at higher margins so we can hire better people."

Eileen winced at Carol's blunt criticisms of nearly everyone else in the room.

"Thank you for your usual candor, Carol," she said, forging ahead. "Sue?"

"Clearer statements of work," Sue began. "I also had selling at higher margins. And, Evan, please don't take this personally, but I do think we need a better project management system. It's too hard to

get information out of your department when clients ask for status updates.”

“That’s okay, Sue. I had the same thing on my list,” said Evan.

“I also had better invoicing,” said Sue, bracing for Carol’s response.

“How so?” Carol responded, folding her arms across her chest.

“Well, we get a lot of complai—um, inquiries, about our invoices. If they were delivered more promptly and included clearer detail about the work being performed, I think our clients would appreciate it,” she said gently.

“Well, just how do you think I can do that when we aren’t defining the project properly during the sales process,” Carol barked, “and when I’m sorting through emails and Post-it notes from operations to figure out what the heck to bill each month?”

Vic stopped doodling on his legal pad and cut in suddenly. “Whoa there, Carol,” he said. “Let’s just get the ideas on the list.”

“But I—” protested Carol.

“Damn it, Carol,” interjected Eileen, surprised by her own temper. “We’re just brainstorming possible solutions. Sue’s got a valid point. Can we move on?”

“Whatever,” the testy controller said dismissively. She settled back in her chair and glared at Sue.

“Art, anything to add?” Eileen continued.

“Just focus groups or some kind of market research, Chief,” said Art, again getting looks from Sue and Carol.

“Very well,” Eileen said. “Vic?”

“Just three things, Eileen,” he said. “First, I think we need new offices.”

“What?” Carol said reflexively.

“New offices. I know we have a couple of years left on our lease. But this place is dark, too corporate, and not conducive to fostering the kind of teamwork we need to knock our clients’ socks off. I said that when we moved out here to the ’burbs three years ago, and I think it’s more true now. Plus, we have to do something radical to shake this run of bad luck.”

Wanting to be fair, Eileen dutifully recorded “new offices” on the whiteboard. She heard Carol murmur “Oh boy” under her breath. Undaunted, Vic continued.

“Second, I think we might be in the wrong business.”

Everyone in the room suddenly fixed his or her complete attention on Swan's unpredictable CEO.

"You heard me correctly," Vic continued. "We need to reinvent this company from the ground up with a renewed focus on what clients are going to need over the next ten years. We're still selling plain old business and technology projects, and our clients are just not buying those anymore."

"Okay," Eileen said slowly. She looked skeptically at Vic, poised to write something. "How, exactly, would you say that for the list?"

"How would I say that for the list? C'mon, Eileen, I just suggested we scrap our business model and start over, and you want to know how to write that on your *list*?"

"Well, yes. I do," replied the surprised president. "What's wrong with that?"

"Because your list," he said, "is a waste of time—trivial details. We might as well whitewash the fence while the house is burning!"

A switch had been flipped in Vic's brain. When he looked back on this moment later, it would never be clear exactly what had set him off. He did recall feeling absolutely certain that Swan Services had been going about things in precisely the wrong way for all these years. He was suddenly seized by an overwhelming desire to convince his longtime partner that incremental progress was not enough.

"Call it 'reinvent Swan,'" he said sharply.

"And the third thing," he said, "is that you and I need to admit that the way we're running this company isn't working."

Immediately the mood in the room shifted from painfully awkward to panic-stricken. The executives worked hard to avoid eye contact. The fan on the LCD projector hummed loudly. A throat was cleared nervously. Eileen opened her mouth to speak but said nothing.

"Face it, partner," Vic continued. "Running this company has gotten *hard*. We're not having fun anymore, and we're not hitting our numbers like we used to. I think we've been asleep at the switch for the last year, and we need to make some radical changes or we're screwed."

Eileen's head was swimming. "How do you mean?"

"We've been running this company together for a long time—me at thirty thousand feet, you in the trenches. Clearly, that hasn't worked as of late," he said loudly. "So I'd propose we switch it up."

Eileen glanced at the other executives. Four sets of wide eyes darted back and forth between her and her partner, trying to figure out what was going to happen next. Eileen agreed that something was broken, but Vic running day-to-day operations? That was truly crazy!

“You’re suggesting that *you* run the company day to day?” she asked, trying in vain not to sound defensive.

“Sure, why not?” he asked.

That did it. Eileen felt the heat rising into her face.

“Why not?” she hissed. “I’ll tell you why not! You have absolutely *no idea* what ‘day to day’ is. It means being in this office nearly every day for the last six months. It means seventy-hour workweeks. It means spending more time with your kids on a cell phone than in person—missing baseball games, parent-teacher conferences, and *birthdays*, for God’s sake! It means paying attention to detail. It means discipline and sacrifice.”

“Maybe the way *you* do it,” Vic said firmly.

“C’mon, Vic, you’re a *sales guy!*” She regretted the words as soon as she said them.

“First of all, Eileen, I’m a hell of a lot more than a ‘sales guy.’ For starters, I’m your cofounder and partner—we’ve built this business *together*, and you know it.”

“You’re right, Vic,” said Eileen, backpedalling futilely. “I didn’t mean—”

“And being a ‘sales guy’ means I understand people,” Vic continued. “I know how to build and leverage relationships, how to get things done through others. Those things *matter!* You’ve spent the last three months locked in your office with your spreadsheets, intent on convincing us all that the sky is falling. And what has it gotten us? Your most promising executive resigned in the restroom. Evan’s so overworked he keeps a *cot* in his office, and today he spent three hours with us focused on everything he’s doing wrong. Your old friend Art the vulture is circling our carcass hoping for more work, and Carol’s here to point out what everyone else is doing wrong.”


Vic jumped up and drew a tangled series of lines and swirls on the whiteboard. “What it’s gotten us,” he shouted, “is a big, hairy, dysfunctional *mess!*” Vic handed his marker to Eileen on his way out

the door, leaving the stunned president alone with her wide-eyed executive committee.

“I think we’re done here,” she said in a barely audible whisper.

The team filed silently out of the conference room. Eileen sat for a moment, stunned. She and Vic had argued many times before, but something about this blowup felt different. The severity of Vic’s attack had surprised and hurt her.

Having just seen her partner beeline toward his office, Eileen elected to gather her things and head straight to the parking lot. She wasn’t sure exactly where to go; she just knew better than to risk further escalating the confrontation. Arriving at her car, she chucked her things on the passenger seat and noticed the hastily scribbled Post-it note affixed to the steering wheel:



Biz Roundtable
Cocktail Event
Walker Museum 6-8

Eileen had been a member of the Twin Cities Business Roundtable—a peer group for small business owners—for three years. These days she rarely had time to attend the group’s regular social and education events. She had written the note earlier that morning after promising several people she would make it tonight. Still seething, Eileen stole one last glance at Vic’s vehicle before pulling slowly out of the lot.

“I’d rather chew glass than make small talk right now,” she thought grimly. “On the other hand, maybe a stiff drink will do me some good.”

HOPE

Vic slammed open his office door, replaying the last few minutes in his head. Gradually coming to grips with what he had just done to his partner, he slumped into his chair, dropped his head, and rubbed his temples. Slowly Vic allowed himself to acknowledge how scared and unhappy he had become these last few months.

He'd been having trouble sleeping for the first time in his life. His trademark confidence had begun to erode, causing him to play it safe and avoid conflict, another first. Vic began to realize his own frustrations and self-doubt had caused the sudden attack. He had lashed out at Eileen because her relentless focus on the negative made it impossible to ignore the fact that he and the rest of the team at Swan just weren't getting it done.

"Damn," thought Vic. He hit Eileen's speed dial, hoping for the chance to make things right.

Eileen checked her vibrating smartphone at a stoplight.

She pressed the "ignore" button when the name "Vic Hightower" popped up on the display. After thirty years she knew well how he operated. He was calling to apologize.

Their "professional" relationship had begun on a whim, when Vic suggested they start a lemonade stand in their neighborhood, the City Lakes district near downtown Minneapolis. With Vic on a street corner reining in passersby and Eileen managing the stand, the "business" was a success from the start.

Throughout their many entrepreneurial adventures, Vic had been the front man and Eileen the backbone of their operations. The two ran numerous ventures as teens—a lawn-care business, a bike repair shop, and even a stint reselling bulk candy to other middle-school students. Although they pursued different tracks through college, the pair made an effort to stay connected. Eileen studied business and graduated with honors from the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management. Vic changed schools and majors three times, all the while less interested in studying than in running a series of remarkably profitable ventures from his dorm rooms and apartments.

Eileen secured a high-profile job with a prestigious investment banking and management consulting firm right out of school. For nine years she moved up quickly in several of the firm's practice areas and ultimately worked closely with more than sixty companies. From the beginning, she had planned to eventually leave the firm to buy a business—or start her own.

Vic's postcollegiate career was as fluid as Eileen's was stable. He took his first sales job as a fourth-year junior and was immediately successful. Over the next few years he replayed the same story several times—excelling in his first several months as a business developer only to later become bored, frustrated, or both. Despite the frequent job changes, though, Vic's talent and drive to win always helped him perform at a high level.

Although on divergent paths, the two friends spoke often. During one such call eleven years earlier, Eileen had first sought feedback regarding her plan to start a technology consulting business. Within days, the two had cobbled together a compelling business plan and had committed to making it happen—together.

Eileen snapped out of her walk down memory lane when she arrived at the Walker Art Center. She parked and went inside.

"Well, I'll be," said a familiar voice from the registration table. "I was beginning to think you were a figment of my imagination!"

Eileen smiled at Bill Pullian, executive director of the Business Roundtable, and extended her hand sheepishly. "I figure I'd better show up every once in a while," she replied. "Otherwise you're going to think my membership fee is a charitable contribution."

Walking away, Eileen wondered if Bill could tell she was still reeling after her train wreck of an afternoon. She glanced to her right to see Miguel Gutierrez zeroing in on the open bar.

"Hello, stranger, can I buy you a drink?" he asked.

"Very generous of you, Miguel," she answered. "I'll be sure to return the favor when we're at some high-priced fund-raiser."

Eileen was genuinely glad to see Miguel. He had been a member of her roundtable since she joined the group more than three years ago. Although he ran one of the largest and fastest growing companies in the Twin Cities chapter, he had always been generous with his time and counsel.

“How ya been?” he said, extending his arms for a hug.

“I’ve had better days,” she said.

“Well, let’s grab a drink and talk about it,” said Miguel.

The pair collected their cocktails and retreated to a less crowded spot.

“So what’s happening?” Miguel asked.

“It’s really just the same old story...” Her voice trailed off, and Miguel raised an eyebrow to invite more.

Eileen hesitated. On the one hand, Miguel was the *perfect* confidant—very successful but humble enough to share his trials and tribulations with other members of his roundtable. On the other hand, by sharing what had happened this afternoon, Eileen worried she would be admitting that the company she had painstakingly built was falling apart.

Miguel motioned to some nearby chairs. “Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

“Well,” Eileen said with a heavy sigh, “you know how much harder things seemed to have gotten since our \$7 million year.”

Miguel nodded; Eileen had shared a few details in prior discussions.

“I’ve spent most of the last year trying to figure out why and to get my team to respond. Until today they’d been mostly ignoring me, blaming the problem on stuff outside our control. Today I finally convinced them otherwise,” she said ruefully.

Miguel looked confused. “That sounds like *good* news.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” replied Eileen with a sarcastic laugh. “In less than three hours, my best executive tried to quit—in the ladies’ room, no less. My ops guy pretty much ran screaming from the room when we started talking about ways to improve customer satisfaction. Our marketing guy cares more about generating revenue for his own agency than our survival, and my controller spent the whole meeting pissing everyone else off.”

“Sounds awful,” Miguel said soothingly.

“Those were the *bright spots!*” said Eileen. Both she and Miguel had a good laugh at her expense. More comfortable telling the story now, she went on to describe the private discussion and public conflict with Vic. Miguel listened intently, asked a few clarifying questions, and then grabbed a business card from his coat pocket.

“You’re right, Eileen, that is one lousy day,” he acknowledged. “But it might be the best thing that ever happened to you.”

Eileen was puzzled. “How is *that* possible?”

“Because it happened to me,” said Miguel, smiling.

“One of your people resigned in the *ladies’ room*?” she joked.

Miguel laughed and continued, “About five years ago, I had—by far—my worst day in business. The company was really struggling, and it had been unbelievably hard on my family and me. I was working all the time, waking up at all hours of the night—it was awful.”

Eileen was shocked. Of all the entrepreneurs she knew, Miguel seemed like the calmest and most balanced.

“Finally, on that terrible day, I decided I’d had enough. I realized that everything about the way my company operated needed to change. Luckily, a friend and mentor helped me understand I probably couldn’t make that kind of change on my own. So I took his advice and, as he had done a few years earlier, asked for help.”

Miguel took his business card and wrote down a phone number on the front, then flipped it over and wrote something else on the back. He slid the card to Eileen.

“When you’re ready to make things better—permanently—call my friend Alan Roth,” Miguel said, standing.

“Wait, Miguel—who is this Alan?” Eileen said, standing as well. “Why do you think he can help me?”

“Because that’s what he does, Eileen. He helps people like us get what we want from our businesses,” he said.

“He’s a consultant?” she said with a sour look. “Listen, Miguel, I really respect you, but if I walk back into my business tomorrow suggesting we hire another consultant, I’ll have a full-scale mutiny on my hands!”

Miguel nodded reassuringly. “I get it, Eileen. I felt the same way about consultants, which is why it took me six months to call Alan myself. But he’s not a consultant—he calls himself an ‘implementer.’ All I can tell you is that his system and approach are completely different from anything you and your team have experienced. And it’ll flat-out work.”

“I don’t know, Miguel,” protested Eileen.

A mutual friend walked by, and Miguel held up a finger to get her attention.

“I have to run, Eileen—Melanie and I have been trying to connect for weeks,” he said. “I really do think Alan can help. Call him.”

“Thanks, Miguel,” she said, fingering the business card. “You’ve definitely given me something to think about.”

Before placing Miguel’s card in her bag, she noticed her friend had written something intriguing on the back:



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the first chapter of
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