INTRODUCTION

THE FEARLESS ORGANIZATION: CONSIDER THE POSSIBLE

Much of our time is spent working—some forty, sixty, even eighty hours per week. That's more time awake than we spend with our friends or family and rivals the time we spend sleeping. Work is such a significant part of our lives that it even affects the quality of our sleep. Shouldn't the time we spend at work be worth it? Shouldn't that time be filled with a sense of purpose and accomplishment and not just packed with appointments and never-ending task lists? Shouldn't we be energized by the efforts and successes of our work team rather than drained by them? Shouldn't work be a time to learn, a time to engage with others to do something great, a time to be with people who enjoy what they are doing? And shouldn't the energizing effects of our work cascade over into our personal lives so our family and friends can see and feel our positive energy every day, instead of seeing us perpetually distracted with a phone to our ear?

Most, if not all, of us wouldn't hesitate to answer those questions with a resounding "YES!" That's because, deep down, we believe work should be more than just getting through a daily task

list, checking off items as we finish them. Work should be a place that builds energy, not drains it. Work should provide opportunities for growth and improvement that bring out the best in us as individuals, as teams, and as entire organizations. Work should be such a positive force in our daily lives that those around us can't help but notice and be affected by our energy.

Too often, however, work isn't like that at all. Instead of energizing us, it traps us. Instead of inspiring us, it dulls our senses. The workplace is full of bureaucracy and negative complexity. Layer upon layer of systems and processes intended to keep everything running smoothly derail us on a daily basis. (Sometimes key people don't even know why these processes exist.) What's worse, instead of simplifying processes to solve the problems, our organizations keep adding more systems to the tangle already in place. We end up spending more time making sure to dot our i's and cross our t's than we do creating inspiring and innovative "new" work. Work feels like an old city with nothing but blind alleys or narrow, congested, one-way streets. We can't seem to get where we want to go, at least not quickly and without a significant extra effort. Indeed, after routinely spending that effort for little result, cynicism and mediocrity set in. We are trapped.

In an environment like that, nearly everyone in the company is toiling with the same goal: keep the systems and processes in check and get the product—any product—out the door. The systems and processes themselves often seem like the primary focus of the organization. Unnecessarily complex systems have an intense gravitational pull. Commonly, everyone in the organization is working in some capacity to keep the systems from spiraling out of control, even if it means adding more processes and procedures to keep everything in line. The sad part is that, without even realizing it, we ourselves become complicit in adding to the complexity that traps us.

Not all companies are like that. Some shine like beacons of excellence and growth in the crowded market. Think for a moment. You can probably name several, small and large, in your neighborhood, in your country, and in the world. There's

seemingly no end to what these companies can do, create, and deliver. They seem to make a game of topping themselves! Their growth and excellence appear to know no bounds. So what's the difference? What makes the difference between true growth and a stifling existence? What's the difference between those companies that shine and the ones where work is a slog, apathy is everywhere, and products and people are mediocre at best? And how can your organization become a company that makes work a joy and excellence and innovation a mission?

The key is in liberating leaders. In companies where complicated systems reign, nearly everyone has his hands in the daily details of producing the product or delivering the services. Managers *and* frontline employees (and top executives and sometimes even the CEO) are tangled up in running the day-to-day aspects of the business, or the Run. The frontline activities are so unpredictable, unreliable, and complicated, and the systems surrounding them are so often superfluous, that managers can't seem to pull themselves away. (As you can imagine, this situation frustrates managers and employees alike.) Time and energy are consumed by urgent but unimportant tasks rather than activities that produce sustained personal and organizational growth. Managers have difficulty forgetting bad situations, and that inability to let go shakes their confidence in their frontline team and its activities. To compensate for their lack of confidence in the Run, managers become conditioned to overmanage and underlead. Regaining confidence is an uphill fight. So, while managers are stuck in the front line, they're not leading or pursuing activities that propel growth and innovation.

The precondition for liberating managers is having a front line that can operate reliably, excellently, and independently day in and day out every day of every week of every year. The Run needs to be rock solid—perpetually. It's the foundation of the entire organization. Yet, at the same time that the Run needs to be solid, it can't be rigid. It also needs to evolve and transform as the company innovates and grows. A Run like that involves getting the entire company, and particularly the front line, to be

fearless. The front line needs to feel powerful, not powerless. It needs to be freed from worrying about senseless initiatives, ridiculous mandates, and unnecessary meetings and e-mails. It needs to be trusted, encouraged, and accountable to itself. It needs to be emboldened.

Run-Improve-Grow can get you and your organization to fearless. It can show you how to embrace bold. By implementing Run-Improve-Grow, organizations finally arrive at consistent excellent performance, free of the dramatic ups and downs that often take place when external changes require new plans or procedures. The first part of this book, Run, describes how to use the principles of Run-Improve-Grow to build a solid—and simplified—foundation that focuses on excellence and empowers the front line to be fearless and take true ownership of essential day-to-day operations.

The second part, Improve, explains how to capitalize on the momentum created by the fearless front line to liberate the organization's managers. Management systems, leadership styles, and the entire mind-set of the organization are all transformed in the Improve. With a fearless front line, simplified management system, and new organizational attitude, an organization is ready to launch boldly into the Grow. The third part of the book, then, outlines what the organization needs to do to make (then keep) bold promises, place (then win) bold bets, and scout (then hire) bold people. Senior managers have been freed to pursue strategic innovations and new opportunities that will propel the company to greater relevancy, ever-higher levels of excellence, and profitable growth.

It doesn't stop there, however. Run-Improve-Grow isn't confined to a beginning, middle, and end. Run-Improve-Grow is a perpetual model that approaches improvement as a continuously moving system that stimulates a culture of consistent relevancy, new growth, and constant innovation. For that reason, Run-Improve-Grow has near-universal applicability. It's not geared for a particular type of organization in a particular set of circumstances. The principles work for *any* organization—no

matter how unique you think your situation is or how specialized and different your industry is. Run-Improve-Grow is based on fundamental principles that are universally true for every system and collection of people. So, even though many of the examples presented in this book relate to operations and manufacturing, Run-Improve-Grow has been applied in many organizations, functions, and industries. Whether a leader is struggling to guide an organization to stay afloat or create a bolder vision for an already flourishing team, Run-Improve-Grow has helped create and establish a culture of sustained success and innovation.

That's because Run-Improve-Grow is a holistic, well-proven system that integrates technical improvement tools, humanistic leadership practices, professional business standards, and a visionary entrepreneurial orientation. Run-Improve-Grow allows organizations to (re)create themselves over and over and over again, each time achieving newer, more deeply satisfying levels of growth.

Imagine what it would feel like if your organization had:

- confident frontline leaders and employees able to handle the complexity that comes with true (new) growth;
- efficient systems and processes owned by the people most closely connected to them;
- a continuous-improvement mind-set that permeates the organization's culture;
- a unified vision of peak performance in which your top performers are driven to even higher levels;
- time for mid-level leaders to focus on proactive improvements and for top-level leaders to focus on growth-related activities;
- open systems of communication; and
- more productive frontline employees who hold themselves accountable, have ownership of their own solutions, and have a better understanding of the entire business.

And what if you could reliably:

- grow confidently in the direction of your choosing?
- promise the moon—and deliver it regularly?
- provide the most innovative solutions to your customers' problems?
- attract the industry's best talent?
- command premium pricing of products and services that are heavily in demand and are far superior to any alternatives?
- enjoy working every day?
- experience no compromises—can you grow, simplify, *and* attract and engage the best talent?

Imagine a workplace that is free from the stress of managers and staff always finding problems but rarely acting on solutions, a workplace where teams establish and agree on clear standards of excellence, and a workplace where people are encouraged to propose bold ideas and then make them realities? Run-Improve-Grow makes that workplace possible.

The ultimate payoff is the virtuous circle. Excellence at anything—sports, music, art, cooking, business—requires practice. When you start something new, like playing the piano, the practice is arduous. Your fingers feel heavy and slow. They plod along, stumbling over the keys. Your eyes can't decide if they should be watching your hands or reading the music, so you're constantly losing your place. The notes aren't marked on the piano keys, and the score is in a completely different language. Half an hour of practice feels like a month. You might get discouraged and stop. The more you practice, and the more you focus on your practice, however, the better you become. Your eyes don't have to look at your hands anymore and can decode many notes on the score simultaneously. Your fingers get used to the movements and find the right keys more quickly. When you strike a wrong note, you keep going (rather than stopping to bang the keys in frustration). Soon, what you're playing sounds like music, and you want to perfect more, and more difficult, songs. You experience joy through the music *and* through your ability to produce it.

The same basic concept applies to playing par golf, baking a cake, drawing blood, sewing a dress, designing a software package, designing a fixture, running an experiment, or packing a skid. It applies to hobbies and to work. It applies in the emergency room, front office, back office, production line, storefront, warehouse, and the research and development department. The more you do something, the better you get; the better you get, the more enjoyable the activity is.

The same is true of the improvement and transformation process. Run-Improve-Grow is built on the principle that practice in a perpetual process can create meaningful, sustainable growth, and the approach has been proven many times over with many success stories across industries. Today's business environment is nothing if not fluid. Companies—and their employees—need to adapt continuously, and arguably they need to adapt more quickly and more regularly than ever before. Forget the bluster. In a fast-paced, ever-changing environment, you need reliable, dependable backup for people making bolder and bolder moves. You need people throughout the organization who are fearless.

That's why becoming practiced in the improvement and transformation process is so crucial. If you keep reacting reflexively to the changing environment by rolling out the latest and greatest continuous-improvement programs, you'll always be running in all directions with no destination. Your fate and the fate of your organization will be dependent on (or hostage to) externalities.

I advocate a simpler, more purposeful approach. This book will help you create a bold road map. As you read, think big and start small. Stop being buffeted by the churning rapids of the business environment. Strap on a helmet, grab an oar, and fearlessly direct your own course.

Keep it simple and be fearless.

Ray