I went out to our garage the other day to grab a strip of molding for a small home project. When I slipped the piece of wood from its place, a pile of boxes crashed to the floor.

Staring at disbelief at the mess I just made, I realized what happened. Big boxes had been stacked on top of small boxes, heavy boxes on top of light boxes, and full boxes on top of empty boxes. Collapse was inevitable, and my simple act set this sequence in motion.

A similar dynamic occurs in leadership when we stack broad organizational responsibilities on top of inadequate interpersonal skills and incomplete character. According to a 2023 survey by Price Waterhouse Coopers, the average tenure of a CEO has dropped dramatically to just under five years, with boards needing to remove their primary leader due to ethical lapses jumping over 50% to the highest levels ever.

What's going on?

Essentials for Executive Effectiveness

Organizational Leadership
Leading the Enterprise

Interpersonal Leadership
Leading Others

Personal Leadership
Leading Oneself

Big boxes are stacked on top of small boxes, heavy boxes on top of light boxes, and full boxes on top of empty boxes. Collapse is inevitable.

Guess what? There's a better way to lead. One that does not result in the fallout we are facing today.

It starts with stacking the boxes of leadership better. It starts with stability at the very foundation with effective personal leadership, leading oneself. Then it places on this bottom box strong interpersonal skills, leading others. Then, and only then, the weight of organizational leadership is added to the mix, leading the enterprise.

While companies around the world spend millions of dollars on a technology stack to improve the performance of their business, the leadership stack I just described is a hundred times more important.

Personal Leadership: Leading Oneself

The work of leadership begins within. It begins by looking inside our soul and knowing what matters most. It begins by being value-centered and principle-driven.

"What possible business purpose is there", you might ask, "for doing something as goofy as looking inside one's soul?"

Remember the boxes?

When the base of leadership is hollow and empty and then it's built upon, collapse is inevitable. And collapses cost money, lots of it! There's your business purpose. If not also a life purpose, being healthy and whole.

Identifying our values, while a good start, is not enough in leadership. Those guiding principles must find themselves being expressed in every day life. Enter priorities. Or more specifically, the management of our time so that we use it for the most important things.

The truth is: time, not money, is our most limited business resource. When we lose money, we can go out and make some more; but when we lose even a minute of our time, we will never get it back.

Effective executive leaders know this and make every minute count, again, doing what matters most in life and leadership.
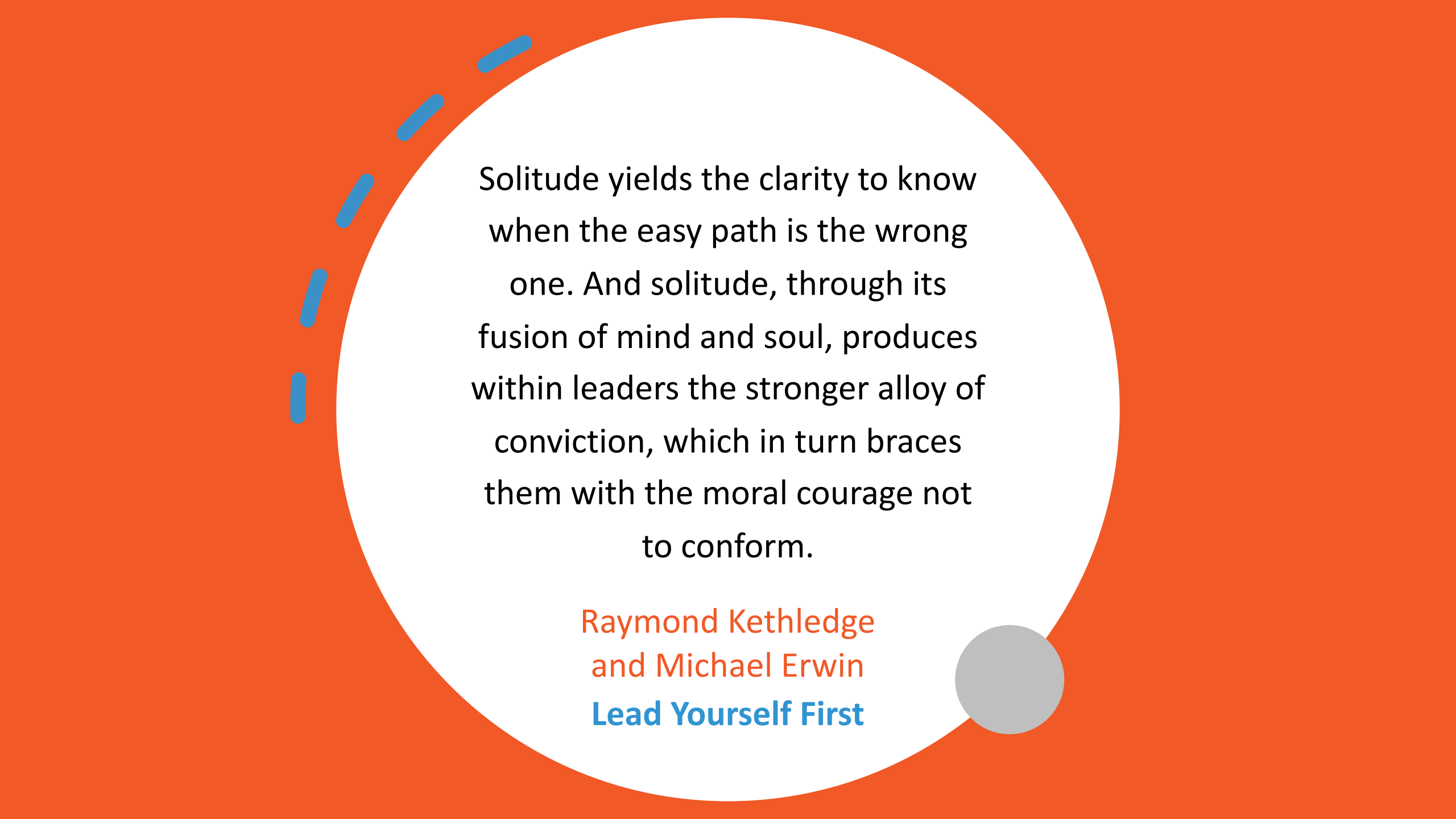
When leaders attend to their values and priorities like this in a consistent manner, they embody an executive presence that others follow freely. They possess character that gives them credibility, inspiring the people who follow them with an unwavering trust. Additionally, they embody confidence in their own unique voice, speaking out with authenticity and authority.

And finally personal leadership involves significant doses of emotional maturity.

Emotional maturity is being aware of one's own emotions as well as the emotions of others. Instead of ignoring this vital dimension of life, wise leaders have a rich vocabulary to describe their inner state. From this awareness, emotional maturity is able to keep from being hijacked by one's impulses—that is, emotional self-regulation—while at the same time deeply connecting with the people within one's sphere of influence, building deep loyalty as a result.

These are the elements of personal leadership, offered with one ominous warning. None of this can be done at the pace we are living our lives today, checking email immediately upon waking up, rushing from meeting to meeting, and scrolling through our phones in bed as we try to fall asleep. This constant state of urgency and the distinct lack of solitude out brings does not nurture clarity and courage, two essentials for effective leadership.

Build into the rhythm of your life time for solitude. Down time. Think time. Time for rest, renewal, and reflection. Ignore this are your peril!

Solitude yields the clarity to know when the easy path is the wrong one. And solitude, through its fusion of mind and soul, produces within leaders the stronger alloy of conviction, which in turn braces them with the moral courage not to conform.

Raymond Kethledge
and Michael Erwin
Lead Yourself First

Interpersonal Leadership: Leading Others

While personal leadership is about leading oneself, interpersonal leadership is about leading others. Managers may try to lead their team well; but without self-leadership, they're exposed as an empty suit. When we do the hard work of character development, however, we establish a platform of credibility that wins the hearts and minds of the people who report to us.

This approach to leadership does not see employees as interchangeable parts, emotionless robots who act without feeling. Rather it builds a winning culture where people are inspired to give one-hundred percent effort, one-hundred percent of the time.

Culture is the combination of beliefs and behaviors any group of people embrace, from businesses to churches, families to nations. It's the way we think and the way we act in these groups consistently over time. Culture is the inner operating system of our organizations, the one thing that changes everything.

Building a winning culture, however, is not a simple as putting a plaque on the wall with some serious sounding words. That produces cynical eye-rolls and a distinct disengagement. A winning culture is lived, first by you and your leaders, and then by the rest of the team. And it's celebrated by telling stories, like ancient tribes did sitting around the fire, stories of those who embody your culture fully, in spite of obstacles that stood in the way.

What stories are you telling?

Finally, leaders with strong interpersonal skills also communicate with care and candor, not one or the other but both at the same time. And they're heard as a result. They don't blow up relationships (and organizations) when a difficult discussion is needed. Their honesty and humanity, with a sincere side of humility, wins the day.

How do you do that? While volumes have been written on cross-functional communication and conflict resolution, I find this simple paradigm to be extremely useful. Is the disagreement you're facing about options, a position that's being taken on a specific issue, or objectives, the underlying concern of the issue?

If it's the latter, start by forging agreement around mutually shared objectives, and then work up from that foundation to options that satisfy both parties' concerns. If it's the former, explicitly affirm your agreement around mutually shared objectives, recognizing that you don't have a genuine conflict, just a different point of view on how to proceed. Then work from this agreement to options that satisfy everyone.

In short, address conflict by first defining where you agree rather than disagree. This is more than a silly self-help slogan, but a proven approach to forge real resolution on the issues that too often divide us.
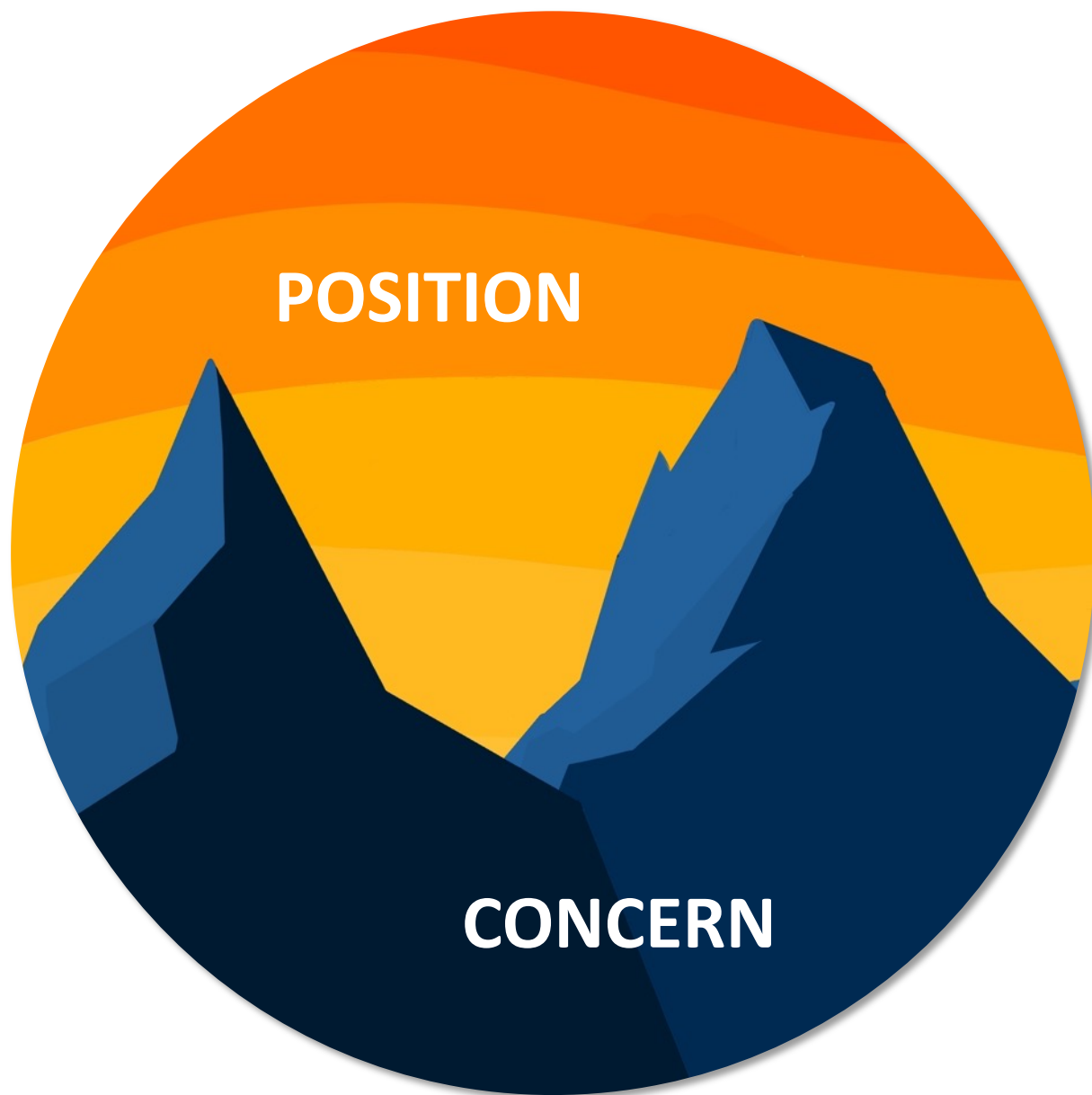
Finding Common Ground

When disagreement over others' **positions** exist, drill down to mutually shared **objectives.** That is, the underlying **concern** that both parties agree upon.

Then build consensus on the **options** that work best for these mutually shared objectives, **positions** everyone can support in moving forward as a team.

Organizational Leadership: Leading the Enterprise

Now it's time to lead the enterprise and propel the business forward.

Organizational leadership involves setting a viable market strategy and casting a bold vision for the future. Please note, however, that leading oneself and leading others is no mere prerequisite to this work, but essential to it. Why? Strategy and hurry are never found together in the same package, and the wisdom that's needed for effective long-term vision is discovered in the process of collaborative communication with others.

Ultimately, however, strategy and vision have got to get done. The dream must become reality. Enter focused planning and execution.

Unfortunately, most organizational planning devolves into a shopping list of endless things to do. That's not the kind of planning that moves a business forward, diluting its limited resources an inch deep and a mile wide. Focused planning, however, is an inch wide a mile deep, committing the resources of the organization to a vital few priorities and getting them done without exception.

A filter I use for focused planning is the traditional Eisenhower Matrix. You remember the four quadrants? Urgent and important, not urgent but important, urgent but not important, and not urgent and not important.

The secret to strategy execution is eliminating the last two quadrants in that

list: urgent but not important, not urgent and not important. You'd be surprised(or, perhaps, maybe not) at how much of our organizational resources are wasted on these low priorities.

It is then our responsibility as a leader to focus first on the things that are not urgent but important. In doing so, the remaining quadrant, urgent and important, will be greatly reduced as fires are prevented from ever getting starting rather than running around trying to put them out. And, yes, true emergencies—fires—do happen, and we need to attend to them But most of our emergencies can be avoided by thinking through and acting on our organization's highest priorities and not leaving them to the last minute.

Leaders who lack emotional maturity, however, can't do this work. They're driven by an inner anxiety and a compulsion to please everyone. Consequently, they can't bring themselves to strike anything from their ever-expanding things to do, especially the things that are urgent but not important.

Neither do they have the courage to follow through with a plan when traditional ways of doing things that aren't working any more need to be eliminated. This is why so many brilliant strategies fail to see the light of day.

Mercenary, Martyr, or Missionary?

Organizational Leadership
Leading the Enterprise

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I receive very little pushback from executive leaders when I present these three domains. They make logical sense.

What I find, however, is a distinct lack of development in them. As with anything in life, it's doing that's hard.

A leader might be good at personal and organizational leadership; but run roughshod over people, acting like a hired gun, a mere mercenary. Or a leader might lead others and the organization well but not take care of themselves, which results in their becoming a martyr for the cause.

Then there's the leader who's all about people, people, people and the business suffers, pleading for money in the marketplace like a missionary, not a successful business. It takes all three operating in symmetry for executive leaders to be effective.

Finally, developing deeply in each of these domains rarely occurs without the help of others. For most leaders this means spending time with a skilled executive coach. Sure, some of us

highly disciplined souls can download a marathon training plan and compete at the highest levels, but these people are few and far between. Most of us mere mortals need a trusted advisor outside of ourselves to help us become the leader we're meant to be, iron sharpening iron.

That's what I do professionally, and have done for over twenty years. It would be an honor to explore what working together in this way might look like for you.

About Bill Zipp

Author, speaker, and executive coach, Bill Zipp helps hardworking sales managers become better leaders, grow their people, and hit their number.

Over the course of the last two decades, Bill has been a trusted advisor to scores of sales organizations around the world, from ADP to SAP, Nintex to InsightSoftware, Businessolver to SOVOS. Many of these companies experienced dramatic growth while working with him, some doubling topline revenue.

Bill is the author of the bestselling book, *The Ultimate Sales Manager Playbook,* and lives in Corvallis, Oregon, home of Oregon State University and the beloved orange and black of the Oregon State Beavers. He's married to Denise and has three amazing adult children: Beckie, Ricky, and Renee.

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