

waking up

IN CORPORATE AMERICA  
THE SEVEN SECRETS THAT OPENED MY EYES

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## IN CORPORATE AMERICA

THE SEVEN SECRETS THAT OPENED MY EYES

Eric Pennington

*Advantage*<sup>TM</sup>



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WAKING UP IN CORPORATE AMERICA

FOR THOSE WAKING UP...

## Preface

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When the idea for this book came to me, I at first ignored it. This was due to my tendency to over analyze things and put them away for another day. However, I believe there is a major untapped resource out there in Corporate America. That resource is you. I want to help you move from just surviving to thriving. That is why I could not ignore the call to write this book.

My motivation is to speak to you where you are—the corporate citizen, or maybe slave. I was there; I spent almost twenty years charting the treacherous waters where many things just didn't make sense.

If you are like me, you think there has to be more to a career than stock options, promotions, and retirement. It took me a while, but I discovered that corporate life did mean more than the aforementioned. I found work is a vehicle designed to move us to that place where we know and are known. I know that may sound strange, but it's true.

You see, we've made the mistake of thinking career and work success was the aim. But I'm here to tell you it's about life success—not at the expense of career, but to the enhancement of it. Some might say this is a contradiction, and these people are probably ninety-five percent of the senior managers out there today.

I don't claim to be a genius or visionary, but after participating in about two million meetings (yes, I've lived to tell), I know there is something terribly wrong out there. I think you agree with me. Matter of fact, I know you do because I've talked to you. Much of this book was born out of frank and sobering conversations with a wide range of corporate soldiers. The looks in the eyes, the pauses, and the sighs point to a workplace experience we all share.

This book is not designed to insult or indict Corporate America. At the end of the day, we all have to work, and some of us were destined to do that within a corporate structure. I believe the majority of senior managers and their fellow executives are well intentioned. I think they want to do the right thing, but like you, they can't seem to make sense of this thing called work. Consequently, the problem is we were never meant to make sense of work; we were supposed to make sense of life and then work would take care of itself.

I've compiled seven principles (or secrets) that have worked in my life and career. I'm sure there are many more out there, but I look at these as the seven most important. Additionally, they represent real world experience. The people referenced within are people I know (though some of their names have been changed to protect the innocent and guilty) or have met in a one-time encounter. Their stories are a part of what makes the book and journey relevant. Relevancy is vital in discovering breakthroughs that last.

This book will not solve every issue, but I'm confident it will bring clarity and direction. I've set out to help you discover what you were designed to do. Abraham Maslo, in his "Hierarchy of Needs," says self-actualization is a human being's number one need. I agree!

God created 6.8 billion people, so you might wonder where you fit in. He gave us each unique DNA and a unique story to tell. We spend so much of our time in this thing called work, so shouldn't we live it with meaning? After spending almost twenty years in Corporate America, I think most folks want that sense of purpose. Unfortunately, many people in organizations are not developed, and over the years they grow cynical and jaded. For the life of me, I don't understand why organizations don't grow their people. Organizations are so fixated on earnings and expenses they've forgotten what gives them the fuel (people) for their growth. I don't expect I will change your CEO's

## PREFACE

mind, but maybe I can help you realize that your life is the most important pursuit.

WAKING UP IN CORPORATE AMERICA

# SECRET 1

## Be Authentic

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*Authentic leaders realize that power flows through them, not from them.*

*--Ken Blanchard*

Some years ago, Rick Williams, a wise mentor and friend, advised me to not let the corporation define me. He also advised me to be the authentic person I was designed to be. Those words still reverberate in my mind. Many pundits might think healthcare or career advancement would be the greatest issues people face in the workplace. But I believe being authentic is possibly the biggest issue/struggle facing people inside Corporate America today.

Definitions will determine the level of our authenticity. This is true for all people, whether they know it or not. I call those that don't know it the "working dead." In order to define ourselves properly, we must begin with authenticity in mind. Authentic motivations, authentic thoughts, and authentic dreams are essential. If we're not authentic leaders, then we're counter-genuine leaders. It's a daunting challenge, but we must find a way to develop authenticity and bury insincerity.

## THE LAND OF AUTHENTIC

Authentic behaviors occur when we are willing to make sacrifices and trust our gut. If you've been caught in the vacuum of positioning, a place where everything is staged for the audience (usually your boss), then this might be difficult to embrace. Be willing to communicate

your authentic opinions and actions as if life depended on it. In other words, take risks. Put something on the line! Consider risk as an entrance exam into authenticity.

Another exciting occurrence in the place called “authentic” is a sense of destiny. The first installment of the movie *The Matrix* communicates this brilliantly. The character Neo is on a path of destiny. The journey is long and risk-filled, but he presses on. As you may remember, he isn’t entirely sure of himself throughout the film. But in the final showdown, he awakens to who he truly is. Neo realizes he has the gift, and he embraces it. We’ve all been given the gift of authenticity. Unfortunately, very few ever accept and embrace it.

If senior managers rose to the level of authentic, we’d have more people willing to be themselves. Organizations would then have environments full of honest two-way communication. They would be beautiful states where ideas, obstacles, and opportunities are laid out on the table. They would be places of trust. Such organizations would ultimately be the high performers.

Don’t allow yourself to stay in a place where positioning is the norm, you will start to become as you behold. Examine the health of the enterprise carefully. Signpost up ahead: senior managers rarely wake up where corporate sleeping is condoned. Follow your vision and leave the organization if you need to.

## THE POWER OF AUTHENTICITY

Let’s now explore how we move to practicing authentic behaviors. First, remember that authentic influence applies to everyone, whether you are an entry-level receptionist or the CEO. Far too often, we buy into the lie that this mind-set is exclusive to high-level executives. I remember a time when an associate engaged me in a robust discussion

about authentic leadership. He had a variety of opinions about the subject. Jack was an inquisitive guy, but we had rarely spoken about such things. He had a history of not taking no for an answer. He also questioned everything, with a strong opinion to boot. As we began the conversation, I passionately spoke of the importance of authenticity. He really wanted to agree, however it was obvious he didn't grasp the concept. More than likely, his experiences reflected what most of us have endured. I told him the essence of my concept was diversity, the kind of diversity where everyone's voice (not their skin color) really matters. After our spirited discussion, he realized I truly wanted the work group to be originals and not replicas. This was strange science because he'd been asked to be a duplicate under so many past leaders.

Allowing people to be authentic gave me a reputation of being a little over the top, but my team was always the better for it. Think about it, do we really want an environment where fakes are the norm? Most people I've led want the opportunity to be themselves (while doing their best in their area of expertise). Organizations blow it when they don't encourage authentic behaviors. It's the authentic leaders who produce the greatest results. Name one organization where fakes carried the day? You would probably need to check the bankruptcy filings to find them. When you evaluate an environment, work or otherwise, make sure it embraces authentic behaviors—behaviors like honest communication and courage under fire.

## THE PROBLEM WITH COUNTER-GENUINE INFLUENCE

I've had many examples in my career of what counter-genuine influence looks like (in managers and non-managers alike). About ten years ago, I worked for just such a leader. Bill really didn't like people, but

he continually pursued managing them. He wanted the paycheck and power that managing provided. Bill didn't get the connection between the love of people and influencing.

As someone who reported to him, I felt no love. There were many days where he struggled even to say hello. I sometimes wondered if I was a phantom. Because he wasn't an engaging man, he didn't make the attempt to connect with me. Despite this, I found myself many times wanting to ask him why he pursued leading people. Looking back, that kind of question would have led to my firing.

Ironically, Bill lit up like a Christmas tree whenever the group president came around. He was definitely a charter member of the ChapStick Club of America. Needless to say, my gut says he was lost in a maze that so many leaders are. You know the place, a place where the idea (I want the privilege of power, not the responsibility) of something is better than the reality.

By the way, your organization is possibly an enabler of leaders like Bill. Every counter-genuine leader needs a sponsor. In the name of fear and greed, Corporate America acts as this willing sponsor.

Counter-genuine leaders wear many faces and play many roles. Of course, the roles change depending on what the scene calls for, but one of my favorites involves the "I really care about you" conversation. These conversations usually happen when senior managers return from seminars or workshops where motivational speakers inject them with some good insights. However, they're not connected to living out what they have learned.

I once had a division president ask me how my family was doing. I almost fell out of my chair. Now keep in mind this was at a company picnic. I was rather shocked because she had never, in the three years I worked there, asked me about my family. She seemed sincere, but ironically, she never asked me again.

Counter-genuine leaders do just enough to play a role, but no more. Most counter-genuine leaders are so inwardly focused, they fail to see that most people can spot insincerity a mile away. Here's a news flash for all the senior managers in the room: your people know and see more than you think.

The agendas used by counter-genuine leaders include climbing the wrong corporate ladder, micro managing those they lead, denying responsibility when things go wrong, and pure hungering for power. In their book, *Leadership on the Line*, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky give some wise insights about power. "Power can become an end itself, displacing your attention to organizational purposes. An inflated sense of self-importance can breed self-deception and dysfunctional dependencies."

What causes leaders to run from authentic behaviors and motivations? Most counter-genuine leaders have developed patterns and habits that can reach as far back as childhood. Authenticity implies uniqueness, which our society does not embrace. Just look around you...conformity is more the norm. Don't misunderstand me, we all need boundaries, but not to the point where it chokes out our unique self.

I'll give you an example of someone I managed for many years. Her name was Jane. Jane was a different thinker. I knew this from the moment I met her. To her, Corporate America was a breeding ground for compromise and conformity. In many ways, she felt the work environment was a place where people could feel loved. Jane was a feeling-driven person, and she was definitely a corporate casualty.

Her different thinking was considered a threat inside the organization. We worked in an environment where marching to management's drum was a form of career protection. Typically, conservative companies frown upon independent thought (even when they say they

welcome it). Our group needed refreshment, and I needed her help to turn the enterprise around. One of the ways to do this was to seek out leaders who wanted to be authentic, even if they had never been given the opportunity before. Jane was intrigued by my overtures, but it was clear to me it would take time for her to trust my intentions.

As the weeks passed, I began to understand the wounds Jane possessed. She was somewhat defensive and tended to be suspicious of corporate leaders. This made perfect sense because most of the leaders she worked with were counter-genuine. We talked a lot, and as the months passed, she began to discover her own authentic style. That style was always there, but the organization wasn't producing the right kind of conditions for authenticity. Most of her experiences were with leaders who thought leadership meant power and privilege. So Jane did as many do; she withdrew from authentic behaviors.

Trust is a key component of any relationship, especially inside a conservative organization. Our workplace wasn't the easiest place for two people to build trust. But once we were able to connect on that level, we benefited from a couple significant by-products of trusting each other. First, I gained a lot as the leader of the group because a different point of view was given freely. Second, Jane experienced growth because she felt free to be herself. This is the essence of empowerment. I'll never forget her thanking me for showing her that it was okay to be authentic. What an honor it was to receive such a compliment.

The journey to authentic leadership is full of difficult and scary turns. Many give up because no one is there to spur them on. It is sad to think of all of the potential wasted. It's ironic that being you (being authentic) is discouraged, while posing is considered a norm. Jane gave me great inspiration regarding the importance of changing for the sake of authenticity.

## WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO DREAMING?

Come with me now to a time when you were a kid. Imagine you were interested in things the other kids were not. (For some, this will require less imagination than others.) Maybe you liked a certain type of music that others did not or you played a sport that wasn't popular. More than likely, you were made fun of or shunned. You probably began feeling embarrassed and isolated. If you didn't have someone to tell you it was okay to be different, you more than likely buried your interest. Certainly, embracing and exploring your interest would have been the best route to take.

The bottom line is being authentic starts with self-examination. Bill George, in his book *Authentic Leadership*, recounts the following experience around self-examination and authenticity, "My commitment to myself was to be the same person at home, at work, in the community, and in church. During this time, Penny was a great reality check, challenging me when she observed me behaving differently in social settings, for example, and talking to me about how I could change. This was not easy. It took years before I could make these interior walls disappear and let people in every aspect of my life know who I really was." Are you ready for this? Don't be afraid. The dream is you, and you are the dream.

## THE ROAD MAP TO AUTHENTICITY

If we're going to find the big rocks of authenticity inside ourselves, then we need a place where we can be alone—a quiet place for reflection where we can think. I've found my home office and Caribou Coffee to be excellent places for quiet reflection.