

How to Learn from Rough Landings,  
Blunders, and Missteps



**BILL TREASURER**

Author of *LEADERS OPEN DOORS*

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## **More Praise for *A Leadership Kick in the Ass***

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“*A Leadership Kick in the Ass* is, at its core, about two essential human virtues—courage and humility—and a reminder that these two qualities are inextricably linked. Bill Treasurer shows us that it takes a lot of courage to open yourself up to honest feedback from others and how that openness enables you to become more grounded, more aware, more confident, and more caring. At times Bill is highly irreverent and cheeky, but he’s always deeply caring and respectful of the difficult challenges leaders face. And Bill does not simply render critiques; every step of the way he offers insightful and practical advice on how you can lead with your best self. Through stories from his personal and coaching experiences, Bill reveals the transformative power of the courage to be human. This is one of the most unique and valuable books you will read all year, and I highly recommend it.”

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“Bill artfully describes the harsh, if somewhat humbling, reality that leaders do learn some of the most valuable lessons through mess-ups! The approach Bill uses in taking the reader through poignant examples while offering guidance to seize learning opportunities as they occur is but one of the elements that combine to make this a great read!”

—**Mark Brashear, CEO, John Varvatos**

“Bill Treasurer’s over two decades of experience working with leaders comes shining through in this must-read book for all leaders. Bill’s no-nonsense approach to calling it as it is, and getting us as leaders to truly look at ourselves with all our ‘pimples and warts,’ is a refreshing and necessary, albeit sometimes hard, dose of reality we must be willing to face if we truly want to be the best leaders we can. Bill’s insights, examples, and action plans throughout the book will help all leaders who have the courage to choose to be better!”

—**Jeff Hayes, President and CEO, CPP, Inc.**

“Bill has taken one heck of a touchy topic and motivates us to read about our foibles and imperfections. Then he has the audacity to challenge us to be better leaders! With just the right amount of advice added to powerful stories, Bill encourages us to be the best leaders we were meant to be.”

—**Elaine Biech, author of *Training and Development for Dummies***

“Bill really delivers with this book—a strong message, great storytelling, and lessons that make us take that hard look in the mirror leading to a more authentic self. Finding and leading from this position will undoubtedly bear fruit for readers of this book.”

—**Chris Maslin, Director, Biltmore Center for Professional Development**

“Leaders make mistakes. Learning from those mistakes and growing takes courage and humility. For over a decade Bill Treasurer has helped shape our future leaders with his candid, courageous style of training. *A Leadership Kick in the Ass* lights the path to confident, courageous, and inner-centered leadership. I highly recommend this book.”

—**Matthew Walsh, Cochairman, The Walsh Group**

“Bill Treasurer reminds us that every leader is flawed. Every leader can improve, learn new lessons, and make different choices. He doesn’t let his readers get stale as leaders. His style is warm yet confrontative. A winning combination for real growth.”

—**Beverly Kaye, founder and Chair, Career Systems International, and coauthor of *Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em* and *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go***

“Bill Treasurer provides proven tools and processes for managers at every phase of their career to grow and thrive in the midst of their biggest disappointments. A must-read if you’re serious about improving your leadership.”

—**Karin Hurt, coauthor of *Winning Well***

“The greatest lessons in life don’t come from success. They come from our missteps, setbacks, and screw-ups. This book will help you turn them into invaluable lessons that you’ll one day look back on with gratitude for all they taught you. An invaluable resource for any person who wants to be a truly extraordinary leader.”

—**Margie Warrell, bestselling author of *Stop Playing Safe***

“This is a practical book; if you are a leader who hasn’t made some big mistakes, you likely aren’t leading. This book will help you understand the cause of some mistakes and more importantly help you learn from them. This is a thought-provoking book too; it helps unravel the balance between confidence and humility—an important balance to consider. It’s time to start reading.”

—**Kevin Eikenberry, bestselling author of *Remarkable Leadership***

“Bill Treasurer offers a valuable guide to leadership through a series of humorous and honest examples, proving that failures are sometimes the most instrumental lessons on the road to success. Whether you’re just getting started in your career or are an established executive, *A Leadership Kick in the Ass* is a pivotal read for anyone who aims to excel as a leader.”

—**Pierre Naudé, CEO, nCino**

“Bill’s book helps you reframe life’s defeats in a way that builds your compassion, your humility, and most importantly, your capacity to get the best out of those that you lead.”

—**Conor Neill, Professor, IESE Business School, and Past Area Director, Entrepreneurs’ Organization**

“As in *Courage Goes to Work*, once again Bill Treasurer demystifies a nebulous concept into practical terms. In his newest book, he brings this same level of clarity to ‘confidence and humility,’ a dynamic tension that effective leaders face. He offers practical insights from real leaders’ mistakes, straightforward guidance, and thoughtful reflection. A humorous read on a serious topic that can provide readers with a jolt out of cruise control.”

—**Julia Urbanchuk, Senior Director, Global Talent & Organization Development, eBay**

# **A Leadership Kick in the Ass**

## Other Works by Bill Treasurer

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*Leaders Open Doors* (ATSD, 2014)

*Courage Goes to Work*

*Courageous Leadership:  
A Program for Using Courage to Transform the  
Workplace* (Pfeiffer, 2011)

*Positively M.A.D. (Making a Difference)*

*Right Risk*



# **A Leadership Kick in the Ass**

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*How to Learn from Rough Landings,  
Blunders, and Missteps*

**Bill Treasurer**



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
*a BK Business book*

# A Leadership Kick in the Ass

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*To Steve Rivi,  
CEO of Aldridge Electric Incorporated,  
for leading with integrity, foresight, and courage*

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# Foreword

Being the manager of a Major League Baseball team has taught me that there are two kinds of leaders: those who have been humbled and those who are about to be. It's not a question of *if* you'll have adversity; it's *when*. Hardship is what makes leadership hard. But facing hardship, and helping others face it too, is pretty much the point of leadership.

Here's what I'd tell a leader who is going through a hard time: welcome to the club! The first time you fail or lose or let people down, it's an initiation, a rite of passage. Now you can stop pretending to be perfect or above the people you're leading. Now you can get out of your own way and start serving others, for real. The humbling of a leader sometimes takes getting the ego kicked out of you.

I'm a little hardheaded, and I held on to my ego too tightly for too long. Life had to clobber me a couple of times before I set aside my pride and paid attention to the lessons hardship was trying to teach me. I've been to the World Series as a player, coach, and manager, and lost each time. I've been called up to the big leagues, and sent back down to the minors. I've been on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, and to twelve-step recovery meetings (for almost twenty years). Like I tell my players, anything you've done wrong, I've done worse and I've done twice.

The hard knocks I've gone through have been my education. They've taught me that the smallest package in the world is a man wrapped up in himself. As a leader, you've got to tame your ego lest it run roughshod over everyone and everything. I've learned that failure is an event, not a person. As a leader, you can't let failure define you, but you ought to let it shape you and how you lead. Most importantly, I learned that I don't have all the answers. When you're going through hardship, it's silly to try to go it alone. There are people available to us all the time who are eager to help, if we'd just ask. Leaders, like everyone else, need mentors, coaches, and other leaders. Being there for others, especially when they're going through hardship, is a leader's job. It helps if you've been seasoned by some hardships yourself.

As a coach, my job is to help everyone on the team, and the team as a whole, be a little bit better every day. Baseball is a game of wins and losses. All the practice, conditioning, and mental preparation—from preseason through postseason—is focused on one aim: get a lot more Ws than Ls. It's what happens in between games that sets the ledger. If everyone stays focused on doing at least one-tenth of 1 percent better than yesterday, we'll earn more Ws. By striving to be a little better each day, even when things don't go our way, at least we'll have improved.

What I like about *A Leadership Kick in the Ass* is that it is focused on helping you get bigger Ws by learning everything you can from your humbling Ls. The stories have great lessons, and the tips are straightforward and practical. The book's main message is important: good leadership takes confidence and humility. If you're willing

to learn, a kick in the backside can bring you both, and you'll be a better leader for it.

The leaders I've gravitated to are strong but not intimidating. They've given me their time, attention, and experience, and helped me want to be better. They've taught me the value of unconditional respect, even when it's hard. I have to respect the umpires, even if I don't agree with the calls. I have to respect the fans, even when they yell at me. I have to respect the media, even when they write bad things about me. I have to respect the great game of baseball, and the greater game of life, even when they're throwing me nasty curveballs. These days, I tell my players, "Respect everything and fear nothing." Everything matters, and everything and everyone deserves respect. The funny thing is, the more respect you give to those around you, the more you'll have for yourself. In good times and in bad, you become a better and more confident leader by respectfully serving others, with humility and gratitude.

Love,

Clint Hurdle

Manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates



## Preface

My interest in writing this book began twenty-five years ago, when I learned that I sucked at leading. I was a traveling gypsy, hurling myself off one-hundred-foot towers into small pools at amusement parks throughout North America. I had just become the captain of the U.S. high-diving team and was responsible for leading a troupe of young, high-flying athletes and ensuring that they consistently performed in tip-top shape. It was my first leadership role, and I was a damn good leader, I assumed, because the team was performing decently, and, well, the fact that I had been selected as the team's captain was proof enough.

Each day, my teammates and I would put on a thrilling aerial exhibition for our amusement park patrons. We'd start by performing Olympic-style dives from the three-meter springboard. Next, we performed a comedy routine in which an audience member (another diver, planted in the audience) challenged one of our teammates to a diving competition. After that, we'd entertain the crowd with clown dives—called *dillies*—like the “Baby Catch,” when one diver does a front somersault into the arms of another diver, who simultaneously does a back somersault before they crash into the water together. The show culminated with a diver scaling a one-hundred-foot-high diving ladder and hurling himself toward the water, traveling

at speeds in excess of fifty miles an hour before hitting a small pool that was ten feet deep.

We were young and cocky, and I was the cockiest among them. I wore my Speedo proudly.

One day, after what I thought was a lousy performance, as the park guests were exiting the aqua theater I lit into the team. "That show was a total disaster," I barked. "Good God, you call that diving? You looked like flying polka dancers. If this is the kind of team I'm saddled with, I have serious concerns about the park extending our contract."

There was something else that had irked me. One of the divers had left his sunglasses on the stage prior to the show. The captains who had taught me would have never stood for that. "One more thing. Who's the idiot who left his stupid shades on the stage for everyone to see?"

Silence.

"Listen up. The next show better be the best one we've ever done, or I'm going to start pruning the team. I'm not going to let you embarrass me like that."

*There, I thought, that'll teach 'em. A swift kick in the ass will do this team some good.*

As the team shuffled away, one of my divers, Steve Willard, stayed behind. Steve was older than me, and had seemed less fazed during my previous outbursts with the team. Once the team was out of earshot, Steve said, "Let me tell you something, Treasurer: if you keep talking down to us, I'll walk. I don't need this job so badly that I'm willing to let you treat me and everyone else like crap."

I became defensive. Who was he to talk to me like that? I thought. If I let him dominate me, people will see me as

weak. “Hey, I’m your boss, not the other way around. I’ll treat you and the team like you deserve to be treated. If you want me to stop yelling, earn it by performing the way I expect you to.”

Steve shook his head like I was missing something. “Listen, dude. You’ve got bigger problems than the sunglasses I forgot on the stage. If you keep making people afraid of you, nobody is going to want to work for you. You suck at leading.”

Gandhi once said, “The truth only hurts if it should.” Steve’s harsh comments stung because, down deep, I knew they were true. I wasn’t being a leader; I was being a jerk. I sucked at leading. The truth was, I didn’t know what I was doing. I had no idea who I was as a leader. The best I could do was mimic the leadership style of the captains I had watched, other bosses before them, and ultimately my dad. My own approach to leadership was mostly based on the heavy-handed, high-strung, and disciplinarian style of my father. I wasn’t being me. I was me being him. *Respect me, dammit, or else!*

Leadership change often requires a startling blow, and Steve’s words were the jolt I needed and deserved. I was utterly humiliated. After licking my wounds of embarrassment, I set out to become a better leader. I started reading books on leadership, observing leaders I admired, trying different leadership approaches, and paying close attention to the needs and reactions of my divers. Respect, I learned, can’t be forced or commanded. It has to be earned and re-earned through every encounter with those whom you’re leading. The more I explored my interest in leadership, and the more focused I became on

earning the team's respect, the better I got at leading. Eventually, I decided to go to graduate school, and I did my thesis on the relationship between leadership style and effectiveness.

Humiliation is powerful, important, and revealing. It strips away the layers of defensiveness that our egos devote so much time to building and fortifying. To be humiliated is to be vulnerable, exposed, and defenseless . . . all things the ego vigilantly guards against. What makes the experience of being humiliated so valuable to a leader's development is that it is through humiliation that one gains humility. And humility is crucial to leadership.

### **How I Get My Kicks**

In the two decades since retiring as a high diver, I've been a practitioner of leadership development. My professional life now consists of working with experienced and emerging leaders, designing and delivering comprehensive leadership development programs (often multiyear in nature), coaching executives one on one, delivering leadership keynotes, and writing leadership-related books. I am privileged to have spent nearly every working day over the last twenty years as a developer of leaders. It's what I do.

I have great respect for leadership authors who study leadership at major universities, and I often apply what I've learned from them in my work. Their research makes an invaluable contribution to the study and practice of leadership. But I am no leadership scholar. I am a leadership plumber. Instead of studying leadership from high on a university hill, I show up to the job site every day, roll up my sleeves, and work directly with leaders to remove

whatever hairballs may be mucking up their leadership pipes. The work ain't always pretty.

In the pages that follow, I'll share stories and insights that come directly from my daily work with leaders. There won't be any research statistics or academic theories. Instead, the lessons will draw from the most ancient form of research: personal experience. The lessons in this book come directly from the work I've done with thousands of leaders around the globe. One theme in particular will be reinforced throughout the book: that the greatest leadership lessons—and the development of your unique leadership identity—come from mistakes, embarrassment, and humiliation. The most enduring and transformative leadership lessons result from a good kick in the ass.

Time and time again in my work with leaders, I have heard stories of transformational change that hinged on a jarring event. Consider a few examples:

- Over the course of three months, a middle manager has two out of six direct reports quit. HR informs the manager that during exit interviews each person cited being micromanaged by the manager as the reason for his or her departure. Ouch!
- A department director becomes deeply frustrated that she hasn't made it into the VP ranks, where she argues she belongs. Finally, the CEO tells her why she's been excluded: the VPs see her as uncooperative and contentious, and they just don't like working with her. Ouch!
- A hotshot new leader goes through his first 360-degree feedback survey and is dumbstruck

when he reads that he is “arrogant” and “obnoxious.” Ouch!

- An experienced senior partner who is up for the managing partner role gets passed over for a colleague. After interviewing her prior employees, the selection committee decides against the promotion because she “lacks loyalty” and doesn’t “bring people along with her.” Ouch!
- A project manager has an epiphany that work has become an unhealthy obsession after leading a conference call with her team . . . two hours after delivering a baby. Ouch!
- Over the course of a decade, a senior leader champions the career of a trusted direct report whom he views as his most likely successor. The leader, who prides himself on being a good judge of character, is shocked to discover that his direct report has been running a side business with his executive assistant . . . with whom he is having an affair. Ouch!

A *Leadership Kick in the Ass* explores how startling experiences—often in the form of embarrassing or humiliating events—can have a powerful impact on your development as a leader.

## **From Bad to Good**

The untold truth about leadership is that good leaders nearly always start out as bad leaders. The path for most leaders isn’t from *good* to *great*; it’s from *decidedly bad* to *pretty good*. Leadership stripes are earned the hard way. You’ll make lots of mistakes, render lots of poor decisions,

make lots of political blunders, and suffer through many kicks to the backside. You'll learn how to do things right by doing a lot of things wrong. Eventually, if you allow yourself to learn from the hardship, you develop wisdom. That hard-earned wisdom brings value to your leadership . . . and gray hairs to your head. The trick is to do as little damage as possible while your hardships are investing in your wisdom.

### **Thanks, I Needed That!**

I've never lost sight of the fact that I got interested in the topic of leadership because I was such a sucky leader. Today I am grateful for the steel-toed boot that Steve Willard bruised my oversized ego with all those years ago. That psychological spanking gave me my career, and, ultimately, led to the writing of this book. It was the instigation that pushed me to become a better leader. Though I can't claim to be humble (it seems unhumble to make such a claim), I am much less arrogant than I used to be. I am also much more comfortable in my own skin. A leadership kick in the ass, if you let it, can be the pivotal moment when your leadership style becomes more real, grounded, and effective. If you follow the lessons all the way through, you become a stronger and more confident leader. That's right, humiliation can be the gateway for the development of true confidence. Good leadership often starts with a swift kick in the ass.

## INTRODUCTION

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# Kicking Leadership's Gluteus Maximus

Good judgment is the result of experience and  
experience is the result of bad judgment.

—Mark Twain

**A**t some point, every leader is confronted with the reality that his or her leadership is seriously and substantially flawed. It is at this precise moment when a leader faces a choice: learn and grow or remain blindly loyal to ignorance. All leaders worth their salt will get a psychological kick in the rear end eventually. It is a critical and inevitable part of the leadership experience. Choosing to learn from the experience requires exploring the leader you've become and clarifying the leader you want to be. It also involves suffering through temporary embarrassment and insecurity. As the renowned psychologist Carl Jung said, "There is no coming into consciousness without pain."

Some leaders refuse to accept any culpability when they get kicked, choosing to double down on their conviction that their way of leading is "right," regardless of how the people they're leading respond to their leadership. They view the kick not as a learning experience to embrace, but



as an insult to reject. While this choice skirts the psychological discomfort that growth requires, the end result is often self-righteousness, rigidity, and leadership narcissism. Ultimately, though, failing to accept and learn from a backside jolt is as futile as trying to keep a beach ball under water. No matter how often a leader rejects feedback that runs counter to his self-identity, the beach ball will keep popping back up in the form of negative consequences. The leader who gets fired from a dozen companies rather than capitulate and accept that his approach to leading needs to change will end up having a lot of empty seats at his retirement party.

How leaders deal with, or fail to deal with, butt-kick moments will make all the difference toward their future effectiveness, impact, and well-being as leaders. In fact, a good old-fashioned kick in the tail can be the turning point in one's career—the moment at which a leader stops swimming against the tide of his limitations. After a gigantic and very public psychological ass kicking, involving getting sacked from the company he founded, Steve Jobs said, “Getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me.”

### **Confidence, Humility, and Balance**

The best leaders, those we most admire, are comfortable in their own skin and help us become more comfortable in ours. The best leaders are centered, grounded, and nontoxic. They lead not so their power can grow, but so ours can. Through giving the best of themselves, they draw out the best in us. The best leaders are confident and humble, and in balanced proportions. The goal of

this book is to help you grow from whatever kicks you may endure so that you can lead from a place of confidence and humility. More than ever, the world needs more confidently humble leaders.

Much of this book centers on confidence, humility, and the balance between the two. They are like siblings, forever bonded, each existing in relation to the other. Each matters to leading, and the absence of one has a crushing impact on the other two. Too much confidence causes a leader to get too far out over his skis, leading to a wipe-out. Too much humility can lead to timidity, weakness, and leadership impotency. We want our leaders to display both confidence and humility, but not too much of either. When the two become wildly out of balance, the needs of those being led get sacrificed at the altar of leadership dysfunction.

### **Functional and Dysfunctional Leadership**

We consider leaders functional when they carry the right blend of confidence and humility. Conversely, we view leaders who are excessively one or the other as dysfunctional. The leaders we most want to follow know who they are and what they stand for, yet are also gracious and not stuck up.

*The best leaders are centered, grounded,  
and nontoxic. They lead not so their  
power can grow, but so ours can.*

When confidence becomes untethered from humility, arrogance follows. Arrogant leadership is selfish leadership,

and arrogant leaders fixate on getting *their* way. Without the moderating effect of humility, confidence slips into conceit and self-centeredness. The self-centered leader loses sight of the very purpose of leadership: to improve the conditions of those being led. Unless he gets his way, he will be irritable, combative, and controlling.

If confidence minus humility equals arrogance, then humility minus confidence equals weakness. Whereas arrogant leaders are selfish and insist on getting their way, weak leaders are ineffective, ceding the way to more dominant or persuasive people. Weak leaders lack backbone, influence, and ultimately relevance. In the worst instances, weak leaders are useless. They don't get things done. They don't effect change. They don't wield influence. Few things are as pitiful as an impotent and irrelevant leader. Nobody wants to be led by a wuss.

## **The Rude Awakening**

Eventually, arrogance and weakness lead to the same outcome: a humiliating wake-up call for the leader. Ass kicks are startling and embarrassing experiences, often brought on by the leader's own behavior. They are the natural consequences of overly strong or anemically weak leadership. Leaders mature, progress, and evolve based on how they respond to hurtful moments. This book provides practical guidance to ensure that you benefit whenever you get your butt kicked. By exploring the concepts of confidence and humility—as well as other important leadership concepts like self-respect, selflessness, and resilience—the book aims to help you be a more functional leader. Or, at the very least, the book

will help you minimize the impact of your leadership dysfunctions!

## **Leadership with Pimples and Warts**

I need to be clear right up front that I have no intention of dressing up leadership with a rosy veneer. My work with leaders has convinced me how immensely difficult it is to get leadership right. Leading other people, for a host of reasons that we'll explore, is really, really hard. Indeed, the sheer glut of leadership books may be the best evidence of how hard leadership truly is. If it were easy, budding leaders wouldn't be so thirsty for leadership advice. Rather than try to glamorize the topic, I intend to strip it down, so you can have a more grounded, authentic, and reality-based view of what it takes to lead. Unlike other leadership books you may have read, *A Leadership Kick in the Ass* proposes that

- leadership is easier to get wrong than to get right,
- leaders are often their own worst enemies, and often get in their own ways,
- the most enduring and transformative leadership lessons come from humiliating leadership experiences well navigated,
- not everyone is cut out to lead (but everyone can grow in their leadership influence),
- to be most effective, leaders need both confidence *and* humility; deficiencies in either cause poor or damaging leadership.

This probably isn't the first book about leadership that you've picked up to read. Nor is it the first leadership book

I've written. My hope, though, is that it will be the first leadership book that pushes you forward with a footprint on your bum. If you read this book and nothing about your leadership changes, then I haven't done my job as an author. You won't change if all I give you is leadership platitudes and niceties. Your brain doesn't need any more leadership cotton candy. Rather, the book's aim is to rattle you, provoke you, and challenge you. So along the way, and at the end of each chapter, I'll give you a little kick so that the concepts sting enough to hold you accountable to your leadership potential. To write a book about the importance of butt kicks and then not give you any would be out of step with the book's message, don't you think?

A good ass kick can provoke a great comeback. Sprinkled throughout the book are stories about people who succeeded not in spite of their kicks, but because of them. These stories are under the heading "Kickass Comebacks," and I included them to inspire great comebacks from you, too.

## **A Word on the Word**

It took a while to settle on the title of this book. My publisher and I considered easier, softer words. In the end, though, we settled on a three-letter swear word. Why? Because of the truth of the word. Sometimes situations are just so perplexing, embarrassing, and leveling that they kick your ass. I mean, haven't you ever heard someone describe a situation as being so upsetting that it's "kicking my ass"? Sure you have. Maybe you've even said the words yourself. That said, I promise not to toss the word

around like a New York City dockworker. Besides, you're not a *Mayflower* pilgrim, right?

Consider, too, that the phrase has a strong positive connotation. When you talk about wanting to give someone a good kick in the fanny, it's to inspire change, help someone perform to his or her potential, and inspire accountability. It's a way of kick-starting positive action and forward movement.

Finally, it may help to know that my eighty-year-old mother approved of the word, saying, "Let's be honest, Bill, *ass* isn't really much of a swear word."

*Nobody wants to be led by a wuss.*

### **This Kick's for You**

In particular, you'll get a lot out of *A Leadership Kick in the Ass* if you're still smarting from the last you had. In other words, if you're a leader who has been humiliated by a recent hardship or failure, this book is for you. You'll also benefit from the book if you're

- someone who is new to the leadership ranks—a rookie or a greenhorn,
- an experienced leader who is moving into a new or substantially bigger role,
- a participant in a leadership development program, or a leader going through a 360-degree feedback process,
- a recently fired executive who is suffering from a crisis of confidence or questioning your ability to lead,

- an experienced leader who has become disillusioned with how massively hard and perplexing leading others has turned out to be.

You know who else can benefit from this book? Know-it-all leaders who think they’ve got the topic all figured out, and that they have nothing left to learn about leadership. In other words, leaders whose bloated egos could use some downsizing. These folks might want to put on their Kevlar underwear!

**How the Book Holds Together**

Chapter	You'll Learn	Key Takeaways
Preface	How this book was twenty-five years in the making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ The greatest leadership lessons come in the form of a startling jolt</li><li>➤ Humility is an outcome of humiliation</li></ul>
Introduction: Kicking Leadership's Gluteus Maximus	What this book is about, and why it's time to strip down leadership's veneer and get real about leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ You'll be deemed a functional or dysfunctional leader by how you handle your startling moments</li></ul>
Part I: Transformative Humiliation		
Underscores the importance of "transformative humiliation," and explores how butt kicks typically work		
Chapter 1: Ain't That a Kick in the Pants	Why your response to a butt kick will determine whether you benefit from it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Self-discovery takes courage</li><li>➤ Kicks shine a light on our shadows . . . and that's a good thing</li></ul>

Chapter	You'll Learn	Key Takeaways
Chapter 2: The Anatomy of a Butt Kick	Why the more oblivious you are before the kick determines how painful the kick will be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ There are four stages that butt kicks go through</li> <li>➡ Accepting or rejecting your kick results in either humility or arrogance</li> </ul>
<b>Part II: Career Kicks</b> Describes the kinds of kicks you're likely to experience at different stages in your career		
Chapter 3: Kick Me, I'm New!	How butt kicks help new leaders get experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ New leaders quickly face startling realities</li> <li>➡ The most important shift leaders make is from <i>selfishness</i> to <i>selflessness</i></li> </ul>
Chapter 4: The Cheeky Middle	Why midcareer kicks are so painful, and how they can influence the kind of leader you'll be if you make it to the senior ranks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ Midcareer leaders are often frustrated by a specific type of tension</li> <li>➡ Common midcareer kicks include the Passover, the Smack- down, and Ebbing</li> </ul>
Chapter 5: Shrinking Big Shots: Seasoned Leaders Getting Their Kicks	Why leadership season- ing and wisdom are functions of accumulated butt-kick lessons applied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ Cresting and the fear of closing doors makes seasoned leaders feel marginalized</li> <li>➡ The entire workforce can benefit from senior leader "ambassadors"</li> </ul>
<b>Part III: Leading, for Worse or for Better</b> Introduces two leadership archetypes that are particularly prone to getting kicked: Pigheads and Weaklings. Also sets <i>confident humility</i> as leadership's highest behavioral aspiration.		
Chapter 6: Kick-Worthy Leaders: Pigheads and Weaklings	How arrogance and weakness are signs of poor leadership, and how both lead to an ass kicking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ There is a difference between self-respect and self-neglect</li> </ul>

(continued)



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Chapter	You'll Learn	Key Takeaways
Chapter 7: A More Perfect Derrière: Confident Humility	How embarrassing events can ultimately result in confident humility, and why possessing both should be the highest behavioral aspiration of all leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ Over- and underconfidence is imbalanced leadership</li> <li>➡ Having a right-sized ego is more important than having a big or small one</li> </ul>
Chapter 8: Three Expressions of Confident Humility	How confidence and humility can be used to help you become versed in three leadership roles: Loyal Rebel, Velvet Hammer, and Genuine Faker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ Loyalty works best when matched with independence</li> <li>➡ Assertiveness works best when matched with diplomacy</li> <li>➡ Sometimes the right approach is to fake it till you make it</li> </ul>
<b>Part IV: Be Humble, Be Good</b> Provides strategies and tips for kicking your own duff so that you can keep your ego in check. Culminates with a vision of what leadership can look like after you've applied all of the lessons your humiliating event aims to teach you.		
Chapter 9: How to Kick Your Own Ass	How a consistent regimen of self-inflicted butt kicks will keep you self-aware, and prevent others from having to kick you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ Leadership takes self-discovery, and self-discovery takes courage</li> <li>➡ You grow by purposefully doing uncomfortable things</li> <li>➡ Every leader should have a chief ego deflator</li> </ul>
Chapter 10: Leading at the Point of Goodness	How being a good leader starts with being a good person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➡ Integrity matters most to leadership</li> <li>➡ Good leaders know and live their values</li> <li>➡ The people you're leading deserve for you to be good</li> </ul>

## Startling Change

Heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson famously once said, “Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” By definition, a swift kick in the ass is painful. Essential as they are to the leadership maturation process, the learning starts after you pick yourself up off the mat. A leadership kick in the tuckus can be the moment where everything changes for you as a leader. These stark and startling moments can rattle your confidence to the core, often provoking serious thoughts of rejoining the nonleader ranks or quitting altogether. But these moments can also be the starting point where you assess your strengths, clarify your values, and develop an authentic and true leadership voice and style. Ass-kick moments are important because they can make you set aside a false leadership identity so that a more genuine and grounded identity can emerge. These events have the potential to inspire what I call *transformative humiliation*, and when that transformation happens, you’ll be more respectful of yourself and those around you. Thus, your leadership experiences preceding the kick are just a prelude to the real leadership story that begins afterward.



*Transformative humiliation* refers to the positive behavioral changes that result from experiences that are embarrassing, leveling, and painful. Properly navigated, such experiences can cause you to become more grounded, real, and humble, resulting in a leadership style and approach that are more uniquely your own. Transformative humiliation is often the entry point for genuine humility and positive leadership change.

Above all, benefiting from *A Leadership Kick in the Ass* requires choosing adaptability over obstinacy. It means assuming responsibility for your own actions and the consequences they bring. It involves having the courage to soberly acknowledge the leader you are today while you diligently work to be a better leader tomorrow. It means heeding the pure voice of your conscience. It means accepting the challenge of personal change and letting go of outdated preconceptions. As Viktor Frankl once said, “When we can no longer change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

The core of this book is really about *independence*. Once you’ve juiced out all the lessons that your kick hits you with, you’ll be unencumbered by doubt and self-consciousness. You won’t be dependent on the validation of others to judge your worth as a leader. You’ll stop overcompensating for your weaknesses by being falsely confident and overdominant, and, instead, will gain strength in the humble recognition that leading and influencing others is a privilege to be honored and treasured. Your kick will ultimately teach you that the only way to bring out the best in those you’re leading is to lead with the best of yourself.

Gaining leadership independence hinges on understanding, anticipating, and contending with the harsh experiences that bruise your ego. That’s what this book will help you do. As you’ll come to learn, butt kicks are really gifts that can make your leadership more authentic, effective, enjoyable, and wonderfully liberated.

*The only way to bring out the best in those you’re leading is to lead with the best of yourself.*

## PART I

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# Transformative Humiliation

**I**t takes a lot to provoke personal change. Willpower alone hardly ever works. Broken diets, resolutions, and promises bear witness to that. Something more powerful and disruptive is needed to make change take hold: a psychological butt whipping. Sometimes it takes a startling and rude awakening, often accompanied by strong feelings of embarrassment, to bring about enduring change. Pain is often a better teacher than comfort. Why? Because once you've experienced it, you work harder not to experience it again. It's after you fall off a bike and scrape your knees that you pedal harder and faster. Pain commits you to making changes to avoid more pain.

In this section, you'll learn

- why embarrassing moments are so important to the growth, development, and seasoning of leaders,
- how leaders, through their behaviors and actions, often cause their own butt kicks,
- how your reaction to your swift kick will determine whether or not you'll ultimately draw value from it,

- how butt kicks work, and why the intensity of the sting is related to how oblivious you are before the kick happens,
- what to do the next time you get kicked in the keister!

The primary takeaway from this section is that, when you're a leader, suffering through an embarrassing experience can inspire positive and lasting leadership change.

## **Ain't That a Kick in the Pants**

Isn't it funny how obvious and oblivious are so close?

—Author unknown

**M**y work with leaders sometimes involves inviting the leader's direct reports to purposely kick him or her in the keister. One of the most effective ways of doing this is having the leader go through a 360-degree feedback process, where the people they are leading rate the leader's style and performance. The raters often include the leader him- or herself and the leader's boss(es), peers, and direct reports—hence a “360-degree” view. The feedback uses an anonymous survey consisting of quantitative data and qualitative (open-ended) questions. The idea is that people are likely to give more honest answers if they don't feel threatened that the leader will retaliate against them for their honesty. A leader's self-perception can be quite biased, so involving the broader perspective of others can be a useful development tool. While 360-degree surveys aren't perfect, having administered hundreds of them over the years, I've seen them result in positive leadership change. Sometimes dramatically so.

To be sure, it takes courage to subject oneself to a leadership 360. The feedback can be raw and hurtful. In rare instances raters will use the process as a way to get back at a leader they don't like. But mostly the feedback is helpful because it allows the leader to illuminate blind spots that may be blocking his or her effectiveness.

### **Sometimes Even a Butt Kick Won't Work**

Meet Bruce. Bruce is a headstrong senior executive in the construction industry. He is physically imposing (six foot four) and socially dominant. He is the proverbial bull in the china shop, viewing nearly every interaction with clients, subcontractors, and direct reports ("subordinates") as a competition to be won. While Bruce has developed a strong track record of taking on the toughest and most complex projects, he also has a well-earned reputation as a controlling hard-ass who has left a trail of human wreckage in his wake.

As is often the case with leaders like Bruce, a lot of pent-up frustration spewed forth in his 360. Though he rated himself nearly perfect on every leadership question (giving himself nines and tens on a ten-point scale), the people rating him gave him ones and twos. The qualitative comments were just as bad, including one from his boss, who called him "petulant" and "irrational." One direct report called him a "blockhead," and another said he was a "brute."

Less surprising than the stark feedback was Bruce's reaction to it. He basically blew it off. He dismissed it as sour grapes from mediocre performers. It wasn't him, it was *them*! They were just slackers and complainers who

couldn't keep up. And if it weren't for *him*, nothing would get done. Even when slapped with overwhelming and illuminating evidence of the need for Bruce to change, he chose to stay obnoxiously loyal to his ignorance. *Block-head* was an apt description!

### **Thank You, Sir! May I Have Another?**

Now meet Derek. Like Bruce, Derek works in the construction industry but for a larger company. He is a senior project manager who typically leads large civil engineering projects such as water treatment plants and hydroelectric dams. Derek's 360 was even more scathing than Bruce's. Words that popped out of his report included *hot-tempered, explosive, unapproachable, aggressive, edgy, harsh*, and *impersonal*. Rater comments included the following:

- *Derek's a good talker and not a good listener. He will cut you off before you can finish making a point.*
- *He has a habit of self-promoting and blowing his own horn.*
- *He cuts people down in a derogatory way . . . often in front of other people.*

To be sure, the feedback stung Derek. At first he got a little defensive. Then he got quiet. Then he got inquisitive, asking, "How do these results compare to my peers?"

"Not too well," I confessed.

After more silence, he said, "Okay. What do I need to do?"

"Get to work," I replied.



For the next six months Derek and I spent ninety minutes every other Tuesday focused on improving his leadership. He'd use his own work situations as a petri dish to experiment with different approaches. He'd have small homework assignments, such as thinking about leaders who had left a positive and/or negative impression on him, reading leadership articles, and clarifying the kind of leader he would be proud to be. He also kept a leadership journal, reflecting on such questions as, "Why, exactly, do you want to lead others?" "What, exactly, qualifies you to lead others?" and "In what ways, exactly, would you like to make a positive difference in the lives of those whom you lead?" The key was for Derek to get as specific as possible. Hence the heavy emphasis on the word "exactly."

During our coaching sessions it also became clear that lack of self-care was an issue. Beyond work, he didn't have a life. All he did was work. He didn't make time to work out, he had no social life, and he was full of anxiety. It was easy to see why people didn't like working for him—he was a tightly coiled ball of stress, on the verge of springing loose at any moment. So we made caring for himself (*self-leadership*) a top priority, including joining a gym and setting aside an hour of uninterrupted "me time" at least twice a week.

Becoming a healthier, stronger, and more effective leader takes a genuine investment in yourself. Even still, the payoffs aren't instantaneous. While Derek made real improvements during our coaching time, I didn't learn how fully he had grown until some five years later. One of the advantages of having long-term consulting relationships with my leadership development clients is that I get to

work with successive generations of leaders. Often the new leaders who are participating in a leadership program today were led by leaders who went through the program years before. I had originally met Derek when he was a participant in a two-year leadership program I had developed for his company. Five years after completing the program, two of Derek's direct reports got accepted to the same program. Both of them talked about what a great mentor he had become for them, how he was a positive influence on their careers, and how they hoped to lead like him someday. In my work with leaders, few things are as gratifying to hear as how a leader with whom you've worked has now become a positive influence on a new generation of leaders. Leadership is really working when leaders create new leaders.

*Becoming a healthier, stronger, and more effective leader takes a genuine investment in yourself.*

### **Slapping Cheeks**

The difference between the reactions of Bruce and Derek to tough feedback comes down to courage. Not the kind of courage that it takes to fight, compete, or charge a hill, but the kind of courage that it takes to soberly see yourself as you really are. It's courage of a more vulnerable kind. It's the courage it takes to loosen the grip on your need to be right or perfect and admit that you are the main source of your problems and ineffectiveness. This is the courage of capitulation, disarmament, and surrender. Your old ways have lost, and unless you adopt new ways of leading, you will continue to lose over and over again.

This is the courage it takes to own your leadership life. We'll explore this idea further in chapter 9.

Bruce is a grizzled fighter. Throughout his career he succeeded by outdominating and controlling others. He *willed* his way into building hard and complex jobs. Building the job always came first. It's where the money was made. Why should he care what people thought of him? He built the biggest and most profitable projects in the company. His exceptional results *proved* that he was a good leader. Based on Bruce's perspective, it's understandable that he would choose to reject his 360 feedback rather than to accept responsibility for changing.

But in rejecting the feedback of the people who had directly experienced his leadership, Bruce made the deliberate choice not to grow. Choosing otherwise would mean chipping away at his blockhead and cracking open a deeper truth about his successes; the money he made for the company had come at a great cost in human suffering. Yes, Bruce had made a lot of money for the company. But he had also cost the company a lot of money in the form of low morale, high turnover, and lost leadership potential. Not admitting that hard truth was easier than changing. Ultimately, Bruce was a coward. By failing to take responsibility for his leadership failings, he spared himself the discomfort that change causes. By not changing, Bruce was free to do more damage to the people he was charged with leading. Leadership arrogance always exacts a price.

Derek, conversely, took the more courageous path of self-discovery. He soberly looked at the leader he had become and didn't like what he (and others) had seen. He

wanted to be a better leader, and that would require adopting a new leadership mind-set and awkwardly trying new leader behaviors. Rather than entrench himself against the marauding feedback invaders like Bruce did, he decided to do the legwork of improving himself. He used the feedback as a baseline against which he could gauge future progress. By using the feedback that way, he evolved from a bad leader to a good one. The difference between Bruce and Derek is that Derek used the lessons drawn from his humiliating 360 feedback to bring about positive leadership changes in himself. In his case, humiliation brought about personal transformation.

### **Now Discover Your Butt**

There's been a lot written about "strength-based" development approaches in recent years. You're better off building on your natural strengths and talents, research suggests, than trying to improve your weaknesses. The usefulness of the strength-based approach explains its popularity. It makes good sense: put yourself in situations where your gifts and talents can be put to good use, and you'll increase the likelihood of being successful. As the great motivational theorist Abraham Maslow said, "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself."

*What makes an ass kicking so painful (and useful) is that it shines a red-hot light on the parts of yourself that are holding you back and legitimately need development, often the aspects of yourself that you'd rather avoid or didn't even know existed.*

Building on your strengths works best if you have a realistic hold on what your strengths actually are. Pinpointing your strengths takes a careful assessment of the totality of your makeup, and that includes acknowledging what you're *not* actually good at. The challenge is that our self-perception is often rosy or cloudy, causing some people to highlight the brighter aspects (while minimizing the darker elements), and others to do the opposite. What makes an ass kicking so painful (and useful) is that it shines a red-hot light on the parts of yourself that are holding you back and legitimately need development, often the aspects of yourself that you'd rather avoid or didn't even know existed. Sometimes the kick illuminates the parts of yourself that need pruning or uprooting altogether. Absent the illumination that the kick provokes, your view of your strengths is, at best, inaccurate or incomplete.

### **Sunshine and Shadows**

Strengths are good things. Until they aren't. Past a certain point, our strengths start to cast a shadow. The leader who is comfortable speaking in public may come to hog attention. The leader who is a gifted critical thinker may become overly critical of others. The leader who is great interpersonally may place too much emphasis on subjective criteria when making decisions.

Every leader should develop and nurture his or her unique gifts and talents. To be fully developed as a leader, though, you need to go further. Every leader needs to be keenly aware that strengths can become overly potent, sometimes toxically so. The strength of *drive* can give way to *dominance*, which can become the weakness of *intimi-*

*dation*. Likewise, the strength of *confidence* can slip over into the weakness of *arrogance*. Every leader is made up of sunshine and shadows. Paying attention only to the shiny parts of your leadership causes your shadow to grow, practically ensuring a kick in the saltshaker.

The ego's first job is self-preservation. In Bruce's case, his ego contributed to his not even being able to look at how his strengths had in fact become weaknesses. Bruce's strength at controlling and dominating the job had spilled over to his controlling and dominating people. While his win-at-all-costs drive contributed to his building big jobs, it also contributed to his losing great people. His competitive zeal resulted in his winning a lot. But it also came at the expense of everyone else around him having to lose. Admitting all that would mean deconstructing everything that, at least in his mind, had made Bruce successful. His ego simply couldn't allow for that. Changing would have required skills that he just didn't have and wasn't ready to learn. It would have meant learning how to be vulnerable, cooperative, and not in control. It would have taken a much harder ass kicking to make Bruce want to change.

And that's exactly what happened. Within two years of going through the 360 process, Bruce got sacked. The people he had led had gotten wiser, older, and less willing to take it. A few of them had themselves moved into leadership positions, and no longer felt the need to subjugate themselves to Bruce's heavy-handedness. People started complaining about Bruce more vocally to the senior executives above him. The din of the mutiny was too loud for his bosses to ignore, so out the door Bruce went. (Of course, in his eyes, it was *their* fault.)



### **THE SUNSHINE AND SHADOW REVIEW: A Leadership Team Activity**

It's interesting that the leaders who are charged with bringing out the best in the workforce often struggle with bringing out the best in each other. There is often a surprising amount of game playing at the top of the organization, and in the game of social dominance, leaders often try to outdominate each other. Showing the kind of vulnerability that healthy relationships require can be a challenge for senior leadership teams. One activity that can promote safe vulnerability among the members of leadership teams is "Sunshine and Shadows." Here's how it works:

- Tell the group that often what we call "weakness" is really just an overgrowth of our "strengths."
- Have one of the leaders sit in the seat at the head of the table—the "hot seat." In round-robin fashion, have each of the other leaders comment on the strength that the hot-seat leader contributes to the team—his or her "sunshine."
- After each leader has commented, the hot-seat leader must say, "Thank you." After thanking the group, the leader can ask questions for clarity if he or she wishes.
- Next, have each leader comment on the "shadow" that is sometimes cast when the hot-seat leader's strength becomes too potent.
- Again, after each leader has commented, the hot-seat leader must say "Thank you" before asking questions for clarity. He or she may NOT, under any circumstances, offer excuses for, or defenses of, his or her shadow.
- Once the leader has had his or her sunshine and shadows reviewed, move on to the next leader on the team.
- After all leaders have gone through the process, have the group discuss the value of understanding each team member's sunshine and shadows.

Here is one fundamental truth about a butt kick: if you refuse to learn the lessons it can provide, a harder and more painful kick is sure to follow. As the saying goes, “If you don’t learn the lesson, you have to repeat the class.”

## How to Handle a Kick in the Butt

How does what you read about Bruce and Derek relate to you? Think back to the last time you learned a lesson the hard way. How did you react? Did you make changes to become better and stronger? Or did you entrench yourself in the conviction of your rightness? Here are some quick tips for ensuring that you’re ready to benefit from whatever kicks you may next endure:

- **Focus on the long game.** A kick is just a momentary speed bump on your longer leadership career. The spike in pain will eventually yield to worthwhile lessons and changes. Focus on where you ultimately want your career to end up, not the detour it may have taken.
- **Learn from your feelings.** Pay close attention to the feelings that come up for you after you get kicked. Identify what you’re feeling, precisely. Do you feel embarrassed, fearful, resentful, or something else? Then ask yourself, “What information is this feeling trying to give me?” and “What is the lesson this feeling is trying to teach me?”
- **Remember, discomfort=growth.** Comfort may be comfortable, but it’s also stagnant. You don’t grow in a zone of comfort. You grow, progress, and evolve in a zone of *discomfort*. The more



uncomfortable the kick feels, the more growth can result.

- **Broaden your view of courage.** Being vulnerable, open, and receptive to change is a form of courage. Hard-charging types wrongly see courage as being fearless. Nothing could be further from the truth. Courage is *fearful*. The simplest definition of *courage* is “acting despite being afraid.” Courage requires fear. As long as you keep moving forward, it’s when there’s a knot in your stomach, a lump in your throat, and sweat on your palms that your courage is doing its job.
- **Don’t be oblivious to yourself.** How much might it be costing you to remain loyal to your ignorance? Self-exploration and discovery can be painful, but what is more painful in the long run is being a stunted human being, incapable of acknowledging, assimilating, or shoring up your shortcomings.
- **Be your own project.** Lots of people lead projects better than they lead themselves. Think about what it takes to lead a great project. You start by identifying your desired outcomes, you put together a timeline and pinpoint critical milestones, you marshal the resources the project will need to be successful, and you identify metrics to track progress. Guess what? You can manage your kick recovery the exact same way.
- **Stay present.** Rather than try to avoid all that surfaces for you during and immediately after the humiliating event, fully immerse yourself in the experience. What feelings come up for you? What

fears are at work? How might your feelings and fears serve you once the entire experience plays out? What are you learning and how can you put those lessons to good use?

As much as the self-discovery can be painful, it is also fantastically rewarding. The journey to the center of one's self is the most important voyage you'll ever take. It's how you become a whole person, truly knowing the full dimensions of your talents, idiosyncrasies, and deepest desires.

Ultimately, if you let it, a humiliating kick can be the entry point for a richer, fuller, and more complete understanding of yourself, as a leader and as a human being. Armed with that knowledge, you'll be better able to use your strengths—and actively mitigate the shadows your strengths sometimes cause—so they better serve you and others. Abraham Maslow sums it well: “What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself.”

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