

# Prologue

Stuart Smith is Chairman of the Board of NOP Inc., a high-tech manufacturing organization located in an industrial suburb of the Seattle metro area. He always had big dreams.

NOP had experienced a fall from grace after being known in Wall Street circles as the fastest-rising star. Under the former CEO, now retired, NOP stock values floundered, stagnated, and then vacillated at substandard levels. Stuart, the high-powered, number-crunching, Wall Street-hugging septuagenarian, was head-hunting for a new CEO, preferably a young and dashing version of himself, who would turn NOP back into Wall Street's darling.

Strategic analysis indicated that a merger with a SaaS firm of comparable size would produce market synergies, offer tremendous growth potential, and ensure long-term stability. Stuart identified two contenders for the merger, but there was one hitch: investor reluctance. A past merger with QR, a smaller firm, sent its stock price southward, and NOP's financial history stood tarnished.

"Poor Wall Street performance is a symptom," the investment advisory firm told Stuart. "The root cause is culture. Younger generations see NOP's culture as divisive and unfriendly. To get investor support for the merger, NOP must prove that it has a thriving culture, proclaims inclusion, celebrates diversity, embraces millennials and Gen Z, and achieves high employee engagement."

That was a boatload of crap—warm and fuzzy stuff like corporate culture. Stuart rolled his eyes. "I need to hire the right CEO," he told them. "Someone who will get the job done. Then the right investors will flock to us. NOP stock will rise. Wall Street will be happy."

Stuart held the firm belief that diversity was overrated. There was no diversity on the board of directors. They had known one another since their high school days—more than fifty years. Their families were friends. Having grown up in the same or neighboring suburbs, they possessed similar family values and quickly agreed on major company decisions. Sameness of the board and like-mindedness was the mandatory condition for success, not diversity.

The advisory firm sent Stuart a one-page profile of Gavin Pearson in Seattle, saying, “He can transform your culture and turn NOP around. Wall Street loves him.” He was well-known for fostering the trust-and-open high-performance team culture at Prominent Staffing Company. “Bring him on as CEO,” they said. “Watch NOP fly high. Investors will rush to NOP.” The advisory firm had Wall Street’s diktat.

Stuart noted with disappointment that Gavin Pearson was not a younger version of him. In fact, he was quite the opposite. Gavin’s career was checkered, if not downright unfocused. He had been immensely successful in the latter part of his career, but his credential was tied to a halo that screamed, “Brand ambassador for organizational development and cultural transformation”—exactly what Stuart detested as a lot of warm and fuzzy nonsense.

Yet, Stuart had to abide by the Wall Street diktat. For the love of big money. And for the love of being perceived as the man on top, who would pull the strings and make NOP a Wall Street darling again.



Gavin’s twinkling blue eyes reflected sincerity. “People create value for the businesses they work for. That is my staunch belief.”

On a deeper perusal of Gavin’s resume, Stuart revised his opinion, noting that Gavin had an impressive track record. A self-made executive who paid his own way through college, Gavin had worked in the technology industry for two decades. The last twelve of those years were with Prominent Staffing, a technology staffing firm he currently headed. Starting out as VP—Sales & Delivery, Gavin rapidly rose to become the CEO. He spearheaded two concurrent acquisitions followed by one mega-merger, each one sending the stock price of the staffing firm soaring.

“My immediate goal,” Stuart said, “is to raise NOP’s stock price to the peak it once enjoyed. And then have it moving in tandem with the Dow Jones blue-chip index. How would you accomplish this?”

Gavin’s demeanor was mellow. “I depend on the people of my organization to achieve success. I believe in unifying my teams. Against all odds.” He described a plan to achieve such a goal, smattered with solid examples based on experience.

Gavin’s accomplishments preceded his reputation. His charisma was overpowering. Listening to him, watching his body language, Stuart was convinced that Gavin, with his quiet confidence and go-getter attitude, was the perfect choice. NOP was an aggressive organization and needed an inspiring leader at the helm, with strong beliefs and a proven record of bottom-line success. Most importantly, Gavin had the backing of the Wall Street heavyweights.

“Stay close to your people,” Gavin said. “Feel their pulse. Establish a climate of trust and team. Empower and enable your second line. Step back. Watch them deliver. *Be there when they need me.* That is my style.” He expressed unflinching faith in the power of his highly skilled and well-proven approach.

Stuart seethed inwardly at this anomaly. In the corporate world of logic with data and number-crunching for success, there was no place for abstracts. He resolved to make Gavin tone down all that touchy-feely stuff and mold him into a closer clone of himself, a more cold-and-calculating version. *Once I have him in my clutches,* he thought, *I will turn him into the next Jack Welch.*

“Gavin, you are hired.” Stuart extended a welcoming hand. “One or two board members may want to talk to you, but my decision is final.”

“Excuse me, Stuart.” Gavin appeared flustered. “I thought this meeting was informational. I love Prominent Staffing and everything I do. No way I am looking to leave.”



At his monthly breakfast meeting, Gavin turned to EZ, his self-appointed mentor, who worked for Excellent Cultures, a leading firm for corporate transformation. “I need your help. To make a big decision.”

“You’ve been offered the CEO position,” EZ said. “NOP is a mid-market company struggling to firmly entrench itself in the cloud-computing environment. Engaged in the business of sale, distribution, and maintenance of technology devices compatible with Microsoft and Amazon products and solutions. NOP has the potential to be a Fortune 500.”

Gavin admired his former baseball coach. “You seem to know it all. Why am I not surprised?” During his undergraduate college days, he had made a life-changing transformation, thanks to EZ’s help. After losing touch, Gavin reconnected with EZ at a college reunion, where his former baseball coach gave powerful anecdotes on organizational transformation as part of the reunion address. There, Gavin re-established a mentor-protégé relationship and retained EZ as his executive coach.

Typical of a former sports coach, EZ was well-known for the use of sailor-style slang mixed with southwestern expressions. “Seattle’s corporate scuttlebutt has the news,” he said, referring to the NOP offer. “I picked it up from a friend who hangs out with NOP’s advisory firm. NOP has been stuck for a while, and their chairman is a real ball-buster.”

Gavin was momentarily drawn into his world of reminiscence. “I get goose bumps every time I remember our performance in the college world series. I’ve not forgotten the bond I developed with every teammate, the deep commitment of service we vowed to one another. And the culture of excellence it produced. That is what propelled us to win the series.”

“That was more than thirty years back,” EZ said. “Thirty-five college guys and an excellent culture. Piece of cake.”

“Do you think I have a similar opportunity at NOP? To create a culture of excellence?”

“Why not? Requires a lot more heavy lifting, though. Building such a culture for a firm with hordes of highly diverse execs and managers is a totally different ballgame. And especially the new breed of tech workers.”

“In their early days,” Gavin said, “NOP soared to great heights, thanks to a unique position in the market. Then the edge was lost due to poor leadership. It’s still struggling to catch up. My gut says there’s a great opportunity there.”

“Even at the peak,” EZ said, “NOP never pursued excellence. An outdated culture, thanks to a bunch of internally competitive corporate politicians with their habitual self-centered mindset. NOP degenerated across time and got stuck. Like the boiling frog fable.”

“EZ, you have their pulse. What obstacles do you anticipate if I take the offer?”

“Only one. A Bobby-Knight-style chairman who thinks he can fix everything with his power tactics.” EZ showed no reservation in openly sharing the inside scoop. “He’s a smash-mouth bulldog. He has hacked off and infuriated most millennials. Also the Gen Z folks who have started to enter the workplace. He has the top managers tangled up with stock options and golden handcuffs. That’s his way of making sure they don’t leave NOP.”

“Sounds like a bad career move,” Gavin said. “NOP could soon hit rock bottom. And the person I am supposed to report to would be the one causing it.”

EZ scratched his scraggly beard. “Not a deal crusher. Stuart is desperate to woo Wall Street. For that, he will give away the reins to the new CEO. Take it from me, the ole dog will give you *carte blanche* if you take the job.”

Impressed that EZ knew so much of the corporate undercurrents, Gavin decided to play his own devil’s advocate and benefit from EZ’s insights. “Guys like that never get it, that a *service-over-self* culture can win big. They are too deep in their own selfish egos to make the switch.”

“Agreed,” EZ said. “Nothing will work if you can’t put the old dog in a soundproof cage and keep him there.”

“Even if he promises me the moon, he may step in and take it back just before it starts to shine.”

“Possible.” EZ stretched and yawned loudly. “Old habits die hard. The ole fart might use you as bait. Once he sees success, he could screw you and grab the reins back. Unlikely though. Because he’s behind the eight ball.”

Gavin felt hesitant. “I can handle aggressors if they are straight shooters, no matter how power hungry they are. The WYSIWYG principle. This one is different. Not only a rockhead but also cruel, it seems.”

As if knowing this was not his decision, EZ shrugged. “Even though guys like this are set in their ways like hardened concrete, they have the fire in their guts to win big when pushed to the wall. They wanna win big and will do anything to get there. Remember what I taught you that first spring?”

Gavin remembered but didn’t say. *Do the right thing ... in the right way ... at the right time ... on time ... this time ... every time ... If they could beat the Trojans, they’d be Trojans.* The chant became louder and more intense in his mind.

EZ said, “The story’s similar to Gevco, Insnap, and Provinco—medium-sized tech firms that we transformed. All with Atilla the Hun holding the purse strings in a steel fist. We got their ROIs soaring. With double- and triple-digit growth over the years.”

Over the years, Gavin had learned to trust his gut. EZ’s affirmed support was the final assurance. “I must accept the challenge. No backing down. Believe me, this will be like our World Series championship all over again. With huge returns for everyone.”

“I knew it.” EZ hit the *Send* button and held his phone toward Gavin. “Read what I just sent to my scuttlebutt buddies. I had it saved and was waiting for our meeting to confirm my prediction would come true.”

How the chairman pulled off the seemingly impossible feat of whisking the CEO of Prominent Staffing away from the love of his life to lead a problem child like NOP may never be known. What we do know is that a historic announcement set the corporate world abuzz.

Gavin Pearson was the incumbent Chief Executive Officer of NOP.