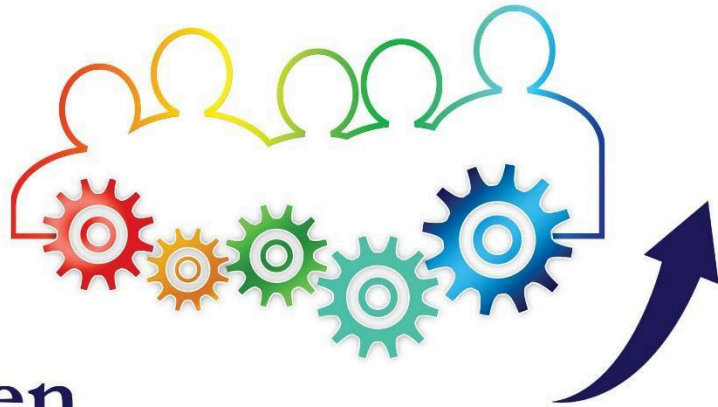


Transform, Then Thrive

A Tale of Corporate Transformation

Mini-Book Version

Transform,



Then

THRIVE

A Tale of Corporate Transformation

STEVE GANDARA

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A Tale of Corporate Transformation

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Principles and practices that change your organization for the better. They are truly timeless as I've seen them work for over 25 years now. — David Jaworski, Principal Program Manager, Microsoft Teams, former President of Microsoft University

Our high 95 percent engagement scores on the Toyota Survey (including hourly workers) are a result of the hard work of our team along with great programs like Excellent Cultures. — George Christoff, President, Toyota de Puerto Rico

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Introduction

Whenever I hear someone use the words TRANSFORMATION or CULTURE, I cringe. In today's society, especially in the corporate world, these two words have become overused. We'll explore this phenomenon later in the book, but for now, perhaps we can agree that when words mean different things to different people, effective communication becomes difficult, if not impossible. When effective, excellent communication is crucial to your success, having words mean the same thing to everyone who uses them is essential. I wrote this book to help leaders at all levels gain clear understanding of the true meanings of both *transformation* and *culture*, how powerful they can be and how they can work either for you or against you, depending on how well people understand and utilize the principles behind them.

With my wonderful bride of more than five decades, communication is a frequent topic of mine. Add the four years of dating before we were married, and you'd think, by now, we would have mastered the art of communication—at least between each other and with our eleven children. Frankly, I don't think we're even close to mastery. Why?

When it comes to how our brains are wired, we're opposite. She's a gifted designer, making the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine. And she's a world-class mother of two natural and nine adopted children. I'm a husband, dad, and for more than four decades, a business leadership culture coach/consultant. Our backgrounds are quite different. We may use the same words, but our brains see different things. Why? Because she sees the world through the eyes of a designer and mom, and I see the world through the eyes of a consultant/coach fix-it guy. For example, when I'm standing on a ladder, holding a heavy wall mirror, trying to help her decide where on the wall it will look the best, we're the perfect example of mass confusion. She says, "Move it over there." I say, "Over where?" And she says, "Over there where I told you to move it last time." Because

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I'm getting tired of holding the heavy mirror, I lose my patience and shout, "Over where? Left, right, up, or down?" Of course, my gruff impatient tone of voice hurts her feelings, and she reacts accordingly. Add to this mix, two strong Type A leaders who both grew up as the oldest of four siblings, and you might

imagine that we're approaching a communication disaster. Thankfully, we've learned a little bit about culture and transformation. While we certainly

haven't "arrived" at least we're "well on the way."

Since I'm not qualified to write a book on marriage, this book is about those two overused and often misunderstood words: TRANSFORMATION and CULTURE, which are important where you work as well as where you live.

Does my marriage communication narrative sound similar to what might happens with your team, company, or workplace? If not, then you likely have what's called a "passive defensive culture." It's happening, but it's hidden beneath the surface and difficult to see. NOT GOOD! If my communication example does sound similar and the conflict isn't resolved, then you likely have an "aggressive defensive culture." Also, NOT GOOD! Or if you think the issue has been resolved, but the people involved are packing subconscious IOUs just waiting for the perfect opportunity to retaliate, then you have both a passive defensive and an aggressive defensive culture. This is REALLY NOT GOOD. In fact, it's REALLY BAD. With the conflicts resolved, I can stay happily married for several decades after eleven children. With your conflicts resolved, you can have a proactive, productive, constructive culture where results, people's potential, team effectiveness, and progress can be maximized. However, even in this last productive scenario, there's no guarantee that you've reached your optimum level of effectiveness and performance, because there's always better. This book is about getting better.

These various scenarios have a common problem, which you likely deal with regularly. Both at work and at home, you're a normal human leader

who can't read people's minds or discern what's going on under the surface in their subconscious thinking and desires. Your team, your company, or your family can easily be "stuck" and not know it. Because culture is the driving force behind almost everything that involves people and their beliefs, and 95 percent of what we believe is subconscious, effective open-and-honest communication is a challenge that every leader, parent, or boss faces every day.

One day when I was traveling to a CEO Summit, a university professor friend reminded me how Malcom Gladwell defined being an "expert" in his bestseller *Outliers*. According to Gladwell an expert is someone who's invested 10,000 hours (or approximately five full-time work years) of deliberate practice. According to Gladwell, with almost fifty years spent producing the world's best cultures for the world's best companies, with the countless hours of our team of seasoned leaders and scientific data-gathering partners, we may not know more about transformation and culture than everyone in the world, but we've got to be pretty close.

In the *Transform, Then Thrive* story, you'll enjoy the leadership experiences and communication challenges of Gavin, Stu, Elvis, Harriet, Tanya and other NOP, Inc. leaders. Please don't overlook the value of the principles and proven processes you'll see deployed in their daily lives for corporate transformation. These principles, processes, and practices have been proven

effective time and time again. While the names, characters, organizations, and scenarios of the narrative have been fictionalized, this story represents real life in typical business cultures. No doubt, you'll identify many situations similar to what you have experienced at work and at home.

Paul Bigham, one of my best CEO friends and clients taught me that while I may not have the gift of prophecy, I happen to be blessed with the gift of experience, as do our other Excellent Cultures coaches and consultants, who contributed to this book. Experience may not be the best teacher, but it's certainly the best guide to "what not to do." You're about to experience in story form nearly five decades of proven processes that have produced

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the world's best cultures for many of the world's best companies, including triple to quadruple ROIs.

Enjoy your journey to discover development of a better culture in *Transform, Then Thrive*.

Preface

Gavin Pearson and Stuart Smith were about as different as two people could ever be.

As an infant, Gavin was abandoned by his drug-addicted birth mother. He grew up in one foster home after another until he was ten, when he was adopted by a loving couple.

Two years later, what began as a wonderful family turned to tragedy when Gavin's adopted father, an over-the-road trucker, was killed in an accident while delivering cargo. Gavin was devastated by his father's passing, not only for his own loss but also for his mother. She was trying to be strong for his sake, but the sadness in her eyes and her pale, worried look made him wonder how they would make ends meet.

She cleaned houses during the day and waited tables at night, at a small family-owned restaurant up the street. They were desperately struggling.

Even though Gavin had only known his adopted parents for a few years, they were the only people who had ever truly loved him. He was so appreciative, loving his mother very much. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll do everything I can to help."

In the early hours before school, riding the bicycle his father had given him, Gavin delivered newspapers to homes in the area. Then he pedaled home as fast as he could, with barely enough time to change clothes and say, "I love you, Mom," before leaving for school. Right after the last bell, Gavin jumped onto his bike to cross town and mow lawns in a middle-class community.

Seeing kids playing baseball reminded him of the days when he played catch with his dad. "Son," his dad said, "someday you'll be a great baseball player." Before he died, he told Gavin's mom how proud he was.

Knowing how much he loved baseball, his mom worked overtime so he could play shortstop on the neighborhood Little League team. Because of their unconditional love and relentless encouragement, he honored his parents by following the work ethic they had taught him.

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“Excellence isn’t where we came from,” his mom said, “but it’s where we’re going. Don’t conform to what others do. Always be the best you can be, no matter what.”

His mother’s encouragement caused him to excel in both athletics and academics. She was so proud of him when he received scholarship offers from major colleges and universities. But then she became very ill, with a serious heart condition.

Without hesitation, Gavin set aside his future to support his mom, who made him promise to go to college and play baseball as soon as she was well.

Gavin got a job at a tire store close to home. With the same excellent work ethic he had in school and sports, he quickly moved up from installing to selling tires on the showroom floor. With his mom’s improved health, he enrolled in the local community college, where he took all the mandatory freshman classes. Near the end of the school year, he received a grant to attend the university in the city.

While sitting in psychology class, Gavin asked his classmate, “David, do you like this class?”

“What do you mean, Gav?”

“I mean, do you *like* the class? I’m really into the part about how any opinion, statement, or belief that we hear and accept will be stored in our subconscious. Then it controls who we become and determines our future without us even knowing it. Powerful stuff. It reminds me of what my mother used to say about not conforming to what others say. We can be better than that.”

“If you say so.” David didn’t sound impressed.

Gavin nodded toward the man with the half-smoked cigar. “Hey, who’s the scruffy guy who always comes in late, sits at the back, and then leaves early?”

“Oh, that’s Coach Zelle. Elvis Zelle, our baseball coach. I guess he’s good. Last year, he took our team from last place to being a national contender. He talks to himself and then comes up with the craziest questions that nobody understands. Three days later, you’re walking to

class when both the question and the answer pop into your head. He's a strange guy."

After his morning classes, Gavin's walk to the tire store took him past the baseball field. When he could, he paused to watch practice and listen to the ping of aluminum bats. He imagined scooping up a ground ball and throwing to first base. In his mind, he heard the snap of the ball in the first baseman's mitt, just before the runner reached base.

A low, gruff voice said, "Love the game, don't ya, kid? Ever play?"

For a moment, Gavin thought he was dreaming, then looked up to see Coach Zelle. "Sir?"

"You're here gawking at my guys. Ya ever play?"

"Mickey Mantle League. Pony League. Played in high school before Mom got sick, but I had to drop out."

"Ya go to school here?"

"Yes, sir. I'm finishing my sophomore year."

"Come on, let's see if ya can hit."

Gavin hesitated, not wanting to be late to work. "You mean now?"

"Did I stutter? I said, *Come on*. Kid, there are only two kinds of people in this world: buttheads, and rockheads. Buttheads know who they are and want to change. Rockheads think they're princes and don't listen to nobody. Which are you? Pick up that bat and step up to the plate." He looked toward the mound. "Lefty, throw the kid some heaters and mix 'em up with your best junk."

Gavin had barely reached home plate with his bat when a fastball whizzed toward him. He instinctively hit the dirt facedown to avoid being smashed in the ear.

Coach Zelle laughed. "Don't know if you can hit, but you sure know how to duck. Lefty, give him one in the zone."

Gavin sent a line drive into left field. He hit the next pitch above the pitcher into center field, then drove another ball into left.

"Can ya push one?"

"Sir?"

"Can you hit one to right field? Lefty, give him one low and away."

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As if the bat knew what Gavin was thinking, the ball flew over the first baseman's head into right field.

"Wanna walk on?"

"Excuse me?"

"Duh ... I said, do you want to try out for the team?"

Gavin shook his head. "I really do love the game, but I have to work to pay tuition and living expenses. I wouldn't be able to make practice. I'm already late for work. Sorry."

"Who do you work for?"

"Jaffco Tires. I sell tires and wheels."

"You work for Buzzy? Don't worry. I'll fix it with Jaffco Tires. You're walking on."



Stuart Smith grew up with two older sisters in the privileged home of a Wall Street arbitrageur. He attended private schools. At the insistence of his overbearing father, he played lacrosse and hockey in high school.

Stuart's father was too busy to attend any games, but he developed relationships with the coaches and got frequent reports on his son's performance. He was also a big donor to Stuart's all-boys prep school, which was his own alma mater. The headmaster gave him frequent reports on Stuart's academic performance.

"Heard you almost scored a hat trick last night, Stu."

"Yes, sir. Only got two. The ref called goalie interference on the third one. He was a real SOB."

"Well maybe you'll do better next time. Get the puck into the net instead of sucker-punching the goalie. You know we Smiths are known for excellence in this town. It's high time you lived up to it. Get the job done right the first time, on time, every time, and we always win. That's who we are. Our family culture. Maybe one of these days, you'll figure it out."

"Sure, Dad."

"I'm serious, son. If you're going to play for the Bulldogs, you can't be messing around in high school like this."

“But Dad, I’m not sure I want to go to Yale.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The Smiths all go to Yale. In fact, we practically built that university. You’ll play lacrosse and hockey. You’re pledging Beta Theta Pi. I expect you to be Phi Beta Kappa and valedictorian, president of The Order, and wear the skull and bones proudly. After that, you’re going to Harvard Law and excel there, just like I did. There are only two kinds of people in life.”

“I know, Dad. Buttheads and rockheads. To you, everything is so black-or-white. What about all the shades of gray in-between?”

“Stop being a rockhead. You can’t be half pregnant. There are no shades of gray—only the winner’s way and the loser’s way. I didn’t spend those big bucks on your education and bribe all those coaches for nothing. Grow up and be a man. You’re a Smith, and we’re always at the top. We always win. That’s the Smith culture. So you’re going to Yale, and that’s final.”



Excellence, Culture and Transformation. Three powerful words that are overused in corporate circles today. Far more than mere words, they represent principles and processes that drove human behavior in the formative years that made both Gavin Pearson and Stuart Smith the men who they became.

While the words were the same and principles were similar, the two men were very different. Such is the saga of words and principles of our society today. Appearing to be the same, their application is remarkably different.

Backgrounds, points of view, values, and deeply seated beliefs define who people are.

Excellence

At Excellent Cultures, we believe Excellence is a deep-seated belief system that engulfs the life, soul, and lifestyle of everyone—individuals, families, teams, companies, and nations. Our research and nearly five

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decades of experience producing the world's best cultures for some of the world's best companies and their leaders indicates something powerful and highly significant.

Merriam-Webster says the word *excellence* is derived from *excellent*, which they define as very good of its kind, eminently good, *first-class*, *superior*.

Many talk about excellence as if it were an everyday household word. A small portion is relentlessly committed to excellence, is living excellence, and is leading others to excellence.

Excellence is more than winning or being number one. It's the lifestyle of daily living, beyond Kaizen, Six-Sigma, Lean, and other forms of continuous improvement. In fact, without a *culture* of excellence, continuous improvement processes never work to their full potential. Excellence means ...

- never settling for mediocrity.
- working better and smarter all the time.
- being a leader in high-quality visions and solutions.
- impacting the lives and futures of everyone you influence.
- never stopping short.
- always seeking something better.
- being joyfully and continuously dissatisfied with the status quo.

Most leaders go to sleep concerned about their problems and wake up frustrated, because nothing changed while they were dreaming.

Leaders who are relentlessly committed to excellence go to sleep thankful for problems to solve and wake up inspired with solutions they can hardly wait to implement. They know who they are, love what they do, and know why they do it. What others call problems are seen as opportunities. They constantly search for the truth, and the truth *beyond* the truth. They inspire others without having power or authority over them. They embrace dreams to *be* better and *do* better, loving what they do. Their dreams go

beyond self-focused self-improvement to team-focused service over self-culture. They have the uncanny ability to connect and align people's

dreams with their own. People don't follow them because they must. They follow because they are inspired by their leadership.

Culture

Culture is the most misunderstood word in the corporate world. Leaders and employees talk about culture non-stop, but few have a good understanding of what it is. Why? Because most people think they already know. They don't know what they don't know. The problem is, the word *culture* means something different to everyone. Therefore, people think they are talking about the same thing when they actually aren't. It's like asking a group to visualize a *fruit*. People nod as if they have the same picture, but each one sees something different: an apple, orange, or banana. Maybe a cherry or watermelon, which are nowhere close to the same. In Latin America and the tropics, it might be an avocado, pineapple, or papaya. In apparent agreement, they are confused but don't know it, and they don't know why.

Using the word *culture* will create confusion until everyone has a clear picture of what is meant. Welcome to the corporate world and to organizational frustration.

A simple Google search reveals two primary definitions of corporate culture—one from Harvard (US), the other from Cambridge (Europe). Put together, culture is simply *the set of shared beliefs that govern how people behave at work*.

When the boss is perceived as a jerk, employees behave opposite from those who believe the boss is phenomenal. Those who believe the economy is rough will anticipate major struggles. Often, they will even unknowingly create problems to justify their beliefs. Conversely, those who believe the tough economy presents exciting new opportunities will excel.

Peter F. Drucker, the father of management, says, *Culture eats strategy for breakfast*. The Harvard Business School says, *Culture eats strategy for lunch*. Costco co-founder Jim Senegal is known for saying, *Culture isn't everything. It's the only thing*.

Transformation

The word *transformation* is used so frequently and loosely in leadership, business, and corporate circles that it is misunderstood as much as *culture*. Because words and their meanings are powerful forces that drive action and behavior, let's circle back to Merriam-Webster's definition of *transform* so we can be on the same page. *Transform* is ...

- to change in composition or structure.
- to change the outward form or appearance of.
- to change in character or condition: convert.
- to subject to mathematical transformation.
- to cause (a cell) to undergo genetic transformation.

All these definitions have the central concept of phenomenal change. It's quite interesting that the ancient Greek word for transform is *metamorfóno*, from which we derive the English word *metamorphosis*. For our discussion, perhaps *metamorphosis* is a better single-word description of *transformation*. Now, let's look at Merriam-Webster's generic definition of *metamorphosis*:

- Change of physical form, structure, or substance, especially by supernatural means.
- A striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstance.
- A typically marked developmental change in the form or structure of an animal (such as a butterfly).

Indeed, *real* transformations are like beautiful butterflies that emerge from non-descript caterpillars. Not only are the changes deep, but they are lasting and sustainable—the opposite of New Year's resolutions that fade in a week or two, only to be repeated a year later with the same frustration.

Transformation is more than a desire to do better. It is a permanent change in identity, from inside-out rather than outside-in. Using a plant analogy,

Transformation is more than a desire to do better. It is a permanent change in identity, from inside-out rather than outside-in.

the change is at the roots, not just the fruit. True transformation must focus on changing the very soul of an organization—the hearts and minds of every leader, employee, vendor, customer, and even family members. It is a complete cultural change.

Real transformation changes people's individual cultures and everything touched by them. Transformed hearts and minds then change everything on the team or in the organization. The changes and improvements never stop. Most importantly, they are lasting in nature. They are sustainable.

Why is this important? It's the crucial element that makes a group function as a team. It's what allows teams and organizations to blend their individualities into one mind and heart that *celebrates* diversity rather than *tolerating* it. The outcome is synergistic, where one-plus-one adds up to more than two. It can equal anything from twelve to seventy-seven depending on how much synergy you have. We've seen this happen on sports teams from time to time, when they are "in the zone." Many of us have had the rare opportunity of being part of a synergistic team when this was the case. But how does it happen? How does one *create* or *cause* synergy?

Excellent Cultures has spent nearly five decades producing the world's best cultures for the world's best companies. Having worked with the whole spectrum—from individual leaders hungry to excel, to mature startups that want to be around for generations as well as world class Fortune 5's rapidly on the move—we've learned what works when it comes to real transformations. We've also learned what doesn't work, what's a temporary fix, and what's a profound waste of time.

As you read about the cultural transformation of the fictional NOP Inc. in *Transform, Then Thrive*, you will identify with the challenges and frustrations that leaders and employees experience. You will likely find NOP's challenges similar to your own experiences as a leader striving for excellence. You will definitely enjoy the profound insights offered by young CEO Gavin Pearson and corporate transformation expert Elvis Zelle, his former College World Series championship-winning baseball coach, as they combat Chairman Stuart Smith's warped, self-serving ambitions, greed, and manipulation.

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You will learn the core practices and data-driven strategies that produce triple- and quadruple-digit ROI growth, and you will understand the emotional journey behind real and sustainable transformation.

Most of all, as you trace the vices and victories that NOP's leadership team travels through, you will learn to transform from inside-out rather than outside-in. Your success won't fade and disappear by the next season like just another New Year's resolution.

You'll sustain your success because all change that's meaningful and lasting originates inside and works its way out. Above all else, you will experience Excellent Cultures' proven process to *Transform, Then Thrive* and never again waste your time, energy, or money making yet another failed New Year's resolution.

Prologue

Stuart Smith is Chairman of the Board of NOP Inc., a high-tech manufacturing organization located in an industrial suburb of the Dallas metroplex. 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. "Even moving headquarters from Seattle to Dallas for both the image change and the robust Texas business climate didn't help our stock price. I need to hire the right CEO, 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

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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 Dallas, 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.”



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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. “Dallas’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.

About the Author



Steve Gandara and the Excellent Cultures Team have spent nearly five decades producing the world's best cultures for the world's best companies, delivering triple- to quadruple-digit ROIs. A Hispanic American, Steve grew up in a West Texas family of overachievers, graduated from the University of Oklahoma, served as a US Army Reserve Officer, and completed postgraduate work in management and leadership at Texas Christian and General Motors Universities. He has served a wide range of leaders and firms from startups to Fortune 500s as both executive coach and leadership consultant. His clients include CEOs and Corporate Execs, Entrepreneurs, Business Owners, Family Office CEOs, Sales & Marketing Execs as well as Clergy and Nonprofit CEOs. Clients praise his expertise in helping them discover hidden, below-the-surface insights and using them to devise and implement breakthrough strategies.

Using a unique combination of scientific assessment data, seasoned experience and proprietary technology, Steve and his colleagues have designed and orchestrated strategies delivering client ROIs ranging from 225 percent to 1750 percent in less than two years. Their unique "Service-Over-Self Organizational DNA" that produces "Corporate Cultures of Relentless Commitment to Excellence" generate distinct competitive advantages. These have produced awards for Industry Dominance, Top Performance, Best Places to Work, and Workplace Diversity.

Offerings include everything from scientific assessments to leadership and executive coaching, both live and virtual workshops, sustainable mobile learning, proprietary web-based tools and full-scale corporate

Transform, Then Thrive

transformations. Clients range from startup entrepreneurs to family biz to global giants like Toyota, their largest client served for nearly four decades.

Steve leads a busy life as husband to Denise, his high school sweetheart and wife of more than five decades, father of two natural children, nine adopted children, and nine grandchildren. When not meaningfully engaged with family or clients, he has served in board and volunteer positions as a high school youth mentor, school board member, licensed foster parent, minority scholarship fundraiser, church board president, social service charity and college board of regents' chairman. He has taught college classes in entrepreneurial leadership and speaks regularly to corporate and business leaders about High-Performance Leadership, Team Building, Corporate Unity that Celebrates Diversity, and Corporate Culture Transformation. He regularly delivers Achieving Excellent Culture Workshops, both live and virtually, to leaders ranging from middle managers to CEOs of organizations of every size and scope in diverse geographical locations.

The Excellent Cultures Transformation Process

This story is inspired by actual events in real organizations. Certain incidents, locations, and characters have been created or altered for dramatic purposes, as well as to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the individual characters and organizations.

The Excellent Cultures Transformation Process for leaders and organizations has taken nearly five decades to create and perfect. While much detail has been included to assist leaders in their own transformation processes, there are several components that could backfire if implemented incorrectly or without proper expertise. Please consider attending an Achieving Excellent Culture Workshop for leaders or reaching out to info@ExcellentCultures.com for additional expertise.



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