

JOHN W. FOREMAN



LEADERSHIP WISE

WHY BUSINESS
BOOKS SUCK, BUT
WISE LEADERS
SUCCEED

WILEY

Leadership Wise

**Why Business Books Suck,
but Wise Leaders Succeed**

Leadership Wise

**Why Business Books Suck,
but Wise Leaders Succeed**

John W. Foreman

WILEY

Copyright © 2023 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada and the United Kingdom.

ISBNs: 9781394191680 (hardback), 9781394191697 (epdf), 9781394191703 (epub)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permission.

Trademarks: WILEY and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates, in the United States and other countries, and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

If you believe you've found a mistake in this book, please bring it to our attention by emailing our reader support team at wileysupport@wiley.com with the subject line "Possible Book Errata Submission."

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023941189

Cover images: Papyrus: © MarekPhotoDesign.com/Adobe Stock, Portrait: © Olena/Adobe Stock
Cover design: Wiley

Contents at a Glance

A Few Things Up Front	xv
Chapter 1 Business Books Suck	1
Chapter 2 Let's Warm Up! Ten Business Choices Where One Option and Its Opposite Both Have Merit	19
Chapter 3 Generating Options	61
Chapter 4 What's Your Objective?	89
Chapter 5a A Brief Interlude	103
Chapter 5 Check Yourself Before You Wreck Yourself	107
Chapter 6 Making the Most of Execution	129
Chapter 7 "Keeping It Real"	147
Chapter 8 Shaping the Company for Success	167

<i>Conclusion</i>	189
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	195
<i>About the Author</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	199

Contents

A Few Things Up Front	xv
Chapter 1	
Business Books Suck	1
Context Is Everything: Do Things That [Don't?] Scale	6
What If I Said That Bad Leaders Are Too Consistent?	11
Introducing Wisdom Literature	12
The Facebook Uncle Dilemma	14
Chapter 2	
Let's Warm Up! Ten Business Choices Where One Option and Its Opposite Both Have Merit	19
Let's Take a "Walk Around the Business" People	22
A Players vs. B Players	24
Accountability vs. Blamelessness	25
Inputs vs. Outputs	30
Far vs. Fast	34
Process	36
Speed vs. Order	39
Specialization vs. Generalization	40
Top Down vs. Bottom Up	41
	45

	Product	49
	Good vs. Great	50
	Bundling vs. Unbundling	52
	Build vs. Buy	55
	I Didn't Give You Answers; I Gave You	
	Options	57
	Let's Do a Little Exercise	59
Chapter 3	Generating Options	61
	Let's Get This Out of the Way: Consult	
	Yourself	64
	Consult Your Co-workers and Customers	66
	Set Expectations in These Conversations:	
	You're Just Gathering Input	67
	Consult Your Network	69
	Go Ahead, Read the Business Books!	70
	Management by Metaphor	71
	What Are My Levers? Chart Options Against	
	Your Decision Levers	79
	Using All the Parts of the Animal	81
	Pull a "10th Man Rule"	82
	Checking In on Our Exercise	84
	Wisdom Literature Would Suggest None	
	of These Options Is "Wrong"	84
	Isn't This Overkill? "Paralysis by Analysis"	85
	Over-confidently Incorrect	86
	This Needn't Take Long	86
	Analysis Paralysis Is All About	
	Objectives, Not Options	87
Chapter 4	What's Your Objective?	89
	A Problem Isn't a Priority	91
	Two Words to Know and Love:	
	Minimize and Maximize	93

	Is It Possible to Love Two Objectives at the Same Time?	96
	Turn Priorities Into Constraints	100
Chapter 5a	A Brief Interlude	103
	There's Plenty of Book Left!	104
Chapter 5	Check Yourself Before You Wreck Yourself	107
	Going Deeper with Data	108
	Is an Anecdote Data?	109
	Quantitative vs. Qualitative. . .Who Wants Pretty Good Pizza?	110
	Priorities and Constraints Come First	112
	You Know What They Say About Assumptions	112
	Default to Learning Fast and Iterating	113
	Not All Who Wander Are Lost	114
	One-way vs. Two-Way Doors. . .or Are They Streets? Two-Way Things	117
	Do a Premortem	121
	Blazing Through Covering Your Ass	127
Chapter 6	Making the Most of Execution	129
	Make Your Decisions "Fully Loaded"	131
	"Use All the Parts of the Animal"	133
	Establish Success and Failure Criteria Up Front	135
	Be Transparent, But Commit to the Bit!	139
	Transparency Costs You Nothing	140
	What's "My Part of Our Whole?"	142
	Commit to the Bit	143
	There Is No Separation of Mind and Body	144

Chapter 7	“Keeping It Real”	147
	Emotions Are Shortcuts	148
	Diving a Little Deeper into My Knee-Jerk Reactions	150
	All Feelings Are Valid. Always Acting Out of Them Is Neither Authentic nor Beneficial	155
	A Process for Becoming Increasingly Authentic	157
	Start with Post Facto Reflection	160
	Positive Reinforcement Is the Feedback Loop That May in Fact <i>Change You</i>	163
	That’s Cool. But It Doesn’t Apply <i>to Me</i>	164
	Enough with This Woo-Woo Feelings Stuff	166
 Chapter 8	Shaping the Company for Success	167
	Company Culture and Values	168
	Culture Is a Sum of Our Values, Explicit and Implicit	169
	Good Leaders Actively Check On and Shape Their Culture to Produce Better Decisions	171
	Culture Eats Decision-Making for Breakfast	173
	So How Do We Eat Culture for Breakfast?	175
	Making Implicit Values Explicit	179
	People: Hiring, Managing, Promoting, and Firing	183
	Hire People Who’ve Read and Like This Book	183
	Give Less Responsibility to Those Who Make Poor Decisions. Give More to Those Who Make Great Decisions	185
	Scale Your Impact	188

Contents	xi
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>189</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>195</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>197</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>199</i>

*To Lydia Foreman, who taught me about Wisdom Literature
and gave me the idea for this book. I couldn't ask for a better wife
and friend.*

A Few Things Up Front

Hi! I'm John. I work as the chief product officer (CPO) at one of those tech unicorns you're always reading about called Podium. As far as unicorns go, we're pretty grounded. We're based in Utah, not Silicon Valley. Better skiing, worse cocktails.

We build software to help local businesses run their front office: things such as finding leads, talking with customers, collecting payment, marketing, and getting feedback. I'm in charge of making sure we build the *right* software. I'm paid to make good decisions (that's important. . .we'll get to that).

At Podium, we do regular training for all our managers. We found that oftentimes when things went awry, it wasn't a problem with the folks on the ground. No, they were often just "following orders." But somewhere in that managerial chain of the telephone game, things had gotten wonky. And while our managers were super smart, hardworking folks, many of them hadn't managed before, and they just needed some help being more effective. Hence, we implemented regular manager training. I was on board!

That is, I was on board until someone from HR asked me to conduct one of the training sessions.

"What do I talk about?" I asked.

“Whatever you want,” they said, “perhaps your management philosophy or something topical to our values or what’s going on in the business.”

I replayed in my head things I’d heard in previous manager trainings. There had been content on managing your time wisely. There’d been a bit on holding folks accountable. I remember one leader shouting, “Fuck hustle culture!” All the people who’d presented their bits seemed to know what they were talking about. They had a perspective on work.

And then there was me.

“Uh, let me think about it and get back to you,” I said.

Did I have anything to say about management? I’d been leading people since my first year out of grad school, and here I was with a graying beard, three kids, two dogs, a 20-year marriage, and absolutely zero to say about leadership. Well, not exactly zero. I had precisely two words to say.

It wasn’t that I didn’t think about leading. I thought about it constantly. I had to lead people every day! No, it was that every time I tried to distill my views on the topic, all that was left in the distillation was a 150-proof bottle of “it depends.”

It depends. My leadership philosophy could be summarized in two words.

Shit. How was I going to train my managers in the subtle art of “it depends?” I started talking it through with my wife, Lydia. She doesn’t work in tech like I do. No, she’s got an academic background in Hebrew Bible and has spent much of her working life in ministry. When I told her that my leadership philosophy was “it depends,” she understood me. She’d encountered it before in cultures that existed rather far away in space and time. She was able to give me some historical footholds for what felt like me just hanging off the side of a cliff all alone.

So I got to work trying to articulate just what I meant. I didn’t have anything shocking to say like, “Fuck hustle culture!” I kinda

like hustling. I also like naps. But I was able to clarify my milque-toast “it depends” philosophy.

I presented my thoughts to Podium’s managers, and interestingly enough, they liked what I had to say! They agreed! I was shocked. Perhaps they were just sucking up? I hope not.

What follows in this book is my theory on leadership. There’s not much to it, honestly. And what there is, well, I didn’t make up. It’s ancient. Dare I say, it’s wisdom! But before we dive in, let’s define our terms a bit.

Other Than Being a Bad Corporate Trainer, What Are My Qualifications?

It was a cold fall day in 2018. I had gotten out of bed in Atlanta, Georgia, with the gurgles. My stomach felt like a milkshake that someone was blowing bubbles into through a boba tea straw. Audibly so. I spent the morning gripping the sides of the toilet like a kid doing cannonballs at the pool. You get it. You’ve been there.

But today was an important day! Many of the product teams at Mailchimp (this is where I worked before Podium) had “showcase” meetings where they’d take myself (the CPO) and the chief technical officer through what they were working on. It was my chance to micromanage the hell out of them. Ooooooh, I lived for a good round of micromanagement. After I got off the toilet for the third time, I told Lydia I was going make a run for it. I grabbed a coconut LaCroix and headed out the door.

Now, Atlanta isn’t known for its speedy commutes. I lived 7 miles from the Mailchimp office at the time, but that usually took me 25 minutes to drive. And even with a degree in mathematics, I hadn’t done the math on the time between my intestinal “contractions.”

I made it 10 minutes into my commute before I shit my pants. I remember the exact spot. It was here.



Source: John Foreman

I hit a U-turn faster than a mobster trying to lose a tail, stuffed my jacket between me and the seat, and gunned it home like Ryan Gosling in *Drive*; only my outfit was far less pearly white. I was 34 years old at the time.

I've never had a coconut LaCroix again. I never told that story to my colleagues at Mailchimp. *And I never again tried to push through the trots to make a meeting.*

This story is basically my entire professional life in a nutshell. I care deeply about my work. Perhaps a little too deeply.

And I often shit my pants, proverbially speaking, in pursuit of excellent outcomes. In the process, I learn lessons, whether they be about R&D teams or about morning commutes.

You've never heard of me. And there's a good reason for that! I'm not a luminary. I'm not a titan of industry. I'm not a wunder-kind. I have no quotes on leadership that appeal to courage; my inspirational quote would be more like:

A leader shits their pants trying to get through Atlanta traffic to work.

Not sure that's terribly inspiring.

I'm just a guy who's had to lead for a long time. And I've failed *a lot*, gastrointestinally and otherwise. And I've succeeded sometimes! Reviewing my progress throughout the years, I've gotten better at leading over time. I've learned some things that have allowed me to get better at making decisions for teams and companies.

What I've learned is generalizable. As in, anyone who wants to be a better leader can engage in these things I've learned over the years. More to the point, they can engage with the stuff in this book *without having to be someone else*. There will be very little in this book about changing your voice Elizabeth Holmes-style, drinking your coffee with MCT oil in it, low-dosing psychedelics, or whatever the new on-surface leadership performance tactic might be. My goal is that you can learn a thing or two about leadership from this book and apply it at your job *while still being yourself*—maybe even a better version of yourself, rather than trying to get you to be someone else entirely. One of my employees once called me an “equal opportunity asshole,” so I'm definitely not going to try to get you to behave like me.

So why do I think I'm capable of writing a leadership book especially given that just a year ago, I was scared to talk to my own managers about the topic? Here are my basic qualifications:

- **I'm an OK writer:** Most leadership books are nauseatingly dull. I don't even know how people got through them before the 1.5x audiobook speed button was invented back in the early naughts. They're almost impossible to get through unless Alvin and the Chipmunks are your narrators. I swear to you this book will be 20 percent more interesting than any other leadership book you've bought in the airport bookstore. Why am I confident of this? My previous book was about Microsoft Excel (Not sorry. Excel is the best!), but the preponderance of the reviews say it's 20 percent more interesting than other stuff about Excel, and if I can make spreadsheets interesting, I can make business leadership interesting. Hell, more often than not, leadership and spreadsheets may be the same things in modern times.
- **I know some fiddly academic things:** I have a background in decision-making. I have a graduate degree in it from MIT (math applied to decision-making, specifically). And I worked as a consultant helping some of the largest organizations in the world make decisions using math. I wrote a book about decision-making (from a mathy perspective) called *Data Smart*. So when I talk about decision-making in leadership, I'm not *purely* shooting from the hip. Only kinda from the hip? I'm shooting from the midriff, let's say. The midriff is in style again fashion-wise, right? Ka-chow!
- **I've seen some shit:** I was the chief product officer for Mailchimp and helped build a product that eventually commanded a \$12 billion purchase price from Intuit. And currently, I'm the chief product officer at Podium. We're

currently valued at about \$3 billion. That's a lot of value to be responsible for! As a tech executive, "life comes at you fast." Every week there are tons of decisions to make. Hiring and firing, forming teams and dissolving teams, building products and sunseting them, moving money around, deciding which customers to make happy and which to piss off. I've seen a lot, and I've had to make thousands and thousands of decisions, some of them quite important.

- **I've failed:** Too many business books are written solely from a place of strength to prop up the ego of the author. That's cool. But that's not this. I've made so many bad decisions I've lost count. If you don't believe me, please know that *I have a neck tattoo*. That's how committed to bad decisions I seem to be. Gotta practice what you preach! Failure is how we learn.
- **I've succeeded too:** But I don't want to fetishize failure! We fail so that *we can do better*. Those who fail for failure's sake and cite bullshit like "90 percent of Google's experiments fail!" are so tiresome. They'd A/B their own wedding night if they could. They've become so enamored with failure that they no longer seek to win. I fail, but I've failed while trying to win. I shit my pants, but at least I'm trying to make the meeting when I do! And I've kept my eyes open when I fail, taken note of why, and done better next time. My hope is to pass on those learnings to you.

Those are my basic qualifications, such as they are. Let's get to it.

What's a Leader?

A leader is a dealer in hope.

—Napoleon Bonaparte