



# Introduction

Leading has never been easy. From our first experiment trying to get our classmates to follow us or receiving our first official assignment at work, leadership has always demanded our best effort. That hasn't changed—but something else has: the complexity of the problems we face and the organizations we lead has increased exponentially.

Perhaps this complexity finds its energy in the scope of your enterprise, or it may merely be a function of increased volume. These are great problems to have . . . if leaders can orchestrate an appropriate response.

Unfortunately, for many leaders, our past successes just don't translate. The game has literally changed before our eyes. The methods that worked extremely well in the past no longer have the same effect. In many cases, the tried and true has become the tired and tarnished.

Most of us began our leadership journey utilizing an approach with striking similarities to the game of checkers, a fun, highly reactionary game often played at a frantic pace. Any strategies we employed in this style of leadership were limited, if not rudimentary.

## 2 Chess Not Checkers

The opportunities in our world for leaders to play checkers and be successful are dwindling.

The game today for most leaders can better be compared to chess—a game in which strategy matters; a game in which individual pieces have unique abilities that drive unique contributions; a game in which heightened focus and a deeper level of thinking are required to win.

Although *Chess Not Checkers* provides a rich metaphor for leaders, it is much more than that. The game of chess contains four specific parallels that can inform and transform any organization seeking new levels of performance. I've positioned each of these ideas as a “move” your organization can make to draw closer to your goals. Collectively, these moves can be your blueprint for sustained high performance.

I hope this simple story will resonate with you. The company Blake leads is not real, although the situations he faces are as relevant as today's news. I've intentionally omitted details about his organization, leaving it largely nameless and faceless. Hopefully, this approach will make it easier for you to think about your own organization. Is it possible you may be playing checkers when the game is chess? If that is your situation, today can be the day you start learning a new game.

It's your move!



## The Decision

If you miss the “opportunity of a lifetime,”  
*do you ever get another one?*

Blake wrote these words in his journal, put down his pen, and stared out the kitchen window. He had gotten up early; he couldn't sleep, anyway. His mind was racing as he reflected on his life and career up until this point.

The last decade had been a whirlwind. After his father died, Blake had invested five years trying to live up to his dad's expectations. Jeff had always believed his son could lead. Blake had never been sure, but he pushed through his doubts and dedicated himself to learning the skills of leadership.

Blake's leadership journey had been frustrating. After learning to cast vision, build teams, get results, and more, he had been passed over for formal leadership positions. Confused by this turn of events, he reached out to his longtime mentor, Debbie Brewster. She helped him gain the greatest insight of his life thus far: *If your heart is not right, no one cares about your skills.*

## 4 Chess Not Checkers

This revelation led Blake to the next phase in his journey. Armed with the skills he had learned, he began working diligently to strengthen his leadership character. According to those closest to Blake, it was working. Blake was becoming a leader people wanted to follow.

Now, a decade into his career, he finally felt like he understood leadership. The men and women he worked with seemed to agree. There were rumors Blake might someday move into senior leadership. But still, Blake was skeptical about his future at Dynastar, and he had lingering doubts about his own leadership. If he had so much potential, why hadn't he already been given a position of leadership? All these thoughts made Blake's current decision even more difficult.

The options were clear: stay at Dynastar with the *hope* of a bright future, or take an offer to be the CEO of a small business in a nearby community.

"Small" was a relative term. The business had annual sales of several million dollars and employed more than fifty people. Blake's income would be more than he was currently making, but that was not what excited him. Based on what he had learned, he believed the business had tremendous untapped potential. He was convinced that in a few years, he could double the sales—and profits. The upside opportunity was significant.

There were still two lingering issues. The flat sales had not escaped the notice of the parent company. They were eager for a turnaround. In his conversations with senior leaders, Blake had the distinct impression he would need to make things happen quickly or the business could be closed or sold. His challenge would be to get it back on a growth trajectory as quickly as possible.

The other issue was Megan. Happily married to Blake for just over ten years, she had been with him every step of the way. Blake knew she was unsure about him making this move.

Blake went to the counter to get another cup of coffee as Megan came into the kitchen. "Good morning," he said.

"Morning," Megan mumbled as she made her way to the coffee maker. Blake handed her a cup, and she cradled it with both hands and held her face six inches over the cup to breathe in the warmth. Now somewhat awake, she said, "Today's the day you need to make a decision, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Have you decided?"

"I'm going to do it."

"What tipped the scales?" Megan asked.

"I see this as a huge opportunity for us. It looks to me like the business has been over-managed and under-led."