

THREE IMPOSSIBLE PROMISES

THE INSPIRING TRUE STORY OF OLYMPIC GOLD
AND HOW ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE MEANS EVERYTHING

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INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN

A few years ago I met a woman named Lynne Ruhl, a small business owner in Cincinnati. Several of my business associates and friends had been telling me for months that I just absolutely had to meet this lady. So I finally did. I was reluctant to spend my time on what I thought would be just another networking meeting, never imagining that I would later become directly involved in her business. I finally agreed to meet her one afternoon at a local coffee shop, where we met and sipped sodas and chatted. She was nice. At first, she seemed maternal and simple, gentle and plain spoken. I found her to be a likeable but generally average and fairly unremarkable person in almost every way.

Then I heard her story.

I listened as Lynne described her business, Perfect 10 Corporate Cultures, as she spelled out what she did and why. The *why* fascinated me. The *why*, as it turned out, was deeply and profoundly rooted in her experience as Culture Manager for Cincinnati Gymnastics Academy (CGA) in the 1980's and 1990's. The *why*, I came to believe, applies to all of us, to you and to me and to our business endeavors, and especially to those who lead others. This book is really Lynne's story. It is about *why* she does what she does. It is about what she learned at CGA.

I tell this story purely from Lynne's perspective. I have talked to CGA's gold medalists, to CGA students and CGA's world class coach, to CGA's top tier sports psychologist from that era, to past employees, staff

members, parents, and athletes. But this story is not democratically told. It is told as Lynne's reality; it is told as she experienced it. It is not a biography. It is not a historical account of all that went on in that gym. It is Lynne's story; it is her truth. I tell it as truthfully as I can, having only changed the names of some gymnasiums and a few of the story's characters.

At its core, this is a story about beliefs. It's about what we at Perfect 10 Corporate Cultures believe and the reasons for those beliefs, though the reasons are less important. Reasons are always thin when it comes to beliefs. They are always murky and hollow and unconvincing. If the reasons were crystal clear and compelling, we wouldn't need beliefs because we would *know*. Beliefs are *beliefs* because they connect and blossom not so much in our minds but rather in our hearts. They are not something we calculate and arrive at, decide upon and conclude. Rather, they are something we discover was planted inside us when we were first formed. Beliefs are not gentle. They are the thundering things thrust upon us, and they consume our very lives and drive us ever forward.

At Perfect 10 Corporate Cultures, this is what we *believe*:

We believe that people are more valuable than you can know, that when people understand their uniqueness and have a safe place to bring it out and use it, they excel. And we believe that most of us, as leaders, vastly underestimate the talent and potential in our midst. The hard thing isn't finding the right talent. The truly hard thing is bringing it to the surface and unleashing it.

We believe that the time has come when it's no longer okay to do business in a way that leaves people as collateral damage. We believe that workplace leaders are called to lead, especially in areas of culture, and that they are anointed for their unique roles. We believe that leaders have a special and sacred calling, that they are responsible and accountable for establishing cultures in which people are treated with respect, not because of what they deliver or how they perform, but simply because of their inherent human dignity. We believe leaders are called to create places of integrity, where trust lives because people do what they say they will do, where promises are kept, and where everyone participates in creating an

accountable culture. We believe leaders are called to create places where people challenge and confront one another in healthy, constructive ways. We believe that the primary job of a leader is to create and manage culture. We believe *you* are that leader and that through the workplace culture you create, you literally have the power to change the world. That is what we believe.

This is also a story about what we know to be true. Unlike beliefs, knowledge is something we do indeed think through and rationally conclude. We *know* things because we, the jury, have sat in the courtroom of life and business, and we have studied all the evidence. We have arrived at rock solid conclusions backed by inescapable logic that overwhelms any degree of reasonable doubt. We *know* things because we see the proof.

At Perfect 10 Corporate Cultures, this is what we *know*:

We know that when leaders deliberately establish a cultural foundation of respect and trust, human performance soars. We know that when leaders do these things, they produce better performance, higher revenue and profits, and more satisfied customers. We know that when leaders fail at these things, it is most often because they lack the skill and know-how, not the desire. We also know that they don't need to always get the culture perfect. They can and do succeed despite their own human shortcomings, and even though the cultures they create may remain imperfect. We know that leaders who do these things also do something immeasurably more. Leaders who do these things make a profound difference in the lives of people. They enable a kind of human fulfillment in the workplace – and in the world beyond it – that has rarely been known, and they unleash the awesome power of human compassion and character that our world so badly needs. We know workplace leaders can do *both*. They can treat people the right way *and* have fantastic success in business and the workplace. We know that this is not an act of careful balancing, not a way of keeping competing ideas in careful check. Rather, we know it is a long overdue marriage, a sort of blessed synergy, and its time has finally arrived.

We know that culture matters more than strategy, because a poor culture cannot implement a great strategy; yet even a mediocre strategy

executed by a great culture wins.

At Perfect 10 Corporate Cultures, we live for the day when organizational culture takes its rightful place in the workplace, fully

Healthy cultures and good business results are not competing ideas to be balanced and kept in check. Just the opposite: they are perfectly complimentary and synergistic, a long overdue marriage.

embraced as the single greatest lever to achieving performance, profits and results. We live for the day when cultures of profound respect and human dignity will be commonplace. That's why we do what we do. That's what drives us. That's why I'm writing this book, and why I ask that you share this message with others.

Our founder served as Culture Manager for Cincinnati Gymnastics Academy, which went from humble and toxic beginnings to become a world renowned training facility for Olympic gold medalists. In the process, a global industry was transformed, and organizational culture took center stage in one of the most unlikely and remarkable success stories of our time. It is a story that will touch your heart and ignite your deeply held beliefs about people, workplace culture and performance. And it is a story that will provide evidence, courtroom proof, that when leadership gets the culture right, human performance soars beyond anything we can comprehend.

This is that story. We hope it will become *yours*.

PART ONE

UNQUALIFIED

CHAPTER 1

THE PHONE CALL

The sound of the phone ringing came as it always does, jarring and out of the blue, yet familiar. But this time it would change everything. She wouldn't understand that until years later, of course; she had no inkling of its significance when she answered.

Even after she hung up, Lynne Ruhl counted this as just another phone conversation and a mild distraction. She could not have been more wrong.

When the phone rang, Lynne put down her Bible on the coffee table beside the overstuffed living room chair she had settled into. She reached over and hit the pause button on the cassette player, which had been gently filling the room with the haunting voice of Nancy Honeytree, singing from her Maranatha Marathon album on the Myrrh Records label. It was 1983, and Honeytree was making it big in Christian music. It took Lynne a moment and some conscious effort to come out of her deep immersion in study.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Ruhl?"

"Yes."

"Hi, Lynne, this is Dave Jones, at the gym. I'm calling about your daughter, Becky."

"Oh, my gosh. Hi Dave. Is everything okay?"

"Well, yes, Becky's fine. Nothing to be concerned about. Actually just the opposite," said Dave.

"Oh? So tell me what's going on."

Dave said, "Lynne, I have been coaching Becky for a few months now, and she's a real delight to work with. She's a great little kid. You

know, she really seems to love gymnastics, and she has a real aptitude for it. She's got lots of enthusiasm. It's so surprising to see that in a seven year old. Frankly, she's head and shoulders better than all the other girls I coach in her neighborhood group; there's just no comparison."

Lynne felt the pride that all parents do when they hear that their child is excelling at something.

"Oh, that's so good to hear, Dave. I so appreciate all you do with her," Lynne said with genuine sincerity.

"Today I tried something, just as a sort of experiment," Dave said, his voice ticked up a notch in energy and enthusiasm. "The older girls, the eight and nine year olds, were having bit of an informal competition, just among themselves. Well, I decided to let Becky work with them just for this one session, and Lynne, it seemed to me she performed better than all of them."

Lynne was blushing now, proud but a bit uncomfortable with such a glowing report. Every parent wants their kid to do well. But parents also feel uncomfortable when children do so well that they become "different." Lynne didn't know how to respond, nor did she yet know what Dave wanted – had he called simply to report on Becky's progress? She just listened.

Dave continued, "Well, it's pretty unusual to see that kind of talent in a girl so young. I mean, she's pretty darned good and frankly I'd like to move her up from the neighborhood group to the competitive program. The hitch is that we don't have a competitive program for her age group right now, but I'd like to move her up anyway. I know she's only seven but I can put her up with the eight and nine year olds and I really think she'll do fine despite the age difference."

"Uh huh..." Lynne was listening, taking it all in, but in her mind she wasn't sure she wanted this for Becky. This thought triggered the next, raised her awareness that she wasn't even sure what moving Becky into competitive gymnastics really entailed. Mostly she wanted to slow things down and take some time to think it through. She sensed that Dave was about to ask her permission to move Becky into the competitive program, and Lynne wasn't ready to give an answer.

After a long moment Lynne said, "Gee, I'm going to have to digest this, Dave. I knew she has been having fun there and that she loves gymnastics, but I honestly didn't know she was doing *that* well."

Lynne thought back on how all this had started and smiled to herself. Her mother, Lynne's mother, wanted to spend time with Becky, to have something that was just for the two of them, a way to bond granddaughter to grandmother and create some memories together. "Would you rather do dance or gymnastics?" Grandma had asked little Becky, back when she was only three years old, as if there were no other choices to be considered by a grandmother and granddaughter who wanted to spend time together. "Gymnastics!" Becky had replied, without hesitation, Lord knows why. But she absolutely loved her gymnastics sessions and loved her time with Grandma. Lynne didn't want to disrupt that, and wondered to herself if "competitive gymnastics" would mean changing all that.

Lynne asked, "Competitive gymnastics? I have no idea what that is. What would it mean for us, Dave?"

Dave answered, "Well, for starters, instead of one hour each week, it will mean eleven hours. With that group we do two hours most days and –"

"Eleven hours a week? Are you serious? She's only seven!"

"Afraid, so, Lynne," Dave said. "But the good news is that she'll be learning a lot more and will be in with kids that are really good and all that will help her grow into a better gymnast. I know she's good enough to do it, and I think she'll love it. And in the worst case, if it ends up not being for her, you can always drop Becky back into the neighborhood program."

Lynne considered this for a long moment.

Dave said, "I know she'll love it, Lynne. And I'd hate to see a kid with her kind of talent not have it developed. Even if she fizzles out, it seems to me you still have to give a kid with her potential a shot."

"Wow," Lynne replied. "Okay, okay. You've thrown a lot at me, Dave. I really appreciate your calling me and I'll think about this, and I'll talk it over with Roger when he gets home from work tonight. We'll let you know whatever we decide."

They said their goodbyes, and Lynne hung up the phone and returned to where she had been studying the Bible. But it was impossible to recapture her trance-like concentration from earlier, and after some minutes of trying, she finally took the portable cassette player into the kitchen, pushed the 'play' button, and set about the business of preparing dinner.

Still invisible to her, the grand, cosmic gears of transformation had engaged and had slowly begun to turn. Their work would take some time, but the eventual results would be undeniable, and Lynne Ruhl's world would never be the same.

It seems the greatest, most pivotal moments of our lives always come at us like this, disguised as common, unremarkable events, like everyday visitors. They don't arrive loudly or with fanfare, not in fancy suits or flashy neckties, not in evening gowns nor in fashionable, sequined styles. They tap gently on our door and we, preoccupied with the relentless though mundane concerns of our lives, greet the things as the humdrum visitors they appear to be, dressed in jeans and tee shirts as they are.

How many of them have we dismissed, unaware of their significance, oblivious to their fantastic power and promise, which we cannot see until after we have embraced them, until after they have changed the course of our lives and years have passed?

Is there a visitor at your door, right now, that might later prove to be life changing?