

Chapter 1

THOUGHTFUL AND RUTHLESS

THE TRIGGER POINTS FOR THOUGHTFULLY RUTHLESS

My first realization about thoughtfully ruthless leadership occurred when Microsoft took a \$1 billion write-off in 2007 for the *red-ring-of-death* quality problems with Xbox. I was part of the Xbox leadership team, and we were in danger of becoming irrelevant unless we broke away from our strict focus on 16 to 22-year-old men in North America who liked shooting and racing games.

Don Mattrick became the new CEO of Xbox, and he epitomized a thoughtfully ruthless leader. In my first meeting with him, he said, “Val, what are your top ten priorities?” I rattled off five, but then he interrupted me and said, “Here are mine, and here are five more for you that you need to add to your list.” Every morning Don thought of the three biggest issues that prevented him growing his business and focused on those that day. He monopolized meetings to drive his agenda, which frustrated everyone around him, but he focused on the goals of the business, ruthlessly and relentlessly. We learned how to make meetings more effective by building *Don time* into the agenda wherein he could share his thoughts and ideas, but the team could still cover the topics that needed to get decided as a group. He knew how to not get sucked into the tactical day-to-day execution and stay focused on long-term strategy.

When I shared some of my views on the leadership team and the changes that needed to happen for us to turn around the business, he said, “Let’s spend a day on this next week.” I went to his home in Vancouver, Canada, and we talked for a day about how the business would grow in the next three years and what the implications would be for the leadership and organization. We created a plan for what we would change when. That became the basis for the three-year plan for the Xbox business.

Don made his first million dollars at the age of 17 when Electronic Arts bought his games company. He turned around Xbox from a billion-dollar loss to a multibillion-dollar profit. Don is the embodiment of a thoughtfully ruthless leader.

My second trigger happened in South Lake Union, a neighborhood in downtown Seattle that had been transformed when Amazon moved its headquarters and 15,000 employees there. In my first week at Amazon as the human resources director for the fashion business, I spent time with a cross section of people to understand the business and the culture. I asked everyone the same two questions: (1) “What does it take to be successful here?” (2) “What advice do you have for someone new?” one of the buyers gave me the best advice: “Be ruthless with your time, and get used to continually letting people down.” That phrase stuck with me as I learned more about the Amazon culture, which moves at lightning speed while orbiting around one central force: the customer.

When I worked at Land Rover in England, our planning meetings were in four-year increments; we reviewed monthly and quarterly sales, faxed from the various global dealerships. There was a huge contrast! Land Rover was compiling data from faxes, whereas with Amazon customer behavior was analyzed by the keystroke, within seconds and often instantly, so you had to move fast. Pixel-level decisions were made to appear on the Amazon home page (the gateway) and each subsequent page, which are then analyzed to determine the success or failure of a product or promotion. Priorities change, and you have to be able to make on-the-spot decisions for where you will focus your own time and how you will lead your team. I learned to become more ruthless.

The final trigger happened the day I brought my twin daughters home from the hospital. My eldest daughter was 23 months old, making me the mother of three daughters under the age of 2. Just like a juggler learns to juggle with more and more balls, I quickly learned to meet the demands of

two newborns and a toddler, returning to work as an executive at Microsoft after six months of time off. The secret, I discovered, was being ruthless with my own time, energy, and resources. My husband and I had to ruthlessly make sacrifices. What could we do personally, or where could we outsource? Obviously, we would outsource noncore activities, such as folding and organizing laundry, and use that precious time to play with our daughters. We had to be ruthless.

I first wrote about being thoughtfully ruthless when I launched my own consulting practice. It was the first special report I wrote, and I have had resounding feedback from my clients about its impact. This idea packs a punch, but first let's explore what happens if you are only thoughtful or only ruthless.

WHO IS THOUGHTFUL? WHO IS RUTHLESS?

If I were to ask you to think of a thoughtful leader, it would likely be easy for you. A thoughtful leader knows everyone's name and wants to be liked by everyone. And everyone does like such a leader, until it is decision time, when the thoughtful leader sees a fast-approaching wall and slams the brakes on hard and stalls. Tough decisions often paralyze thoughtful leaders.

One leader I worked with used to deliberate for weeks over decisions that could have been made in minutes! When I asked him what was causing the delay, he said, "Val, this decision won't be popular, so I am trying to figure out a way to make it more palatable for everyone." Even during team meetings, members of the team would say, "It's time to make a decision; let's make the call right now." But still delays occurred, and the competition raced ahead while his team got more frustrated with inaction, and his reputation suffered. Thoughtful leaders are often loved most by junior employees, tolerated by managers, and loathed by executives.

Thoughtfulness is drummed into us from an early age:

- Think about others before yourself.
- Don't hurt someone's feelings.
- Go to your room and think about what you have done.

These are all phrases most of us have heard growing up, so when it is time to be a little less thoughtful, no wonder it can feel so out of character.

There are three definitions of thoughtful leaders:

1. They consider the intended and unintended consequences of their actions.
2. They deliberately focus time and attention on the needs of others.
3. They are reflective of past results so they can repeat successes and learn from failure.

Now think of a ruthless leader. I'm sure you can think of one or two. You may already be scowling. A ruthless leader appears not to care about the implications of their actions and will regularly put their needs in front of others, either consciously or unconsciously. Ruthless leaders are not always liked, but they are often respected.

The serial executive investor Carl Icahn is a ruthless leader. From a distance, he is a disrupter, ruthlessly shaking up the companies he invests in and the boards he is a member of.

There are three definitions of a ruthless leader:

1. They make bold, sweeping decisions.
2. They pay no regard to how people may react to them.
3. They provide unfiltered and often unsolicited feedback at every opportunity.

Ruthless leaders are often loathed by more junior employees, feared by managers, and respected by executives.

CAN YOU NAME ONE?

The far more interesting question is whether you can name a thoughtfully ruthless leader. They are neither too thoughtful nor too ruthless but intentionally spend their time, energy, and resources to reach their goals. They are the ones who have catapulted themselves ahead of their peers and the competition. You may be pleased to hear this is not like a permanent tattoo. It is a state of mind, a learnable (and forgettable) trait, so there is hope. The impact of being too thoughtful or too ruthless will either put the brakes on your company's results, drive your employees crazy, or drive yourself insane.

I have worked alongside some of the top leaders in the world's most innovative companies, and I have seen the brilliant, the mediocre, and the downright cringe-inducing actions of leaders. Those actions have left either a shambolic wake or phenomenal results that redefined how we play and interact with technology.

Thoughtfully ruthless leaders do not leave their business results to chance. Every decision is deliberate and every moment is purposeful. They do not worry whether everyone will like them or agree with them. Making people happy isn't one of their goals; yet, they attract and retain happy people because of their relentless focus and predictable business success. Many leaders focus on the market conditions or the competition as reasons for lack of growth. Yet the single biggest variant is the leader and how they prioritize their time and energy personally, with their leadership team and with the rest of the organization. It's easy to get sucked into the current issues of today's customers, products, and financial results, but leaders who know how to dedicate time to looking ahead one to three years will outpace their competition.

The thoughtfully ruthless leader has confidence, happiness, and clarity on his or her life priorities that nothing and no one is permitted to interfere with. It was unheard of for an executive from Microsoft to work remotely; yet, Don Mattrick made that a condition of accepting the CEO of Xbox role. He would remain based in Vancouver, Canada, and travel to Redmond, Washington, two or three days a week. Don prioritized his family time and taught the leadership team how to work remotely and that being present at the office wasn't a factor in galvanizing a leadership team to transform the Xbox business.

By now, you may be wondering what being thoughtfully ruthless with your time, energy, and resources really means and the impact it will have on your life and business. Let's explore that now.

YOUR TIME, ENERGY, AND RESOURCES

Thoughtfully Ruthless with Your Time

In a constantly connected world, delivering real-time information and keeping up with e-mail, texts, tweets, posts, shares, likes, and pins can seem as futile as sweeping up a pile of leaves on a windy day. You get a fleeting, brief moment of satisfaction, but then the technical wind blows, and you

are back where you started with the important and unimportant demanding your attention, like a new pile of leaves in front of you. A spontaneous approach to managing your time will not work, not unless it is scheduled and planned spontaneity is built into your overall plan! If you do not value your own time and plan it in a thoughtfully ruthless way, then other people won't either. Many leaders I work with to improve performance tell me that they don't have enough time at work, and they are frustrated that they don't have enough time to spend on their favorite activities at home. At this point, I usually share a little secret, and it is one that some people have to hear several times to believe. I will share it here, since you paid the cost of admission:

You are the single greatest barrier to spending your time as you want to.

At this point, many leaders go on to tell me how their company, boss, job, project, and life are different; how I couldn't possibly understand; and how they would love to change, but it is just not possible right now. I then refer them to my thoughtfully ruthless secret.

Many people have their e-mail set to populate their laptop or their phone with new messages every few minutes. You would never get any work done if you let people knock on your door every 120 seconds, but that is what you are doing with your e-mail, unless you control when and how you receive your messages. Many of you will likely have a version of a to-do list when what you really need is a to-don't list to prevent you from focusing on the wrong activities. Great intentions are never enough, you need the discipline to commit and to make it happen. I often work with leaders to create a *lost discipline list*, which I designed to help leaders understand why they haven't achieved past goals and what got in the way. You can sometimes create this in five minutes, though it may take longer if you truly don't know why you don't achieve what you set out to achieve. You may also need to discuss it with someone who can give candid feedback.

If you are not careful, it is easy for your calendar to take on a life of its own or for your multiple virtual in-boxes to take over your time. But leaders who are thoughtfully ruthless dedicate specific times of the day to respond to their complete virtual in-box and to systematically plan their calendar to accelerate their strategic goals, rather than being victimized by time and

circumstance. Many leaders get dragged into the here and now of everyday execution, therefore neglecting to look at the horizon months or years out. Thoughtfully ruthless leaders dedicate time to considering strategic options and alternative scenarios for their business so they can accelerate growth faster than the competition.

Being thoughtfully ruthless with your time also means being in a job that plays to your strengths, that inspires and energizes you. Otherwise, you are simply wasting a precious opportunity to develop different experiences and skills.

Because we all want more time for what matters most to us, I am always on the lookout for those who successfully achieve that. When I worked with Robbie Bach at Xbox, he was the president of the Entertainment and Devices Division. He was well known for protecting his family time—he was home for dinner every evening and coached his three children's basketball teams. I asked him if he always had this approach and how he maintained it during some highly successful and highly turbulent times at Microsoft.

In my early years at Microsoft I was working incredibly hard and long hours and eventually it became too much. I considered quitting. Back in the early days, there was no remote e-mail access, so working late meant being in the office and that took its toll. A life coach I was working with told me I needed to get control of my life. So he helped me develop a plan where I would always be home for breakfast and dinner, I would coach my kids' basketball teams, and I planned all of my travel domestically and internationally nine months in advance. I created a system: I would travel twice a year to publishers around the world. They knew when to expect me, and if they needed my personal time outside of that, we would talk on the phone, meet at a conference, or they would come and visit me in Redmond. The day-to-day meetings that I ran were easy to control. It was harder if it wasn't my meeting, but I had to get used to just walking out of meetings at 5:30 and telling people that we needed to reconvene.

Clearly, Robbie was both thoughtful and ruthless with his time.

With 153,650 books on time management available on Amazon today, something is missing though. It is not enough to be thoughtfully ruthless

with your time. You have to be thoughtfully ruthless with your energy and resources, too.

Thoughtfully Ruthless with Your Energy

I have noticed a recent trend with some executives that I work with. Many are telling me they are exhausted, overwhelmed, and not spending their energy where they would like to. This leads to them being miserable, no longer inspiring their teams, and even unproductive. High-performing leaders often leap from one significant all-consuming project to another without taking a moment to breathe in between. It isn't possible to run a marathon as a connected series of 100-meter sprints; your body couldn't handle the pace and intensity. Yet leaders push themselves and their teams to do the corporate equivalent and then are surprised when people burn out and quit.

Google's CFO Patrick Pichette mentioned in his resignation letter that he wanted to climb mountains with his wife, but not every executive has to quit to lead the life they want to lead right now. They just need to manage their energy in a thoughtfully ruthless way.

There are three critical ways to becoming more ruthless in a thoughtful way with your energy:

1. Be sure you are in your perfect job doing perfect work.

Your role may have evolved from when you first accepted it, your business may have significantly grown or declined, or you may have new responsibilities. This is why you need to periodically ask yourself what makes your eyes sparkle in your ideal job and whether you are in it right now.

2. Check your ROE.

Business leaders know about return on investment, but they rarely know about return on energy. Do you spend excessive energy on thoughts, activities, purchases, possibilities, or pondering that is simply not worth the effort? Wasted energy can't be retrieved; it is gone forever. Children are a great role model here; they do before they think and waste very little effort considering or contemplating. If you can be more ruthless by not wasting energy on unimportant thoughts, you will free up your capacity to focus your energy to spend elsewhere. Companies need to do this just as much as individual

leaders. One example of this wasted energy with little return occurred at a video games studio where I used to work. The energy wasted on an easy-to-solve problem baffled me. Not only did this waste energy of employees complaining about the lack of music, it also was unproductive, as employees couldn't concentrate or be creative because there was too much distraction and background noise in shared office space.

When Microsoft bought the Rare Games Studio from the three founding brothers, they were making games for Nintendo. Xbox bought them to broaden the types of games you could play on the Xbox. I joined them to manage the transition after the acquisition. Rare Games was a company of musicians, artists, and animators in a small village in the middle of the British countryside. Xbox was part of the (then) largest company in the world. When I talked to employees about what changes they would like to see to help them make better games, almost all said, "We want to be able to listen to music when we work."

Working creatively requires focus, attention, and inspiration, and that was sometimes hard in wide-open barns that housed each game team. What I thought would be a simple and fast resolution had history and complexity behind it. Teams had previously been allowed to listen to music, but on one fateful day, one of the founders was trying to talk to one of the members of the games team and he didn't respond because he had headphones on. That was the day that the music stopped, and nobody thought that it would ever change back due to the determined nature of one of the founding brothers. It took some persuading, but eventually the leadership team agreed to bring back music. During my tenure, I introduced several changes and new benefits, and I increased communication and training, but what I still am known for is bringing back the music.

When I visit a new client, I like to stand in the coffee line and listen in the hallways. What I hear indicates where people are spending their energy. Are they talking about customers, products, and profits or drama, hearsay, and complaining? What would be the equivalent to music while you work in your organization?

3. Burst your bubble.

It is easy to stay inside of your bubble. Inside your bubble are your longtime friends, your trusted work colleagues, and people you know

well. It is comfortable and easy, but frankly, it won't continually stretch, grow, and energize you. You see it at every conference and trade show you attend: the same people connect and socialize with the same people. But if you want to stay energized and inspired, you have to burst your bubble of comfort and continually strive to expand your circle of influence at work and in your personal life, in what you read and listen to, and in the events you attend. How many of the business colleagues and close confidants you have today did you meet in the last 12 months? If you are always with the same people, you won't get inspired with new ideas, experiences, and growth opportunities.

Knowing who you aspire to be connected to and focusing on getting the right introductions will rapidly catapult your success as a thoughtfully ruthless leader. When I quit my corporate career to launch my own consulting business, I had one great fear: I didn't know anyone in my network who I aspired to be. I needed to seriously upgrade my network of thought leaders who had successful solo practices. I joined the Million Dollar Consulting community and immediately found what I needed and was looking for. The community that Alan Weiss has created is a remarkable place for getting connected with other thought leaders and learning from those who were already successful solo entrepreneurs. Now I have established many great new friendships, peers, and mentors who have helped me rapidly grow my business.

Chapters 7 and 8 further explore how you can be thoughtfully ruthless with your energy.

Thoughtfully Ruthless with Your Resources

Imagine your company two years from now; how much will you grow? What will be your revenue, profit, services, and products? Now, look at your current leadership team and organization. How would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 in regard to your capacity and capability to lead that future organization? If the answer came very easily to you, then already you have a head start on many of your peers who simply get too caught up in the immediate needs of their business to even start to think about their future business.

CrossFit founder Greg Glassman went from being a personal trainer at Gold's Gym to building a multimillion-dollar business and creating a billion-dollar industry. He told me, "Leading a business in high growth is like operating a rocket ship where you have to change how you operate it on the ground, at 5,000 feet, 10,000 feet, and 100,000 feet. Only a select few leaders can adjust to the altitude change and succeed."

Many start-ups forget about the lofty goals and timeline they set out in their pitch documents and immediately get sucked into execution, which undoubtedly leads to missed deadlines and disappointed investors.

Mismatched employees are one of the top distractions for many of the leaders I work with. Incompatible leaders spend months or years on the wrong leadership team in the wrong job with the wrong priorities. They are miserable, and their teams often are, too; yet, rarely does the situation get resolved as quickly as it could. I have never had a leader say that they regret acting too fast with a decision about their people, but I have met those who regret acting too slowly. Hesitancy often prevents action when leaders are faced with someone on their team who has incompatible skills or the business has simply outgrown them. This misery usually occurs when the leader has not spent enough time on team assessment and action to rebuild the team. You may have a great team that can deliver results, but the differentiation that creates breakthrough results can be determined by one simple question: *Do you have two potential successors on your team who could take your job?*

If you don't have two potential successors, you will fail to scale personally, and your business growth will be held back. You cannot grow and take on new responsibilities if you don't have strong successors to delegate to. Thoughtfully ruthless leaders will make it their number one priority to build and galvanize their leadership team in the first 60 days. You can learn exactly how to do that in Chapter 9; skip there now if you cannot wait.

I was walking around a fast-growing start-up in Silicon Valley in 2015. The CEO was giving me a tour, and he was telling me a third story about how his company used to be a year ago—how it was small enough that everyone could sit around one table for lunch, and now it was really difficult because his team had expanded and was spread out over two floors of his building. I stopped him and asked how he saw his business growing in two years. I flummoxed him. He couldn't answer. I suggested to him that he needed to create powerful stories about the future and tell those stories

because that is what will inspire and motivate his team to grow. This isn't much different from what I'm teaching my daughter about how to ride her bike: you have to look where you are going, not where you have been; otherwise, you will crash into an unexpected obstacle.

Being thoughtfully ruthless with your time and energy will create incredible strength, but unless you also focus on your resources, you will fail to scale your business. Focusing on resources will help you to reinvent how you lead as your company grows.

One example of a desperately needed reinvention was when Xbox had just written off \$1 billion for quality problems with Xbox 360, and Nintendo's Wii was the hot item for the holidays in 2006. Xbox had a reputation as a hard-core gaming device that was close to becoming irrelevant outside North American teenage boys.

I worked with the Xbox leadership team to create a radical approach to achieving the goal of broadening the appeal of the Xbox from a narrow demographic of gamers that liked to race cars and shoot things to a broad, appealing family-entertainment device. I designed and facilitated an innovation program to broaden the minds and possibilities for Xbox.

We brought together a diverse group of leaders, partners, and creative and technical experts to a remote location and broke every cultural rule in the Microsoft book of doing business: no laptops, no PowerPoint, and no spreadsheets. Invitations were earned by expertise, not seniority in the business. We engaged in three days of play, immersing ourselves in customers' lives, competitors' products, and the broader entertainment industry. Small teams had artists to visually capture thoughts and ideas. A science fair midway through allowed people to hear others' ideas and build on them (not ridicule or trash them). It culminated in a verbal pitch session venture capitalist-style to a panel of executives back on campus at the end of the week. One of the ideas was for a 3D camera that you could control with your body and your voice. This is how Kinect—which sold 10 million devices in three months, setting a new Guinness Book of World Records for the fastest-selling device of all time—was born. Kinect has now sold 20 million devices and repositioned Xbox as an entertainment hub for the living room.

It is not enough to simply know your vision; you have to create understanding and belief within your leadership team, organization, and investors. This generates agreement about use of resources. Friction can occur when there is confusion about the current strategy and the plan

to get there. You hold a powerful role in galvanizing your team around the strategy and engaging and inspiring everyone behind it.

HOW THOUGHTFULLY RUTHLESS ARE YOU?

By now, you may have a picture in your head of how thoughtfully ruthless you are. To help you gain a more accurate understanding, I am sharing my assessment here so you can find out for yourself. In my work with CEOs, leaders, and entrepreneurs, I developed a leadership assessment that I use at the start of many of my partnerships. I have provided a shortened version here. For complimentary access to the full version, go to www.valwrightconsulting.com/thoughtfullyruthless. Follow the directions, and see where you fall on the thoughtfully ruthless spectrum.

Rate each question:

- 1: Strongly disagree
- 2: Disagree
- 3: Neither agree/disagree
- 4: Agree
- 5: Strongly agree

Section A

1. I am satisfied with my discretionary time._____
2. I am proactive with meeting commitments and rarely miss deadlines._____
3. I have regular slots of open space on my calendar._____

Section B

1. I am energized and inspired at work._____
2. I surround myself with people who inspire me, energize me, and make me laugh._____
3. I have an enviable inner circle of advisors who offer me support and candid feedback._____

Section C

1. I am thoughtfully ruthless with the allocation of budget and people to deliver priorities._____
2. I hold the bar high for my team and take appropriate corrective action._____

- 3. I have a vision and plan for how my organization will grow in the next two years._____
- 4. I reward achievements that accelerate company, team, and individual goals, in that order._____

Calculating Your Thoughtfully RuthlessSM Leadership Score

First take your score for each section, then calculate your thoughtfully ruthless percentage scores for each section and overall.

	Score	%
A – I am Thoughtfully Ruthless with my time	___/15	
B – I am Thoughtfully Ruthless with my energy	___/15	
C – I am Thoughtfully Ruthless with my resources	___/20	
I am a Thoughtfully Ruthless leader	___/50	

Interpreting Your Results

- > 80% —Congratulations, you are a thoughtfully ruthless leader; you know how you focus your time, energy, and resources. The rest of this book will show you how you can further capitalize on these strengths and continue to grow your business. You may have individual questions to focus on. But don't stop reading this book now; you will still learn valuable lessons and benefit from the exercises. You can also get your team to complete this assessment, and you can help them become just as thoughtfully ruthless as you!
- 41–79% —You have areas in which you are not being thoughtfully ruthless. Identify which are causing you the greatest pain or those that are the quickest to change and implement them tomorrow. Once those changes are in place, pick another two and focus on those and continue until you are satisfied.
- < 40% —Watch out, you are out of control! You are at risk of burning out, failing, and driving your organization crazy. Talk through your results with someone you trust and build a fast plan for addressing the top two areas of concern for you. Skip to Chapter 8 for some immediate action steps.

If you want a more in-depth version of this thoughtfully ruthless leadership assessment, go to www.valwrightconsulting.com/thoughtfullyruthless.

What does it mean if you are strong in one section and weak in another? If you have strength in all three areas, congratulations. Often leaders have one or two areas that need greater focus and attention (see Figure 1.1).

Fail to Scale

If you are thoughtfully ruthless with your time and energy but not your resources, it is likely that you will fail to scale personally, and your company will not grow as fast as it potentially could.

Miserable Burnout

If you are thoughtfully ruthless with your time and resources but not your energy, you will likely be miserable and close to burnout. I see this with many high-achieving executives. They can relentlessly dedicate their time to growing and investing in their business, but they put their business too far ahead of their personal needs and hit a wall of performance that they sometimes struggle to recover from without help.

Exhausted Workaholic

If you are thoughtfully ruthless with your energy and resources but not your time, you likely have an efficient, future-focused organization, and you are inspired and energized, but you probably are a workaholic or a martyr. The

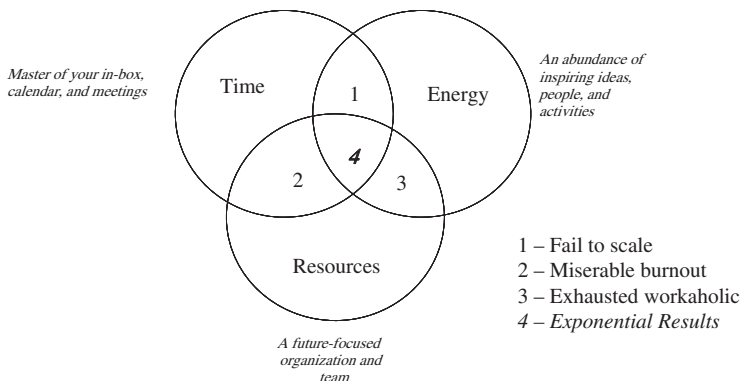


Figure 1.1 The Thoughtfully Ruthless Trifecta

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danger is you are setting a terrible example, and it is unlikely that you can sustain this over a long period of time without making yourself ill.

Once my clients have completed this assessment, they then dream of the possibilities for their ideal life. We create their ideal approach to their work and their life, dreaming of the perfect day, week, and year—along with their ideal allocation of time—and compare it to their current reality. I share this along with other practical tools for increasing your thoughtfully ruthless scores in Chapter 11. Go ahead and skip to there now if you cannot wait.