

1



“A” GAME

Alex checked his reflection in the full-size mirror by the front door one more time. He couldn't remember exactly when the navy blue sports coat and white dress shirt became his uniform, but it has become his signature look, and it suited him well. The look always reminded Alex of how far he had come. He headed outside, and his Tesla reacted as he got closer to the car. He settled into the driver's seat and reversed down the long stone driveway, wove through the perfectly manicured streets of his gated community, and waved at Gertie at the guard gate before turning onto the main road. He always says hi to everyone, whether a resident or a worker, rich or poor. Alex believed that you shouldn't just communicate with people; you should *connect* with everyone. The most important thing in the world to Alex is people.

Years ago, when he was looking for office space, two things were important to him. One was being close to home, which benefited him and his family, and two was that it had a lot of windows that benefited his teammates at work. He wanted his culture to feel open and free so everyone could enjoy working together and enjoy life. Alex devoted his day to taking care of all his *people*. The office on Gardner Street was the perfect fit. The open-concept space featured exposed brick walls, trendy lounge furniture in the center, and private offices and conference rooms settled behind floor-to-ceiling glass walls. The laptop-friendly workstations built into the wall and designed to look like classic workbenches were Alex's favorite feature.

He wanted his office to feel like a really cool home-away-from-home for all his teammates to enjoy.

It was Saturday morning, so the office was quieter and slower than usual, but there were still a few people buzzing around the space. He didn't ever have to ask anyone to work extra, come in early, or work weekends. Everyone sort of did this on their own. It was part of the culture from day one. Everyone, for the most part, was completely dialed in and connected to the business. Alex built an amazing business from humble beginnings using some simple but non-negotiable strategies.

Alex walked into the first conference room and checked his watch—8:30 a.m. All his regional managers would arrive in the next hour. Alex was a simple man and found security being where he needed to be long before anyone else. He wanted that to bleed through his culture. He was a stickler for time. *On time is late, and early is on time* was his favorite mantra. He paced the room, carefully pushing in the chairs, adjusting the table slightly, and checking his reflection again in the large window overlooking the parking lot.

Alex believed in meetings. He didn't believe in long meetings, but he believed in getting the team together as much as he could face-to-face. He loved Zoom too if it meant his team could talk and stay connected. But his face-to-face meetings were his favorite, and he didn't mind the extra expense; he thought it was well worth it.

All of his meetings were run the same way on purpose and didn't involve a lot of preparation. Everyone knew the basic template. Alex didn't like surprises, so his meetings were run very efficiently, and the rhythm of them was predictable. His regional managers grew to love the predictability of his meetings and knew the flow very well. Everything was mapped out, and every regional manager knew the expectation of how to run their region. These meetings could practically run themselves.

Alex started with one store but now owned 150 stores with 2,000 employees that brought in more than \$300 million in revenue. He believed each store needed its own dedicated crew of about 12–15 people. The goal was to build a perfectly constructed team that operated at a championship level. The *crew* was what made each store tick. This meeting with his 16 regional managers was everything to Alex. Each regional manager had the task of recruiting, developing, and retaining top talent and building each crew at each store they managed. It was the only meeting he ran himself. This one was his pride and joy, and he felt it was his most critical meeting to keep his team and culture strong and positioned for growth.

He looked up when he heard a knock at the conference room door. Two tiny, uniformed women with large rolling carts stood smiling in the doorway. He ushered them in and helped them set up the goodies in the middle of the table. Two boxes of bagels, two dozen donuts, three trays of muffins, three portable cardboard containers filled

with black coffee, a few flavored creamers, napkins, plates, and two bowls of assorted fruits. He looked at the table and hoped it would be enough for the 16 attendees; he always struggled with estimating how much he'd need for events like this. Alex had placed the order with the local breakfast cafe the night before with special instructions to have it delivered by 9:15 a.m. and "don't forget the vegan and the gluten-free people!"

He tipped the women generously and went about setting up the breakfast foods in a precise and organized manner. After a few minutes of rearranging the food on the table, the first wave of regional managers began to arrive. Ben from region 3 and Carla from region 4 walked in and greeted Alex with firm handshakes and a smile.

Alex, known for his simple but powerful ideas, created a way to differentiate their stores from any other brand and each store from another. He created a numbering system where he classified each region based on the sequence of when the store opened. The lower the region number, the longer it's been open.

The others arrived quickly after, and the conference room began buzzing with quiet conversations. Alex loved it. He would join in and chit-chat often but just loved to observe his work family coming together. Everyone helped themselves to plates loaded with breakfast treats and found their seat around the conference table. Alex looked around at his team of regional managers and felt a

sense of pride. The co-leaders and teammates of his winning team had arrived.

Everyone was happy, smiling, and interacting with each other, just like it was a family reunion. Culture, his people, and team pride were everything to Alex. He let them connect for as long as possible and then brought the meeting to order. Alex believed the time to connect with your peers socially was critical to the brand, and although he never said it publicly, he thought it was the most important part of the meeting.

He kept his meeting short because the real reunion would happen after the regional meeting at the bar located right across the street from the office. The bar loved Alex, and Alex loved the bar. He kept a running tab, and his team could just sign for the drinks or food, and the bar billed Alex once a month. It was just another small detail that made Alex lovable to his teammates. He was the employer of choice, and it was easy to see why once you joined Alex and his team, you were a teammate for life. He was always looking for ways to take care of his people.

Almost 20 years ago, he had taken a chance and invested his life savings, his very last dime, into a hardware store in the quaint downtown area near his home in San Jose. That was store 1. Now, Alex was the owner of 150 stores around the region and took pride in hiring the best of the best to run each location. Alex took it upon himself to recruit and select each regional manager himself.

He knew these hires were his most critical hires, they needed to be the right kind of leader with the right kind of heart. His company was known as a dream job and routinely found a place on the “Best Places to Work” list in almost every business publication.

He loved telling the story about how he was writing his business plan and had to come up with a name for this hardware store he never knew he was going to start. He tossed around a ton of ideas, but nothing seemed to fit. And then, when he couldn’t possibly think anymore and needed to walk away from it for a bit, he tossed his shirt into the dirty hamper and was getting ready to jump in the shower. He looked quickly at his reflection, and his eyes shot directly to the tattoo of a redwood on his arm. It was a tribute to his mentor, Mr. Hank. There was a meaning and a story behind the redwood tree, and Alex got the tattoo on the first anniversary of Mr. Hank’s death. Redwood Hardware, Alex decided. *Perfect*. Over time, the chain became known as Red’s throughout the community, but the story and meaning behind the name were always very special to Alex.

Alex believed in “owners” and that everyone who works for him should own something. Alex always said, “Owners stay longer than renters.” He decided against the franchise model, but every one of his regional managers and store managers share in the profits. It had been a while since he brought all of his regional store managers together, but before he went on vacation, he wanted to get them together to express his gratitude for their hard work over the last

year and create a space for authentic conversation, as well as feedback, questions, and concerns. Alex was thrilled with where business was now, but the vision was for a national footprint, so he couldn't afford to become complacent.

Alex believed in slow and steady growth just like a tree. He believed that if you planted it in the perfect place, it would thrive, and if you nurtured it, it would grow big and strong and reach its full potential. In the beginning, you are taking care of the tree, and soon enough the tree will be taking care of you.

Once he had this region the way he wanted, Alex believed the whole country was their next feat. Alex would always say, “Business is just like a tree; you need slow and steady growth.”

Everyone knew that Alex was always quoting this phrase. He got the nickname Tree Boy around the office because he was always using analogies around landscaping, flowers, and gardening. It all started when Christy made a surprise visit to the store and accidentally called him one of her favorite nicknames, Tree Boy. Shawn had heard the endearing nickname, and Alex knew it was over. By the end of the day, all of his teammates were using the nickname. He pretended to hate it, but deep down he loved it.

In the beginning, nobody remembers exactly when, but Alex spent weeks in his work shed creating a masterpiece. He put hours of blood, sweat, and tears into his craft, and

the end result was a gorgeous, handcrafted sign made out of redwood that said,

“We are not in the hardware business, we are in the people business.”

Now, as a tradition for each new store, that original sign is flown to the new location and hung in the back office by Alex himself before anyone is hired.

Alex wasn't ashamed of the fact that he always had tears streaming down his face as he hung the original sign. Red's Hardware has a great reputation in the industry. Some industry experts call it a cult. Alex initially was very uncomfortable with that language, but he later understood that it was intended to be a compliment. Now, Alex jokes that the root word of *culture* is *cult*!

In the early days, Christy and Alex ran the store and built the foundation together. Christy always ran the books and was in charge of the numbers. But working together caused some serious problems for them as a couple. Christy was always stressed out, and Alex was learning how to lead. Alex learned after a few years that his business will always be a reflection of him. If he wants his business to grow, he must grow first. When they were ready, they hired Shawn.

Alex remembered the tall, extremely shy, lanky, nerdy college kid walking in for an application, and Alex wasn't

so sure he'd be the right fit at first. Christy loved him right away as he had a background in math. She also had a more personal reason for wanting to get Shawn on board as soon as possible: Shawn would be her replacement, and she knew that when he was hired, she could step back and step into the role she desired. As an only child, having a large family was very important to her. This was Alex's baby, not hers. Alex saw potential in Shawn and immediately went to work developing and cultivating his confidence. As a former college golfer, Alex knew that confidence was the difference in his teammate's performance.

Shawn was a numbers guy. He was a quick thinker, was great at mental math, and had a very analytical brain. Over time, Alex would learn that when there were numbers to crunch, P&L reports to read, or accounts to be balanced, Shawn was the guy. Initially, Alex hired Shawn because he knew that Shawn was strong in areas that Alex was not. As Shawn learned more about the company, he mimicked and mirrored the way Alex interacted with people, and soon it became contagious. Alex would always preach to Shawn, “We are in the people business, Shawn!” Shawn bought in from day one and became a pillar on the team.

Alex opened the meeting as he always did, with a statement as everyone chimed in. “We are not in the hardware business, we are in the people business.” Then he went on by expressing gratitude for their hard work and reporting on some of the highlights of each store. This meeting was not about facts and figures, but about really listening

to the needs and concerns of his team. He then effortlessly flowed into listing the company's key performance indicators and asked for feedback on the new technology and software that was being implemented in some of the stores. He paid special attention to his regional managers who had just been promoted to make sure they were executing "The Red's Hardware Way."

After quickly reviewing the store's safety and security guidelines, the best part of the meeting began: the open-ended conversations. Alex wanted to hear some good news about each store: "Always give me some good news first." One by one, each regional manager gave a positive report about their region and each store. The open-ended conversation was critical because each regional manager would alert Alex of what they needed or what problem they needed taken away.

As CEO, his number-one focus was not what his regional managers could do for him but, rather, what he could do for his regional managers. Alex knew that if he served these 16 professionals well, his entire organization would run like a well-oiled machine.

Although Alex saw the world as a master landscaper and gardener, there was one tool he despised: the machete. He taught his regional managers, "You can't walk around with a machete all day tearing your people down. A machete is a tool used when you have lots of things to cut. We are coaches, and coaches walk around with a whistle instead.

We build our crews up. We don't cut down. Sometimes we have to gently prune, but it is to promote growth.”

Once the meeting transitioned to the conversation, Alex was all ears, and he and Shawn took copious notes to make sure he gave his regional managers exactly what they needed.

Aside from the amazing financial benefit, they knew they mattered and were important to the brand. His culture was cult-like: everyone had the same mindset, and Alex had duplicated himself through his leadership and therefore built an amazing culture. But everyone was allowed their freedom at the same time. When you were ever confused about what to do or even in doubt, the question became, WWAD. What would Alex do? And all of a sudden, the answer was clear.

Tyesha had an idea of how one of her stores could participate in the town's annual community cleanup, Joe vented his frustrations about the company's cumbersome return policy, and Greg proposed an idea of hosting weekend workshops where kids could come and learn to use specific tools or build things like birdhouses. Alex wanted them to be transparent and speak their mind. As the room buzzed with conversation, Alex listened closely and used his iPad to jot down notes and ideas. If an idea was good and could help the business, Alex would act immediately and give the proper credit to the creator of the idea. His teammates knew that Alex listened to

his people. Alex believed in a de-layered organizational structure. “There is no Big I and a little you. Redwood Hardware is about us,” he would say.

Alex was the undeniable leader, but these regional managers knew they helped build this thing too. When the room quieted down, Alex asked each regional manager how they were serving their communities. Each store had to be involved in its community and be philanthropic, but he left it up to the regional and store managers how they’d contribute to their individual communities. “If you own something, you stay longer than if you rent.”

Alex knew that although each store must have the same culture, he left the product mix up to each regional and store managers because he trusted his leaders to know what people buy in their area. Each regional manager was responsible for overseeing 8–10 stores each and ran their meetings with the same simple template that Alex used. The idea was that if they all ran their meetings the same way Alex ran his meetings, the culture should bleed down to each store.

“Tell me about your crews. Tell me about the managers who are running the stores daily. Are you noticing any issues or obstacles?” He knew the key for a strong culture was for his regional managers to care for their people the same way Alex cared for them. He even allowed each regional manager to run a tab at a local bar and offer their crews a place to hang out. And the regional managers took

care of the bill. Shawn paid attention to this bill, because he and Alex knew from experience, the larger the bill, the stronger the crew.

“Are you making sure your new hires are onboarded to the crew in the right way? What practices have you put in place to help your team understand our common goals?” Alex asked these questions every time and appreciated that his regional managers came prepared with a response. These regional managers were his hires, and he looked for professionals who were likable and knew how to motivate and inspire others.

Carlos shared with the group that some of his managers have been having one-on-one meetings with each of the teammates and defining goals using the SMART methodology. Jen, one of the newer managers, mentioned that one of her 10 stores was starting to struggle after one of her managers hired a toxic employee who quickly and drastically altered the company culture in just the few short weeks since she started. She candidly asked around the table for ideas and suggestions on how to help her store manager build the trust back in their team. Alex and the team reminded her about the differences between a company with a high level of trust versus a low level of trust. It was like one voice; they all got it and believed the same things.

It was important for Jen to communicate with more experienced regional managers, especially with Alex present.

In a strong family, the older kids modeled good behavior because they knew the younger kids were looking up to them. Alex just watched as his seasoned regional managers began to coach Jen on the impact and what to do to fix a bad situation.

He would just listen like a proud papa, as his older regional managers helped mentor and coach the younger regional managers. Sometimes Alex would get emotional as the gravity of what Red's Hardware had become hit him. When the seasoned ones are stepping in to teach the new ones, that is when you know you have a strong culture.

The final recommendation was that when there are trust issues between teammates, the overall energy of the business decreases, and so does productivity.

"A low-trust organization produces highly stressed environments, which is never good for business," Alex reminded her seriously. He repeated exactly what his regional managers had to say but shifted the conversation to an in-depth talk about accountability in the workplace, transparency, and Jen's ability to help rebuild this trust with intentionality.

"We are in the people business, and we love our people, Jen. I've seen how you love your people. But we can do that to a fault. We can't afford to allow one person to destroy what we built. What *you* built! A bad fit should

be obvious. What happens at your store happens to all of us. I hate firing people. I hate those meetings where we had to let people go too, but they were necessary. The best part of having a strong culture is that bad fits are obvious.”

Alex knew what Jen needed to do, but he had the patience and self-control to allow her to come to her own obvious conclusion. Alex needed Jen to own it. Alex learned years ago that to grow and increase capacity he couldn’t get into the short grass, and he surely can’t micromanage.

Alex offered a final word: “Sometimes people are toxic because they are toxic, but I’ve learned some people have some personal things going on, and that is what makes them toxic. Jen, you need to find out what is going on with your crew member who may be hurting outside of work. Be decisive based on what you learn.”

“What about the chemistry in your stores?” Alex asked, looking around the room. He listened carefully for words like *collaboration*, *execution*, *quick shifts*, *creative thinking*, *big-picture thinking*, *detail orientation*, and *interpersonal skills*. From what he was hearing, it seemed like his regional managers were taking the time to hire managers and build teams to fit with the company culture and to add to the chemistry of the store. “Don’t grab random people; they must fit the culture, and everyone must complement each other’s skill set. If we are in the people business, hire good

people.” Alex reminded them. *A beautiful landscape is made up of all types of vegetation, and they work together perfectly.* And so should your crew.

“Experience is not always a good thing. Sometimes it’s hard for people to unlearn their bad habits. Hire for attitude and train for skill,” Shawn chimed in.

Alex always asked the same questions at each meeting so his regional managers knew what was important to Alex and the success of the business. He always focused on the six non-negotiable traits of a winning team. He believed if his stores mastered these six things, their stores would be unstoppable. Everyone knew these six traits were their responsibility to cultivate:

1. Common goal
2. Communication
3. Accountability
4. Trust
5. Chemistry
6. Commitment

He closed out the meeting by reminding each regional manager that they were hired not just because they could run a hardware store, but because they were exceptionally good with people. Their strengths and their commitment to building relationships, seeing people, hearing people, and creating teams with purpose and vision are why they were such an invaluable part of this team. He thanked

them again for their time and their commitment and reminded them that he'd be on vacation for a week but that he was just a phone call away if they needed him.

“Run your store like you own it!” is how Alex closed out every meeting.

Everybody filed out of the room and to the bar across the street for lunch and drinks. Alex usually joined for the fun, but today he had to run to grab his family and catch his flight. He stood in the doorway and said goodbye to each manager as they left. When Yumiko came up to him, he motioned for her to step aside with him.

“Are you excited to start wedding planning?” Alex asked. The small Asian woman smiled and pulled out her phone. She scrolled through pictures of the wedding venues, and Alex refrained from commenting on the gorgeous landscaping of the outdoor venue.

“I wanted to let you know that we want to take care of your honeymoon. Wherever you want to go, we will take care of it. If you need to use the jet to get there, we can make it happen.

Yumiko put her hand up to protest, never one to take anything from anyone. But Alex stopped her.

“No, no. Don't even try it. Christy and I are so excited for you and Aiguo; it's been a long time coming, eh? It

would be our pleasure. Just let us know what you need,” Alex said, smiling from ear to ear, and Yumiko nodded. She knew Alex, and she knew his generosity had no end. She knew if he said he was going to send them on their dream honeymoon, there was no point in resisting.

Alex loved to serve his people; changing lives is what he lived for. He grew up with an absent father, but the way he healed himself was by being incredibly loyal to his people, above and beyond the norm. He did so much for so many people who worked for him, and nobody knew about it most of the time. *Your character is defined by what you do when you don't think anyone's watching*, he would always tell his kids. He didn't care how big or important someone was. He had made more money than he had ever hoped for and loved to share it with his people. Alex didn't need anyone to know how he helped or served his people. He did it because it felt right.

When the room was empty, Alex threw all of the plates and empty containers into the trash. Alex wiped down the table with a paper towel, turned off the lights, and shut the door just as Tamara was pushing her cleaning cart toward him. She looked at the conference room, and it was spotless. She was thankful but not surprised, because Alex did this every time.

No job was too small for Alex. He built this business from the ground up, and he was still the same guy today as he was 20 years ago.

“I was going to clean for you!” she said, in her strong Caribbean accent, pointing to the spotless conference room.

“Oh, no worries, Tamara, I got it. Wasn’t that much. That group doesn’t make a mess. Thank you, though. The rest of this place looks awesome,” he said, gesturing around the office. “How’s school?”

“Good! I study hard and stay up late. Almost done with my classes. Two months,” she said proudly. Alex smiled and put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m proud of you. But you should be proud of yourself.” She beamed, and they said their goodbyes. He settled back into the driver’s seat, started his Vacation Mode playlist, and headed home.

Reflection

Alex made it a top priority to connect with his team and infuse a family-oriented atmosphere, ultimately creating a culture built on a foundation of trust. Spend five minutes brainstorming how you can better connect with your people.

