

*Chapter 1*

# **Turmoil**

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## The Calendar

Ruth looked at her calendar and groaned. What she saw made her head pound and her stomach clench. Her laptop screen was covered in colors representing meetings from early morning to late at night. The packed days of back-to-back meetings extended weeks into the future. Ruth knew she could not keep up this pace and wondered why all her hard work was not producing the results needed to sell her company. Why was her team not able to accomplish the goals to do the things that would take BBDI, Inc. to the next level and allow her to take a much-needed break?

Ruth had started Breaking Boundaries Data Innovation (BBDI) eight years earlier and built it into a multimillion-dollar enterprise serving a global audience. The shared vision and mission of the organization was to create a world that relies on truth to make better decisions. The foundation of the company's data innovation solutions was software Ruth designed herself. She was proud of the partnerships she created to accelerate the company's growth and her clients' growth. Now she needed her executive team to step up if they were going to accomplish the objectives set by the board of directors.

Ruth shuddered as she stared at her packed calendar. Time is a strange thing, she thought. When you are starting your company and trying to find clients, time moves sufferingly slow as you think about all the ways the business can change the world and also the ways it might fail. But after years of hard work creating a successful company,

when it's finally time to sell and reap your reward, there doesn't seem to be enough time in the day to do what matters most.

Her number-one priority right now was to figure out what was wrong with her executive team. The team was not working well together, and Ruth was overwhelmed by the aggressive goals and timeline the board had set for her company. She had chosen every board member and picked long-time professional friends and colleagues who would hold her accountable and challenge her to take her leadership and vision to the next level, but in this case she felt they were taking the accountability thing to an unrealistic level and were hurting her more than helping her. She had great relationships with each board member but when they met collectively the dynamic seemed to change. Personal relationships gave way to ego and power trips where board members jockeyed for who could challenge her the most and take credit for the sale of the company. After all, it would look great on their bios to be a board member of a company that everyone in the industry followed and sold for a huge financial gain. She had heard many stories in the past about boards who abused their power and even removed the company's founder, but she couldn't believe this was even a possibility for her. Yet with boards and business you just never know, she thought, and she was more stressed than ever.

This company was her fifth baby, in addition to her four children at home. She had built it with years of sweat, grit, and hard work, and was determined to finish

strong and create a successful exit. Ruth certainly cared more about her company than her board did but she couldn't put her finger on what was wrong with her team. Things were simply not working, and she was desperate to figure out how to get her team to perform at the level necessary to release their new product offering that would allow BBDI to assume a place of dominance in the market, while carving out an entirely new category for business decision management software (BDM). Just like Robert and Kate Kestnbaum were pioneers of database marketing in the 1980s, leading to the rise of the CRM, Ruth and her team would redefine business decision management with a proprietary combination of data innovation solutions and powerful database management. But they had to get a working product out in time before anyone else hit the market and took away their competitive advantage.

Ruth inhaled deeply and exhaled. She shrugged her shoulders as an attempt to loosen up her body the way she did years ago during pressure-filled moments of her college volleyball games. It was time for her weekly executive team meeting, and she needed to clear her mind and focus. She closed her laptop, picked up her leather-bound journal with her notes for the meeting, and started to walk down the hall to the conference room. Her executive meeting began every Wednesday morning at 7:30 a.m. She expected each member of the team to be there and be ready to begin on time. She could see a few faces through the glass door of the conference room as she walked down

the hall and was looking for one person in particular but didn't see her. Was Paula there? And if not, how many of the team decided to take the easy way out by logging in online instead of participating in person? The way Paula had been acting lately, Ruth doubted she would see Paula sitting in the conference room.

Paula was the president of BBDI, Inc. She was a powerhouse business strategist and a true thought leader in the data innovation marketplace. Ruth depended on Paula to help drive the organization's operations, product launches, sales, and strategic business objectives, as well as the people on the executive leadership team. But Paula had been acting strange lately. Ruth didn't want to seem paranoid, but she had started to pick up on some disengagement signs from Paula over the past few months. Paula normally did not contradict Ruth's decisions in front of the executive team but lately this had become the norm. When Ruth asked Paula if anything was wrong, she always responded, "Everything is fine." Somehow Ruth didn't believe her.

Ruth opened the glass door to the conference room and scanned the faces at the table. She saw everyone she expected to see either in the room or online. The only face she did not see was Paula's. No one in the group was talking. People were looking at their laptop screens, drinking coffee, tea, or energy drinks, and waiting for her to start the meeting. At least everyone had their cameras turned on. Ruth's executive assistant, John, looked at her and

mouthed that he had texted Paula to see if she was having technical issues but had not heard anything back yet.

Ruth smiled at John and calmly said good morning. She chose not to say anything about Paula's absence and sat down at the head of the table while checking the time on her phone. It was 7:26 a.m.. Ruth filled the awkward silence by asking a few of the team members how their day was going, but she didn't hear a word they said because thoughts of Paula's absence were filling her mind, frustrating her.

Time inched forward to 7:30 a.m., and Ruth knew she needed to start the meeting. However, with everything that was happening with the new product launch, she did not want the president to miss the important discussion topics. The fact that Paula was not setting a good example for the team frustrated Ruth. This was a time when the group needed to raise their level of commitment, not drop their standards of excellence.

As the time turned to 7:32 a.m., Ruth let out a sigh of disappointment and started the meeting.

## **The Meeting**

Ruth welcomed the team and began the meeting by asking for their updates. Each leader shared the progress on their objectives. Ruth listened and made notes. None of the team asked questions or talked about how their work impacted each leader's teams cross-functionally. No one

talked about any challenges they were facing. Everyone focused on their own responsibilities, but there was no discussion about how their progress or lack thereof impacted their overall goals and team success—just one-sided updates, in which the team was just checking the boxes to get the meeting completed so they could get on with their day.

After the VP of HR finished presenting, Paula’s voice came through the conference room line before the next person could start. She apologized for being late and, off camera, said she would share her update last.

The meeting continued, but Ruth’s frustration was growing. She did not understand why Paula would be late and appear to be disengaged from the meeting. She wrote a note to connect with Paula privately later in the day and continued listening to her team. As she looked around the conference room table, it seemed that the group’s eyes were glazed over. “Where did the spark in this team go?” she thought to herself. “Why does it feel like there is no passion or purpose in them?”

When the meeting ended, Ruth felt like she wanted to cry. She was a strong woman, but lately that strength was being tested, and she felt her confidence waver. The company she created was crumbling instead of growing stronger, and she felt powerless to do anything about it. Her team no longer cared about their work or each other, and it couldn’t be happening at a worse time. Ruth shook her head. “Why are they abandoning me to do this on my own?” she thought.

## **The Elevator**

After completing her morning meetings, as Ruth was leaving for lunch she stood in front of the elevator thinking about her frustrating team meeting and her apathetic team. Thankfully her noon meeting was canceled, or she would have been sitting at her desk working through lunch as usual. She was deep in thought when the elevator doors opened and she came face to face with Paula. They stood staring at each other for a moment. Even though Paula looked like her usual self, her energy was different. Ruth tried to make eye contact but Paula wouldn't look her in the eyes. Ruth asked if she had time for lunch. Paula smiled politely and declined as she whisked past Ruth with a promise to connect later in the day.

Ruth got on the elevator and watched Paula turn into Mitch's office before the elevator doors closed. Mitch was the Vice President of Operations, and his team was behind on their deliverables for the new product launch. Ruth hoped Paula was headed to his office to offer guidance and support. She would make sure to ask Paula about Mitch when they connected later in the day.

