

UNIQUELY YOU

TRANSFORM YOUR
ORGANIZATION
BY BECOMING THE LEADER
ONLY YOU CAN BE

RON KITCHENS



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All author proceeds from this book will be contributed to programs that embrace the belief that *the greatest force for change is a job.*

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Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

Brené Brown

Author's Note

Over the past thirty-five years as a businessperson, elected official, philanthropist, economic developer, and organizational consultant, I have had the privilege of working with some of the most amazing women and men in America. This book is dedicated to them, with gratitude for the lessons they taught me. I share these lessons with you to help you lift up future leaders—especially the next generation, who I believe will be the greatest generation our planet has ever seen. Millennials, this one's for you!

You will notice that I end each chapter with sections titled “Always Forward” and “Your Unique Journey.” These include questions intended to stimulate you to understand your own unique life experiences and how they can serve you, your organization, and your future on your unique journey.

Always forward,

Ron Kitchens
Lyndon Hill
Kalamazoo, Michigan
September 1, 2018

Foreword

COFFEE AND VISIONS

..... HEATHER BAKER

Early November 2006, I found myself in the job market. Or rather, life thrust me into it. Given my role as a stay-at-home mom, over the prior ten years I'd considered myself "voluntarily retired." But life's twists and turns found me about to become the divorced mother of three young children who liked to eat and to live in a warm house. It was time for my employment reentry.

Job prospects seemed dubious. I was an Ivy League graduate who had majored in history and now lived half a country away from my prior business contacts. Potential employers could easily view my decade-old experience as an organizational consultant as outdated. And workplace technology had changed a lot. On paper I appeared overqualified or underqualified, depending on who was looking.

Would anyone take a chance and hire me?

Ron Kitchens did.

His name came up during my preinterview with a Midwest staffing and recruiting firm. My interviewer informed me that Ron Kitchens at Southwest Michigan First was seeking a receptionist, and I was a potential candidate. The name didn't mean anything to me at the time, but I was told that Ron Kitchens was absolutely "awesome" and that I would love him.

Truth be told, I did not enjoy chitchatting on the phone, nor did I know how to make coffee, as I didn't drink it. Yet. But I immediately underwent a talent evaluation and discovered that my talents just might complement the Southwest Michigan First team. I met with Ron Kitchens the following week.

As I arrived at our meeting place, my nerves ascended right along with the hotel escalator. It had been fifteen years since my last job interview. Most of my conversations over the past few years had been with humans under age ten. I was led to a table where a warm and gracious gentleman stood to shake my hand. He invited me to sit. Immediately I felt at ease.

Over bacon and eggs, Ron Kitchens and I spoke at length about our past experiences, the mission of Southwest Michigan First, and what the future might hold for both of us. I explained my reservations, and he assured me that my fit with the team was most important, and that my missing skills could be taught. He liked to introduce new employees through the front desk or concierge roles. By answering the phone and greeting guests, I would learn the why, how, what, and who of the business, in preparation for other responsibilities.

Ron Kitchens quickly became Ron.

I answered my first phone call for Southwest Michigan First on January 8, 2007. The ride since then has been exciting. And unique. Ron is always leading our community and organization forward.

I'm an outsider to the Midwest and the world of economic development—both comprising the ground in which Southwest Michigan First is rooted. So I bring some objectivity in what I share. I had previously worked at for-profit companies; now I was supporting an agency with an altruistic mission. Today I am officially a raving fan.

After my first month and a half on the job, Ron approached me with an idea—the first of many—that would become his first book, *Community Capitalism: Lessons from Kalamazoo and Beyond*. It would tell the history of Southwest Michigan First and its impact on the community, the first book by a leader of an economic development organization with all profits going toward its mission: “The greatest force for change is a job.” Ron had noticed that my writing was much better than my coffee, and he asked me to do research and editing for the book.

The Kalamazoo area was—in some cases, still is—the global capital of celery, paper, corsets, Upjohn Company medicines, Shakespeare rods and reels, Gibson guitars, Kellogg's Corn Flakes, Checker taxis, and Stryker knee replacements. But hard times hit in 1999. The community fell into a desperate recession even before the 2009 worldwide “Great Recession.” In that last year of the twentieth century, General Motors closed its local 2.2-million-square-foot automotive stamping plant, laying off four thousand people. Six paper mills closed in the following two years, putting 1,200 more

people out of work. Another seven hundred employees lost their jobs when National City merged with First of America. Perhaps most devastating was a series of mergers and acquisitions involving the Upjohn Company, Pharmacia, and Pfizer, eliminating an additional four thousand high-paying jobs.

Southwest Michigan First responded with its “community capitalism” approach, strengthening community facets of place, capital, infrastructure, talent, and education. Arriving on the scene in 2005, Ron inherited more than a few economic development projects already in the works and was tasked with:

- Filling the revamped 1.9-million-square-foot stamping plant—now known as Midlink Business Park—with manufacturing and logistics companies.
- Attracting more than fifty new and startup design, high-tech, and biopharma companies to the business campus of the Western Michigan University Business Technology and Research Park.
- Assisting over a hundred startups in a fifty-eight-thousand-square-foot life sciences incubator.

He put the Southwest Michigan First team into overdrive, attracting and retaining companies. Since then he has ensured service to more than three hundred companies and helped create thirty-eight thousand jobs. Ron found himself:

- Part of the team that crafted the Kalamazoo Promise, a revolutionary college scholarship designed by local philanthropists for public-school graduates.

- Senior partner of the \$65 million SWMF Life Science Fund, which at the time was the largest-ever private capital fund for local economic growth, according to the *Financial Times*.
- One of twenty regional early adopters of targeted team engagement practices for strategic hiring and training.

The story spread. December 2007 found Kalamazoo, Ron, and community capitalism in the pages of *Fast Company*—the first time an economic development group appeared on the magazine’s Fast 50 list. And Ron’s book? Thousands of copies sold, and it became a bestseller, garnering accolades in the field of economic development and named 2008 Global Innovator by Cornet Global.

Southwest Michigan First began earning kudos for engagement practices introduced under Ron’s leadership—its morning kickoff meetings, called “scrums,” family-first policies, strengths-based assignments, and more—about which you’ll soon read. In 2008 the *Wall Street Journal* recognized Southwest Michigan First as one of its Top Small Workplaces. In 2012 National Best and Brightest Companies to Work For picked Southwest Michigan First as its Elite Small Business, and our organization has made the list every year since. The 2016 American Business Awards rewarded Southwest Michigan First with a gold Stevie as the Non-Profit Organization of the Year. In that same year, *Outside* magazine picked the agency as one of its top three Best Places to Work. In 2017 it was certified as a Great Place to Work, and in 2018, for the seventh straight year, the organization was awarded an elite award from West Michigan’s Best and Brightest Companies to Work For.

In 2009 the Southwest Michigan First board tasked Ron to come up with a plan to grow legacy leadership in the community and expand diversity of its C-level membership with respect to gender, geography, age, and industry. Ron came back with an out-of-the-box vision—a must-attend, day-long leadership conference like those offered in New York, Chicago, and Atlanta, jam-packed with top global speakers. Ron boldly challenged the team to invite bestselling authors such as Simon Sinek, Sean Achor, Nancy Duarte, Jon Acuff, and Bob Goff of *Love Does* fame. They reached out to Scott Harrison of charity: water, Lyn Heward of Cirque du Soleil, Senator Corey Booker, leadership gurus such as Patrick Lencioni and Jon Gordon, young entrepreneurs such as singer Caitlyn Crosby and Hannah Brencher, and branding expert Denise Lee Yohn. And Ron mandated that the day open to AC/DC’s “Hell’s Bells” blaring through the loudspeakers. “We will invite everyone we know, and thousands of people will come together to laugh, cry, sing, and be inspired,” said Ron. The event was called Catalyst University.

Almost 350 people attended that first event in 2010, when Simon Sinek of *Start with Why* fame took to the stage. The next year five hundred came. By 2016 we outgrew our original venue and had to move to a hockey rink, growing to three thousand attendees in 2018. If you’re interested, why don’t you purchase a ticket for you and a friend to attend?

Ron introduced yet another big idea—development of a consulting unit that came to be called Consultant Connect. He was proud of the intellectual property our team had amassed on economic development, leadership development, team engagement, and organizational capacity. The time had come to share it with others. He hoped Southwest Michigan

First could become like a teaching hospital for growing the capacity of leaders like us. Initial services involved custom events around the United States to connect economic developers with site consultants, then grew to accommodate programs built around the expertise of our team of consultants. In 2011 Consultant Connect serviced almost twenty external clients, and today more than three hundred groups engage annually at tailored events around the country.

As time moved forward, community stories, Southwest Michigan First strategies, and Ron continued to find themselves featured extensively in national and international media outlets, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Fast Company*, CBS, NBC, Fox, *USA Today*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, the *Economist*, and National Public Radio. But as the global economy changed, news outlets downsized, merged, or closed their doors. So instead of waiting for others to tell the region's news, Ron wondered, why not draw again upon the skills of the team—this time in writing, in coordination with other news sources—and do the unthinkable: start a business magazine? Yes, at a time when many print periodicals were failing, he bucked the trend and started the bimonthly, high-gloss, locally focused *269 Magazine*. More than sixty advertisers showed up, as well as news stories—Ron loves a good story!—featuring 420 companies and 247 leaders in over 140,000 copies. Readers can sense his oversight as publisher on every page.

We see much to celebrate in Southwest Michigan. In 2017 and 2018 alone, plans for \$1.35 billion of investment have been announced in Kalamazoo and the greater Southwest Michigan region. Chief among them are expansions at Pfizer and Stryker, bolstered by Southwest Michigan First's

economic development services. Pfizer will be constructing a \$465 million, state-of-the-art medications facility—one of the most technologically advanced operations of its kind in the world. Stryker is investing \$110 million in its Portage facility, which will lead to the creation of 260 high-paying jobs by 2025. These follow a recent multimillion-dollar expansion of Newell Brands at its design and testing facility in Kalamazoo, after its 2013 attraction announcement to the area’s design-centric workforce. These are just three of over twenty current or recent major projects in the community that have kept the jobless rate below 4.5 percent and at times as low as 3 percent—well below the region’s historical average—over the past two years.

Along with state and local government investment, over the years Ron and Southwest Michigan First have brought together dedicated corporate, community, and civic partners again and again to encourage successful outcomes. The Southwest Michigan First board has grown to a dynamic and nimble sixty-some members—men and women who lead Fortune 500 and other great companies with roots in Southwest Michigan. For its expansion, Pfizer was the first to take advantage of the Good Jobs for Michigan program, signed into law by Governor Rick Snyder and championed by Southwest Michigan First. The attraction of Newell Brands to Southwest Michigan precipitated the creation of the Richmond Institute of Product Design and Innovation at Western Michigan University to further address corporate demand for product design and engineering skills. The organization saw opportunity for greater community alignment as it passed ownership of its life science incubator to the Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D.

School of Medicine. Respected partnerships and outcomes like these led the governor to appoint Ron as trustee of the Kalamazoo-based research university.

Things like these do not happen by accident when Ron Kitchens is around. They are unprecedented achievements brought to fruition through calculated strategy and focused efforts.

Ron and I have become great coworkers, partners, catapulters, cheerleaders, and friends since that fateful day in 2006. I thank him most for helping me find my own unique self. I believe by this book's end you will too.

And in case you're wondering, I can make a good cup of coffee now. Keurig makes it easy.

0

Changed for Good

LIVING YOUR TRUTH

Incredible change happens in your life when you decide to take control of what you do have power over instead of craving control over what you don't.

Steve Maraboli

The first forty years of my life I spent terrified that people would discover the truth about me. That I was a phony, a fraud, not the person they assumed me to be. This fear both drove me to succeed and left me paralyzed. What if people found out that all they knew of my life was a highlight reel? I had never shared the truth with anyone—not my closest friends, not even my wife.

But all of that changed one brisk autumn evening in 2003 at Manhattan's Gershwin Theatre. I had heard that *Wicked*

was one of the best shows on Broadway. I had never gone to a Broadway show before, but I had some time to kill, so why not? For those unfamiliar, the musical is the origin story of the witches of Oz, long before Dorothy would arrive in her tornado-borne house. One of the characters, Elphaba, has green skin. The audience knows that she is destined to become the Wicked Witch of the West, but she starts out a good witch. As the first act unfolds, she begins to grow angry that she has to put on a front to appear normal and earn the affection of her peers.

The dam holding back Elphaba's emotions breaks in the first act's final song, "Defying Gravity," in which she sings about limits others place on her because of their perceptions of her. She finishes by stating that their approval comes at too high a cost.

Intermission began, the song's words still echoing throughout the theatre. I sat with tears streaming down my cheeks, crying over a song about a green witch. I'm not talking about national-anthem crying or I-can't-believe-I-am-a-father crying. This was deep, guttural, ugly crying. The only other time I ever cried tears like that was upon the death of my grandfather.

This was a story I had never heard before. Yet I had known it my whole life.

I was Elphaba. Green and different. I was unlike my peers, but I knew that somewhere others must have a similar history.

My story began when two teenagers ran away to Mexico to get married because they were far too young to do so in California. My mother was not even old enough to drive when I was born. She was so scared that she lied about her age on my birth certificate for fear that the hospital would call Child

Protective Services or, worse yet, her father. I wish that were the worst of it. The plot grows darker with the intrusion of learning disabilities, abuse, family mental illness, poverty, and, in the end, my crippling fear of being discovered as a fraud.

When I had walked into the Gershwin Theatre that night, all of these unsightly details had been safely tucked away for decades, painted over with a veneer of marketplace success and respectability. I had been traveling the country speaking at sold-out conferences and leading a multimillion-dollar organization. I lived in a luxurious house on a golf course with my all-American family.

But I was a walking paradox. I was surrounded by Ivy League graduates; it had taken me eight years to graduate from state college. My friends were from families of influence and education; I was the dyslexic son of a dyslexic father who never learned to read. As an adult I had achieved financial wealth. But as a child I had climbed inside a Goodwill donation box to steal school clothes.

During intermission at the Gershwin I struggled to regain my composure. Throughout the second act my mind spun. Sitting there, I realized that life—with its journeys, struggles, and main characters—is always speaking to us. It is telling us who we are, who we are not, and who we are meant to be. Our stories shape who we are. We cannot escape them; we can only embrace them.

I walked out of the theatre a new man that night. No longer would I carry a suitcase of shame about the story that formed me. No longer would I live in fear that people would discover my past. No longer would I harbor anger at those who hurt me. It was time to stop running from my story and start listening to my life.

But living that commitment—a transparent life, setting aside old fears—proved to be an even more difficult journey. Living fearlessly is a muscle that has to be developed daily.

As I have looked back on my past and present, I have realized that they are inextricably linked. Each of us has lessons that life is trying to teach us. But we must listen without judgment and self-loathing. We must embrace our unique stories and let them shape us as fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, entrepreneurs and business leaders. In fact, these last two roles are the reason this book exists—to show how my past life experiences have revolutionized my leadership, often without me even realizing it. I want to teach you also how your story can transform you into what only you can be, the unique leader your organization needs.