



VAL WRIGHT

THOUGHTFULLY  
*Ruthless*

THE KEY TO EXPONENTIAL GROWTH

WILEY



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*For Andy,  
for your love, friendship, laughter, and boldness to move across the  
other side of the pond, and utmost unwavering confidence in me.*





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# FOREWORD

In 30 years of executive and entrepreneurial coaching around the globe, I've observed that people tend to begin their day in one of two ways: It's either yet another glorious opportunity for success, exploration, and personal growth; or, it's a long, slow crawl through enemy territory.

Mind-sets inform behavior, whether consciously or subliminally. My dogs' mind-sets are always positive. If there's an open gate, run through it. Many people's mind-sets default to the negative. Let's do an analysis of the rewards and risks of proceeding through a gate unexpectedly found open. Is it a trap? Could there be danger lurking? What resources should we gather?

Of course, by the time these questions are meticulously answered, someone else has launched Uber, invented the iPhone, and won the Super Bowl. "He who hesitates" these days is no longer "lost," but rather a nonperson. In a turbulent world, we need speed and boldness and a *carpe diem* attitude. The metaphoric gate doesn't remain open for long.

Can you imagine John Donne (and Ernest Hemingway after him) taking the time and analytic intensity to write, "Identifying the populace for whom and not for whom the cacophony in the campanile sounds" instead of "For whom the bell tolls"? Yet in the age of big data and persistent turbulent times, I see too many people *slowing* their pace rather than increasing it.

Val Wright has opened the gates at firms such as Xbox, Starbucks, and Microsoft and then urged talented people through them. For a quarter century, she has fine-tuned what she calls "thoughtfully ruthless" approaches to better create and exploit opportunity by intelligently leveraging time, energy, and resources. She has coached, worked with, and interviewed leaders globally and found the wisdom in what I call *healthy selfishness*: If you don't put your own oxygen mask on first, you're not as able to help others and will eventually be useless.

The filters we are blessed with in the aging process, as the horizon becomes closer and we begin to regret what we might not complete, can be

used at much younger ages if you allow yourself the opportunity. Val doesn't assume the reader is damaged—as so many business books do—but does believe that there are behaviors and skills that aren't always understood, let alone utilized at the most propitious moments. That's why suggestions here such as avoiding *regret roulette* and *letting go of the mediocre* seem so obvious and useful, while also so neglected.

I've known Val for several years, and she is one of the true all-stars I've had the pleasure to coach and support. She practices what she preaches, in that she's forthright, fast, and factual. She suggests nothing that she doesn't practice herself and that I've seen a thousand successful people employ consciously or naturally. Val will drive you toward the *conscious competency* of ensuring that the techniques that follow can immediately and pragmatically improve your life and career.

The question that remains is whether you have the thoughtful ruthlessness to do so. That bell tolls for thee. . . .

Alan Weiss, PhD  
Author, *Million Dollar Consulting*, *Million Dollar Maverick*,  
and more than 50 other business books

# PREFACE

Not enough people can say I feel in control, I am achieving my priorities, I am energized and inspired, and I have discretionary time to use as I choose. Too many people are exhausted, miserable, and focused on the short term. Leaders who are *thoughtfully ruthless* with their time, energy, and resources will catapult themselves ahead of the competition. Unlimited energy, increased discretionary time to use as you choose, and a backup team who support you is your reward for being thoughtfully ruthless.

When I suggest to my executive clients that they need to be more ruthless, I often see them wince. It has connotations of being brutal, selfish, and heartless. Once I explain my definition of thoughtfully ruthless, I get more nods and acknowledgment that this could accelerate results. For me, being thoughtfully ruthless means managing your energy and resources by being direct, being imperturbable, and focusing on the long term, while recognizing that your time is precious and you can control it, ruthlessly.

I have been part of teams that broke the mold and created groundbreaking, innovative products such as Kinect for Xbox. This book will include that story as well as conversations with innovative founders, such as Gregg Glassman, who built the multimillion-dollar business of CrossFit Inc., which created the billion-dollar industry of affiliates, equipment, nutrition, and apparel. After starting as a personal trainer at Gold's Gym, Glassman catapulted his success by being a thoughtfully ruthless leader. You will also hear other executive insider stories, including how Amazon broke into the fashion industry and turned it on its head. Yet this book goes beyond storytelling and includes a tool kit of exercises, assessments, and proven practical ideas that a leader can implement in his or her business immediately to accelerate growth.

I have been accelerating growth for leaders in Fortune 50 companies for the past 23 years, and I have noticed that leaders who become thoughtfully ruthless make faster progress at changing behavior and letting go of lifetime

habits. In this book, I share my insights and conversations with executives from Fortune 50 companies and reveal how we did it, including our mistakes, successes, and advice.

The principles in *Thoughtfully Ruthless* go beyond the boardroom; as a mother of three small children, I exemplify being thoughtfully ruthless. This is not about work–life balance; you need to throw away the scales because they constantly cause you to evaluate and question your choices. This is about creating one life that you lead in a thoughtfully ruthless way, and I will share proven techniques to increase discretionary time, energy, and the ability to be imperturbable.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would still be floating around my head as a “perhaps-one-day” aspiration if it weren’t for the following people:

Jeannene Ray, Heather Brosius, Lauren Freestone, Michael Friedberg, and the team at Wiley. Your thoughtful feedback and great partnership resulted in a book that will transform how executives rapidly grow their businesses.

Alan Weiss, my strategic advisor, author of over 60 books and godfather of the most dramatic vibrant community of consultants, speakers, and authors in the world. Thank you, Alan, for continuously pushing and challenging me, and creating the ultimate community that I learn from every day.

My remarkable circle of clients, colleagues, and friends who kept asking me to write this book and cheered me across the finish line. Your positively relentless optimism is infectious.

My three daughters, Naomi, Keira, and Olivia, whose boundless energy, continuous curiosity, and love for everything adventurous teach me valuable lessons each and every day.

Finally, my mum and dad, for teaching me that anything is possible with the right confidence and support.



## **Part I**

# WHY YOU NEED TO BE THOUGHTFULLY RUTHLESS



## 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.