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## INTRODUCTION

### WHY IS LOW-HANGING FRUIT SO HARD TO SPOT?

*So much of what we call management consists in making it difficult for people to work.*

—Peter Drucker



### **Sand in Your Suitcase**

We have written this book out of frustration that you likely share.

We have had the great fortune of working with many successful CEOs of great companies who wanted to give life, not just lip service, to the phrase, “Our people are our most important asset.” When we work with their employees, up and down the organizational chart, in countless locations, and with every function, we hear, “Finally, someone is going to listen to our ideas to make our company better.” We are always struck by the palpable relief they feel.

Companies around the world have grown bigger over the years, but they have not become better. In fact, as most companies grow, they become *less* than the sum of their parts. Incredible advances in technology have not provided the Holy Grail of making work easier. Employees feel as though they are working harder than ever. Yet the companies they work for often

move at a snail's pace and are more conducive to stagnation than innovation—focused more on politics than on profit. This book is for those of you around the world who may (or may not!) love your company and your work but are frustrated at the obstacles that you face every day that stand in the way of improving productivity and profits.

Picture this: you are packing for a vacation. You carefully put everything you need into your luggage. You try to shut it, but the zipper has other ideas: It . . . will . . . not . . . budge! What do you try first? You try sitting on it. Maybe if you put all of your weight on it you can squeeze it shut. When that does not work, you have a choice to make, and they are two unpleasant options—spend money on a bigger piece of luggage, or leave stuff at home that you really need with you.

It is very similar to what happens at work—you can spend money to fix a problem *or* you can live with the problem and just do with less.

Let's go back to the part where you gave up trying to pack everything you needed.

The problem is that along with all your stuff, you were also packing air—a lot of it! You can't see it and you certainly don't need it, but you are still bringing it with you. That air takes up room and causes trouble. You have to take air you don't need rather than the clothes you do need.

Sure, you tried to get rid of some of the air—you sat on your luggage; you put all of your weight on it; you might have even rolled up some of your clothes (which squeezes the air out). But really, you gave up quickly and decided begrudgingly that you would pay \$8 at the hotel to have that shirt washed.

Air is very tough. So tough, in fact, that the air in tires carries the weight of our biggest cars and trucks! Not only is it tough, it fills any little pocket of space it can find.

But what makes air our worst enemy when packing is that it is invisible! Because we can't see it, we don't try to get rid of it. Just imagine if your suitcase were filled with red sand instead of air!

You would work hard to get rid of it. Instead of a bad compromise (\$8 to have a single shirt washed), you might have a happy result. You might get to avoid those ever-increasing baggage fees.

Companies “pack air” in their processes. A lot of it! And typically, managers and management practices give up way too quickly trying to squeeze it out. Yes, if it is the size of a hot air balloon, it probably gets attention. However, what about those thousands of little pockets spread throughout every process and activity? As your processes multiply over time so do the pockets of air!

We have helped thousands of business leaders find money to innovate, be more efficient, serve customers better, and grow their businesses . . . all by turning their invisible “packed air” into visible “red sand.”

Almost every business process and activity you can think of packs air—wasting time and money and forcing bad choices.

Management practices, which have not changed in decades, need a major overhaul. The last major advance in management was the development of “Lean” and “Six Sigma” (now usually described together as “Lean Six Sigma”). Those methods incorporated a scientific approach to improving productivity and profits. But Lean Six Sigma requires a big investment in resources and in time. So, while it can be useful for a few large-scale projects, it is not useful to get at the multitudes of air pockets buried deep in every organization. We like to think of Lean Six Sigma as a huge server farm good for big data crunching. What’s missing from many companies is the laptop approach needed for everyday problem solving.

This book is about practical ways to stop packing air! Most are simple. They do not involve expensive new technology or Greek letters (we are talking to you, Six Sigma!). Change your days by implementing a few or all of the actions in our book, and you will not only add to your company’s bottom line, you will get more satisfaction out of your work life!

Now it’s your turn! We have seen these actions work wonders for everyone from those in the corner office to those closest

to the work, from factory line workers in the Midwest to country managers in the Far East. Flip to any page and find a way to start using them individually—or collectively—today.

## Low-Hanging Fruit

*I don't look to jump over 7-foot bars: I look around for 1-foot bars that I can step over.*

—Warren Buffett

Low-hanging fruit is supposed to be easy to pick. You know the popular definition: Low-hanging fruit represents the actions that will improve your earnings without risk and without much effort. Many managers are convinced that after years of cost cutting, they picked their low-hanging fruit long ago. If the fruit was easy to pick, it would have been, right?

Wrong. Unfortunately, cost cutting often leaves the low-hanging fruit and instead just lops off branches without regard to what is left of the tree. True low-hanging fruit *is* within your reach. We have seen over the decades that harvesting low-hanging fruit produces bigger results with much less risk than those big projects on which companies rely, like strategic transformations and enterprise-wide systems! Talk about fruit that is precarious to reach!

Individual pieces of low-hanging fruit come in all sizes—from those worth millions of dollars to those worth just a few thousand dollars. Collectively, it is your growth engine! This book is your guide to harvest as much as possible!

## Humans Ruled the World by Harvesting— Now You Can Rule Your Company by Harvesting Ideas!

*All of us are smarter than any of us.*

—Ancient proverb