

Releasing Leadership Brilliance

breaking sound barriers in education

EXCERPT



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Chapter 1: Personal Brilliance—Knowing Yourself Gives You “Weight” for Flight

Who Am I? The Problem That Creates Urgency

Simon tells the story about why he is so driven to impact education.

One of my joys when I am home is to drive my children to school. I look forward to it because my parents were not able to do it for me because they were working to put food on the table.

My son Daniel, is a brilliant sixteen year old tenth grader. Thank goodness he’s not pushing to drive just yet. When I am not traveling, sometimes I have the privilege of driving him to school and one morning on the way to school at 06:45 AM I try to strike up a conversation.

Me: “How’s it going?”

Daniel: “Dad, it’s just another day.”

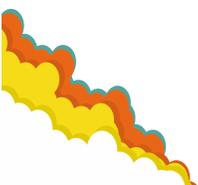
That’s it. No excitement, zero pep, and joyless energy.

Now I know that my son is quiet and unassuming, but there must be something to look forward to. I know that he works really hard in school and by no means was I comparing his response to my high school experience. It just seemed to me that he was coasting through another day.

In an instant I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up and my heart skip a beat. I was a product of a Catholic and public school education in the third poorest city in America – Buffalo, NY. I started working at twelve years of age for my godfather who owned 40 rental properties throughout the city.

But here was my son who was living in the best zip code in Orlando, Florida, receiving a private school education paid for by his parents with no discounts or assistance and the best he could muster up was, “It’s just another day.”

As we were driving along, I looked in his eyes and could see the life being sucked out of him because there was no expectation or anticipation to learn or discover anything that would shift his thinking. He was doing what he was told to do because everyone gets an education. But I was wondering what he was learning. As a father, and taxpayer, it scared the living daylights out of me.



After dropping him off, I came back home because I wanted to take Madison, our brilliant thirteen year old eighth grade daughter, to the local public school for an Honors Math tutoring session to keep her sharp and STEM ready!

On the way to school I started the same kind of conversation with her.

Me: "What is your favorite part of school?"

Madison: "Seeing my friends."

I tried my best to keep a poker face and not drive off the road. Then I pressed in a little more, to make sure that I heard her correctly.

Me: "What else do you like about school?"

Madison: "I love 7th period."

Me: "Why?"

She: "Because it's science class and the teacher always makes it fun. We get to discover new things."

WOW...now that was a very interesting response.

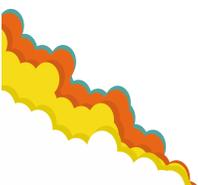
Then I decided to flip the question and asked, "What don't you like about school?"

Without hesitation my thirteen-year-old focus group of one said, "School is boring and not fun at all."

Now, here is where I start channeling my inner Liam Neeson, who played the driven father in the movie Taken. I am doing my best to connect with my daughter only to realize that her curiosity for learning is dying a slow death. When she was eight years of age she was tested as gifted but now at thirteen years of age and despite being put in eighth grade honors math and science, she's bored and not having fun at school.

Was this a phase she was going through? Did I drop the ball as a parent?

What was even more of a shocker to me is that both Daniel and Madison made the honor roll thanks to their mother who has a take-no-prisoner attitude when it comes to grades. Yet school was nothing special to them. They could take it or leave it.



This lack of joy for learning really concerned him. Simon realized his kids were graduating into a world where school, both public and private, trained them to take standardized tests but not to think critically so they could compete in the global marketplace. Instead, they were being shaped by a system that prided itself on conformity, standardization, and big data.

I'm not blaming the school nor am I pointing fingers at the system. As Sir Ken Robinson has noted in a recent TED talk, "If you're a teacher, for your students *you are the system*. If you're a school principal, for your community *you are the system*. If you're a policymaker, for the schools you control *you are the system*." (Robinson, 2013)

Most parents and citizens try to do their part to educate & prepare their kids at home. They want them to be successful in the bigger world. But when we bring our best to the system, no matter what shape that is, we want them to become better not duller. We don't want them to develop the perception that education is boring. That attitude can become a sound barrier that limits success.

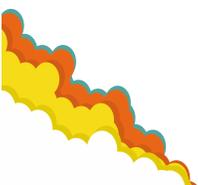
So the question we have to ask is: *Does the system support educators who are passionate about what they do? Do educators feel they are doing significant work? Do they feel and sense the weight of the calling in their lives?*

The Relationship between Weight and Personal Brilliance

Weight is the force of gravity toward the center of the earth. It is what gives an object mass and substance. It helps define the object for us. According to the Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum, there are four principles of flight – weight, lift, thrust, and drag. While lift, thrust, and drag are all “mechanical forces” generated by the interaction between an object and a liquid or gas, weight is a “field force.” A field force does not have to be in physical contact with the object to have an effect on it.

For humans, this kind of field force has everything to do with our attitude and thinking. Our weight (how we think and feel about ourselves) can either build us up or tear us down.

Carter G. Woodson, who wrote the *Mis-Education of the Negro*, states, “If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you



do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told...” (Reprint: Woodson, 2008)

Often in education there is a pull from the system to remain average and to stick with the status quo. Powerful field forces lower the bar of what teachers expect from themselves and their students. These forces emerge from system politics, distrust of authorities, standardization of testing, frustration about the pace of change, fear of independent thinking, risk aversity, and playing it safe. No one wants to be an outlier and those who speak up often have their wings clipped and then they surrender to the invisible power of these forces.

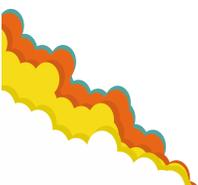
Educators can have all that is needed to soar to heights unknown but if the weight created by the system overpowers them, then it causes a downward spiral which leads to disengagement, discouragement, and disintegration of their brilliance.

In leadership, we see *weight* as the substance, grounding, and presence a person brings to the table. It can generate either positive or negative energy depending upon the attitude, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals.

When it is positive energy, we call it *Personal Brilliance*. It starts by knowing your authentic self as a person and then as an educator, discovering what core values and beliefs frame who you are, and establishing your cornerstones for living. This *weight* grounds you and helps you show up confident, competent, and courageous in your work. It inspires others to bring their best selves to every situation.

We believe that who you are is more important than what you do. Your belief system shapes your future and impacts everyone around you. Your journey to personal brilliance begins with looking at the core of your soul. What drives you? What motivates you? What is it about education that captures your heart?

Personal brilliance comes from finding your inner spark. When you are investing your abilities into something meaningful and congruent with your internal wiring, it creates a spark. That spark is a quality that causes your energy and joy to activate everyone around you.



Personal brilliance also comes from harnessing your presence. You do this by looking at yourself and considering how you intend to *be* before you *say* or *do* the work of leading others. This doesn't mean that you slack off in preparing substantive content. But research shows that 60% or more of what you communicate is delivered by your presence. So investing significant time in working on your own self-awareness and being-ness is essential to developing your own positive *weight* and personal brilliance.

In the end, personal brilliance starts with understanding and changing yourself before you try to change anyone else.

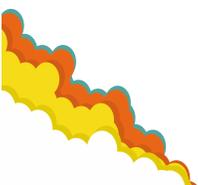
As an educational leader, do you have that spark? Do you have a burning desire to shape the future by unlocking the potential inside of young minds? Or have your wings been clipped by the headwinds of the system?

Unfortunately, some educators never soar because it's safer to stay in conformity. Conformity keeps educators from stepping into their full potential. They may think they are safe and comfortable, but failing to soar often causes them to feel drained and in some cases cynical.

We believe that when educators understand that these kinds of barriers are made to be broken, they will harness the positive forces of weight through their personal presence. That is when educators create a "BOOM."

Let us explain Boom. Tobias Rossmann, a research engineer with Advanced Projects Research and a visiting researcher at the California Institute of Technology, explained that as the speed of an object increases to sonic velocity, the sound waves begin to pile up in front of the object. If the object has sufficient acceleration, it can burst through this barrier of sound waves and is heard on the ground as an explosion, or sonic boom (Rossmann, 2002). In October of 1947, U.S. Air Force Capt. Charles E. "Chuck" Yeager became the first human to fly faster than the speed of sound (Cava, 2012).

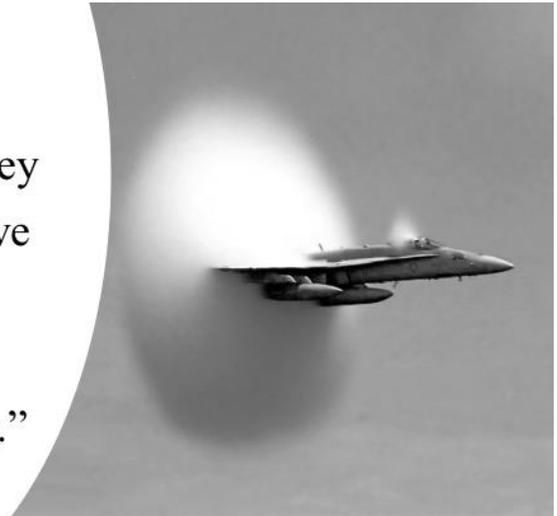
As Chuck Yeager sparked the boom that changed the history of flight, your leadership brilliance can become a boom to change your school system. It is about creating a boom that establishes a school culture of high trust and enthusiastic collaboration. It's about becoming a boom in classrooms by



challenging students to reach for excellence. It's about developing a boom in your community that supports and energizes families to help ALL children thrive.

How do you do it? Accelerate past the inhibiting forces of inertia and instead use the positive forces of self-knowledge and core beliefs to become the agent of change in the classroom and beyond.

“Educators create a BOOM when they harness the positive forces of weight through their personal presence.”



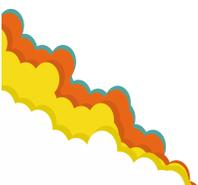
Break Your Sound Barrier: Real Examples from Real Educators

This is a story about Carol Conklin-Spillane who *grew into* her self-knowledge as she began her first leadership assignment as a principal at Sleepy Hollow High School in Sleepy Hollow, NY.

Her school was recognized as a Breakthrough School in 2014. But 22 years ago, things were quite different. Prior to her assignment, no principal had survived at the school for more than four years. Attendance polices were stacked against students in favor of hard rules and regulations that often made getting needed credits for graduation very difficult. Many school practices favored teacher interests rather than student needs. With the parade of principals before her, union contract rules filled the vacuum for leadership.

Carol was undaunted by what she found at the school. She intuitively understood that leadership starts with one's own mindset. And with her strong teacher background, she believed in sharing leadership, personalizing learning for students, and the power of good professional learning.

So she started the school turnaround by using the tools that she had available through union contracts to take the first steps into changing the culture. At the first faculty meeting she asked lots of



questions and listened deeply. She looked at where people sat, who spoke, who the power brokers were. Then she negotiated a deal with union leaders to change faculty meeting time from the contractual one hour per month *each* for faculty meetings and for department meetings to one and half hours per month for faculty meetings only. In lieu of departmental meetings, she promised to be available five days per week after school for anybody who had questions or concerns they wanted to discuss with her.

Then she did a survey of staff to see what their learning needs were and began to use the faculty meeting time for professional learning. She changed the seating arrangements in the meeting room to show how learning could be collaborative and cooperative. She clustered the nay-sayers into one group so that information from reports that came from the different faculty groups was proportional and other perspectives could be heard.

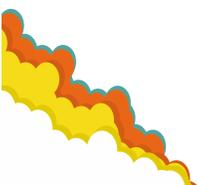
Carol modeled new teaching ideas in the faculty meetings. She listened to teacher insights and what motivated them. She recruited teachers to try out new ideas and added enticements for them to work with her. For instance, she conducted voluntary book studies and collaborated with the members to discuss the ideas, experiment with them, share their experiences broadly with their colleagues, and become experts in the topics.

In this way Carol started small and spread it big. It was a grassroots effort developing teachers using a show-me / follow me model. In this way she grew expertise and leadership from within the faculty and created a climate of interest and change for the school. She also modeled how she wanted teachers to build relationships with students. (Conklin-Spillane, 2016)

Now Carol is retiring after 22 years as principal at the school. She has been recruited to become superintendent at a small neighboring school district. To that new role she will apply the lessons she has learned from her experience at Sleepy Hollow. It is embodied in her favorite quote by Haim Ginott:

“I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that make the weather.” (Ginott, 1972)

This next story is about Tracy Smith who found his personal brilliance mid-career through self-discovery. Tracy Smith was principal at West Bourbon Elementary in a rural school district in Kansas and became a coaching client of Marceta through a project with his regional service center.



Tracy had been very successful in many different roles in his school district--teacher, coach, principal. After 30-plus years he was beloved by students, respected by teachers, and trusted by the community. Now he was eyeing retirement. But with two more years left on his contract to reach early retirement for pension benefits, he came to Marceta feeling burned out and empty. He had lost his fire in the belly. He figured this was just the way life was. He'd had a good life, put his mark on the school district, and would coast to the end. The best was all behind him.

But Tracy learned “that ain’t necessarily so” as the Gershwin lyrics go. A regional grant offered leadership coaching for interested principals and superintendents. Curious about what the process was like, Tracy decided to sign up. Being a cooperative person, he humored Marceta by agreeing to do some self-discovery exercises.

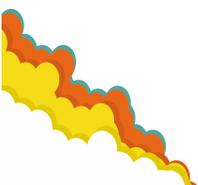
Almost immediately his energy and attitude changed. Before, he had a vague sense of his core values, but after completing a values exercise, he was crystal clear about what really motivated (and triggered!) him. When he crafted his life purpose statement he immediately felt renewed energy and direction for his work ahead.

However, naming and deeply understanding his Cornerstones of Greatness transformed him. He no longer wanted to coast. He was on fire about leaving a legacy of ethics, caring and compassion that would last well beyond his tenure in the district.

Tracy was no longer willing to hide behind the veil of good enough. He wanted to dream big and inspire his staff to their own greatness with students.

Instead of coasting through the last two years of his leadership, Tracy moved his staff into seeing more for themselves and their students than before. Working together, the school won the National Blue Ribbon Award for Excellence at the end of the year. The student reading and math scores rose to the level of Excellence in the state. And he ushered in new grants for community involvement, including pre-school service expansion and development of after-school and summer school programs to support his at-risk student population which hovered at 75%. Tracy became a man with a mission and fire in his eye. (Smith, T., 2014)

Our final story in this chapter is about Sandy Trach a principal at Estabrook School in Lexington, MA. Sandy is a Blue Ribbon Principal recognized by the National Association of Elementary School Principals.



When we asked Sandy about her mindset and approach to education, she said, “I believe that ‘all in’ means *all in!*” “It’s time for principals to listen loudly. There is too much jargon being used in education when talking to parents. There has to be a way to strip away the education speak and have authentic conversations.”

Sandy believes educators are limited in having true impact on children if they don’t know the parents.

Her school serves an urban community in Roxbury, MA. One Sunday she decided to attend the 12th Street Baptist Church which is a historic political activist house of worship. Many of the parents of her students attend this church and as you can imagine when she walked into the church all heads turned to notice who was this white woman coming into their sacred house of worship? WOW...she has a lot of nerve. Some of them had a wait-and-see attitude. What was her motive? Was she just checking off a to-do list item? What was her agenda?

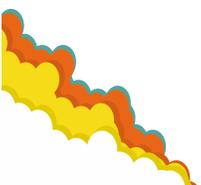
Even though Sandy knew she would stick out like a sore thumb, she was still willing to take the risk of showing up. Her staff asked her *why*. Did she need someone to go with her? Was she going to be okay? On and on.

Nevertheless, because of the *weight* of her bedrock belief to empower the least, the last, and the often forgotten, she didn’t just do it once but stayed consistent. She continued to attend the Sunday Services at the 12th Street Baptist Church and in her consistency the parents came to trust her and open up to her.

One of the core ways to connect with families is over a meal. As a result of showing up in this unexpected place, she was invited to break bread with these families in the fellowship hall after the church service. This allowed parents to get to know her and for her to get to know them.

As Sandy got more comfortable talking to the community and trusting her intuition, she decided to stretch herself by taking on the hottest issues of the day and putting them on the table. As the conversations evolved, she encouraged parents to use a hashtag to openly share their ideas online.

It turns out there was a three-fold benefit to this approach. First of all, Sandy was able to talk to them about what is happening in real time about topics that are at the top of everyone’s mind. That shows she is relevant and in touch with the times. Secondly, sharing the conversation through hashtags invites a wider audience to the virtual dinner table. They can post their feedback and share with



other influencers. Finally, being totally transparent about the conversation builds trust and that is the emotional glue of all relationships. Tapping into this parent voice is a powerful way to listen loudly. Sandy told us that listening loudly is not a difficult concept to practice, but you do have to be disciplined in doing it. In other words, you can't do it just some of the time. People have to come to know you for doing it. She says that school settings tempt school officials and educators to be the ones in the lead of the agenda, the meetings and the conversations. Instead, she advises leaders to let this notion go. She says, "Staff and parents know the children best, and I think it's our job as school leaders to set the conditions for listening to each other. So, my quest and challenge for all of us, is how can we listen loudly—— *together?*" (Trach Interview, 2016)

From our Flight Journal: Anthony Smith, Duvall, VA

Developing Strength through Difficulty

Here is a story about a leader whose difficult childhood lessons prepared him for his school leadership role. Dr. Anthony L. Smith is superintendent of Riverview School District in Duvall, WA. He attributes the district's success to the collaborative, committed culture that values students first in every decision that is made. Anthony Smith developed this perspective through the hard knocks of life.

As an infant, Anthony's mother divorced and remarried before Anthony was two years old. After that he had a fairly typical middle class life until he was 10. And then he says, "My dad committed suicide and my mom went to the bottom of a bottle of alcohol to self-medicate, which she was never able to escape. Boyfriends were in and out of the house and I often became the defender for myself and my brothers against frequent emotional and sometimes physical abuse by them. I believe that it was this time period that impacted many of my values and beliefs."

School became a refuge for him from an abusive home situation. Even though it was difficult sitting through classes at school with all the drama at home, he found teachers and mentors who taught him important life lessons.



- He discovered that to be the best leader, he had to listen more than he talked.
- He discovered that the team was only as good as the weakest in the group. So he constantly asked himself, “What can I do to build the capacity of others?”
- He learned to ask himself, “Are others better today because of what I did yesterday?”

Having to overcome more barriers than most, Anthony learned the resiliency to persevere when times got tough. He developed the grit to lead differently by *never* giving up on himself or others, and to be relentlessly excited about striving for excellence. (Smith, A, Interview 2015)

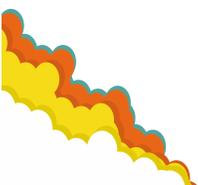
Where’s the Fuel?—Research Background

What is required for our schools to truly break sound barriers in order to reach the promise of education for *every* student? It is that school improvement efforts must tap into a framework that alters the system and culture of schools in fundamental ways. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) found that, “deep change alters the system in fundamental ways, offering a dramatic shift in direction and requiring new ways of thinking and acting” (p.66). Marzano et al. refer to this as second order change. Instead, though, most schools focus on doing incremental first order changes that are short-lived with no lasting results.

Deep change causes a change in attitudes, values, and beliefs that drive a school and requires courage and effort. This is where continuous self-assessment is essential for school leaders.

The *Breaking Ranks*® (2011) research showed that culture change starts with looking in the mirror—not only outside factors that may be barriers, but also a leader’s own practices and attitudes that can hinder cultural shift. Creating conditions in which school improvement can grow is the first challenge of school improvement and it starts with the principal’s own thinking and interactions with people. Self-discovery grounds leadership and lets personal brilliance blossom.

What are your own values and beliefs? How does that play out in what you pay attention to in your work and the conversations you have with your staff? This forms your mind-set which creates the context for school culture even if you are not being intentional about it.



In *Mindset*, Carol Dweck (2006) noted that what people believe about success drives their behavior. If educators don't really believe or expect that students can achieve at high levels, then school improvement efforts are doomed to failure. School leaders must do everything possible to help teachers attain a mind-set that success is the result of time, work and practice—not innate ability. That often means changing the culture of the school.

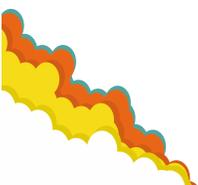
According to Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom (2011), “Organizations with stronger cultures are more adaptable, have higher member motivation and commitment, are more cooperative and better able to resolve conflicts, have greater capacity for innovation and are more effective in achieving their goals” (p 52).

School leaders encourage these attributes when they set a tone supporting continual professional learning and engage teachers in conversations about their own growth.

Michael Fullan (2005) points to the critical role of the school's belief system for the sustainability of school improvement efforts. “Sustainability is very much a matter of changes in culture: powerful strategies that enable people to question and alter certain values and beliefs as they create new forms of learning within and between schools, and across levels of the system” (p. 60).

The good news is that culture can be changed, and new beliefs and habits can be learned. Yet too often leaders want to point fingers at the things others are doing instead of focusing on themselves. It's easy to say, “If only so & so would do something differently—then everything would work well.” But *you cannot change anybody else*. You only control yourself and how *you* respond in situations. And in that way, other people may decide to change *their responses to you* and to the system.

Leaders need to know their strengths so they can build upon them. But over-reliance on one or two areas of strength can also become a weakness. Leaders need to know their challenge areas as well. This helps leaders manage areas of weakness through intentional development while at the same time collaborating with others who have strengths in the needed areas. This ensures a proper balance of all the skills needed by the system to create great results.



And what happens if this self-discovery work is not done? *Breaking Ranks*® research says it can result in *unconscious incompetence*. It could mean “muddling along with a level of competence veiled in good intentions that does nothing to improve students learning within the schools” (*Breaking Ranks*, 2011).

You have to believe in people and have a sincere desire to move things forward. The demands on school leaders at all levels are daunting. Skills of leadership and communication are important to do the work. But if you are too busy to regularly undertake the reflection required to be effective in continuously developing yourself and others, then you are too busy to lead!

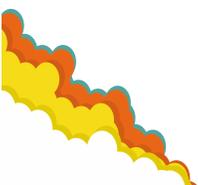
Call to Action: Envision Your Flight Plan

Now it is time for you to take some action. As a leader, change is a constant part of life. Carol Conklin-Spillane, Tracy Smith, and Sandy Trach all decided, in the words of Gandhi, to be the change they wanted to see in the world. Are you ready to do the same thing?

If so, stop trying to fly with the pack. You are called to go beyond where you are now, breaking sound barriers wherever you go.

In each chapter we will be including two or three exercises to get you started reflecting upon and practicing the skills discussed in the chapter.

In this chapter, we want you to begin to feel the weight of your universal assignment and get very clear about your beliefs, purpose, and motivation. Do the exercises that follow to help you sum up the values, beliefs, and contributions you are meant to bring into the world. The exercises will help you envision a flight plan you could have for yourself.



Exercise #1: Mining Your Motivator

Every person is motivated by something in particular. When you know what motivates you, your role becomes more rewarding. You are driven by your passion, and you have a reason for getting out of bed in the morning. This kind of energy is natural, and essential for personal success.

But sometimes you can lose sight of what gets you going and find yourself “in the rough.” The following exercise will help you drill down on what your primary driver is. Knowing that, you are in a better position to ignite your own brilliance.

PART ONE

Ask yourself what kinds of drivers, or payoffs, you seek in anything you do. For example, you may get a sense of satisfaction by making a difference, by helping people, or by overcoming barriers to meet a goal.

To get you thinking, review the list of pay-offs, or motivators, on the following page, and **circle seven that speak to you** as the ones that impact you most.

PART TWO

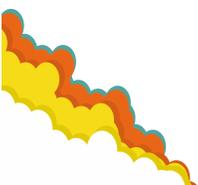
Review the seven choices you circled and **select the top three** that most motivate you, then record them in space below.

Examine your top three motivators and **select the one** that you consider your Core Motivator. Record that in the space below.



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Adapted from Cheryl Richardson (2005). *Stand Up for Your Life*.



MINING YOUR MOTIVATOR *continued*

Communicate	Organize	Solve	Collaborate	Achieve
◆ Inspire	◆ Achieve	◆ Confidence	◆ Connect	◆ Cause
◆ Big Picture	◆ Assemble	◆ Be Aware	◆ Bond	◆ Empower
◆ Attract	◆ Accomplish	◆ Be Present	◆ Coach	◆ Increase
◆ Engage	◆ Build	◆ Mutual	◆ Comfort	◆ Direct
◆ Emphasize	◆ Opportunity	◆ Courage	◆ Run	◆ Excellence
◆ Reflect	◆ Ignite	◆ Impact	◆ Humor	◆ Distinguish
◆ Listen	◆ Develop	◆ Elegance	◆ Congruent	◆ Encourage
◆ Entertain	◆ Prioritize	◆ Mutual	◆ Energy	◆ Execute
◆ Enlighten	◆ Detail-Oriented	◆ Create	◆ Exhilaration	◆ Experiment
◆ Accurate		◆ Awareness	◆ Unleash	◆ Risk
◆ Empathize	◆ Execute	◆ Honesty	◆ Honor	◆ Ethical
◆ Foster	◆ Dedicate	◆ Improve	◆ In Touch	◆ Influence
◆ Complete	◆ Invent	◆ Understand	◆ Integrate	◆ Imagine
◆ Truthful	◆ Master	◆ Recognize	◆ Learn	◆ Add Value
◆ Master	◆ Integrity	◆ Earn the Right	◆ Mentor	◆ Purpose
◆ Explain	◆ Relevant	◆ Discover	◆ Assist	◆ Accept
◆ Tell a Story	◆ Create	◆ New	◆ Experience	◆ Challenge
◆ Visionary	◆ Lead	◆ Opportunity	◆ Contribute	◆ Transform
◆ Leave a Legacy	◆ Quest	◆ Adjust	◆ Appreciate	◆ Best Practice
	◆ Multi-Task	◆ Win-win		◆ Make a Difference
		◆ Forward Momentum		

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Adapted from Cheryl Richardson (2005), *Stand Up for Your Life*.

