

RICK TOLLAKSON

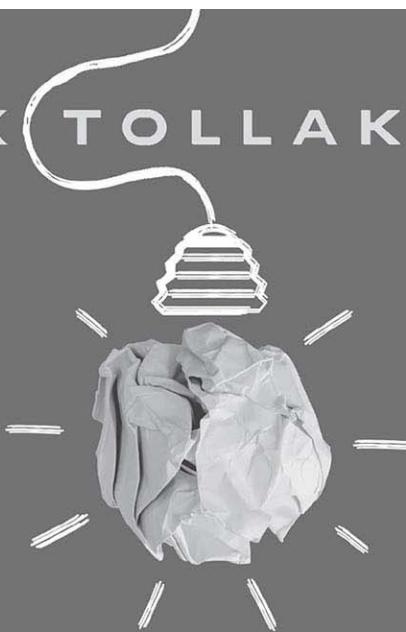


# THINK BIGGER, LEAD BETTER

EIGHT TO GREAT  
PRINCIPLES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

**Forbes** | Books

RICK TOLLAKSON



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*I dedicate this book to Sister Stella Neill for challenging me to “think bigger” and to Jim Hubbell, who gave me the opportunity to lead this amazing Hubbell team.*

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## PREFACE

I was close to turning fifty, and life was good. As the senior vice president in charge of Development at Hubbell Realty Company for nearly twenty years, I thoroughly enjoyed my job. Like many people from my generation, my goal was to retire at fifty-five.

One of the people I worked closely with was our president and CEO, Jim Hubbell. Jim is a fifth-generation member of the company's founding family and the only one to hold the CEO position. To ensure we stayed aligned, we had weekly breakfast meetings to discuss our various projects. During one of these meetings, I mentioned my goal of retiring at fifty-five and said I would work toward that goal over the next five years.

There was a long pause, and I could tell he had not expected this. After a few seconds, he turned to me and said, "Well, then, we have a major problem, Rick, because *I'm* retiring and you're not." Now I was the one who was surprised. With Jim being only five years older than me, I had always assumed he would stick around much longer than I would. This was his family's company, and his last name was on the front door. But Jim had been with the company for thirty years, and he was ready for something new.

To give you a bit of history, F. M. Hubbell, the founder of Hubbell, was a pioneering entrepreneur and visionary in the real estate industry. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential business figures in Iowa's history. Born in Connecticut in 1839, Hubbell moved to Iowa and began his career as a clerk before venturing into real estate. His first transaction, in 1856, at the age of seventeen, marked the start of what would become a real estate empire.

That single transaction laid the groundwork for what would evolve into a company with nearly 170 years of history in the Iowa real estate market. Few

companies in Iowa can boast such a storied legacy, and even fewer have had the consistent impact on Central Iowa that Hubbell has had. It is safe to say that F. M. Hubbell's entrepreneurial spirit established the tone for the company that exists today.

When I joined Hubbell in 1984, I came on board to lead the construction of two major projects: the Hub Tower, a twenty-story downtown office building, and the Kaleidoscope at the Hub, a two-block retail center. At that time, Hubbell Realty was a relatively small company focused on commercial development, property management, and brokerage. We had just under fifty associates, all based in downtown Des Moines, in the Hubbell Building—the first skyscraper in Iowa. At the time of my conversation with Jim, the company had grown modestly to around sixty to seventy associates.

Looking back, maybe I should have been more prepared for what Jim said during that breakfast meeting, but I wasn't. Still, I was extremely excited about the opportunity, and I agreed to his request. A couple of weeks later, Jim and I met for lunch, and he told me that I needed to articulate my vision for the company under my leadership.

I admit that I hadn't thought about it before. Today, I ask our associates, "If I asked one of you to step up and lead this company and articulate your vision for the business, what would you say?" Unsurprisingly, I receive many blank stares, likely the same expression I gave Jim.

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes, "Every company would like to be the best at something, but few actually understand—with piercing insight and egoless clarity—what they actually have the potential to be the best at and, just as important, what they *cannot* be the best at."<sup>1</sup>

Taking inspiration from Collins and other authors, I started to reflect on what made Hubbell Realty successful and what it would require for it to achieve true *greatness* in the future. I sat down and began jotting down all the ideas that came to mind. The list grew lengthy, but I eventually narrowed it down to eight key points. My Eight to Great!

Well, when I presented it to Jim Hubbell, he smiled and said, “Eight is a lot! Couldn’t you narrow it down to four?” I laughed and replied, “Well, I could, but ‘Four to Great’ just does not have the same ring to it.”

Jim smiled, and these Eight to Great principles became the cultural vision of our company, providing us with the road map for Hubbell Realty’s continued success. Since 2004, when I assumed the role of president and CEO, we have grown from seventy to over seven hundred associates. While this substantial growth may not be suitable for every company, it was the right path for us because we identified opportunities to diversify and take calculated risks that enabled us to evolve into the organization we are today. What often surprises people is just how diverse our business has become. Below is a brief overview of the different divisions that comprise Hubbell Realty Company:

1. **Hubbell Multifamily and Commercial Development:** specializes in industrial and multifamily projects
2. **Hubbell Construction Services:** handles construction for our own developments and select third-party clients
3. **Hubbell Property Management:** manages our medical office, flex office, and industrial properties as well as provides third-party commercial property management
4. **Indigo Living:** manages over ten thousand multifamily units across three states, including both our own and third-party properties
5. **Hubbell Capital Formation:** provides equity for our development projects
6. **Hubbell Homes:** is a production homebuilder in Central Iowa, constructing 250–350 homes annually
7. **Embarq Signature Homes:** focuses on custom homebuilding in Central Iowa

8. **Origin Homes:** specializes in rural, build-on-your-lot custom homes and workforce housing throughout Iowa
9. **Hubbell Land Development:** develops and sells 250–500 residential lots annually in Central Iowa
10. **New Home Site Realty:** handles residential lot sales in Central Iowa
11. **HRC Association Management:** manages homeowner associations for over five thousand doors for both our Iowa and Nebraska operations
12. **Site Inspections, L.C.:** provides land development erosion control services in Central Iowa
13. **The Home Company:** is based in Omaha, Nebraska, building 150–200 homes annually, including both production and custom homes
14. **The Land Company:** develops 250–500 residential lots annually in the Omaha, Nebraska, area
15. **Premier Land and Title:** is our title company in Nebraska
16. **Hubbell Golf:** manages and owns Woodland Hills Golf Course
17. **Highmark Senior Living:** manages our Edencrest senior living communities, including independent, assisted, and memory care facilities
18. **Hubbell Asset Management:** oversees our building and land investment portfolio

This list may seem extensive, but these divisions were essential for Hubbell's growth. Since we operate in smaller, tertiary markets such as Des Moines, Iowa, and Omaha, Nebraska, rather than major markets such as Dallas or Chicago, diversification was not merely a strategy; it was a necessity.

At the heart of Hubbell Realty lies a combination of entrepreneurial spirit and adaptability. We've learned to take calculated risks, embrace new

opportunities, and consistently seek ways to broaden our reach. Whether we are entering new markets, launching diverse business areas, or discovering innovative ways to give back to our communities, we've always aimed to think bigger.

Our branding statement, "Always breaking new ground," encapsulates this mindset. It's more than a tagline; it reflects who we are and what has driven us for nearly 170 years. When I reflect on our journey, I see a company that has evolved through strategic risk-taking and a willingness to adapt to changing circumstances. We've faced our share of challenges, but it's that entrepreneurial spirit and refusal to settle that have propelled us forward. It's why we continue to grow and why I believe we'll thrive for many more years to come.

Looking back, one of the key factors to our success has been our adherence to those eight principles I first outlined with Jim Hubbell. They have transformed the way we do business and have kept us focused on what matters most.

The first of these Eight to Great, and perhaps the most important, is having **passionate associates** who are eager to do and be their best. When I took over, Hubbell had about seventy associates, and they all worked hard. We weren't in a culture where people constantly praised you for a job well done. It was more about putting your head down and getting the work done. Our success was driven by that solid core of dedicated individuals who were committed to making the company successful. That's why passionate associates became my top priority.

The second principle I identified was fostering an **entrepreneurial attitude**, which I experienced firsthand. When I joined the company in 1984, I was tasked with helping to build Hub Tower, a twenty-story office building, and Kaleidoscope at the Hub, a retail center. My original personal plan was to complete that project, move on to other opportunities, and develop more high-rises. However, the company allowed me the freedom to explore new ventures and opportunities, keeping me engaged and motivated.

The third principle I focused on was having an **engineering mindset of process improvement**. As an engineer, I understood that even when you reach what you feel is the best solution, circumstances change, and you must keep improving to stay competitive. Passionate people often think working *harder* is the answer, but I knew we needed to work *smarter*, constantly refining our processes to stay ahead. Today, we have two full-time process improvement specialists focused on making the company more efficient and effective.

Number four was our mission statement. I wanted our team to **enrich the quality of life in our communities** by being the leading provider of real estate solutions today and tomorrow by building on a strong foundation of integrity and a commitment to shareholders, associates, clients, and communities. In particular, this commitment to our communities was crucial to me, and I wanted to ensure that we maintained that focus in everything we did.

The fifth principle was **accuracy first and speed second**. A friend once told me, “It’s not speed and accuracy; it’s accuracy and speed,” which made a lot of sense in our industry. You have to get things right the first time before you worry about how fast you’re moving. In construction, we often say, “Measure twice, cut once.” It’s a simple idea but critical for long-term success.

The sixth point was creating what I called “**Hubbell raving fans**.” Inspired by the concept of turning customers into raving fans, I knew that we needed to create an exceptional customer experience, both for our external clients and our internal teams. If we could do that, success would follow.

**Teamwork** came in as number seven. I admit that teamwork isn’t my natural strength. I’m more of a “get it done and then look behind to see who is keeping up” kind of guy. But I realized that for us to succeed as a company, we had to rely on each other’s strengths. Building a strong team was essential for the company’s growth.

Finally, the eighth principle was simply to have **fun**. I’ve always believed that if you’re not enjoying what you do, life is too short to continue doing it. We made sure to foster a culture where people loved coming to work. If

someone wasn't happy or passionate about their role, I encouraged them to find something that suited them better. After all, fun and passion go hand in hand with success. I find it interesting that after sharing the Eight to Great vision for over twenty years, this is the one principle every associate can remember!

That's my Eight to Great. These eight principles became the foundation for how I approached leading the company and driving it forward. They empowered me and my organization to think beyond ourselves and achieve what we never thought was possible. And I'm confident that these principles will work for you.

Unfortunately, I've been surprised to discover that many leaders don't have a clear vision for their company that they can articulate to their team. They have vision statements but no vision. They have a mission statement but no cultural vision behind it.

These Eight to Great principles have worked well for me and my team, and I believe they will inspire you to action. That said, after you've finished reading *my* principles, I hope you will come up with your own set of principles and determine what makes *your* company great. Sit down and ask yourself a series of questions.

*What is my leadership vision? What do I want people in my company, in my community, in my sphere of influence to think, feel, and believe about who I am as a leader? What is it that makes my company great now? What will make my company even greater in the future?*

These are big questions to answer, but these eight principles will start you on the right path.

## INTRODUCTION

# “CAN’T YOU THINK BIGGER?”

Despite Hubbell’s 170-year history in the Des Moines community, when I officially took over as CEO in 2004, I had no idea how much my leadership would push me out of my comfort zone, especially regarding the impact on our community.

In 2006, just two years into my tenure as CEO, Hubbell Realty was invited to participate in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* with Ty Pennington and ABC. Little did I realize that this project would shape the future of our company for years to come. The project selected was not in our market and involved a rural family living outside a small town called Lincoln, far from the area where we built homes in Central Iowa.

The family had a compelling story and one that worked well for television. When we first met them, Mom and Dad lived in a rented RV with the three boys sleeping outside in pup tents. Their home had burned down that past Christmas, and the only plan the family had for their future was their application to the show. This was September, and winter was coming. If *Extreme Makeover* had not come along, they had no idea what they were going to do next.

Despite my logistical reservations, we took on the build. We built them a new home in one week, and it was an exhilarating, high-pressure experience. I had the chance to work closely with Ty Pennington and his entire crew. It was a whirlwind, but seeing the finished product and the family’s gratitude made it all worth it. The experience was rewarding on both a personal and team level. I even made it on the show, and you can still watch the episode on reruns.

After this build, as we returned to Des Moines, I vowed that if I ever found a project in our market that could benefit our community, I would want to build it. That seed of an idea took root, and a year later, in 2007, an opportunity presented itself. A woman named Sister Stella Neill, who was the CEO of Anawim Housing at the time, and her board chair, Loree Miles, came to meet with me. I had never heard of either person or their organization before.

As it turned out, Sister Stella was a force to be reckoned with. She had moved to Des Moines in 1980 and was a fierce advocate for everyone's right to housing, regardless of circumstance. Known equally for her innate kindness and her force of will, she was driven to guide others toward the goal of better communities for all. Her passion for improving the systems around her led to the founding of Anawim Housing, with the goal of providing "safe, affordable housing to low-income families, thus enabling these families to stabilize their lives."<sup>2</sup>

For Sister Stella, helping the unhoused was about more than providing a place for people to stay. It was about strengthening communities, connecting others, and changing people's perceptions of houseless individuals as a whole by focusing on our similarities rather than differences in circumstance. In her words, "I believe those of us who have privilege also have a responsibility to those who do not. Every person has a right to a place to live. We who are privileged by birth or circumstance have the obligation to use the power we have to make that right a reality for every person."<sup>3</sup>

During our meeting, Sister Stella and Loree explained Anawim's mission and said that they needed additional housing for the vulnerable. They owned a few single-family and duplex homes, and they had been renovating older buildings for apartment housing. But what they wanted from me, as a business owner, was an investment in their capital campaign.

I could have easily committed to donating \$2,500 or \$5,000, and I believe they would have thanked me and moved on to their next appointment.

Instead, I said, “You know what? How about we build you a home in a week, just like we did on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*?”

I expected Sister Stella to be thrilled, but instead, she looked at me and said, “Rick, I really appreciate the offer, but can’t you think bigger?”

I have to admit, I was a little stunned by her response. I mean, here I was, offering to build them a house for free, and she was asking if I could think bigger. I thought for a moment and said, “OK, I’ll double down. How about we build a duplex—two homes? You’ve got duplex lots, so we’ll build one of those.”

Again, calm and collected, Sister Stella said, “Rick, that’s very generous, but can’t you think any bigger?”

At this point, I was starting to get a little frustrated. Here I was, a small-town Lutheran boy who had never had to interact with Catholic nuns, and I didn’t quite know how to handle her persistence. But her determination sparked something in me.

I asked, “How big do you want me to think?” She then told me about their vision to build a nine-unit row-style townhome project, a nine-plex.

“You want me to build *nine houses*?” I asked in astonishment.

She smiled and said, “Rick, I want to know how big you can think!”

After a brief pause, I said, “You know what? You’re on. We’ll build you a nine-plex.”



*Sister Stella and Rick in front of the nine-plex housing project during construction.*

## A Turning Point

Looking back, that moment with Sister Stella was a turning point for me. I started thinking about how much more Hubbell could do, how much bigger we could think, and how much more impact we could make. But as fate would have it, things didn't go as smoothly as planned.

In 2007, we had our best corporate year ever, but like so many other businesses, we were hit hard by the recession in 2008. Despite the economic downturn, we pressed forward. Luckily, Anawim wasn't quite ready for us to start building in 2008. They were still negotiating with county representatives for the property, giving us time to catch our breath.

By 2009, we were ready to go and moved into a neighborhood that had recently faced significant unrest. That summer, there was a riot, and a few people lost their lives. It was a tough part of town, not far from Drake

University, but it was just the kind of place that needed hope. We prepared the site in advance, putting the foundations in place so that when we officially started, we could focus entirely on the build.

On September 9, 2009, at nine in the morning, we kicked off what we called our “Extreme Makeover Parade.” In seven and a half days, we built nine homes for the Anawim project, and the sense of accomplishment was indescribable. One memory from that project that still sticks with me was a moment during the ribbon-cutting ceremony and open house. A big, burly guy, who was one of the drywall workers, came up to me, tears in his eyes, and said, “Rick, I’ve got to tell you something.”

He explained that a little girl had grabbed his hand during the open house event and had taken him to see her new room. She had excitedly told him, “Mister, mister, I have my own bedroom. I’ve never had my own bedroom before. I usually sleep on the living room floor.” He looked at me and said, “I just started bawling, man. I couldn’t help it.” That moment touched him so deeply that he was ready to build another nine homes right then and there.

The Anawim experience was very rewarding. It was all about team building with our own team and our many trade partners. It was not a business development opportunity, as we didn’t sell or rent any more homes or apartments because we did this build. It was for our team and for our community. I was ready to keep thinking bigger!

Four years later, in 2013, I had another crazy idea. We were developing a project next to Easterseals Iowa Camp Sunnyside. I met with the Easterseals management team and participated in their corporate regatta (a paddleboat race) as a fundraiser for the camp. I’d toured the camp several times and was struck by the poor condition of the cabins. Camp Sunnyside clearly needed our help.

Camp Sunnyside was and remains a year-round camp for special needs children and adults. Its cabins, built decades earlier, were in terrible condition. I met with the camp’s executive director, Sherri Nielsen, and my vice president

of Development, who was an Easterseals board member. I asked about the cabins, and she apologized for their condition. Easterseals did not have the money to improve, let alone replace them.

“What would you think if we tore the cabins down and rebuilt them?” I asked.

Sherri was startled, and she asked how long that would take.

“How long to tear down the cabins? Maybe forty-five minutes to an hour. How long to replace them? We’ll give ourselves one week.”

As it turned out, that day was Sherri’s birthday, and judging by her response, I’d given her the best birthday gift she could have imagined. However, my team had an even bigger vision than I did. Instead of replacing eight 1,000-square-foot cabins, they designed and built two 7,500-square-foot lodges with concrete tornado shelters integrated into the structures. This project completely transformed the camp.

The impact of the Camp Sunnyside project was far-reaching. My friend, Doug McAninch, and his wife, Donna, were deeply moved by the work we had done together. They personally invested their own money into further improvements, including the McAninch Family Aquatic Center, Hero Hall, and the Doug & Donna McAninch Independence Innovation Center. Doug and Donna’s emotional connection to the camp became a driving force for continued growth at the camp.

## On a Roll

We had completed three Extreme Builds, each larger and more complex than the last. We had also been undertaking one project every three to four years. Just when I began to wonder what we should do next, a good friend of mine, the executive director of Ronald McDonald House, reached out to me and mentioned that she wanted me to tour the house to see if I had any ideas on

how it could be expanded. It urgently needed more space, and as I toured the house, I observed that it had been remodeled several times before.

I contacted an architect friend who had committed to reviewing the project. After visiting several other Ronald McDonald Houses, he agreed that rebuilding was the best solution, and the process began. In the spring of 2017, we tore down the existing Ronald McDonald House of Central Iowa on the UnityPoint Health hospital campus and poured the foundations.

We participated in another Extreme Build parade and built a new twenty-thousand-square-foot facility with twenty sleeping rooms, kitchens, and other necessary spaces in just over one week. This was by far the most complicated project we had undertaken. It was a three-story commercial building—with an elevator—that we were building just off the downtown core of Des Moines. This project was also the most rewarding for our team.



*Completed build of the Ronald McDonald House.*

I had thought I would be taking a break from the Extreme Builds when, in 2021, Sherri Nielsen from Easterseals Camp Sunnyside reached out once again. It had a small child development center that provided daycare both for families with members with special needs and for those without. It was busting at the seams and needed a new facility. I asked her what she had in mind, and she said a five-thousand-square-foot building, which was double the space the organization currently had.

I thought this would be a breeze after doing the Ronald McDonald House. But after contacting another architect friend, their firm did a needs analysis, and the building ended up being closer to thirteen thousand square feet. Still, I was committed, and we built a new Child Development Center for Easterseals Camp Sunnyside in one week.

I cannot reiterate how rewarding these projects are to our team and our trade partners. At this time, I had told everyone (publicly and personally) that I was retiring from Extreme Builds. Although I had not formally announced my retirement, it was coming closer. That's when the phone rang.

A friend of mine, Steve Van Oort, a former Polk County commissioner, was having lunch with me when he mentioned that he serves on the foundation board for an organization called On With Life. This organization offers both inpatient and outpatient neurorehabilitation services for individuals with serious brain injuries, neurodiseases, and other brain-related traumas. The people it assists range from teenagers who have been in severe car accidents and require months of rehabilitation to an eighty-year-old former sports announcer receiving outpatient support for Parkinson's disease.<sup>4</sup> In short, the organization wanted to build a home for families with members going through rehab. Although I was familiar with On With Life, I had never visited the campus.

I was amazed by what they were doing. I met with their executive director, Jean Shelton, and members of both our teams. They shared their conceptual master plan, which included two 3,500-square-foot family homes designed to provide five family suites, each with common kitchens and family rooms. I

stated, “If we are going to do one family home, we will do both. So, in 2024, three years after our last Extreme Build, we built “Homes of Hope” in five days.

As I write this book, I have recently attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the project. It was unbelievable, and families will start using them immediately. Now that my time at Hubbell Realty Company is ending, my successor, Kyle Gamble, has committed to keeping the Hubbell Extreme Build program going. As I reflect on the six Extreme Builds, here is an email from one of our associates that explains how big an impact these projects had on our team.

As our leader, you inspired, mentored, and taught all the things you talk about. The culture of giving, the infectious comradery, the passion that comes from these builds was ingrained in all of us. This is your gift or baton that you are now handing to the next CEO. It is a legacy that will continue and is part of the Hubbell experience that you created. The mission continues because the values are now cemented into the fabric of the company. They were gilded into the executive leadership that will continue the cause and use those values to foster future success of the company.

I might need to give that associate a raise!

Sister Stella’s challenge to “think bigger” has resonated with me throughout these projects. I’ve come to realize that it’s not just about the physical structures we’ve built; it’s about pushing boundaries, stepping out of our comfort zones, and making a lasting impact on the community. Now, as I approach retirement, I’m confident that the spirit of thinking bigger will carry on with the next generation of leaders in the company. These projects, which began with one unexpected challenge, have shaped me, my team, and the community in ways I never could have imagined.

## A Thinking Bigger Mindset

One of the things I've really focused on as a leader is encouraging my team to think bigger. When my division leaders come to me with ideas, I often push them to consider not only what they're doing now, but also how they can expand that vision.

I'm always asking, "What if you did more projects, bigger projects, or explored new geographic locations? Where else can you go? What more can you do?"

It may sound like a broken record to some, but studies show it takes the average person hearing the same thing said twelve times before it really sticks. Twelve! I try to tie that entrepreneurial spirit into everything we do. More than just getting a job done, I want to leave an impact on our community and beyond.

We've completed some amazing projects by applying that mindset. One of the biggest examples is our current neighborhood project called Gray's Station. It's a massive seventy-five-acre development in downtown Des Moines, featuring a pedestrian and bicycle bridge that connects downtown Des Moines over the Raccoon River to Gray's Lake. This development could include two or three thousand residential units when fully built. That's thinking bigger!

Another example is how we expanded our homebuilding division into Omaha, Nebraska. We acquired a company there and are constructing homes in that market. In 2024, we also initiated the development of an apartment community and an industrial project in Omaha. Such growth occurs when you encourage your team to think beyond the status quo. It's about merging entrepreneurialism with a broader vision while maintaining teamwork and our core company values.

But what holds people back from thinking bigger? Three words: *fear of risk*. People can become paralyzed by the possibility of failure. They think, "How much risk am I willing to take?"

While I don't see myself as a natural risk-taker, I feel comfortable with the risks we take because they're calculated, not reckless. It's about balancing risk with opportunity and not letting the fear of failure stop you from thinking bigger.

I came up with my Eight to Great because these are the principles I believe are necessary for Hubbell Realty to be a great company. Every company will have different priorities, but these are the ones I felt were most important for ours. When leaders are asked about their vision, they need to have something concrete to offer. Employees want to know where you believe the company is heading and how they are going to get there.

Ultimately, it comes down to this: If you're not enjoying what you do and having fun, if your heart isn't in it and you lack passion, all the vision statements and strategic plans won't matter. You need to discover a way to enjoy what you do, be passionate about your work, and aim higher at every turn.

## **Anyone Can Think Bigger and Do Great Things**

It's possible that you picked up this book because you want to maximize your company's bottom line. That's fine, but this is no longer my primary motivation, and in the words of Sister Stella, I'd encourage you to "think bigger."

Like every leader, I want our company to be successful, but I'm much more focused on our impact on the communities we serve. There's a saying in the Greater Des Moines Partnership that says our community "punches above our weight," and I believe that's true for Hubbell as well. We're not the biggest company in our market, but we're the one doing Extreme Builds and giving back in ways that others could but don't. Our competitors may be more profitable, but they're not making the kind of community impact that we are.

Creating a positive impact is what drives me. I see the difference we make in people's lives. We improve our communities and foster a company culture that people can believe in. When we undertake an Extreme Build, it's not just about constructing a building; it's about teamwork, collaboration, and the creation of something meaningful. Our trade partners and suppliers contribute as well by donating their time, materials, and resources. We're all in this together, and that sense of shared purpose strengthens our culture and enhances our long-term success.

I believe financial success will come if you focus on the bigger picture. This includes the impact you're having and the culture you're building. It might not make you the most money in the short term, but in the long run, you'll be more successful, and more importantly, you'll feel good about the work you're doing. That's what I've learned over my career, and it's something I hope others can take away from this story.

At the end of the day, thinking bigger is about leaving a legacy—one that's built on making a real difference in the lives of the people and communities around you. As you prepare to read the Eight to Great principles I outline in the following pages, I challenge *you* to think bigger. Don't settle for being the person or leader you've always been. Think bigger!

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## PRINCIPLE 1

# FIND PASSIONATE ASSOCIATES

Every business rises and falls on the strength of its team.

I have yet to speak with a leader who doesn't want to hire quality candidates passionate about their work. Yet, despite the numerous recruitment tools, personality tests, and hiring techniques available, most leaders struggle to achieve what Jim Collins refers to as getting "the right people on the bus."<sup>5</sup>

Recently, I was at an Urban Land Institute (ULI) seminar with Simon Sinek, the author of *Start with Why*. In this book, Sinek writes, "Great companies don't hire skilled people and motivate them, they hire already motivated people and inspire them."<sup>6</sup> As I sat and listened to him speak, someone asked him about how to attract passionate individuals.

Sinek chuckled and noted that we often *think* we're hiring individuals who are already full of passion and drive. However, the reality is that we're simply selecting those who seem like a good fit for the role. Their passion and their inner drive to become the best version of themselves aren't often things we can assess in an interview.

The longer I've been a leader, the more I've found these words to be true. Sure, as leaders, we try hard to hire the people who are "the right fit." But the reality is that even our best efforts can fall short. So, what can we do? The only thing we can do. We focus on building a *culture* that encourages and nurtures that passion.

In the hiring process, we can sometimes sense that a candidate is passionate, but it's tricky. Many people are excellent interviewees, and they can convince us that they're passionate about the role. They might say exactly what we want to hear, but once you bring them on board, it quickly becomes clear that their passion isn't as strong as they made it seem.

On the flip side, some individuals may not make the strongest impression during the interview process. They seem solid but perhaps not extraordinary. Yet, once they begin working, they wow you. It's as if a switch flips, and they suddenly outperform everyone else. You're left wondering, *Where did this person come from?* It's amazing to witness such a transformation, but it's difficult to predict.

That's because passion is difficult to discover in a job interview. It takes time. But make no mistake: Passion is what truly drives success in a great company.

## Primary Marks of Passion

The primary traits of a passionate person begin with a willingness to try and a readiness to fail. Passionate individuals put in the effort, often more than they believed they could summon, driven by the desire to improve things. They understand it might not be sufficient and acknowledge that failure is a possibility. Yet, they pursue their goals anyway, which is what distinguishes them. They don't succeed every time, but they arrive with the intent to do their best, no matter the outcome.

Many people equate passion with energy or charisma, thinking it's about being loud or having a big presence. But to me, passion is more about a mindset. It's the inner drive that asks, *What can I accomplish today to make life better for others?* It's about showing up with a purpose, looking to create a positive impact both internally within the organization and externally with

customers or clients. More than simply putting on a show, it's about consistent, meaningful effort.

Charisma can be great, but it's not equivalent to passion. Highly charismatic individuals often go through ups and downs. When they are feeling good, they can energize a room. However, when they are feeling low, it can drain the energy from everyone around them. They may excel in larger organizations where it's easier to blend in, where their roles aren't as scrutinized, and where they can ride on the momentum of a bigger team.

However, in a smaller company like ours, there's nowhere to hide. You can't just talk the talk; you have to walk the walk. It's not uncommon for someone to come in with an impressive résumé from a big corporation, listing all the major projects they were part of. But when it comes down to it, they didn't really *do* much. They were just a small cog in a big machine.

Passion is about more than putting in long hours at the office. It's about delivering results. I tell people all the time not to use office hours as a metric of success. Being physically present doesn't mean you're contributing. There are people who avoid going home by staying late at the office, but that's not what passion looks like. Passionate people are focused on making processes better, solving problems, and figuring out how to achieve results when others can't. That's the kind of passion that makes a real difference, no matter the personality type.

Passion is evident in the way someone consistently goes the extra mile. They don't need to be loud about it; their actions speak for themselves. I've worked with plenty of people who aren't naturally charismatic, but they are some of the most reliable, hardworking individuals I've known. They may not be the ones rallying the team, but when I give them a task, I know it will get done—and it will get done well.

These quieter, more introverted team members often need a bit more encouragement because they may not feel like their efforts are recognized. They might wonder if anyone notices the hard work they're putting in, especially

since they're not the type to seek attention or make a big show of their accomplishments. I make it a point to remind them how valuable they are to the organization because their contributions are just as crucial as those of the more visible, outgoing members of the team.

## A Passionate Culture of Positivity

At Hubbell, we've introduced a "culture of positivity." It's an atmosphere that supports and motivates team members to grow. Not everyone walks in with a burning desire to be the best at what they do. Some might never feel that way, and that's OK.

Being the top real estate developer or manager is not the end goal. It's about becoming the best version of yourself, whatever that might look like. I'm not asking for *perfection*. I'm asking for attitude and *effort*. I'm looking for that willingness to strive toward improvement, whether through learning, volunteering, or engaging with the community.

Back when our team consisted of fifty people, it was easier to foster this kind of environment. We were close-knit, and everyone had a shared drive for success. Now, with over seven hundred associates, it's a different challenge.

Passion is like an inner engine. Without it, you're merely going through the motions. You become a placeholder, not an active contributor. We can't afford to have too many placeholders in our company because we depend on each individual's contribution to succeed. Whether they're a maintenance technician or a high-level executive, everyone needs that inner drive to be their best.

I've seen this passion in action countless times. For instance, when there's an emergency such as an apartment fire, our maintenance team rallies without hesitation, often at odd hours, to help residents in distress. It's not just about fulfilling a job requirement. It's about going above and beyond because they care.

It's the same story with our community projects, such as our Extreme Builds. These initiatives involve many committees and require coordinated effort. Yet, it's the everyday moments that truly amaze me. I remember a young woman, someone I hadn't even met before, who stayed up all night baking cookies just to bring a bit of joy to her colleagues. It wasn't part of her job; she did it because she wanted to brighten someone's day. She was passionate.

One of our top attorneys, a senior member of our legal team, takes time every Thursday to bake something for everyone. If I'm in the office on a Thursday, I can count on finding a dessert a couple of cubicles away from mine. It's not part of her official duties, but it's her way of contributing to a positive culture.

What I mean by creating a space where people can be their best is not just about their technical skills or job performance. It's about fostering an environment where they feel empowered to bring their whole selves to work and express their passions in ways that go beyond their job descriptions. That's what truly makes a company thrive.

## Passion Starts with Empathy

The key to creating a passionate community is to have empathy for others. Mark Sanborn writes, “If you’re interested in others and make the effort to truly know them by listening to them, you’ll better understand how they feel. This is empathy. The need to be understood is one of the highest human needs, but too often people who know us either don’t care or don’t make the effort to understand how we really feel.”<sup>7</sup>

Empathy means prioritizing the needs of others over your own. This has always been a challenge for me, and it's something I've worked on as a leader. That's precisely why we invest so much effort into creating what I refer to as a “culture of positivity,” because it's not something that comes naturally to most

people. Sure, there are those rare individuals who always seem upbeat and positive, but for the majority of us, that isn't our default state.

Since empathy and appreciation don't come naturally to me at all, I work extra hard to express myself in these areas. When we were a smaller company, I made it a habit to personally acknowledge each employee's birthday and work anniversary. I'd send a handwritten card for their first day on the job, their anniversary, their birthday, and a card to express my appreciation for their hard work. It was my way of saying, "I see you, and I appreciate you."

As we grew, that became harder to maintain, so I transitioned to emails instead. Even then, with three hundred associates, that's still a lot of emails each year. It was a lot to keep up with, but I made a point of doing it because I wanted everyone to know I was paying attention and that their contributions mattered.

I have all those dates on my calendar, and I try to make each message personal. If I had the time, I'd even tie the note back to our Eight to Great initiative, saying something like, "Thank you for your entrepreneurial spirit," or "I really appreciate your focus on process improvement during that project."

Small acts such as these were my way of increasing communication and acknowledging their hard work, especially in a way that aligned with our core values.

## **Every Leader Is Different**

Some leaders do show empathy naturally. I have a friend who used to run a large hospital, and he's a perfect example of someone who naturally embodies empathy. I remember being in an elevator with him on the way to his office, and a patient or a patient's family member would step in. Without missing a beat, he'd recognize them and start a heartfelt conversation as if they were an old friend.

He'd ask what they were going through and offer his support, and you could see it wasn't an act. It was genuine. Meanwhile, I'd be standing there thinking, *What is going on here? How does he do this so effortlessly?*

We have many people in our organization who are like my friend and naturally express gratitude and empathy. They'll take a moment to say, "I really appreciate the work you did on this project," and you can tell it comes from a sincere place.

Then there are others, often from my Boomer generation, who tend to approach work with a different mindset. They're the ones who say, "I'm just doing my job. I don't need a high five for that." They're not looking for praise, and they're not quick to give it, either. For them, going above and beyond isn't something that necessarily gets called out unless it's extraordinary.

It's a different world now, and I believe that this shift in mindset is reflected in how we build and maintain our company culture today. It's less about the old-school mentality of "just do your job" and more about creating an environment where people feel seen, appreciated, and motivated to exceed expectations—not because they have to, but because they want to.

## Hoogle High Fives

One way we've tried to create more passionate associates and build a culture of empathy is through what we call the "Hoogle High Five." This initiative has been one of our most successful in fostering a positive workplace. It aligns well with the idea of rewarding people for being their best.

Claire, one of our team members, took the lead on this and gave it a creative name. Hoogle is our associate-facing company intranet. Here is how we started it.

First, we announced that anyone who nominated someone for a Hoogle High Five would be entered into a random drawing. Eight people would be selected each month, and each would receive a \$100 reward. We called this

“Eight to Great,” which completely changed the game. Before the contest, we averaged about twenty high fives per month. After we introduced it, that number jumped to around 250 per month.

The process is simple. Anyone can submit a Hoogle High Five. Some of the nominations are lighthearted. Here are a few examples:

- “Madison goes above and beyond for her community resident events! Whether it’s spending hours baking treats or setting up detailed decorations, she truly goes the extra mile!”
- “Candy is a Bilingual Leasing Consultant who helps find residents’ homes in many of our Indigo communities. She uses her ability to connect cross-culturally and improve leasing/expedite maintenance requests and issues. (She is named by name in 50% of this year’s Google reviews for her communities.)”
- “Robbi created an outstanding and over-the-top experience for new residents who walked in on a Saturday for a tour and were moving in 48 hours later. Her patience, compassion, and follow-through were top-notch. The new residents had been through a frustrating experience, and she made the move flawless for them. Thank you for always going the extra mile for the residents at 92West.”
- “We have some raving fans for Pat! We have had several residents call to tell us how thankful they are for the care Pat puts into the repairs he makes in resident homes. He is always very polite and courteous to the residents, pets, and their living spaces. Thanks for all your hard work and Extreme Ownership you exemplify every day.” —Maintenance Review

I receive and read every nomination. It’s amazing to see the variety of recognition people give each other, from simple acts of kindness to going above and beyond in their roles. The feedback isn’t hidden. Anyone in the company can read these high fives, making it a shared experience.

Overall, the Hoogle High Five has become a core part of our company culture. It's not just a recognition program; it reinforces the behaviors and attitudes we value most. By encouraging people to show appreciation for one another, we've created an environment where passion and positivity thrive.

## Don't Fake It

While there are lots of ways to create a passionate team, the key is to be genuine. In *Unreasonable Hospitality*, Will Guidara writes, “genuinely engaging with the person you’re serving, so you can make an authentic connection—that’s hospitality.”<sup>8</sup>

The difference between someone who’s genuinely passionate and someone who’s pretending is quite apparent. On the surface, they may appear to be a passionate leader. However, when you look a little closer, something feels off. It’s difficult to pinpoint exactly what that is, but you can sense it, and so can others. There’s a disconnect between what they’re saying and how much they truly care for their people. It’s not about words; it’s about actions.

People can tell when you’re faking it, so don’t even try to fool them. No BS. If you’re truly good at what you do and you’re genuinely successful, your passion will show through in your results. People see the impact you’re making, and that success becomes contagious. They want to be part of it, part of that energy and momentum.

You can’t just talk a good game. True passion is evident in your actions, commitment, and the way you inspire others. If it’s not there, people will see right through it. But if it is, you can inspire an entire team to greatness.

## PRINCIPLE 2

# ENCOURAGE AN ENTREPRENEURIAL ATTITUDE

What's the difference between thriving and stagnant companies? Often, it comes down to attitude. Those businesses that falter have bought into a culture of complacency, while those that grow over the long haul have encouraged a culture of entrepreneurship.

When most people think of the word *entrepreneur*, the first thing that comes to mind is “start-up.” However, an entrepreneurial attitude should not be solely reserved for those who are in the early days of launching a brand-new business. It’s a way of seeing the world.

For me, having an entrepreneurial attitude means looking at setbacks differently, not as failures but as stepping stones. It has taught me to ask, “What can I learn from this?” instead of dwelling on what went wrong. This perspective has shaped the way I approach problems, encouraging me to think beyond the obvious and find creative solutions that others might miss.

This attitude is about being bold, resourceful, and open to ideas from unexpected places. I agree with Peter Drucker that “What we need is an entrepreneurial society in which innovation and entrepreneurship are normal, steady, and continuous.”<sup>9</sup> What I’ve come to realize is that this mindset isn’t just for entrepreneurs. It’s for anyone who wants to take charge of their life. It’s for anyone who is willing to be proactive, spot opportunities, and believe they have the power to make things happen.

When you adopt this attitude, you stop waiting for permission or the “perfect” moment. Instead, you take that first step, even when the path ahead isn’t fully clear. Over time, I’ve discovered that having this mindset not only helps you reach your goals but also builds confidence in your ability to handle whatever comes your way. It’s not always easy, but the willingness to take risks and trust yourself often leads to growth you never thought possible.

And the best part? It’s contagious. When you approach the world with this kind of energy, the people around you notice. You start inspiring others—your team, your friends, even your family—to think differently, take initiative, and believe in what they can achieve. It’s amazing how one person’s determination and creativity can ripple outward, sparking a chain reaction of positive change. That’s what makes an entrepreneurial attitude so powerful.

When I first added this concept to my Eight to Great list, it was because I wanted my team to start thinking the way I do and constantly ask, “What can we do to grow the company?” That kind of mindset requires an entrepreneurial spirit. It can’t just be the person at the top generating all the ideas. It means that others step up as well. The challenge is in encouraging that mindset and showing people that taking risks is necessary to make things happen.

## **The Little Man with the Long Shadow**

Several years ago, I picked up a copy of *The Little Man with the Long Shadow*. It tells the story of Frederick Marion (F. M.) Hubbell, a significant American businessman and philanthropist who played a pivotal role in the economic development of Des Moines, Iowa. He also happens to be the namesake of our company.

F. M. Hubbell was born on January 17, 1839, in Huntington, Connecticut, and moved to Iowa at the age of sixteen. His entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen greatly influenced the insurance, real estate, and transportation sectors in the region. As author George Mills notes,

Starting with nothing at 16, he amassed \$4,000 worth of real estate at 17. He served as acting Clerk of the District Court in Sioux City at 18. When he was 19, he was admitted to the practice of law. At 21, he helped found Sioux County, Iowa, and was elected Clerk of the District Court. At 27, he helped organize Des Moines' first streetcar company. At 28, he was the moving force in the organization of the Equitable Life Insurance Company of Iowa. At 32, he and his law partner organized the first Des Moines Water Company. He was deep in railroad building and financing before he was 35.<sup>10</sup>

F. M. Hubbell is often referred to as the greatest entrepreneur in Iowa history, and for good reason. His ventures were ahead of their time. He established Hubbell Avenue and even introduced the city's first trolley car system. His entrepreneurial spirit laid the foundation for what our company is today.

In 1856, Hubbell began his real estate empire with his first transaction. This marked the inception of Hubbell Realty. In 1867, he established Equitable Life Insurance Company of Iowa, which grew to be one of the most successful insurance firms in the state. Under his direction, the company gained a reputation for financial stability and excellent customer service. Hubbell's investments extended beyond insurance; he also accumulated substantial real estate holdings that played a crucial role in the urban development of Des Moines. His real estate endeavors laid the foundation for what would evolve into a thriving metropolitan area.

Understanding the crucial role of transportation in economic growth, Hubbell was instrumental in expanding Iowa's railway networks. He was a key figure in the development of the City Railroad and Norfolk Railroad, among others. His efforts improved connectivity and commerce within the state, positioning Des Moines as an important transportation hub in the Midwest. Hubbell's work in infrastructure not only facilitated trade but also attracted businesses and settlers to the region.

A dedicated philanthropist, Hubbell believed in giving back to the community that had afforded him success. He supported various educational, cultural, and charitable organizations, contributing to the social fabric of Des Moines. His legacy of community involvement is continued by the Hubbell family, which remains influential in Iowa's business and philanthropic sectors. Companies such as Hubbell Realty Company stand as a testament to his enduring impact on the region's real estate industry.

Nearly one hundred years after his passing, his legacy still has a ripple effect on my community and the business I lead today. He set the pace for what Hubbell would become, and his influence still shapes how we do operations. That is the power of an entrepreneurial attitude.

Today, Hubbell Realty Company remains owned by members of the Hubbell family. Our board of directors includes eleven family members and six outside directors, of which I am one. The family members represent the fifth and sixth generations. The company is professionally managed, and there are no Hubbell family members working for the company. Our chairman, Fred Ingham, is a fifth-generation family member.

## Catching the Entrepreneurial Attitude

Because of F. M. Hubbell, entrepreneurialism is deeply embedded in our company's DNA. In 1990, we made a significant move by purchasing a residential real estate company called First Realty Better Homes and Gardens. This was a franchise under the Meredith Corporation, publishers of *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine, based in Des Moines. First Realty had around 250 agents, making it a substantial acquisition.

To give some context, First Realty Better Homes and Gardens was the second-largest residential real estate company in the area. The largest was Iowa Realty, which also dominated land development and owned Midland Homes, the biggest homebuilding company in Iowa. Competing with them wasn't easy.

After this purchase, Jim Hubbell approached me with the idea of transitioning into land development. As my background was in commercial construction, this was a completely new field for me, but I took on the challenge. That's how we began our land development entity.

At that time, the market did not require builders to pay for lots until their houses were sold. This increased the risk of land development. We started our first land development project in 1992 with a community called Venbury in Altoona, Iowa, a northeastern suburb of Des Moines. Though slower growing compared with suburbs in the north and west, it was a promising start. We partnered with four builders who constructed spec homes, which were sold by First Realty agents.

My role was to expand our land development efforts, but the financial constraints made it tough. Eventually, six of us from Hubbell Realty formed a company called Realty Investment Group. While Jim Hubbell chose not to participate directly, the six of us guaranteed construction loans for the builders. This meant we paid them a fee and split the profits on the sale of the homes. None of us had much money, but our stable jobs allowed us to back the financing.

Although I ended up taking on most of the work, Realty Investment Group became quite successful. However, balancing my responsibilities for commercial development with land development and financing builders became overwhelming. To improve operations, I suggested establishing Hubbell Homes, which launched in 1998. The members of Realty Investment Group became part owners alongside Hubbell Realty. Hubbell Homes quickly achieved success, becoming a prime example of entrepreneurial spirit within an established organization. We took risks, invested personally, and built something impactful.

# **Facing Setbacks and Experiencing Breakthrough**

That said, not every venture was a success. Such is the life of every entrepreneur. Sometimes, projects go well, and other times, they falter.

In the 1990s, we had vacant retail space in the Kaleidoscope at the Hub, a downtown development I initially came to Des Moines to build. This space had been empty for nearly ten years since its construction. To fill the vacancies, we started a collegiate sportswear store focused on Iowa collegiate teams, which turned a small profit. We also launched a franchised toy store that was initially successful. For the first time, we were now 100 percent occupied.

Yes, we were initially successful, but when a major tenant vacated, we were back to square one. We tried moving the toy store to one of our vacant spaces in a suburban strip mall, but we were unable to compete with retailers such as Toys“R”Us. Downtown Des Moines had unique foot traffic due to its skywalk system and dense workforce, but the suburban market didn’t offer the same advantages. We ended up having to close the store.

In 2007, we entered the Florida market by partnering with a builder from my National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Builder 20 group, which is a network of twenty homebuilders nationwide. We purchased lots in Vero Beach with plans to share profits. However, the 2008 recession struck, and the builder encountered challenges due to a declining market and the effects of defective Chinese drywall, ultimately going out of business. We were left with devalued lots and had to establish our own homebuilding company in Florida to recover losses. Although we managed to complete the development, we did not make a profit.

Despite these setbacks, a couple of defeats would not slow us down. That same year, we made a decision to divest our office, retail, and flex-office properties and focus on multifamily and industrial properties. We entered the

multifamily sector, purchasing approximately 1,700 apartment units across Des Moines and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, from a local developer.

This marked our first major attempt at apartments and led to the creation of Hubbell Apartment Living, our multifamily management company, now named Indigo Living. Over time, this management venture grew significantly. While we started with 1,700 units, we've since grown this to over 10,000 managed units, with 55 percent of the units we manage owned by a third party.

Diversification became a recurring theme as we continued our transition into industrial and multifamily real estate and moved away from office and retail properties. Initially, this shift gave us a competitive edge, but as the market caught on, competition grew fierce. Each venture added to our entrepreneurial journey, showcasing both the risks and rewards of innovation in a competitive industry.

## Fostering an Entrepreneurial Mindset

Looking back, I believe the entrepreneurial mindset came naturally to me, even though I never explicitly chose to be entrepreneurial. When we launched Hubbell Homes in 1998, I didn't think to myself, *I want to be a homebuilder*. As an engineer, I know how to construct homes, but I had no prior experience in home construction or managing a homebuilding business.

It was more about creating opportunities and finding ways to make things work. Land development, for example, became a creative outlet for me, and it turned out to be very successful. It worked well with our other ventures, so when I first wrote my Eight to Great in 2004, I knew we had to keep fostering that entrepreneurial spirit for the company to continue growing.

Again, when people think of the term *entrepreneur*, they often associate it with start-ups. But fostering that entrepreneurial attitude within an established organization is every bit as important. I knew we needed to create a culture

that encouraged people to think creatively and take initiative. It wasn't solely about launching new companies but also about reimagining existing processes to generate more value.

Indigo Living found ways to bundle services such as internet or sell insurance to residents, generating additional revenue. While vendors often presented these ideas, it still required an entrepreneurial spirit to say, "Let's try this and see if it works," instead of merely keeping to the status quo. This team continues to innovate and devise new strategies to enhance investment income for both us and our third-party owner clients. I've always believed that playing it safe and maintaining the status quo wouldn't sustain us in the long run.

That mindset has led to significant ventures. In 2019, we acquired a homebuilder and a land development company in Omaha: The Home Company and The Land Company. At the time of our purchase, they were constructing about seventy-five homes a year. This year, they are likely to exceed 150. We have also launched other initiatives, such as Embarq Signature Homes, a high-end custom homebuilding company. Recently, we sold a custom showcase home featured in our local home show for \$1.9 million. Another venture, Origin Homes, focuses on custom building on your lot and workforce housing in rural Iowa, which has been highly successful.

We even ventured into senior living. Coming out of the recession, we had a lot of land that needed to be developed, and I saw an opportunity in Iowa's aging population. I pushed my team to explore this market, but initially, they struggled to get creative. It wasn't until a chance dinner with an old high school friend, a civil engineer working on assisted living projects, that I realized the potential.

When I returned to Des Moines, I confronted my vice president of Development about how a consulting engineering firm could find a solution while we couldn't. Eventually, we came together, and now we've developed ten Edencrest communities in Central Iowa, totaling around six hundred assisted living, independent, and memory care homes.

This year, we assumed management of those communities, which added 350 associates to our roster. It has been a steep learning curve, but I view it as another entrepreneurial step. We named the new management entity Highmark Senior Living. Initially, the team was somewhat hesitant to take on the challenge, but it assessed the opportunity, and on January 1, 2024, it embraced the challenge. That's the culture I aspire to build—one where everyone is focused on the next opportunity.

## How to Cultivate Entrepreneurial Traits

I believe the first characteristic of someone with an entrepreneurial mindset is the ability to identify opportunities. As Brian Tracy writes, “Entrepreneurship is the art of finding profitable solutions to problems.”<sup>11</sup> You have to understand the market, recognize where there are gaps, and figure out how to fill those needs.

This often comes from being curious and engaged. Because Des Moines isn't exactly the hotbed of global innovation, that meant I needed to travel, bring ideas home, and adapt them to our market. Through professional organizations such as NAHB, NAIOP, and ULI and their corresponding Builder 20 clubs, NAIOP forums, and ULI product councils, I was introduced to a lot of ideas from throughout the country. In *The Innovator's Dilemma*, Clayton M. Christensen writes, “One of the bittersweet rewards of success is, in fact, that as companies become large, they literally lose the capability to enter small emerging markets.”<sup>12</sup> So, having an entrepreneurial attitude gave me a competitive advantage.

Fostering an entrepreneurial attitude within a team is essential for driving growth and innovation. One of the most critical traits to cultivate is the willingness to put in the extra work. It's easy for team members to stay within their comfort zones, sticking to what they already know. However, true growth demands stepping beyond the day-to-day tasks and embracing new challenges.

This trait became particularly significant when Hubbell decided to buy a homebuilder in Omaha. Through my NAHB Builder 20 group, one of our builders acquired another builder from outside his market. The owner was getting close to retirement, did not have an exit strategy, and wanted to relieve his debt burden and cash out of his equity. We discussed that this was a nationwide trend, with many builders acquiring other builders to broaden their market reach. This was precisely the opportunity we identified in Omaha.

However, embracing opportunities comes with challenges. Fear of risk is a significant roadblock for many, while others feel overwhelmed by the increased workload that accompanies new ventures. A few years ago, we considered entering the fifty-five-plus rental market. The demographic data clearly pointed to a growing nationwide opportunity. Our team did not believe there was an opportunity, so they passed. Ultimately, a competitor capitalized on this opportunity and succeeded, fully leasing their project. This experience highlighted the importance of encouraging our team to look beyond its immediate perceptions and recognize the value of pursuing new ventures instead of following in others' footsteps.

Entrepreneurialism within a team requires initiative, curiosity, and a strong work ethic. Team members must anticipate market trends, take calculated risks, and act swiftly before others do. Waiting until an idea is proven means missing the biggest opportunities. To nurture these traits, it's essential to create an environment where solutions are prioritized over problems.

## **The Key to Creating a Solution-Oriented Environment**

Creating the right environment begins with expecting team members to present *solutions* rather than just *problems*.

When those on my team come to me, I encourage them to bring at least one proposed solution alongside any challenges they face. This approach shifts

the focus from obstacles to actionable steps. I'm willing to offer critiques, share my experiences, and connect them with others who might have faced similar challenges, but I don't want to do their job.

I want *genuine* solutions. There's a significant difference between someone presenting a viable solution and simply saying what they think I want to hear. I've encountered managers who sugarcoat problems, hoping they'll disappear on their own. However, issues don't resolve themselves; they need to be addressed directly. By fostering honesty, even when the truth is messy, I encourage my team to confront challenges head-on and develop strong solutions.

That said, in our industry, time is of the essence. The saying goes, "Time kills all deals." Markets move quickly, and delays can squander opportunities. Over the years, I've honed the ability to quickly assess financials, layouts, and project plans. My extensive experience gives me an edge, and while many of my team members are seasoned professionals with decades of experience, they haven't been in the business as long as I have. I find I have to really push hard to create a sense of urgency to move projects forward faster.

Ultimately, I want a team around me that focuses on solutions and not just problems. I want its members to step up and deliver results. If they can't, this is a sign they're a better fit with someone else.

## **The Power of Encouraging Feedback and Growth**

The only way to create a solution-oriented environment is to have a culture that encourages feedback and personal growth.

This can be a struggle for me at times. In meetings, I often realize that I can be more of a disrupter than a facilitator. Because I've been in my industry for so long, newer leaders can feel intimidated or embarrassed when they don't have the answers they believe they should. To address this, I sometimes step

back, allowing them to work through challenges independently. While this approach takes a bit longer than I'd like, I've found that it builds a stronger team. By taking extra time to listen to others, I'm able to recognize their entrepreneurial potential. I can see if they can identify a need and create a realistic, scalable solution to meet it.

Another way I promote growth among our team members is by leading by example and helping them to envision a broader perspective of what is possible. For instance, when Hubbell launched our custom homebuilding company, Embarq Signature Homes, along with our rural on-your-lot homebuilding company, Origin Homes, I based both on successful builders in my NAHB Builder 20 group.

I took my teams to visit the group's operations and let everyone see firsthand how each of those builders had successfully developed their companies. They could see these were not just abstract concepts. They were proven models we could learn from and adapt. By providing tangible examples, I help my team understand what entrepreneurial success looks like and how to replicate it.

By observing how the group overcame challenges, we could visualize our own path to success. Once my team gets going, the members often become more entrepreneurial themselves, continually seeking new ways to innovate. However, getting them to that starting point is always the hardest part.

Following in the steps of Sister Stella, I'm always trying to encourage those around me to think bigger. I want them focused on ideas that can truly make a difference. To broaden their horizons, I encourage the members of my team to engage with national organizations, such as NAHB, NAIOP, and ULI, and to take advantage of belonging to and interacting with Builder 20 groups, NAIOP forums, or ULI product councils.

My goal is to help them recognize great opportunities as early as possible to develop a truly entrepreneurial attitude. Without that mindset, it's tough to grow, diversify, and stay competitive in real estate development and

homebuilding. We need to keep innovating because if we don't, someone else will.

Entrepreneurialism within a team isn't always about starting something flashy or groundbreaking. It's about making strategic decisions, recognizing trends, and fostering a team that can think creatively and act decisively. By cultivating these traits and creating an environment where solutions are prioritized over problems, businesses can thrive and stay ahead in a competitive landscape.

Helping your team members develop an entrepreneurial attitude empowers them to take ownership, innovate continuously, and drive the organization toward sustained success.

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## PRINCIPLE 3

# DEVELOP AN ENGINEERING MINDSET FOR PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

As an engineer by education and training, I've always seen the world through the lens of process improvement. I'm always looking for better ways to get things done, understanding that *today's* best solution won't be *tomorrow's* best solution. Variables such as technology, markets, and competition are always changing.

That said, not everyone thinks this way. For example, accountants or property managers might be tempted to work harder or put in more hours instead of stepping back to find a better process. They're passionate, and passionate people often default to brute force. But brute force can only take you so far. To grow, you need scalable, sustainable solutions, and that requires a process-oriented mindset.

This is a principle true in business and general activity. Small habitual changes can make a massive impact. To this point, in *The Compound Effect*, Darren Hardy writes, "Since your outcomes are all a result of your moment-to-moment choices, you have incredible power to change your life by changing those choices. Step by step, day by day, your choices will shape your actions until they become habits, where practice makes them permanent."<sup>13</sup>

Still, much as we might nod our heads in agreement, it's tough for many leaders to understand that working *smarter* is more effective than just working *harder*. They stick to what they know and the same processes that gave them at

least a marginal degree of success. Instead of reaching out to others and expanding, they make statements like, “If you want to get a job done right, you just need to do it yourself.” They embrace a self-defeating negative growth mindset.

I’ve seen this resistance firsthand, especially when introducing new software. Early on, it would take our company years to implement a new system. There was just too much resistance to process improvement, and too few leaders had an engineering mindset. Thankfully, over time, this has changed. Experience has taught the team what to look for and how to ask the right questions. The learning curve was steep, but it’s made us faster and more effective at adopting new tools.

Ultimately, process improvement has been the key to becoming a truly great company. Focusing on maintaining efficiency, adapting to change, and rethinking how we work isn’t just an engineering mindset. It’s the mindset of a company that wants to succeed long term.

One man in particular modeled this well.

## The Father of Continuous Improvement

Sometimes referred to as the father of continuous improvement, Sir Edwards Deming was a twentieth-century visionary statistician and management consultant whose ideas transformed modern business practices. Deming emphasized using data and statistical analysis to enhance processes and reduce inefficiencies. After World War II, his teachings were embraced in Japan, where they played a key role in rebuilding the country’s industrial economy and establishing its reputation for quality manufacturing.

At the core of Deming’s philosophy was the idea of continuous, incremental improvement. This focused on refining processes over time rather than relying on occasional major overhauls. According to Deming, “Eighty-five percent of the reasons for failure are deficiencies in the systems and process

rather than the employee. The role of management is to change the process rather than badgering individuals to do better.”<sup>14</sup>

His Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle became a foundation for frameworks like Six Sigma and Total Quality Management. Deming also believed in empowering employees to identify and solve problems, creating a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility. The impact of Deming’s work is most famously seen in the automotive industry, where companies such as Toyota adopted his methods to achieve unmatched levels of quality and efficiency.

I was a young leader during the height of the Deming era, and his philosophy has impacted how I lead today. His ideas about quality and efficiency in manufacturing have really stuck with me. Over the years, I’ve also worked with consultants and joined organizations focused on lean methodologies and process improvement.

However, the game changer for Hubbell was learning from Wellmark, a health insurance company. It had taken process improvement principles<sup>15</sup> that were originally developed for manufacturing and adapted them for the service industry. This approach resonated with my team members because they could see how it applied directly to their type of work. The Wellmark team worked with my senior management team, and we took several of our key processes and worked through Wellmark’s process of documenting them, analyzing them, and developing a new process to implement, monitor, and yet again improve upon them.

Seeing that mindset applied in a service industry helped our team connect the dots. We realized that, while we aren’t building widgets, the principles of efficiency and refinement still hold true. That understanding has shaped how we approach everything from operations to customer service, both in business and beyond.

When it comes to having an engineering mindset and developing process improvement, there are four key steps I find helpful.

## Step 1: Map Out Your Workflow (Plan)

The first step is to outline the existing workflow. This phase is often the most enlightening, as it compels everyone involved to confront the inefficiencies they've unintentionally created over time. At Hubbell, we gather everyone who interacts with the process in one room and have them detail each step they take.

For many, it's a humbling experience. They see the unnecessary complexity in their workflows, things they've never questioned before, and begin to realize how cumbersome the process has become. That's when the light bulbs start going off, and they can see clearly how much room there is for improvement.

From there, we start asking critical questions: *Why are we doing it this way? Does this step add value? Is there a simpler way to achieve the same result?*

Sometimes, finding the answers means eliminating unnecessary steps. Other times, it requires combining tasks or rethinking the entire approach. At this stage, technology often becomes part of the discussion. Teams begin exploring software solutions or reaching out to industry peers to learn how others tackle similar challenges. It's a collaborative effort that starts with mapping out the process and questioning the status quo.

One key to making process improvement manageable is to break the work into smaller pieces. Tackling an entire system or workflow all at once can be overwhelming, causing people to lose focus or feel defeated. Instead, we concentrate on specific parts of a process, addressing them one at a time. Each piece may be part of a larger system, but by handling them individually, we make progress in manageable steps that are easier to implement and refine.

Taking a smaller step, this is something many of us already do in our everyday lives. For example, if you're setting up an exercise routine, you might start by mapping out the most effective sequence of activities. Maybe it's starting with weightlifting, followed by cardio, and incorporating stretching or yoga to improve flexibility. You customize it to what keeps you motivated,

whether it's joining a spin class or setting specific goals for each day. But you also have to accept that you'll never get it perfect. Process improvement isn't about perfection. It's about constant habit refinement. As James Clear writes,

Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement. The same way that money multiplies through compound interest, the effects of your habits multiply as you repeat them. They seem to make little difference on any given day and yet the impact they deliver over the months and years can be enormous. It is only when looking back two, five, or perhaps ten years later that the value of good habits and the cost of bad ones becomes strikingly apparent.”<sup>16</sup>

This same principle of life holds true in business. Just as small changes at home can lead to better relationships, better health, and better finances, small changes at work can lead to better outcomes. The important thing is to see the full picture. Only then are you able to chart a path forward.

## Step 2: Make the Adjustments (Do)

Once a new process is defined, the real challenge of implementation begins. Changing habits and behaviors is one of the hardest parts of process improvement. Even when people sit in a room, agree on a better way to do things, and commit to the change, their natural tendency, especially under stress, is to revert to old ways of working.

Then, there are obstacles that emerge. For example, if you have a plan to attend a spin class at five in the morning but stay out late the night before, your process falls apart. I can say this from personal experience. The question becomes “Do you have an alternative plan?” If your primary process breaks down, what's your backup? These are the kinds of adjustments that make a system more resilient over time.

This is why accountability and fail-safes are so important. A strong process has mechanisms to catch deviations and guide people back on track. Whether through alerts, checkpoints, or regular monitoring, the system needs to support people in sticking to the new method until it becomes second nature.

When we consider process improvement, we rarely completely scrap an existing process and start fresh. Instead, we modify it to refine what's already there. This often means identifying bottlenecks or inefficiencies, such as unnecessary approvals.

For instance, if someone is required to sign off on a step but has no real insight or involvement, their approval is just a formality. Worse, it can sit on their desk for days, adding needless delays. Cutting out such steps can make a significant difference without reinventing the wheel.

A good example is how we're currently revisiting the "starts" process for Hubbell Homes. This process begins when someone decides to start building a house in a particular community. It seems straightforward, but it involves a lot of moving parts, such as finalizing purchase orders, getting plans approved by the building department, and securing a building permit.

We continuously ask, "How long does this take, and where can we cut time?" The actual construction might take 120 days, but if the preconstruction phase drags on unnecessarily, we will lose time before we even begin.

Even during the build phase, delays creep in. If a house takes 150 days to complete when the team insists it can be done in 120, I'll press the team to explain why. Weather excuses don't cut it. The real issue often lies in basic coordination.

A superintendent might forget to confirm with the plumber two weeks ahead of time to ensure they're ready to show up when scheduled. If the plumber arrives, and the preceding work isn't done, they send their crew home. The next time, they assume we're unreliable and show up a week late. That one misstep causes the house to sit idle, wasting valuable time.

These process breakdowns might seem small, but they compound quickly. That's why I stress that homebuilding is fundamentally a manufacturing process. Sure, there's some customization involved, but at its core, it's about repeatable steps: the framer, the plumber, the electrician, the roofer. Each has a task to complete, and if one falls behind, it ripples through the entire project. That's why it's so critical to walk through every part of the process, identifying where things go wrong and finding ways to fix them.

The key isn't to analyze the process once but to revisit it regularly. Processes evolve over time, and what worked a year ago might not be effective today. By constantly reviewing and tweaking, we can find ways to reduce inefficiencies and keep things moving smoothly. It's not glamorous work, but it's the kind of attention to detail that ensures we stay competitive and deliver homes on time every time.

## Step 3: Review the Process (Check)

After implementing a new process, the next crucial step is setting a timeline for review. This ensures that the solution is evaluated in action and adjusted as needed. At Hubbell, we make it a point to revisit workflows, compare the actual outcomes to the initial goals, and ask challenging questions. Are people following the process as intended?

If not, what barriers are preventing them from doing so? Is the process effective, or does it need further refinement? These questions help us identify whether the solution is working as planned or if there are gaps that require another look.

In many cases, the first attempt at a solution isn't perfect. That's expected. We often go through several iterations before landing on a process that delivers consistent and reliable results. This can be a demanding effort, but it is a necessary one.

Reviewing and refining are what turn a good idea into a great system. The key takeaway is that process improvement is not only a one-time event. It's a mindset that requires continuously evaluating and optimizing to address both current and future needs.

## **Step 4: Refine for the Future (Act)**

Even the most efficient processes today won't remain effective forever. Markets change, technologies evolve, and businesses grow, which means processes need to adapt. Recognizing this reality is why we treat process improvement as an ongoing effort rather than a one-time fix. At Hubbell, our process improvement team uses a structured approach to identify inefficiencies and tackle them systematically. By doing so, we stay ahead of challenges, ensuring that we are always moving toward greater efficiency and effectiveness.

Refining processes isn't just about reducing costs or saving time. It's about developing systems that foster sustainable growth and empower teams to excel. A well-designed process equips the organization to tackle future challenges with confidence, laying a strong foundation for innovation and success. While the effort involved may appear overwhelming, the benefits are substantial. Each refinement brings the organization closer to creating a resilient and adaptable framework that supports long-term growth.

By committing to regular reviews and continuous refinement, businesses can ensure their systems are not only efficient but also scalable and future-ready. This approach isn't just an operational necessity; it's an investment in creating a thriving, forward-thinking organization that can meet the demands of tomorrow.

## **There Are Many Paths to Process Improvement**

One of our recent process improvement successes came from our capital formation and investor relations division. When we first started raising funds, we relied on the typical friends-and-family model. As larger investors joined, the demand for detailed reporting grew, and we found ourselves spending an excessive amount of time gathering and sharing information. It became clear we needed a more efficient solution. That realization led us to explore software options for creating an investor portal.

While software doesn't solve everything on its own, it provides a strong foundation. However, to get it up and running, you still need to input data, refine workflows, and allocate resources. This process takes effort, but the results are worth it. For example, our portal now enables investors to access information effortlessly, saving us countless hours of manual work and improving their experience.

From there, we identified additional areas for improvement. The next step was to manage our customer and investor databases more effectively, which led us to adopt a customer relationship management system. We brought in HubSpot and hired an expert to integrate it into our operations—not only for investor relations but also for other divisions, such as Highmark, our senior living division. HubSpot has significantly improved our ability to track leads, manage customer interactions, and uncover insights that were previously invisible to us.

For instance, my CFO recently flagged a report from HubSpot highlighting an issue where a potential customer had emailed us three times without receiving a response. Without HubSpot, if I'd asked the salesperson about the delay, I likely would have heard the usual excuses—too busy, missed the email, and so on. But the data told a clear story. There was no justifiable reason for that kind of oversight. If anything, the customer's persistence indicated a strong interest, and failing to respond was unacceptable.

This incident led us to examine our processes more closely. *Why did the follow-up fail? Where was the breakdown?* We invest significant resources in

marketing and lead generation, so losing a lead due to poor follow-up is essentially a waste of money. A good process should ensure that every inquiry receives a timely response. Ideally, this happens within minutes. If something does go wrong, there needs to be a fail-safe to catch the issue and redirect it.

This kind of evaluation and refinement has been key to improving both our efficiency and the experience we offer to investors and customers.

## Adjust or Move On

At Hubbell, we believe our people are our greatest asset, and we've worked hard to build a team that drives our success. Unlike companies that cut staff to boost efficiency, we focus on coaching and developing our associates to ensure they can perform at their best. Process improvement is central to this philosophy, allowing us to maximize our resources without sacrificing the workforce that makes our company thrive. Rather than just creating tools or systems, I aim to cultivate a mindset where everyone is committed to refining how we work, whether it's responding to leads, managing data, or serving investors.

However, not everyone naturally gravitates toward this mindset. Some people simply aren't wired for process improvement, and that's not always a flaw. Sometimes, it's a personality trait. As Jim Collins suggests with his idea of getting the "right people on the bus," success comes down to aligning individuals with roles that match their strengths.

The "right seat" for someone today may not be the right one tomorrow, especially as the company evolves and priorities shift. Someone who excels at solving today's problems might not be equipped for the challenges of tomorrow, and that's OK. What's important is maintaining flexibility and adaptability as roles and company needs change.

This is where dedicated process improvement staff make all the difference. Many companies neglect this role entirely, even though they have teams for

every other function. Without individuals explicitly tasked with improving processes, it's easy for this critical work to fall by the wayside.

At Hubbell, we've prioritized this function with a dedicated team that's laser-focused on uncovering inefficiencies and implementing solutions to keep us moving forward. The team's work ensures that process improvement isn't a one-time effort but a continuous journey, helping us stay ahead of changes in the market, technology, and our business needs. Even a process that works well today might become outdated tomorrow, so this ongoing focus is essential.

Again, our culture of constant improvement isn't for everyone. Change is a constant here, and those who resist this mindset often struggle to thrive. While we value every team member, we also recognize that some may not align with our focus on innovation and adaptability. This misalignment often leads to mutual frustration. They're disheartened by the pace of change, and we're frustrated by their resistance to growth. At this point, it's usually best if they move on to another organization.

Ultimately, embracing an engineering mindset is essential. Those who thrive at Hubbell view change not as a threat but as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. For those who don't, seeking a company that aligns better with their values and work style may be the best outcome for all involved. This alignment ensures we maintain a dynamic, thriving team capable of driving long-term success.

## **It's a Science and a Discipline**

What's often overlooked is that process improvement is more than common sense. It's a science. Concepts such as Lean and other structured approaches have methodologies behind them.

My process improvement staff have been trained in these methodologies, and they bring that expertise to the table. While I understand the principles and participate in discussions, they're the ones who lead the charge. Their job

is to dive into the details, collaborate with teams, and map out workflows so that everyone understands and implements the new processes. Then, they go back later to evaluate and refine those systems further, so there is a cycle of improvement.

Process improvement is ongoing, but we manage it in a structured and inclusive way. Our management committee regularly reviews company issues and prioritizes them, ensuring the process improvement team knows where to focus their efforts. In addition to these structured reviews, the team generates projects by hosting focus groups—a cultured approach that involves team members at all levels to truly understand priorities. Fixing inefficiencies is important, but it's even more crucial to address the most impactful issues first.

For example, when we took over the management of Highmark Senior Living earlier this year, the team initially thought they had everything figured out. It quickly became clear they didn't. They lacked documentation, alignment, and a clear, repeatable process. The process improvement team has been heavily involved, helping to develop and implement a system that everyone understands and can follow.

This highlights that process improvement is a discipline. Companies that don't prioritize it or rely on informal efforts often miss the opportunity to unlock their full potential. Process improvement requires dedicated resources, consistent effort, and a willingness to revisit and refine systems regularly. It's challenging, but it's essential for sustained growth and success.

## PRINCIPLE 4

# ENRICH THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

The Hubbell Realty mission statement is to enrich the quality of life in our communities by being the leading provider of real estate solutions today and tomorrow. We do this by building on our strong foundation of integrity and our commitment to associates, clients, shareholders, and communities.

My focus has been on the first part: to enrich the quality of life in our communities. This has always been central to everything Hubbell does. This guiding principle shapes every decision we make, every project we undertake, and every relationship we build. Our vision is to create environments where people can thrive, businesses can flourish, and future generations can discover opportunities that inspire them to stay, contribute, and lead meaningful lives.

Our mission statement reflects this belief.

While this mission was established long before I became CEO, I've had the privilege of contributing to its development during my time here. One of the improvements I made was our specific commitment to enriching the quality of life in our communities. This clearly acknowledges that everything we do should contribute to something greater than ourselves.

This commitment isn't limited to major projects or headline-making initiatives. It permeates every aspect of our work. Whether it's building homes, managing properties, supporting local businesses, or fostering partnerships with city leaders, our goal is the same: to leave every place better than we found it.

Ultimately, improving the quality of life in our community involves taking responsibility. It means recognizing that, as leaders, we have a role in shaping the future of the places where we live and work. We're here to set examples for others to follow and build on. This is not always easy, and it often requires navigating challenges, compromises, and complexities. However, when done correctly, it creates a legacy of progress, connection, and shared success that benefits everyone involved.

## An ICONic Initiative

One of the best examples of this philosophy in action is the Iowa Confluence (ICON) Water Trails. Think of a water trail like a bike trail. It's an extended stretch of river, stream, or creek that people can kayak, tube, canoe, wade, or even boat down for miles and miles. In some areas of the larger rivers, visitors can surf, swim, or boat.

What began as an idea to revitalize Iowa's rivers and streams has evolved into one of the most ambitious projects in our region's history. It's transforming how we engage with our natural resources and how those resources can drive economic development, attract talent, enhance our conservation efforts regarding water quality, and boost recreation in our state. However, ICON, like many other initiatives, also serves as a reminder of what true leadership in the community entails.

The ICON Water Trails project has become one of the most ambitious and transformative undertakings of my career. Our past Greater Des Moines Partnership CEO referred to this as the "most transformational project of our generation." It began as the Central Iowa Water Trails initiative, focusing on activating and revitalizing the waterways around Central Iowa.

The idea was simple yet powerful: to take the rivers and streams that define much of Iowa's landscape and turn them into vibrant hubs for local, regional,

and national recreation, connection, and economic growth through public-private partnerships and key leadership involvement.

Central Iowa is uniquely positioned for such an effort. Two major rivers—the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers—run through the heart of downtown, as well as numerous smaller streams, such as Beaver Creek, Fourmile Creek, Walnut Creek, and Skunk River. The question was, how do we take these underutilized waterways and turn them into something extraordinary?

To be clear, I didn't set out to become a water trails expert. In fact, my involvement began entirely by chance. I was at a luncheon and had just received an award for Commercial Real Estate Professional of the Year when I was approached by the head of the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The MPO had received a grant to study water trails, and its head asked if I would be interested in chairing a committee to explore water trails in Central Iowa. I couldn't help but laugh.

“I think you've got the wrong guy,” I told him. “I'm not a fisherman or a kayaker, and I've never even heard the term *water trails!*” In fact, the closest I had come to water recreation was begrudgingly swimming during my time as a triathlete. But the head of MPO insisted I was exactly what they needed because I was a business leader without any preconceived notions about water trails, someone who could bridge the gap between enthusiasts and the broader community, and, well, I “get things done.”

To me, this wasn't solely about water quality or environmental activism, although those are significant aspects of the project. My main motivation was workforce development. I viewed ICON as a means to attract and retain talent by making Central Iowa a more dynamic and appealing place to live in the eyes of younger generations across the nation. In today's economy, cities compete not only for businesses but also for people—particularly young, skilled professionals. ICON could provide us with a competitive advantage.

What followed was a whirlwind of meetings, planning sessions, and site visits. We held more than sixty meetings with stakeholders from every corner

of the community. There were kayakers, canoeists, fishermen, speedboat owners, farmers, and conservationists—all with their own interests and perspectives. We also met with city councils, parks departments, planning commissions, and local businesses.

I was amazed at the passion these various groups brought to the table. For many of them, these waterways were deeply personal, tied to family or heritage traditions, favorite fishing spots, or cherished memories. Together, we identified over eighty potential access points along the rivers and streams. These natural entry points, as our consultants called them, became the backbone of our plan.

To gain inspiration and insights, we visited other cities that had successfully revitalized their waterways. One trip took us to Columbus, Georgia, where they transformed the Chattahoochee River into a hub for white water rafting and recreation. Before this project, downtown Columbus struggled, even with major employers such as Aflac and a nearby military base. The water trails turned everything around. Restaurants, brewpubs, and boutiques sprang up, and people began moving back downtown. Witnessing the transformation was eye-opening. It demonstrated what was possible.

Another trip took us to Boise, Idaho, where they had installed waveshaping technology to create surfable waves in their river system. On a hot July day, we watched as locals in wet suits lined up to ride the waves. Each ride lasted maybe forty-five seconds, but they'd fall off, get back in line, and do it again. It was an incredible scene, not just for the recreation but also for the sense of community it fostered.

Two encounters stood out. First, we met a young surfer who wanted to know where we were from and what we were doing. It turns out this young surfer was from Cedar Falls, Iowa, and had moved to Boise for its outdoor lifestyle. Then we met a city employee operating the waveshaper. He was another Iowa native from Marshalltown. It struck me that we were losing

talented young people to cities such as Boise because of these outdoor amenities. That realization only deepened my commitment to ICON.

Back in Des Moines, I decided to get hands-on, though I quickly learned how little I knew about water recreation. On my first kayaking trip, I panicked when my kayak started taking on water. “Nate, I’m sinking!” I yelled to my companion from the Department of Natural Resources. He calmly suggested I stand up, flip the kayak over, and empty the water. It turned out I was only paddling in two feet of water.



*Paddling through rough waters on my first kayak trip.*

Later, on another trip, we came across a massive pipe running across the Des Moines River. None of us knew what it was, not even the Department of Natural Resources expert who was with me. It turned out to be part of a dredging operation for Easter Lake. So, we climbed out, hauled our canoe over the pipe, and continued on our way. Who would have thought that the middle of the Des Moines River was only two to three feet deep? Experiences such as

these emphasized the importance of proper access points—making it easy and safe for people to enjoy the waterways.

As the Central Iowa Trails project became a reality, the Great Outdoors Foundation took the lead, and that's when the waters began churning stronger. The name was changed to ICON, and we gained momentum, attracting support from all corners of the community. Our board of directors now includes high-profile leaders such as Dan Houston, the former CEO of Principal Financial Group, and Matt McKinney, a West Des Moines city councilman who cochairs the board. Together, we've raised over \$100 million in public and private funding. Our first major project, the Scott Street Dam modification, is currently under construction, with completion scheduled for 2026.

Another project on the Raccoon River, aptly named the Hubbell Trailhead, is set to begin, and our most ambitious plan—a white water rapids course upstream on the Des Moines River at Center Street—remains in development. This is a multiyear effort, I note, as we're about ten years in, and it's significantly larger in scale than similar projects we've examined.

The heart of ICON Water Trails reimagines what Central Iowa can be: a home where natural beauty, economic vitality, and community pride come together. It's about giving people a reason to stay, invest, and dream. For me, it's been a reminder that sometimes the most significant impacts come from stepping outside your comfort zone and saying yes to something completely unfamiliar.

## **Ecosystem Ergonomics**

Communities operate much like ecosystems, where every component has an interconnected role in maintaining balance, growth, and sustainability. Just as an ecosystem relies on the health of its soil, water, and wildlife to thrive, a community depends on its businesses, infrastructure, natural resources, and

people to create a vibrant, livable environment. When one part of the ecosystem falters, the ripple effects are felt throughout the entire system. Similarly, when a business neglects its duty to contribute positively to the community, or when natural resources are underutilized or overlooked, the broader system suffers.

Using ICON as a continued example, Iowa's rivers and streams are like the lifeblood of a natural ecosystem, yet they were historically overlooked or undervalued as community assets. By focusing on revitalizing these waterways, ICON has demonstrated how enhancing one element of the ecosystem—a river—can invigorate the surrounding areas. Water trails bring recreation and tourism, which in turn support local businesses. Improved natural spaces boost property values and encourage young professionals to settle down. Like an ecosystem, everything is connected. What benefits one part ultimately enriches the whole.

In an ecosystem, balance is key. Too much focus on one element can cause others to suffer. Communities face similar challenges. If we pour all our resources into economic growth without addressing environmental or social needs, the imbalance will eventually create problems—such as workforce shortages, declining quality of life, or environmental degradation. Projects such as ICON work because they recognize the need to address multiple layers of the community simultaneously. They foster pride, boost economic development, and create opportunities for residents to connect with their environment.

The role of leadership in a community is similar to that of a keystone species in an ecosystem. Leaders set the tone and pace and often determine the direction of growth and collaboration. When business leaders, city officials, and community organizations work together, they create a foundation that supports the entire system. But, just as in nature, every participant in the ecosystem plays a role.

Whether a local business owner supports a community event, a volunteer maintains a public park, or a city resident advocates for better infrastructure, each contribution strengthens the system as a whole. When the entire ecosystem—both human and natural—is in harmony, the community thrives in ways that benefit everyone, from individuals to institutions.

## Why Should We Care?

Why should business leaders care about their community? The answer has always been simple. It comes down to the same thing that initially motivated me: the workforce. Like most cities in the United States, the Des Moines metro area faces a workforce shortage. Attracting and retaining young people is essential.

So, the question is, what makes Central Iowa a desirable place to live, work, and build a future? There are already plenty of great reasons, but the truth is that we can always do more. Communities grow stronger when we continue to enhance what makes them special, and business leaders play a critical role in that process. Much of my role has involved aligning myself with other community leaders. In the Des Moines metro area, we're fortunate to have many business leaders who share a vision of improving our community.

I'll admit it's frustrating when larger, more successful companies don't step up in the same way. They have their reasons, but I've never found those reasons compelling. Still, the number of business leaders in the Des Moines metro area who generously give of their time, money, and resources is inspiring. Their efforts lead to projects that transform our city and enhance its appeal.

As a real estate developer and homebuilder, community growth is essential. If we're not growing, we're stagnant, and that spells trouble. The state of Iowa grows at a modest pace, but the Des Moines metro area has been a bright spot, showing strong growth compared to other parts of the state and the entire Midwest. However, that growth isn't guaranteed. We must work hard to make

Des Moines a desirable place to live, and in a smaller metro area such as ours, that requires a team effort.

It's not like Atlanta or Denver, where the city's natural appeal does much of the heavy lifting. In smaller communities, everyone needs to pitch in. No single leader or business can accomplish it alone. While not every business leader will join the cause, many will, and they want their community to thrive.

Aside from the long-term economic benefits, the primary reason I'm still motivated to do what I do is because I'm passionate about doing what's right. Because our mission as a company is to enrich the quality of life in our community, I take that mission to heart. I want to make life better for *everyone*.

I want people to stay in Iowa and not move away to places such as Florida, Texas, or Arizona. I want them to see Des Moines as a place where they can thrive. We have jobs here. We have a great quality of life. It's a wonderful place to raise a family and build a career.

## You Can Enrich Any Community

I've visited communities across the country, and what strikes me is how differently people value the amenities they have. Some areas get excited about their thirteen- or fourteen-mile bike trails. It's a nice feature, but in Central Iowa, you can easily spend a whole day on your bike, navigating an interconnected network of five hundred miles of trails without ever needing to venture onto a road or highway. That's a significant difference.

Our bike trails are among our greatest strengths, and many of them run alongside the rivers. They showcase the natural beauty of Iowa while providing safe and enjoyable recreational opportunities. When I first got involved with water trails, I hardly knew what they were. I remember biking along a trail in Johnston and seeing a sign that read Water Trail. I thought, *Well, it looks like a typical riverboat launch site. I guess that's what a water trail is.* At that time, I

didn't fully understand the concept, but I was intrigued. Since then, I've witnessed how water trails can change communities.

One of the most compelling ideas I've ever heard came from a community leader who stated that we owe a certain amount of "civic rent" to our communities. In other words, as members of a community—especially those of us who thrive within it—we have a duty to give back. This resonates with me, though I frame it slightly differently. For me, it's about enhancing the quality of life in our communities.

For example, I cochaired the American Heart Walk with a close friend. Together, we made it one of the largest heart walks in the metro area. Later, when my granddaughter was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of six, my granddaughter and I cochaired the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF) Walk. I'll never forget that experience.

I had my granddaughter standing in front of groups of people, asking them to donate to diabetes research. She was just a little girl, but there she was, helping raise money for a cause that mattered deeply to her and our family. That walk ended up being the largest JDRF walk in our area's history. We had friends, family, and business partners all pitching in to make a difference. Many of them joined me in the walk, all wearing tutus.

## **It Takes A Team**

Efforts like these highlight a fundamental truth: Making a difference requires a team. It's likely that those further outside your circle or sphere of influence play a role. While having key business leaders and philanthropists on board is important, it's more about uniting people from all walks of life to share their perspectives. Financial support varies, and everyone contributes in their own way.

But if you're going to commit to something, you have to go all in. No straddling the fence, no one foot in and one foot out. Too often, people agree

to help but fail to follow through. They may put their name on a list or a résumé, but they don't show up when it counts. That's not leadership. Leadership means showing up, doing the work, and making things happen.

I've always believed that if you truly commit, you can create meaningful change in your community. I didn't grow up in the Des Moines metro area, so I did not have deep roots here, but I've built my life and career here, and I feel a deep responsibility to make Central Iowa a better place for everyone. That's why I've been involved in projects such as ICON Water Trails and the Hubbell Extreme Builds. It's why I've worked to bring people together, not just as a business leader but as a true partner with the community.

I believe every business should aim to be a partner in its community. The extent to which a company can contribute varies based on its size, resources, and leadership, but the fundamental principle remains the same: We all have a role in improving our communities. As a city councilman recently shared with me, "You're more than just a business leader. You're a partner in helping us achieve our goals." That statement resonated with me because it embodies my aspirations. I didn't just seek success for Hubbell but for the entire region.

For me, enriching the quality of life in our community is more than a mission statement; it's a way of life. It centers on creating opportunities, building connections, and leaving things better than we found them. Whether it's through water trails, bike paths, or charity walks, these efforts remind us of what's possible when we work together. They demonstrate that with the right commitment and leadership, we can make a lasting impact—one that benefits not just our businesses but the community as a whole.

## **Take Pride in Giving Back**

One of the things I've always admired about our organization is the pride we take in giving back to the community. It's woven into our culture and values, and it's something I see consistently reflected in initiatives across our company.

For instance, the Toys for Tots drive organized by Pat Crosby from our Hubbell Construction team was a tremendous success. Pat collaborated with the team at McAninch Corporation, one of our long-standing trade partners, and the response was remarkable. Boxes overflowed with toys, and it became an annual tradition in the office. He received numerous Hoogle High Fives because people genuinely recognized the pride he took in these efforts.

This culture of community engagement is a significant reason why people remain part of Hubbell and why we attract new talent. It's not the primary reason we do it, but the pride and connection these efforts foster contribute to both recruitment and retention. From the moment someone joins, it's evident that giving back is an expectation, not just a formality. During my early days at Hubbell, I recalled being asked, "What are you involved in within the community?" Coming from an industry that didn't prioritize this, I found it incredibly refreshing to have opportunities to get involved and stay engaged.

Every associate is encouraged to have at least one involvement outside of work, making a tangible difference in the community. Whether it's local, regional, or national organizations, our associates are out there making an impact. And we're supported in doing so through initiatives such as volunteer time off, which allows us to focus on these efforts without sacrificing work responsibilities.

What's more, people here feel empowered to identify and address community needs. Whether Pat organizes a toy drive or a blood drive following a natural disaster, or executives volunteer to be in a dunk tank for charity, the attitude is always, "How can we help?" That level of connection to the community fosters a sense of purpose and fulfillment that goes beyond the workplace.

## **Do the Right Thing**

The key is having the right motivation. After years of working in community development, I've found leadership responsibilities to be way more meaningful and rewarding than I first imagined. Early on, the focus was often on tangible things such as buildings, new infrastructure, or other visible changes I could point to.

But over time, my perspective shifted. It became less about creating outcomes and more about building something that lasts. Improving the quality of life for everyone in the community became the core purpose, shaping every decision, partnership, and project. This philosophy values efforts to bring people together, spark pride, and open doors for new opportunities, whether in recreation, economic growth, or personal fulfillment.

When ICON launched, Hubbell stepped up with a \$1 million donation, marking the first significant contribution to advance the initiative. For a relatively small organization, this was a bold move—especially considering that most previous contributions didn't exceed \$100,000. Recognizing ICON's potential to transform the city, Hubbell later pledged even more, increasing the total to \$1.5 million. Today, one of the central locations proudly bears the Hubbell name—the Hubbell Trailhead—symbolizing a lasting connection between the company and the community's future.

Over the years, I have received awards from groups such as the American Planning Association and the Iowa Environmental Council, and I also received the first-ever ICON Waveshaper Award. These honors are nice reminders that time, effort, and resources were well spent. But honestly, the real reward is seeing a project come to life and knowing your hard work helped build something lasting.

This leadership approach isn't limited to big, flashy projects. Everyday decisions matter just as much. Showing up, collaborating with partners, keeping commitments, and staying engaged with residents all play a part. Whether it's recognizing an employee through Hubbell High Fives, working

with homeowners to solve issues, or teaming up with city leaders to plan for the future, the same principles apply.

Of course, challenges are part of the process. Obstacles pop up, progress slows, and unexpected problems test your patience. True leadership doesn't back down in those moments. Instead, it digs deeper, finds solutions, and inspires others to stick with it.

At the end of the day, the goal is straightforward: Leave a legacy. Create something that future generations can appreciate and enjoy. A city abundant in recreational opportunities, economic vitality, and a strong sense of community. People may come and go, and awards may fade, but the impact of a transformed community with a better quality of life lasts far beyond any single leader. That lasting legacy, filled with shared pride and potential, is the ultimate reward for leading with vision and compassion.

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## PRINCIPLE 5

# FOCUS ON ACCURACY FIRST, SPEED SECOND

“Speed and accuracy.” This is a phrase I’d always hear Jim Hubbell say at the close of every single executive committee meeting. It became almost a ritual, a mantra of sorts.

His point was that we had to maintain our reputation for doing things quickly and well as we grew. For a long time, I repeated this mantra to others without much thought. But then, I had a moment of clarity.

I was reviewing the Eight to Great principles with one of our trade partners: the McAninch Corporation—a family-owned earthmoving and underground utility company recognized not only for their work but also for their community involvement, such as their contributions to Easterseals. During that discussion, Dwayne McAninch, the founder, interrupted me.

“Rick, Rick, Rick,” he said. “I appreciate what you’re saying, but let’s set the record straight. It’s really *accuracy first*, then speed. Get the accuracy right, and then you can focus on doing things faster. But if you prioritize speed over accuracy, you’re going to end up costing yourself a lot more in the long run.”

He added, “When I’ve got a guy running a scraper, he can go as fast as he wants, but if he’s not paying attention to what he’s doing, he can cost me more money in minutes than I’d make in a month. Those machines move a lot of dirt, and they can make a mess even faster. Accuracy comes first.”

As soon as these words left his mouth, I knew he was right.

# It Starts with Accuracy

Perhaps the conversation resonated because it mirrored something I'd always heard in construction: *Measure twice, cut once*. This lesson is as old as the trade itself but becomes more critical as projects grow in scale and complexity. In our own journey, we learned this the hard way. In our industry, accuracy and quality are often synonymous, so our focus on accuracy becomes a focus on quality.

When Hubbell was smaller, our quality control often depended heavily on the expertise of our superintendents and project managers who had been with us for years. They had the necessary experience to identify issues and resolve them before they escalated into major problems. However, as we grew, we started taking on larger projects and relying more on a less experienced construction and design team.

Over time, the people who truly understood construction weren't always involved in the details of every project. The outcome? We undertook some projects that fell short of the standards we had become known for. They weren't *bad*, but they didn't meet what I would call Hubbell quality. To me, this was unacceptable, and I realized we needed to fundamentally change our approach to quality control. It wasn't enough to assume that our reputation would carry us through.

Accuracy doesn't happen because you *want* it to. It happens because you put the right systems and processes in place to ensure it. So, we made some changes. Today, accuracy starts at the design phase, where we bring in experts from our own team and outside consultants to review the work of our architectural and engineering teams, verifying every detail.

Additionally, we've implemented rigorous quality control measures during construction. Our team spends significantly more time reviewing plans and inspecting work. We also hire specialized consultants to evaluate construction at key stages, ensuring that issues are identified and corrected before they become costly mistakes. We have implemented software that assists us in

documenting all construction details through photographs, videos, and drone videos.

Yes, this approach costs more up front. However, the alternative of dealing with major construction problems *after* the fact costs far more.

## **Catch Mistakes and Accept Responsibility**

Mistakes will happen. There are numerous negative examples that I could share. Recently, I was forced to initiate a lawsuit related to a project where several mistakes were made. The design team had outlined some details and specifications for the roof design, and neither our trades nor design team corrected the flaw. The issue emerged when the details and specifications themselves turned out to be incorrect.

This mistake triggered a chain of events that impacted the entire project. The poor design and subsequent issues due to the design allowed significant leaks, causing moisture to seep into the building. Over time, this moisture contributed to mold growth that, left untreated, could pose a serious health hazard and render parts of the structure unusable. Ultimately, the only solution was to quickly remove and replace all the affected areas. The cost of these repairs reached between \$2 million and \$3 million.

Resolving the issue required a lengthy legal process, but this clearly illustrates the importance of accuracy and quality, along with sufficient oversight. Often, design details are taken from a computer library without thorough analysis to ensure their appropriateness. On our side, no one identified the error before or during construction. Design issues are among the hardest to detect.

Regrettably, this type of issue has become more prevalent in my industry in recent years. When I joined the field, architectural firms typically had experienced professionals who focused on construction details. Their practical, hands-on knowledge enabled them to foresee problems and design accordingly.

Today, much of that expertise has been supplanted by digital tools. Architects and engineers often depend on premade details from computer libraries, using them without thoroughly assessing whether they suit the specific conditions of a project.

For us, this experience has served as a wake-up call. Not only is it important to try to catch mistakes, but it's equally important to take responsibility for our actions. I firmly believe we have a duty to question any detail or specification that seems suspicious. If someone in the field notices a potential issue, they must speak up and contact the architect before proceeding. The mindset cannot be, "I am just following the plans." Rather, it should be, "Does this make sense? Will this work?"

Rushing to meet deadlines or cutting corners for efficiency becomes meaningless if the result is flawed. Achieving accuracy requires diligence, questioning, and close attention to detail at every stage, from design through construction. When accuracy leads the way, speed follows naturally because time is not wasted fixing costly mistakes.

## Prioritize Accuracy and Quality

To reduce the number of mistakes, we focus heavily on incentivizing our team to prioritize accuracy and quality. While speed is naturally motivating because everyone wants to stick to a schedule and complete tasks efficiently, we've made it clear through our processes and incentives that quality comes first.

Of course, speed still matters. Projects are expected to stay on schedule, and no one has the luxury of endlessly extending deadlines. If a project is slated for eighteen months, we don't expect it to take twenty-four. What we do expect is for quality to be built into the process from the very beginning, with care taken at every stage. This approach ensures that when the project is complete, it meets the standards we and our clients demand.

To make this emphasis on quality actionable, we've built training and support systems for our team. For example, in our single-family residential projects, there are specific technical details that everyone needs to understand, such as how to properly install Tyvek weather barriers. We provide comprehensive training for both our trade partners and our superintendents to ensure they know how to meet these quality standards.

Additionally, we use outside consultants to perform inspections on many of our projects. This external perspective adds an extra layer of accountability and helps catch issues that might otherwise be missed. Whether it's a single-family home or a large commercial building, this system ensures that quality remains the primary focus throughout the construction process.

Ultimately, our team leaders and employees are motivated by the understanding that their performance is assessed based on the quality of their work, not merely on how quickly they finish it. By aligning our compensation incentives with these values, we've fostered a culture where accuracy is valued, quality is celebrated, and speed naturally follows from doing things correctly from the outset. This balanced approach ensures that we fulfill our promise of excellence while still honoring our commitments on time. As we say, "On time and on budget!"

## When Accuracy Pays Dividends

One of the most rewarding aspects of prioritizing accuracy is seeing how it directly contributes to the success of a project—not just in terms of avoiding problems but in creating something we can be genuinely proud of. A key example of this is how we approach projects. Since we are usually not just the contractor but also the owner, we approach all projects with what we call "an owner's mindset."

In such cases, where we are also the owner, the stakes are even higher because we have to live with the results. If something goes wrong, we're the

ones left to fix it and pay for the fix. On the other hand, when a project is done right, the benefits ripple outward. This makes our investors happy, keeps tenants satisfied, and ensures the long-term performance of the asset.

There was one project, a mixed-use development, where our emphasis on accuracy really shone through. From the very beginning, we treated quality as nonnegotiable. We brought in external consultants during the design phase to validate every detail, making sure the plans didn't just look good on paper but also worked in practice. We trained our teams extensively, ensuring that every trade partner and superintendent understood the standards we expected. And throughout construction, we carried out rigorous inspections at key milestones.

The results spoke for themselves. The project was delivered on time, with no major issues during or after construction. Because of the care we put into accuracy, the building performed as designed. There were no leaks, no unexpected maintenance issues, and no callbacks to fix overlooked details. Our investors were thrilled because the project immediately began generating returns. More importantly, it set a benchmark for the kind of quality we strive for in everything we do.

What stands out to me is how these practices become a competitive advantage. I know there are competitors in our industry for whom quality isn't a priority. They focus on speed or cost cutting, and they might get away with it for a while. But over time, poor quality catches up with them. That's why accuracy and quality are nonnegotiable for us.

In this project, and others like it, the success we've seen is a direct result of sticking to our principles. When we get it right the first time, we don't just avoid problems—we set the stage for lasting success. And that's what makes accuracy not just a priority, but the foundation of everything we do.

## Hire for Quality

When hiring a leader, particularly in construction, identifying whether someone prioritizes thoroughness over speed can be revealing. It often comes down to their experience with quality control. During the interview process, I often get into how candidates have handled quality issues in their past roles.

I ask questions such as, “What’s your approach to quality control?” or “How do you ensure the work meets standards before it’s too late to fix it?” Their responses often provide insight into whether they have a reactive or proactive mindset. Do they talk about systems and processes, or do they seem overly focused on just getting things done?

In our work, we have implemented tools and technology to ensure accountability and transparency in quality control. If a subcontractor is not meeting the standards we have established, we can detect it early and address the issue before it escalates. This process is less about mistrust and more about the old Russian proverb: *Trust but verify*. You document, you verify, and ultimately, you avoid costly problems.

Most people want to go fast, whether out of habit, overconfidence, or a desire to impress. It’s human nature. But that rush to finish often leads to cutting corners, which ultimately costs more in time, money, and credibility. As I’ve seen over the years, some people approach drawings or specs with the attitude of, “I’ve been doing this for twenty years. I don’t need to read the details.” But the truth is that they might have been doing it *wrong* for twenty years.

In my experience, leaders who prioritize thoroughness are also the ones willing to challenge those bad habits. They take the time to check the drawings, verify their team’s work, and hold people accountable. I’ve spent much of my career reviewing architectural details and making contractors correct mistakes. It’s not always easy.

It’s expensive, time-consuming, and embarrassing for everyone involved. But it’s necessary. If leaders fail to enforce accuracy, the cost of those mistakes can eat into profits or damage a company’s reputation.

## Shift Your Mindset

For younger professionals coming into the industry, especially those who subscribe to the “move fast and break things” mentality, it’s crucial to help them understand the true cost of that approach. This mindset might work in some fields, such as technology, where iteration and rapid learning are the norm, but in construction, the stakes are entirely different. Mistakes don’t only cost time or money; they can cost credibility, trust, and even safety. Shifting that attitude begins with education and real-world examples that make the consequences tangible.

One of the most effective ways to teach this lesson is by showing them the financial and reputational risks involved in prioritizing speed over accuracy. I often explain to new team members that rushing without attention to quality can lead to massive mistakes that could have been easily avoided.

For example, when I was involved in constructing a twenty-story office tower, the same wall detail was used for all twenty stories. This means that if something is wrong at the first level, that error is repeated twenty times. Fixing a single mistake becomes an enormous, expensive task when you have to go back and redo every level. That’s a scenario no one wants to face.

We still use techniques from those days to test and refine quality. For instance, when testing wall sections, we often construct a mock wall and water test it for infiltration. These proactive measures help ensure that we catch problems before they become costly and widespread.

The lesson applies just as much to smaller buildings and projects. In our current work, we often build three-, four-, or five-story buildings, or even row homes in developments with dozens of units. If a mistake is made in the first story or the first unit, it’s likely to be repeated across the entire structure or community. Fixing that error sixty times is a completely different challenge than addressing it once. For young leaders, the key is to help them internalize these stakes. They need to see that moving fast without verifying quality might feel efficient in the short term, but the long-term costs are staggering. I always

tell my team, “You don’t want to be the person responsible for a multimillion-dollar mistake that could have been avoided with a little more care.”

Young professionals should view quality as key to their reputation. Being known for accuracy builds trust, while being associated with rushing and cutting corners can harm your reputation. Accuracy first, speed second.

## It Is Still a Process

Every homebuilder knows the importance of balancing speed and quality. Our team constantly works to improve and refine processes across all four of our homebuilding entities. Whether the target is reducing construction time from 180 days to 120, we’ve put substantial steps in place to achieve that goal without sacrificing craftsmanship.

This is why we’ve implemented such rigorous processes in our work. The goal is to catch mistakes early, ideally before construction begins, and certainly before they’re repeated across multiple units. Here’s how we approach it:

1. **Construction team review:** Our in-house construction team, the people who’ve dealt with problems on-site, are involved in reviewing the plans and details. These people know what can go wrong and where errors are most likely to happen, so their input is invaluable.
2. **Consultant oversight:** We bring in external consultants to review the same drawings. Decades ago, architects handled all of this themselves, but today, the cost of missing a mistake is too high to rely on a single layer of oversight. A fresh set of eyes helps ensure that potential issues are caught in the planning phase.
3. **On-site training and monitoring:** During construction, we train our teams to focus on critical areas such as flashing installation. Window and roof flashing, in particular, require precision to create folds and end dams that channel water out of the building. Even small errors

can lead to water intrusion, so we emphasize thorough inspections and proper technique.

4. **Third-party inspections:** To add an extra layer of accountability, we hire third-party inspectors to perform random checks during construction. These inspections are documented with photographs, providing a record of what was done and ensuring that mistakes are caught before they escalate.

What's striking is how little effort or cost is required to do it right the first time. Installing something as simple as door flashing correctly takes only minutes and costs almost nothing in the grand scheme of a project. But if it's done wrong, the cost of fixing it is immense. It means tearing out drywall, sheathing, and insulation; remediating mold; and rebuilding from scratch.

## The Key to Speed

All that said, speed *is* still important. And the single most important factor that drives speed is communication. Every trade in the process needs to be aligned, knowing exactly when their work is required and being confident that the earlier work has been completed. If communication falters, the entire schedule can unravel.

Take this common scenario: You call a subcontractor out to the site two weeks before the work is ready for them. They show up with their crew, only to realize that the preceding work hasn't been completed. Frustrated, they pack up and leave for another job. When you finally call them back, they're no longer available, and now you've lost two weeks or more because of a simple communication breakdown. This kind of inefficiency can derail a project's timeline, increase costs, and damage relationships with trade partners.

On the other hand, when communication is clear and consistent, your trade partners show up prepared, knowing the jobsite is ready for them. Their

work flows seamlessly into the next phase, and the project stays on schedule. Achieving this requires proactive communication at every stage. It means letting people know where the project stands and what's expected of them and ensuring that materials and resources are ready when they arrive.

Strong relationships with trade partners are essential here. If they trust you to be organized and reliable, they'll prioritize your projects, ensuring timely and quality work. The speed of a project is often a reflection of the leadership driving it. Leaders set the tone by demonstrating efficiency, organization, and accountability. When leaders are clear about their expectations and hold everyone to high standards, teams follow suit. Conversely, disorganized or inconsistent leadership can breed delays and frustration.

In my experience, one of the biggest motivators for maintaining speed is the financial structure of a project. Almost every construction project is leveraged, which means there's an interest expense tied to the loan financing the work. That expense accumulates every day the project remains unfinished. Additionally, you can't start generating revenue—whether through leasing apartments, renting industrial space, or selling units—until the project is complete and has obtained an occupancy permit.

Consider an apartment project, for instance. If the construction schedule extends by an extra three months, you'll pay interest on the entire loan for an additional quarter without generating any income to offset those costs. That's costly, and it directly affects the project's profitability. Leaders must communicate this clearly to their teams: Adhering to the schedule not only helps meet deadlines but also protects the project's financial health.

## Combine Speed and Efficiency

Earlier in my career, I learned the importance of aligning everyone involved in a project to a shared sense of urgency. The best way to achieve this is by committing to a realistic schedule, ensuring everyone understands their role in

meeting it, and holding them accountable. This doesn't mean rushing or cutting corners. Instead, it means planning meticulously and building trust with trade partners so they'll be present when needed and complete their work on time.

I've also learned that leaders need to model efficiency. When a leader is organized, responsive, and clear in their communication, the entire team becomes more efficient. It's a simple concept: If you expect your team to prioritize accuracy and speed, you need to show them what that looks like through your own actions. Whether it's showing up prepared to meetings, addressing issues quickly, or consistently reinforcing the importance of staying on schedule, leadership sets the tone.

Speed involves more than just meeting deadlines; it's also about keeping profitability and minimizing unnecessary expenses. For instance, construction interest accumulates daily, significantly increasing project costs the longer it takes to finish. In addition to financial implications, delays can put a strain on relationships with clients, investors, and trade partners, undermining trust and damaging reputation.

That's why leaders must stay laser-focused on the schedule. It starts with building a solid plan, ensuring that trade partners are ready when needed, and maintaining clear communication throughout the project. If one trade falls behind, it can create a domino effect that impacts everyone down the line. The cost of these delays isn't only the time lost. It's the trust of your partners and the success of the project. To achieve speed on a project without sacrificing quality, you need three key elements:

1. **Proactive communication:** Keep everyone informed about the project's status and expectations, and ensure the jobsite is ready for each trade partner when they arrive.
2. **Accountability and leadership:** Set a clear example of efficiency and hold everyone to the same standard, reinforcing the importance of

meeting deadlines without cutting corners.

3. **Trust and relationships:** Build strong relationships with trade partners by being organized, reliable, and respectful of their time.

When you have both accuracy and speed in place, projects move quickly and efficiently, and the entire team—from leaders to trade partners—can feel confident they’re working toward a shared goal.

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## PRINCIPLE 6

# CREATE RAVING FANS

Few books have impacted me as much as Ken Blanchard's *Raving Fans*. I first came across it in the nineties and found it to be a cornerstone book for understanding and delivering exceptional customer experiences.

This concept applies to both our external customers, such as buyers, clients, and residents who depend on us, and our internal customers, associates, and trade partners, who help turn our vision into reality. Raving fans are about delivering an exceptional experience that surpasses satisfaction and transforms customers into passionate advocates. As Blanchard writes, "Just having satisfied customers isn't good enough anymore. If you really want a booming business, you have to create Raving Fans."<sup>17</sup>

For Hubbell, this commitment is central to who we are. A company doesn't last 170 years without continuously striving for excellence in customer experience, making it a nonnegotiable part of our identity. Creating raving fans isn't easy. No matter how much effort you put in, not every customer will walk away happy.

Even so, the goal remains the same: *to offer every customer, resident, or client an outstanding experience that leaves them eager to recommend us to others*. This ambition drives us to continually refine our processes and approach to customer service, ensuring that we're always aiming to exceed expectations. We want to deliver what we promise and then exceed expectations.

This idea resonates throughout every part of our business, from homebuilding to property management to senior living facilities. Whether helping a family buy their first home, welcoming a tenant to an apartment, or

providing care for a senior resident, the same principle applies. The experience must be seamless, professional, and personal.

## **Customer Experience Has Changed**

Over the last two decades, the importance of customer experience has increased significantly, driven by the growth of digital platforms and evolving consumer expectations. A single negative Google review can tarnish a company's reputation, whereas positive experiences cultivate lasting trust and loyalty. For Hubbell, this has involved being proactive in every customer interaction and ensuring that each step of the journey demonstrates our commitment to quality, accuracy, and responsiveness.

Managing customer experience was easier when we were smaller. However, as we've expanded, maintaining consistency has necessitated carefully crafted processes and systems to ensure that quality is never compromised. For us, building raving fans begins with intentionality. We collect feedback through surveys with companies such as Avid Ratings and Yardi, which provide insights into homebuyer satisfaction. In our senior living operations, senior managers engage with residents daily, asking about their meals, activities, and overall experiences.

This direct engagement lets us tackle issues in real time and fosters trust with the people we serve. Internally, we prioritize ownership and empowerment, training our team members to be proactive and responsive at every interaction. Programs such as our Hoogle High Fives recognize employees who go above and beyond, reinforcing a culture of excellence that benefits both customers and the organization.

Referrals, repeat customers, and positive online reviews are critical drivers of growth. Unlike companies that try to cut corners and rely on price to attract customers, we've found that a commitment to quality and customer experience builds loyalty and long-term success. The trust we create through positive

interactions ensures that our reputation remains strong and that customers continue to advocate for us.

Even with the best intentions, not every interaction will be perfect. Some customers are unhappy before the process begins, and nothing you do will change that. So, we focus on the majority of customers, who value a good experience and are willing to collaborate to make it happen.

At scale, creating raving fans becomes more challenging, but it also becomes more rewarding. With larger volumes of customers, the stakes are higher, but the opportunity to leave a lasting impact is even greater. And processes, strong leadership, and consistent feedback allow us to continue delivering exceptional experiences across the board.

## **Creating External and Internal Fans**

At Hubbell, creating raving fans begins with a relentless focus on delivering exceptional experiences, both externally and internally. For our external customers, we aim to leave lasting impressions that not only inspire loyalty but also drive referrals and repeat business.

Because negative reviews can have a far-reaching impact, we are deeply committed to ensuring that every step of the customer journey is seamless, professional, and positive. This commitment is rooted in our unwavering dedication to three critical elements: quality, accuracy, and speed. Together, these pillars shape trust and satisfaction.

When quality falters, trust erodes. Inaccuracies undermine confidence in the promises we make. Delays in timelines create frustration and diminish the likelihood of repeat business. For these reasons, we don't see quality, accuracy, and speed as mere operational goals; they are essential to our entire strategy. They serve as guiding principles that shape every decision, interaction, and process we pursue, ensuring our customers always feel supported and valued.

Understanding how well we meet these high standards requires intentional feedback gathering. Internally, we use surveys, reviews, and programs such as Hoogle High Fives to measure success and identify areas for improvement. Positive reviews validate our efforts, but negative feedback is equally important, as it points out opportunities for growth. This feedback loop ensures that we are continually learning, evolving, and striving to exceed expectations.

Of course, challenges still arise, and they often reveal deeper flaws in our systems. For instance, a delayed invoice approval from a project manager can create unnecessary stress for both the subcontractor and the accounting team. Situations such as these aren't about assigning blame but rather about identifying where processes need to be strengthened. An effective system would address these issues early, preventing them from escalating into larger problems.

When mistakes or delays happen, they underline the importance of having fail-safes and clear accountability. The goal isn't to rely on perfection but to create systems that catch errors early and make operations smoother, reducing the strain on everyone involved.

Appreciation is an essential aspect of our culture. When the accounting team steps in to address a last-minute issue, it's important for the project manager to express gratitude. Those simple moments of acknowledgment help alleviate tensions and enhance collaboration. They also remind everyone that, while mistakes occur, the focus should remain on teamwork and shared success. Simultaneously, it's crucial to promote personal responsibility so that everyone takes ownership of their role, thereby minimizing the need for others to rectify preventable mistakes.

Ultimately, happy customers—whether external clients or internal team members—are our best advocates. Every system we refine, every meaningful interaction we have with a resident or colleague, and every moment of gratitude we express helps build enthusiastic supporters across the board.

## Go Above and Beyond

Creating raving fans involves exceeding expectations and delivering an experience so positive that people want to share it with others. Over the years, I've witnessed countless examples of this in our business, from homebuyers excited about their new homes to residents appreciative of a timely maintenance visit. These moments arise because we prioritize the customer experience at every level and work diligently to ensure our teams are empowered to solve problems and make things right.

On the maintenance side, I hear stories all the time about how our teams go above and beyond for residents. Just recently, someone wrote in to praise one of our workers who showed up late at night to fix a leaking faucet. What impressed them wasn't just the quick response but the way our team members handled it.

They were professional, courteous, and willing to explain what had caused the issue. It was a small problem, but the way it was handled left a lasting impression. That's the kind of experience people remember, and it's the kind of experience that makes them want to recommend us to others.

Homebuilding is another area where creating enthusiastic supporters is essential. Purchasing a home is one of the most emotional and significant decisions a person can make, and they want to feel supported throughout the process. I've heard from homeowners who were anxious about how issues would be addressed after closing, only to be astonished by how responsive our team was.

One person told us their biggest fear was being left to deal with small issues on their own, but every concern they raised was addressed quickly and professionally. That experience left them feeling cared for, and they went on to recommend us to their friends and family. That kind of word-of-mouth referral is priceless.

Creating raving fans is vital to our business success. Whether we're recognizing outstanding associates through our Hoogle High Fives program or quickly responding to feedback, we constantly seek ways to transform customer interactions into positive stories. It's not always easy, but the effort is always worthwhile.

Every interaction is an opportunity to build trust, and trust is what creates lifelong advocates for our brand. The same can be true of your business.

## **Perception Is Everything**

The difference between a good and a great customer experience often comes down to perception. In my view, if your processes are well-designed and executed, every customer interaction should qualify as great. But the reality is that not every customer will feel that way. Their expectations or personal tendencies might lead them to see flaws in situations where most others wouldn't.

It could be something as straightforward as asking them to make a decision. For some, decision-making is stressful, and no matter how much you simplify the process, they'll struggle and project their frustration onto the experience as a whole. That's why you'll never achieve 100 percent satisfaction in customer surveys or reviews. Even when everything is done perfectly, some individuals won't perceive it as great.

Sometimes, there's nothing you can do to turn a customer into a raving fan. One story that still makes me laugh involves a homeowner who called me directly on Christmas Eve. She had recently moved into her new house and was absolutely furious because her jacuzzi tub wasn't working. She told me I had "ruined her entire holiday." She had been looking forward to relaxing in her tub with a glass of wine, and now, thanks to us, her Christmas was a disaster.

While she yelled, I remained calm and guided her through some troubleshooting steps. I asked if she had checked her circuit breaker, reminding her about the ground fault interceptor required by the building code, which we had discussed during the home orientation. Reluctantly, she checked, pressed the reset button, and suddenly, the tub roared to life. With a half-hearted grunt, she mumbled, “Huh, well, have a merry Christmas,” before hanging up the phone. She still wasn’t happy, but at least her Christmas wasn’t “ruined.”

The longer we are leaders, the easier it becomes to grow tired of dealing with minor complaints. However, we need to recognize that the way we treat negative individuals often shapes how the general public will perceive our company. When we lash out or treat them harshly, others notice. But when we treat them with decency and kindness, we build trust in our communities.

If you want to grow your business, delivering exceptional customer experience is essential. People will evaluate your company based on how you treat them, whether that’s through word of mouth, online reviews, or direct recommendations. If you aren’t providing the kind of experience they expect, they’ll look for someone who will.

## Be Proactive in Collecting Reviews

When you deliver a great customer experience, you need to have a way for others to know about it. Asking for feedback, highlighting positive experiences, and addressing negatives quickly and effectively are all part of the equation. It’s not enough to rely on good processes. You also have to actively manage how those processes are perceived.

This is why it’s crucial to gather as many reviews as possible. Positive reviews serve two purposes: They enhance our brand, and they help us understand what we’re doing right and what might need adjustment. Each day presents a new scenario. Some customers may be delighted with their

experience, while others might have concerns. Managing this balance requires a proactive approach and a commitment to staying engaged.

Many business leaders hesitate to ask for feedback, fearing rejection or an awkward interaction. However, the reality is that asking for a review can open the door to valuable opportunities. A satisfied customer is often happy to share their experience when prompted. Even when someone has concerns, approaching them directly can turn a potential issue into a constructive conversation. This openness helps us address problems before they escalate and demonstrates our commitment to listening and improving.

I encourage my team to get creative in asking for reviews. For example, at our Woodland Hills Golf Course, one team member offers a free beverage to anyone who leaves a Google review during their visit. The review doesn't have to be positive. This gesture has been highly successful, helping the course gather over a thousand reviews in less than two years and become one of the top-rated courses in Iowa. The positive feedback has boosted its reputation and attracted more visitors, leading to record attendance for three years.

By actively engaging with the people who rely on us, we show that their opinions matter and that we are committed to delivering the best possible experience. This effort helps us maintain a strong reputation and build lasting relationships.

## **Evaluate the Good and the Bad**

I've got a lot of great examples I could share. For example, at Woodland Hills Golf Course, the numbers tell a compelling story of success. With 1,080 reviews and a stellar 4.7-star average, it is the most-reviewed golf course in Iowa. This remarkable achievement is the result of a straightforward but powerful practice: asking for feedback at the right moment.

The pro shop front desk staff have mastered the art of timing, consistently requesting reviews without influencing the rating. Their approach

demonstrates the value of engaging with customers when their experience is fresh and positive. Over 80 percent of these reviews highlight the exceptional service provided by the team and the high quality of the course, underscoring the profound impact of great customer care.

This emphasis on personal connection and service excellence extends across all areas of our business. Recently, a future homeowner took the extraordinary step of visiting our headquarters in person to share his experience. He praised Chris, one of our sales professionals, for his professionalism, positivity, and outstanding customer service. This unique moment reflects the personal bonds our team fosters with clients, demonstrating that great service is about more than transactions—it's about relationships.

Our maintenance teams across Hubbell Property Management, Indigo Living (our multifamily management company), and warranty services and teams are another cornerstone of our customer satisfaction strategy. These teams work tirelessly to handle urgent and unexpected situations, from water main breaks and malfunctioning appliances to lockouts at any time of day or night. Their efforts have not gone unnoticed.

Google reviews frequently refer to them as “lifesavers,” “a Godsend,” and “the most friendly guys you’ll ever meet.” While the quality of our buildings and amenities is crucial, it is the dedication and professionalism of our maintenance teams that truly set our communities apart. Their willingness to go above and beyond transforms challenges into opportunities to build trust and loyalty.

Accountability is also a critical component of our approach to reputation management. Our team meticulously reviews every low rating, from one to three stars, to understand the root cause of dissatisfaction. We break down each issue, identify areas for improvement, and respond with transparency and sincerity. Although not every outcome can be resolved to perfection, these efforts demonstrate our commitment to continuous improvement and genuine

accountability. Customers recognize when a business takes responsibility, and this transparency strengthens our reputation over time.

Beyond service excellence, we understand that quality and efficiency drive satisfaction. When we deliver on quality and meet project schedules, budgets align, and customers become advocates. This ripple effect supports our goal of creating raving fans who are eager to share their positive experiences.

From mastering the art of asking for feedback to providing unmatched service and accountability, these practices reflect the values that define our organization. Whether through timely Google reviews, personal connections, or exceptional maintenance support, we aim to exceed expectations and build lasting trust. Every interaction is an opportunity to reinforce our commitment to quality and care, ensuring that the people we serve feel valued and heard.

## Encourage and Listen

One of the ways you create a raving fan culture is by noticing the good in others. In *The New One Minute Manager*, Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson describe how good managers observe an employee performing well and deliver immediate feedback. Instead of waiting for a formal review or annual meeting, the manager takes a moment to acknowledge the effort right then and there.

They describe what the employee did right, why it matters, and how it aligns with the company's goals. This immediate recognition not only boosts the employee's confidence but also strengthens their commitment to delivering excellent results. To do this well, Blanchard and Johnson recommend this one-minute praising formula:

### THE FIRST HALF-MINUTE

1. Praise people as soon as possible.
2. Let people know what they did right—be specific.

3. Tell people how good you feel about what they did right, and how it helps.

PAUSE

4. Pause for a moment to allow people time to feel good about what they've done.

THE SECOND HALF-MINUTE

5. Encourage them to do more of the same.
6. Make it clear you have confidence in them and support their success.<sup>18</sup>

By consistently praising positive actions, you create an environment where employees feel valued and motivated. Employees who feel supported are more likely to go above and beyond, creating exceptional experiences for customers. Over time, these interactions foster a culture of excellence that resonates beyond the workplace, turning satisfied customers into raving fans who advocate for the company.

## Create a Culture of Excellence

There is a reason why creating raving fans made it into my Eight to Great. I believe that consistently providing experiences that foster trust, loyalty, and enthusiasm is what enables businesses to thrive. This demands intentionality, innovation, and a commitment to nurturing genuine relationships.

To fully embrace this idea, I encourage you to start by putting yourself in your customer's shoes. Whether they are buying a home, moving into a rental, or utilizing your services, their journey is personal. Small actions, such as addressing concerns, solving problems promptly, and demonstrating genuine care, leave lasting impressions. These moments often determine whether someone feels merely satisfied or transforms into a passionate advocate. A

positive interaction can evolve into a story they share with others, helping to build your reputation.

This same approach applies within your organization. When teams feel appreciated, supported, and empowered, they naturally go the extra mile. Recognizing someone for their efforts, whether they solve a problem late at night or improve a process, creates an environment where morale and collaboration flourish. A culture that values its people drives excellence and benefits everyone involved.

Challenges are inevitable. Mistakes happen, and not every customer will leave happy. What matters is how we respond. Addressing concerns directly, learning from feedback, and improving processes can turn setbacks into opportunities for growth. The goal is not perfection but continuous progress, always striving to do better.

The most important step is to take action. Start with small tasks. Ask for feedback from a customer after an interaction. Recognize an associate for a job well done. Identify one process that can be improved and take steps to enhance it. These small, consistent actions accumulate over time, leading to meaningful change.

As you move forward, remember that creating raving fans is a journey, not a one-time effort. It requires ongoing focus, creativity, and dedication. The rewards, such as referrals, repeat business, and a reputation for excellence, make it worth the effort. By focusing on what truly matters and acting with intention, you can build a legacy of care and quality that resonates far into the future.

## PRINCIPLE 7

# REMEMBER THAT TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

I used to dread teamwork. I saw myself as an independent, get-it-done performer who preferred flying solo rather than relying on a group. But as our company grew, I quickly realized my mindset needed to change.

Hubbell couldn't function as a bunch of lone rangers tackling tasks in isolation. Every time we launched a new development project, it called on more than just the development team. We needed finance, marketing, and customer service, too. Without true collaboration, we'd tangle ourselves in unnecessary complexity and miss out on valuable perspectives.

So, I had to invest the effort to build and encourage teams, moving from "I'll handle it all" to "We can do more together." That shift involved sharing responsibility, celebrating collective wins, and making space for diverse opinions. Once I saw how much stronger our outcomes became, everything changed for me. I learned to put my ego aside so that everyone could win.

This is a critical point for leaders. As Patrick Lencioni writes, "Team leaders must be selfless and objective, and reserve rewards and recognition for those who make real contributions to the achievement of group goals."<sup>19</sup> It's not about *I*; it's about *we*. And as the title of John Maxwell's 2002 book says, *Teamwork Makes the Dream Work*.

**WITHOUT TEAMWORK, WE'RE IN TROUBLE**

When I was just getting Hubbell off the ground, we were too small for any formal teamwork structure. It was basically me and a handful of others, and each person took on multiple roles. We did not have big departments or interlocking processes that forced us to collaborate. As the company grew, I realized that, if we wanted to succeed on a larger scale, we needed to come together and function as a team. That realization led me to focus on process improvement initiatives that demonstrate how people in different roles have to coordinate and communicate.

I saw this issue surface recently with my head of development. He's a great leader but was too focused on his own tasks and assumed everyone else would move at his pace. The problem is that a big part of development involves lining up the equity and financing to pay for projects.

You might think that is straightforward, but the information required to raise equity and secure financing comes directly from the development team. If the development manager does not communicate what is needed, the teams responsible for capital formation and legal documents cannot do their work effectively. Before you know it, the developer is ready to break ground and discovers there is no money to fund the project. Meanwhile, departments such as legal and finance are wondering why they never received what they needed.

I compare it to building a house with a tight schedule. If everyone else uses up extra time, the painter might find that the two weeks he expected to paint has shrunk to two days. It is frustrating, but it happens when nobody is making sure each step of the process fits together. That is why we rely on process improvement to outline every step and identify precisely who needs what information and when.

For example, if you are trying to raise equity, you need to have the syndication documents in order, you need to know your project size and your assumptions about debt, and you also need market studies and appraisals. Everything ties together, and without that communication, it all falls apart.

I have seen occasions where the equity team is out there raising funds, and the construction team suddenly announces an added expense in their budget. That is the worst possible timing because now we have to backtrack and revise a bunch of numbers. Effective teamwork means lining up all the moving pieces from day one. As Lencioni writes, “Great teams ensure that everyone’s ideas are genuinely considered, which then creates a willingness to rally around whatever decision is ultimately made by the group.”<sup>20</sup>

Too many people rely on these projects for us to risk sloppy handoffs. In the end, my experience taught me that you have to go beyond small, tight-knit beginnings and adopt a real system of communication and cooperation. It is the only way to handle complexity as the company grows, and it ensures everyone is moving in sync toward the same goal.

Of course, it wasn’t always a smooth ride, and there were plenty of bumps along the way. Early on, people were unsure how to mesh their personal work styles with others’, leading to friction and misunderstandings. But by addressing these issues head-on—through open communication and continuous feedback—we gradually built an environment where everyone felt heard and valued.

## Allow Room for People to Fail

In *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, Doris Kearns Goodwin tells the remarkable story of how Abraham Lincoln brought together a cabinet made up of his fiercest political rivals to help guide the country through its most challenging period. Lincoln’s leadership stood out not just for his vision and determination but for his ability to manage conflicting personalities and turn opposition into strength.

By valuing diverse perspectives and showing humility, patience, and a knack for compromise, Lincoln united a deeply divided team to preserve the Union during the Civil War. The book paints a vivid picture of how

collaboration, even among adversaries, can lead to extraordinary outcomes when the stakes are highest. Goodwin writes of Lincoln:

He possessed an acute understanding of the sources of power inherent in the presidency, an unparalleled ability to keep his governing coalition intact, a tough-minded appreciation of the need to protect his presidential prerogatives, and a masterful sense of timing. His success in dealing with the strong egos of the men in his cabinet suggests that in the hands of a truly great politician the qualities we generally associate with decency and morality—kindness, sensitivity, compassion, honesty, and empathy—can also be impressive political resources.<sup>21</sup>

Because of his team of rivals style of leadership, Lincoln remains one of America's most beloved presidents. He worked with people who weren't just loyal to his agenda but those who brought contrasting viewpoints to the table. And, together, they made our nation stronger.

One of the reasons many leaders struggle to follow in Lincoln's footsteps is because they fear what might happen if others fail. What if they allow in someone slightly less competent and they have a slightly different agenda? So, they micromanage, running themselves into the ground in the process.

While I personally never had a huge issue with delegating, the kinds of high achievers I tend to hire often struggle with it. They find it hard to sit back and let someone else fail. Yet, the reality is that people *need* to learn by making mistakes. If I tell someone exactly how to do their job at every step, they will never figure out a better way on their own, and they definitely will not develop the confidence to handle challenges independently.

I still remind folks, "You are going to make mistakes. That is part of the learning process." I would rather have someone come to me with a proposed solution than just dump a problem on my desk. When it comes to mistakes, I

am pretty patient as long as we are learning and making progress. I let people keep going down a particular path for a while before I step in.

If I sense they are drifting too far off course, I will nudge and encourage them in the right direction. If that does not work, only then do I step in more directly. At that point, I will clarify exactly what I want and why, giving them the parameters to get back on track.

One thing I have observed is that when people are stressed, they tend to revert to what they are most comfortable doing, even if it is *not* what they should be focusing on. For example, I might see someone in a leadership role jump in and do someone else's job just because they feel safer there. That is usually a sign that I need to intervene and help them figure out the real issue causing the stress.

Ultimately, I know I can probably handle a lot of tasks myself, sometimes even better than the folks I hire. But if I did *everything* personally, I would never have the time or energy to lead, innovate, or expand the business. Delegation is crucial. Plus, letting people learn from their own experiences is how we build a stronger team overall. Only when people have room to fail will they have room to grow.

## Establish Good Processes

As your team grows, it's important to establish good processes. When the "team" is just you and a few other people, everything feels simple. In that scenario, there's no real need for formal structure. Communication is quick, roles are obvious, and decisions can be made on the fly because there are only two, maybe three, people involved. It's straightforward: I do this, you do that, and we're done.

However, the dynamic changes dramatically as your team grows. Imagine running a small neighborhood bakery that suddenly lands a contract to supply pastries to dozens of local coffee shops. When it was just you and a helper

baking and selling out of your storefront, you didn't need elaborate systems. But now, with a team of bakers, delivery drivers, and sales staff, it becomes impossible to rely on memory or informal chats to manage operations. If roles, responsibilities, and timelines aren't clearly defined, you'll quickly find yourself in a state of chaos. Deliveries might be late, orders could get mixed up, and your employees—no matter how hardworking they are—will inadvertently step on each other's toes.

I've spoken to plenty of companies that experienced this kind of growing pain. They were riding the high of rapid growth but felt like they were flying blind. My first question is always, "How much time are you spending on setting up processes?" The answer is almost always, "Not much." That's when I tell them, "You need to start, or everything else will suffer."

Without a game plan, even the most talented players struggle to succeed. The same principle applies to business teams. Processes are your game plan, ensuring everyone knows their role and how they fit into the larger picture. Clear processes ensure that every team member knows exactly what's expected of them and when.

For instance, if one person's task is to prepare raw materials for production by nine o'clock, and another's role is to begin assembly right after, there's no delay or overlap. Without clear plans and timelines, people waste precious hours waiting for direction or clarification. I've seen teams with brilliant individuals struggle simply because they lacked a road map. Processes eliminate that uncertainty. They provide the structure that allows everyone to jump in and excel at what they do best without confusion.

Returning to our bakery example—with processes in place, you know that one team handles dough preparation by five o'clock, another handles baking by six o'clock, and a third handles packaging and delivery. Everyone knows their role, and the operation flows like clockwork. Customers get their pastries on time, and the team functions smoothly without unnecessary stress or miscommunication. The power of processes is that they turn teamwork into a

well-oiled machine, where each part contributes seamlessly to the success of the whole.

## Address Mistakes and Move Forward

Growing up, I was primarily involved with individual sports, such as wrestling and track. A wrestler is technically part of a team, but when you step onto the mat, it is just you and your opponent. It can be pretty unforgiving—either you win or you lose, and that result is fully on your shoulders. Track is similar. Unless you are in a relay race, you are competing in your own lane, trying to beat your own time or outrun the person next to you. That background probably contributed to my independent streak. I was used to measuring success by my individual results.

Team sports are different. A mistake by one player can drag an entire team down. In football, a lineman jumping offside or having too many players on the field can set the entire team back five yards or nullify a great play. The same is true in business.

In a true team environment, mistakes happen. And when they do, I let people know. I don't try to belabor the point or drag people down, but I don't let issues remain unaddressed. I want to make sure we don't make the same mistake twice and that we get back on our game. Sometimes a leader is a bit like a coach calling a brief timeout after the quarterback throws an interception: "Yes, you threw an interception. Yes, that was a big deal. Let's figure out what went wrong, fix it, and get back on the field."

It is all about balancing accountability with moving forward. You cannot pretend the mistake never happened, because that means nobody learns from it. But you also do not want to beat it into the ground, because then the person who messed up is stuck replaying it over and over in their mind, and that is how you end up throwing another interception on the next drive.

In my experience, the best sports teams—and the best business teams—recognize errors, deal with them honestly, and then refocus on the goal. If I can bring that same spirit from the locker room into the conference room, I find we stay unified and keep pushing ahead, even when someone jumps offside or tosses a bad pass. That is the essence of real teamwork.

## **The Best Team Members Complement Each Other**

Like a professional sports team, there are star players who specialize in specific areas, but it only works if everyone knows exactly what their roles are and how to coordinate with each other. When Hubbell was smaller, it was as if we had a tight-knit squad: just me and one or two others who handled everything from scouting properties to hammering out contracts. Now, with multiple departments and projects going on simultaneously, we need a clear playbook to keep everything moving.

Currently, our organizational structure is quite straightforward. I have one direct report: the president and chief operating officer. He has five direct reports: the executive vice president of Development and Management, the chief financial officer, the general counsel, the senior vice president of Iowa Homebuilding and Land Development, and the senior vice president of Nebraska Homebuilding and Land Development.

Around them, like a set of specialized coaches and trainers, we have the support departments: Human Resources, IT, Accounting, Legal, Marketing, Process Improvement, and so on. Each support team has its own role, but they also collaborate with each other so every part of the company can succeed.

Just as a quarterback cannot do his job if the offensive line does not block and the wide receivers do not run the correct routes, similarly, at Hubbell, each department relies on accurate information and timely communication from the others. Take a new multifamily development as an example. Our head of

development might spot a promising piece of property and brainstorm with the vice president of Indigo Living, our multifamily management company, about what kind of project would work.

The land development team gets the land under contract in coordination with legal. The development team retains design service to begin the preliminary design concept, which leads to conversations with our construction leaders, who can run the numbers on materials and labor costs. Meanwhile, our legal team weighs in on contracts, purchase agreements, or zoning requirements, and our CFO's team handles financing with banks.

It is easy to see how one hiccup—such as discovering a zoning issue or forgetting to coordinate a key document—can slow the entire drive toward the end zone. That is why we have to ensure every group knows exactly when they need to step in. For instance, the development team cannot complete its pro forma without help from our asset management folks, who track real income and expenses for comparable projects. If the asset management team sees something unrealistic in the numbers, they will point it out so we do not overpromise or undershoot. That is the kind of feedback loop that keeps us from blowing up a great opportunity because we missed a detail.

And then there is the homebuilding side, which has its own rhythm. In homebuilding, you often buy land years before you even break ground. If you do not plan ahead for entitlements and zoning, you could be sitting on property you cannot actually develop when you want to. There is a lot of coordination between land development, construction, and sales to make sure we finish paving the roads and installing utilities before we start advertising houses. Each step depends on the previous one, and without proper coordination, you are left scrambling at the last second.

All of this is happening at once, across multiple projects. We might finalize equity on a project in December, line up the next one in January, and have two more coming right behind it. Each one has a different timeline for design, financing, and construction. Meanwhile, on the homebuilding side, if we did

not start preparing a piece of land the previous fall, we might not be able to pave the streets in time for spring construction. This is exactly why we need a unified game plan: so the coaches (department heads) know when to call the right plays (initiatives), and the players (various teams) can execute on cue.

Ultimately, our team structure works because everyone understands that they are part of something bigger than their own department. It is like running a “team of teams,” each focused on its own specialized role, but all working in concert to drive the company forward. When everything clicks, we can close financing on a project without missing a beat, get construction underway on schedule, and keep the pipeline moving for the next set of developments.

It is the difference between a bunch of talented players who never practice together and a cohesive unit that understands the playbook inside and out. The latter is how you build a winning record—on the field and in business.

## **Signs of a Healthy Team**

It becomes obvious during our project meetings if a team is jelling together. If everyone understands the timeline, and nobody is stuck saying, “I cannot move forward because I am waiting on legal,” or “The CFO is holding me up because we do not have the appraisal,” that is a good sign. If I see a lot of blaming or frustration, it usually means our processes are out of sync.

For instance, if the developer was supposed to orchestrate the project schedule and did not communicate properly, legal or finance might hold things up without knowing it. Once the team is functioning well, you see far fewer of those conflict points.

Ultimately, I know a team is cohesive when they are not yelling at each other or pointing fingers. Instead, they are focusing on the work and hitting milestones. There is a sense of shared ownership in making sure deadlines are met and nobody is hanging around waiting for the next step. That is the point

where processes have paid off, and it feels like everyone is working together toward the same goal.

In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni writes that “cohesive teams” have the following qualities:

1. They trust one another.
2. They engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas.
3. They commit to decisions and plans of action.
4. They hold one another accountable for delivering against those plans.
5. They focus on the achievement of collective results.<sup>22</sup>

These are all signs of health. There are silos of division, but there is clear communication and a common mission. Everyone is rowing in the same direction.

## Get the High Performers on Board

There are many ways to build a team. Some leaders lean heavily on personality profile tools such as Myers Briggs. While I have had limited success with these tools, the one I've found the most helpful is the DiSC profile, a popular personality assessment tool that measures four core behavioral tendencies: Dominance (D), Influence (i), Steadiness (S), and Conscientiousness (C).

It offers insights into how individuals approach tasks, interact with others, respond to challenges, and handle rules or processes. I've found the best approach for my leadership style is to bring talented, driven people on board (high-D individuals who can implement and get things done) and then figure out the best position for them after seeing them in action.

I want A players on my team, and then, to borrow Jim Collins' terminology, I will figure out which seat on the bus they sit in. Over the years, I have noticed that competency often comes first, with personality fit and

attitude right behind it. You can interview someone three or four times, but you never truly know how they will perform or integrate until they have been working with you for a few months. People go through life events, crises, and other challenges that can change their attitude and effort overnight.

The most seemingly perfect hire can suddenly struggle if they encounter personal issues, or they might get overwhelmed by the job requirements once they are actually in the role. Sometimes we have to move people around to find a better fit, or we may lose them entirely if the mismatch is too big.

For me, having a team of high implementers and high-D individuals helps us scale quickly. I compare it to a basketball team filled with offensive-minded players who can score a lot of points. That is excellent for growth, but eventually, you realize you also need strong defenders—people who excel at details and make sure the fundamentals are in place.

In a business context, those defenders might be the accountants, quality control specialists, or legal experts who focus on precision and consistency. If you have too many offensive “drivers,” you can leave yourself exposed in critical areas. On the other hand, if your team has too few creative thinkers, you risk missing out on big ideas or fresh approaches.

No matter how many assessments we do, it is still tough to predict who will thrive. We can see someone’s DiSC or Myers Briggs results, but those do not always guarantee a good fit. That is why I rely on a certain level of trial and error, especially as we grow. We hire individuals who show strong capabilities and then let them find their niche within the company. If it turns out they are better suited for a different role, perhaps more behind the scenes, or maybe with a bigger leadership responsibility, we will try to give them that opportunity.

In the end, I have learned that a bit of “positionless” thinking helps. Just as the modern NBA thrives on flexible players, a growing business often benefits from bringing in talented people and letting them gravitate toward the roles where they can make the biggest impact. We still have a few specialists, like our

“centers,” who manage finances or legal details, but it is really about assembling a roster of individuals who can adapt, problem-solve, and support one another. It is that collective versatility that makes a team thrive over the long haul.

## Address the Gaps

One principle I always stress is the importance of filling the specific skillset gaps in your team. As an organization grows, you will naturally identify areas where you need more expertise—whether in finance, marketing, operations, or a creative function. Sometimes, you can address those needs by outsourcing, especially in the early stages, when it might not be cost-effective to hire full-time employees for each role.

Eventually, though, you reach a point where outsourcing becomes more expensive and complicated than having an in-house team. For instance, if I am managing a development project, I can outsource construction, legal work, marketing, and project management, but the more projects I take on, the more challenging it becomes to juggle a dozen separate consultants who each have their own clients and schedules. Creating an internal team builds cohesiveness and allows you to maintain tighter control over your timelines and quality standards.

Another vital principle is that teamwork lives or dies by communication. It is easy to assume everyone on the team is on the same page until you realize two leaders who work right next to each other are not sharing critical information. Even in a small office setting, misunderstandings happen if people fail to check in with each other. Sometimes it can be as simple as scheduling a weekly fifteen-minute conversation to clarify responsibilities, identify pain points, and confirm deadlines. That small investment in regular dialogue can prevent larger issues down the road.

Communication is also about honesty and openness. Let your teammates know what you need from them, and find out what they need from you. If the

manager overseeing construction feels overwhelmed, they have to be comfortable voicing that to the rest of the team so resources can be reallocated.

By having open, consistent communication channels, you give everyone the best chance to perform well and support each other effectively.

## Be the Leader a Team Wants to Follow

Ultimately, for great teams to remain together for years, they need a great leader. In *The Innovators*, Walter Isaacson writes, “One problem with successful teams, particularly intense ones, is that sometimes they break up. It takes a special type of leader—inspiring yet also nurturing, competitive yet collaborative—to hold such teams together.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, they need to be a leader their team *wants* to follow.

This requires a blend of character, vision, and relational skills. At its core, leadership isn’t about a title or authority. It’s about influence and trust. A leader who inspires their team fosters a sense of shared purpose and cultivates an environment where individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute their best.

A leader’s character is the foundation of their influence. Integrity, honesty, and accountability are nonnegotiable traits that build trust. When team members see a leader who follows through on promises, owns mistakes, and acts with fairness, they’re more likely to respect and emulate that behavior. Authenticity also matters. A leader who is transparent about their challenges and genuine in their interactions creates a deeper connection with the team.

Great team members gravitate toward leaders who provide clarity of purpose. A compelling vision gives people something meaningful to work toward and unites them under a common goal. However, having a vision isn’t enough. A leader must effectively communicate it.

Clear, frequent, and inclusive communication ensures everyone understands their role and the broader impact of their work. Leaders know

when to make the tough calls. As Gino Wickman writes, “On a healthy team, where the vision is clear and everyone is on the same page, eight out of ten times, everyone will agree with the solution. However, sometimes they won’t, and someone needs to make the final decision.”<sup>24</sup> Great leaders also listen actively, seeking input and making adjustments to show the team they’re not just steering the ship—they’re navigating it together.

Leaders who prioritize their team’s growth and well-being create loyalty and motivation. Empowerment involves trusting team members with responsibility, encouraging innovation, and providing opportunities for development. Supporting the team means being approachable, recognizing achievements, and addressing challenges promptly. A leader who mentors and invests in their people inspires confidence and loyalty because they show they care about more than just results. They care about the individuals driving those results.

Ultimately, being a leader a team wants to follow is about inspiring through actions, not commands. When a leader embodies the qualities they seek in others, cultivates a vision worth pursuing, and prioritizes the well-being of their team, they create a legacy of influence and success that resonates beyond any one individual.

## PRINCIPLE 8

# HAVE FUN ALONG THE WAY

Of all the Eight to Great principles, this is the one people remember the most. That's because life, at its core, is too short to spend without joy. Yet so many of us settle into routines that seem to drain rather than fill us.

Work becomes a series of checkboxes, meetings, and deadlines. We rationalize it, telling ourselves, "That's just how it is," or "I'll make time for fun later." I've been there.

For many leaders, the idea of prioritizing fun seems counterintuitive. After all, work is supposed to be serious. It's about profits, performance, and productivity. But here's the catch: When teams connect over moments of lightness, they are not only happier but are, according to one Oxford study, 13 percent more productive.<sup>25</sup>

In a small way, having fun is a business strategy! Shared laughter creates bonds that withstand stress, improve communication, and foster an environment where creativity and collaboration can flourish. Fun isn't a distraction. It's a necessity.

I tell people all the time, "If you are not having fun with your work, why keep doing it?" As someone who has spent a lot of time at work, I have always believed that if you are going to invest a significant amount of time in something, you should be able to have fun doing it. Otherwise, it becomes a grind that eventually drains your energy and passion.

## Find a Job You Enjoy

One of my favorite books is Brian Tracy's *Goals!* It is a comprehensive guide to setting and achieving personal and professional objectives. The book emphasizes the transformative power of clear, written goals and provides a step-by-step framework to help readers identify their desires, break them down into actionable steps, and stay committed to their vision. Tracy highlights the importance of visualization, prioritization, and time management while addressing common challenges such as procrastination and self-doubt. Above all, this book helps people know which jobs they are and aren't passionate about.

I can't tell you how many copies I've handed to people on my team. Why? Because I want them to love what they do. This has turned out to be a positive and a negative. It's inspired many on my team to find more joy in what they do. But it's also shown several others that they need to do something else. Multiple times, after I've handed out a number of copies, a few recipients have later come back to me and said, "Thanks for the book, but I realized this job is not what I really want. I am resigning and pursuing something else."

After recovering from my initial shock, I can't help but be a little bit happy. I'm sad they're leaving, but I'm glad they're moving on to a place they can enjoy. They've discovered a path that is more personally fulfilling. That sense of self-discovery is precisely what a good leader should want for people, even if it means losing a capable team member.

Dale Carnegie noted, "People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing."<sup>26</sup> In business, many have recognized the importance of mixing productivity with enjoyment. A classic example is Southwest Airlines. From its early days, Southwest cultivated a culture where employees were encouraged to bring their personality to work and have a little fun along the way. Flight attendants were known for cracking jokes over the intercom, and pilots would sometimes greet passengers in playful or unexpected ways.

This "fun" culture did not mean Southwest ignored profits or punctuality. They simply believed that, by letting employees be themselves and enjoy the

experience, customers would feel more at ease, and everyone would be motivated to work harder for the company's success. That blend of lightheartedness and high performance became one of Southwest's defining strengths in a notoriously tough industry.

One concern leaders often have is balancing a fun culture with the need to stay professional. In my experience, the two are not mutually exclusive. You can maintain high standards and strict deadlines in the office, while also supporting a culture of positivity and playfulness. Having fun together does not mean your team takes its work less seriously. If anything, team members who feel connected and enjoy being around their colleagues usually work harder for each other when the pressure is on.

In the end, you want people to say, "This is a place where I feel included, I can be myself, and I look forward to coming in each day." That is where you see real payoff, not just in morale, but also in productivity and retention. When you invest in team building, you are reminding employees that you value them as individuals, not just as roles on an organizational chart. That kind of culture may take effort to build, but the results make it worth the work.

A little levity breaks the usual routine of daily tasks and deadlines. "Having fun unleashes creativity," Jack Foster writes. "It is one of the seeds you plant to get ideas."<sup>27</sup> When you make room for laughter and shared experiences, it reminds everyone that there is more to work than spreadsheets and meetings.

## **Everyone Has Their Version of Fun**

I have tried to create this atmosphere at Hubbell, though I have learned that what feels fun to one generation, or even to one individual, may not be the same for another. For example, we once hosted a "Hubbell Happy Hour" for a couple of years, and that really appealed to a certain group. Others were not as

enthusiastic about it, but they might show up for an ugly sweater contest or get excited about a chili cook-off.

We see the same variation in different offices. In our corporate location, dressing up for Halloween might draw a huge crowd, while employees in another region prefer a community volunteering event or a casual “coffee break” gathering. The key is staying open to new ideas and embracing variety. Fun does not have to be extravagant. Sometimes it is as simple as getting together for a quick game after work, decorating the office for the holidays, or celebrating milestones with a theme day.

I remember a dunk-tank fundraiser we did for charity. The day turned out to be chilly—maybe fifty degrees at best—but we had already booked the dunk tank, so we went ahead with it. Members of the executive team willingly took turns getting dunked in cold water, and employees donated money to send their bosses into the tank again and again.

While standing there shivering might not sound like fun to some, one of my top leaders later told me it was the most fun he had ever had at a work event. It gave him a reason to bond with colleagues, laugh at the unexpected, and share a memory that went beyond the day-to-day grind. That kind of moment stays with people.

Again, everyone is different. Your version of fun could be a cooking contest, a softball tournament, or a volunteer day at a local shelter. The important part is that it brings people out of their usual silos, lets them blow off steam together, and reminds everyone that work does not have to feel like a chore. When you make space for those experiences, you build camaraderie that carries back into the office.

The goal is to let people connect beyond their usual roles and to remind them that, yes, it is possible to work hard while also enjoying themselves. When employees have a chance to recharge, laugh, and be creative together, it tends to spill over into better collaborations and stronger relationships on the job.

Team building can have a real impact on how people feel about coming to work each day. I have seen firsthand that you often need to push yourself to plan fun activities, even when the calendar is full, and everyone is juggling deadlines. It is easy to think, *We have too much going on right now*, but if you do not make time for your team to connect on a more personal level, you lose out on the long-term benefits of collaboration and camaraderie.

As the company grows, planning these events gets more complex. When you have seven hundred people on staff, not everyone will show up to a single company-wide function. You learn to break it down by department or interest group, so people can choose activities that appeal to them. The key is to keep trying out different ideas, encourage employees to participate, and then see what sticks.

There will always be serious deadlines and important targets, but when you make room for these moments of lightness, you build a sense of community that can carry the team through the tougher stretches. That might mean trying ten different activities before finding the one that clicks for a particular group, but it is worth the effort. After all, a workplace where people want to show up and give their best is ultimately what sustains both morale and results.

## There Will Always Be Pushback

Having fun doesn't come naturally to every leader. In the words of Jerry Seinfeld, "Having fun is a very particular skill. And not everyone has that skill."<sup>28</sup> Some worry it will undermine their authority, while others simply feel too busy to make it a priority.

Because of this, many leaders do not prioritize fun in the workplace. They are often so focused on the usual concerns—profit, efficiency, meeting deadlines—that the idea of creating an environment where employees genuinely have a good time never makes it onto their radar. But what I try to help leaders like these see is that creating a joyful workplace isn't about putting

on a clown act or ignoring the pressures of the job. It's about creating moments where people feel human, where the weight of deadlines and expectations momentarily lifts, and where they're reminded that they're part of something bigger than themselves.

It is actually possible to be both respected and relaxed. One way is to let people feel comfortable making fun of you in good spirit. That does not mean you become a punch line, but you show you can laugh at yourself. Another tactic is using self-deprecating humor in storytelling.

I love to share anecdotes from my four decades in the business, especially the ones where I made a misstep. People relate to such tales because they see you as human, someone who has learned over time rather than always getting things right from the start. They also recognize that you do take the work seriously—you just do not take yourself too seriously. It is a fine balance that can diffuse tension and invite open dialogue.

This approach reminds me of a historical example with Winston Churchill, who was known for his quick wit even under enormous pressure. Although Churchill's situation was far more serious than corporate life, he often used humor in his speeches and conversations to keep spirits high. Ronald Reagan was another example. By making a well-timed joke or a self-deprecating comment, he showed that while the moment was grave, there was still room for laughter and hope. That same idea can be applied in business leadership: You respect the gravity of the work, but you recognize that people need room to breathe and find joy in the everyday grind.

In the end, leaders should remember that passion, humor, and authenticity do not undermine professionalism. In many ways, they enhance it. A leader who fosters genuine enjoyment and encourages personal growth has a much better chance of retaining top talent, building trust, and creating an environment where people feel motivated to excel.

## **BE CREATIVE BUT TACTFUL**

I have found that creating a fun culture while respecting boundaries is often a process of trial and error. You want to encourage laughter and camaraderie, but you also need to remain aware that people come from different backgrounds and have varied sensitivities. In my experience, one effective approach is to plan events and activities that are as inclusive as possible.

For example, we look for ideas that allow everyone to participate without feeling singled out or uncomfortable, such as themed lunches, creative team challenges, or volunteer days. We encourage feedback from employees about what is working and what is not, and then we adjust accordingly.

It also becomes more complicated as the company grows. When we were around 100 or 150 employees, an annual holiday party worked great because we could still have a relatively personal atmosphere. As we approached seven hundred people, it became difficult to organize a single big event that felt meaningful to everyone.

We decided to encourage departments or smaller groups to plan their own holiday gatherings or team-building experiences. This made it easier for people to connect on a more personal level, rather than feeling lost in a large crowd. A smaller group can also customize the event to suit everyone's interests, and this reduces the chance of inadvertently offending someone with broad or impersonal activities.

Another key is being open about expectations and boundaries. If people know up front that the goal is to have fun together without inappropriate jokes or behavior, they are less likely to cross the line. We might remind everyone of company guidelines or what we consider respectful conduct before a big event.

You can still keep it lighthearted—maybe a quick mention before the activities begin—so it does not feel like a lecture but rather a shared understanding. Over time, as you try different activities and see what resonates, you develop a clearer sense of how to keep the culture lively and enjoyable while still making sure everyone feels respected and included.

## Have Fun!

There's a reason why many coaches end their pregame talks by telling players to "Go out there and have fun." A tense or fearful team usually makes more mistakes, while a team that is relaxed and enjoying the moment tends to perform better. In business, our "games" last much longer than a two-hour competition, but the same mindset applies: If you are having fun, you are more likely to stick with it for the long term.

If you consistently feel miserable where you are, that negativity can spread through an entire team, hurting morale and performance. Yes, you will have ups and downs. The same is true for every member of your team. Personal problems will emerge, and these can take a toll on our moods and quality of work.

But if you consistently, for months on end, hate what you do—or if someone on your team is in that position—it's time to make a change. Don't keep doing a job you despise, and don't expect those on your team to do that either. Life can be tough, but work should be fun.

So, in summary, if you are going to put in the hours, you should find at least some level of enjoyment or fulfillment. Second, check in with yourself and your colleagues: If someone seems persistently unhappy, do not ignore it. There could be a deeper issue that needs attention. Finally, remember that it is OK if your version of fun is not the same as someone else's. In the words of Tony Robbins:

Live life fully while you're here. Experience everything. Take care of yourself and your friends. Have fun, be crazy, be weird. Go out and screw up! You're going to anyway, so you might as well enjoy the process. Take the opportunity to learn from your mistakes: find the cause of your problem and eliminate it. Don't try to be perfect; just be an excellent example of being human.<sup>29</sup>

As you reach the end of this chapter, I want to challenge you to rethink what success really means. Is it just about the numbers, the titles, and the milestones? Or is it also about the moments that make the journey worthwhile—the laughter, the camaraderie, the shared experiences that remind you why you started in the first place?

Fun isn't a luxury or a distraction; it's the heartbeat of a life well lived. It's the spark that keeps you engaged, the glue that bonds teams, and the lightness that gets you through the hardest days. And yet, how often do we let it slip through our fingers because we're too busy, too serious, or too focused on what's next?

Here's the truth: Success without joy is a hollow victory. If you're not enjoying the process, what's the point? The long hours, the stress, the grind—it's all part of the deal, but it doesn't have to consume you. The magic happens when you make space for joy in the middle of chaos. When you allow yourself and those around you to pause, connect, and laugh, you breathe life back into the work. You create something bigger than just a to-do list. You build a culture, a memory, a story worth telling.

So, here's my challenge to you: Don't just make fun a footnote in your story. Make it part of the main plot. Whether it's a small gesture, such as cracking a joke in a meeting, or a bigger effort, such as organizing a team event, choose to be the person who brings energy and positivity into the room. Let your joy set the tone, because it's contagious—and it's transformative.

Remember, no one looks back on their life and says, "I wish I had been more serious." Instead, they cherish the moments of joy, the relationships they built, and the memories that made the journey worthwhile. So, make fun a priority—not an afterthought. Bring it into your work, your relationships, and your daily routine.

## CONCLUSION

# IT'S NOT THAT HARD

As you close this book, let me leave you with a thought I often express to those on my team: *It's not that hard.*

None of these Eight to Great principles are rocket science, but they do require careful intentionality. I point this out because, as leaders, we have this tendency to overtheorize and under-implement. We're always looking for that leadership edge or that next trend, when often the most important thing we can do is return to the basics. The truth is that most things in life and work don't require perfection; they require action.

I often find myself saying, "It really shouldn't take that long," or "Let's just figure it out." That mindset—cutting through the noise, simplifying the process, and taking action—has been a guiding principle in my career. It's a perspective that has served me well, not just in getting things done but in fostering a culture of persistence, curiosity, and collaboration.

Here are the big takeaways to keep in mind.

**Introduction: Think Bigger** | Growth comes from expanding your perspective and challenging limits. Thinking bigger means recognizing potential and taking bold steps to turn it into reality. By daring to aim higher, you create opportunities to lead with purpose and make a lasting impact on the people and communities around you.

**Principle 1: Find Passionate Associates** | The strength of any organization lies in its people. Building a great team means surrounding yourself with individuals who are motivated and eager to contribute. Creating an

environment where passion thrives inspires people to give their best and fosters a culture of engagement, collaboration, and achievement.

**Principle 2: Encourage an Entrepreneurial Attitude** | An entrepreneurial mindset fosters innovation and drives progress. It involves questioning norms, embracing challenges, and finding creative solutions to achieve success. Encouraging this attitude among your team helps unlock potential, seize opportunities, and build a culture of continuous improvement.

**Principle 3: Develop an Engineering Mindset for Process Improvement** | Improvement comes from a focus on efficiency and refinement. Streamlining processes and seeking better methods leads to greater success and sustainability. With a mindset of continuous improvement, you ensure progress by adapting to changes and refining systems to deliver consistent results.

**Principle 4: Enrich the Quality of Life in Our Communities** | This involves balancing economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social well-being through strategic public-private partnerships. Think of your community as an ecosystem where businesses, infrastructure, and natural resources are interconnected. True leadership means actively participating, taking responsibility, and committing to creating lasting, meaningful improvements that benefit both present and future generations.

**Principle 5: Prioritize Accuracy First, Speed Second** | Success is built on a foundation of precision and attention to detail. Taking the time to ensure accuracy strengthens trust and creates a reputation for excellence. Prioritizing quality over haste leads to long-term results that stand up to scrutiny and drive sustainable progress.

**Principle 6: Create Raving Fans** | Delivering exceptional experiences builds loyalty and enthusiasm. When people feel valued and supported, they become advocates for your vision. Fostering strong relationships with clients, teams, and communities amplifies success and creates lasting connections that fuel growth.

**Principle 7: Remember That Teamwork Makes the Dream Work** | This requires leaders and employees to shift from an individual mindset to a collaborative approach where responsibilities are shared, diverse perspectives are valued, and clear communication ensures efficiency. Establishing good processes, allowing room for mistakes, and addressing gaps in skills or coordination help teams function smoothly, preventing misunderstandings and delays that can derail projects.

**Principle 8: Have Fun Along the Way** | The journey toward success should be as fulfilling as the goals you achieve. Bringing energy, humor, and connection to your work builds stronger teams and makes the process enjoyable. When you prioritize creating an uplifting atmosphere, you inspire creativity, resilience, and lasting collaboration.

Several years ago, I instituted Jon Gordon's "One Word" practice at Hubbell. Each year, team members choose a single word to guide their mindset and decisions. As I review the responses I received from my team members this past year, I can't help but be encouraged. Helen T.'s word was *joy*. Joey T.'s word was *intention*, and Dave V.'s was *curiosity*.

I've used this "One Word" principle myself for many years, and I'd encourage you to do the same as you close this book. But instead of picking one word, pick one of the phrases from Eight to Great. Ask yourself, "Which one of these eight principles do I need to work on the most?"

As you move forward, remember to prioritize what truly matters, take what you've learned here, and put it into action. What will you simplify, question, or rethink in the days ahead? Remember: *It's not that hard*. The hardest part is deciding to begin. So start today.

## HUBBELL EXTREME BUILDS

### ABC EXTREME MAKEOVER: HOME EDITION (2006)





## NINE HOMES IN NINE DAYS FOR NINE FAMILIES (2009)







## EASTERSEALS IOWA, CABIN FOR CAMPERS (2013)







## RONALD MCDONALD HOUSE OF CENTRAL IOWA, KEEPING MORE FAMILIES CLOSE (2017)



## EASTERSEALS IOWA, CARE FOR KIDS (2021)





## ON WITH LIFE, HOMES OF HOPE (2024)





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