



PART I

Discovering the
No-Compromise
Leader Within

PART I
Introduction

Becoming a no-compromise leader takes more than the flick of a switch. It takes an understanding of what no-compromise leadership is at the deepest level of human behavior. It will require a 100 percent commitment from you. You must be open to recognizing how your own approach and style of leadership may slow or stall your transition to no compromise. You must understand and meet every qualifier.

No-compromise leadership cannot be faked. Most certainly, you cannot be a part-time, no-compromise leader. If you're not prepared to go all the way, why start the voyage at all? No compromise isn't about big starts and getting within sight of the finish line. *It's doing whatever it takes to cross that finish line and keep going — to keep getting better.*

Your transition to no-compromise leadership will not happen overnight. It's going to be an ongoing process of personal leadership discovery and skill development. Yes, there will be setbacks. You will slip at times and you'll have to push yourself to get back in the no-compromise groove. You will get better at it the longer and harder you work at it. Simply put, you learn to be a no-compromise leader.

You will sense that something is different. It's like installing a new operating system in your computer where functionality is familiar but new

capabilities are now available to you. In essence, you begin transitioning to a *no-compromise operating system* that now governs your leadership thinking and behavior. Here's a sampling of what you can expect to see:

- ✦ Your sense of purpose is focused and sharp.
- ✦ You know what needs to be done — and do it.
- ✦ You tackle pressing issues that you would ordinarily keep on the back burner where they fester and grow.
- ✦ You are more decisive with your communication and how you relate to those you lead.
- ✦ Your demeanor is focused and determined.
- ✦ Those around you can sense that you are engaged and leading — not dictating.
- ✦ You listen with a heightened sense of interest and intent.
- ✦ You make better decisions, because no compromise demands a thorough attention to detail.

What's really cool is that all this no-compromise stuff is going to produce measurable results in your company's performance. Look for results like these:

- ✦ Sales are consistently hitting or surpassing goals.
- ✦ Costs are down.
- ✦ Consistency is evident throughout the company.
- ✦ Customer loyalty and retention are at an all-time high.
- ✦ Your leaders and employees are engaged in growing the company. They feel empowered because you have empowered them.
- ✦ Employee job satisfaction and staff retention are excellent.
- ✦ Your company is conducting business better, faster and more cost efficiently. It's like everything is just easier.
- ✦ Change initiatives move smoothly, without the once-common internal resistance.
- ✦ Profits are best described as impressive.

Your personal mandate to become a no-compromise leader will thrust you out of your comfort zone. It will challenge you to engage when, in your previous thinking and behavior mode, you would take a detour to avoid that tough conversation, decision or task that's outside of your comfort zone. *No-compromise leaders stand on the higher ground of discipline and accountability.* This is one transition that will require your leadership muscles to stretch and burn.

Throughout the chapters in Part One, you will learn the inner workings of no-compromise leadership and how to begin your transition. Part I is all about YOU and how to install a no-compromise operating system into your thinking and behavior.

CHAPTER



1

THE TITANIC COST
OF COMPROMISE

When leaders compromise, or look the other way when compromise occurs, it's the equivalent of a captain drilling holes in the bottom of a ship. A business can sink just as quickly as a ship.

Compromise can occur in every nook and cranny of your business. It can be as simple as employees taking personal calls while servicing customers, wasting company supplies or circumventing procedures. Even the most basic forms of compromise can derail productivity, sap profits and destroy vital customer relationships. Leaders are ultimately accountable for these seemingly minor breaches, as most all business malfunctions can be traced back to those who lead. Further, think about the financial impact on a company when compromise exists in the core behavior and thinking of the leaders themselves. When a leader avoids making a vital decision of any kind, the cost of compromise can truly be colossal.

Every aspect of a company's performance is a reflection of its leaders' thinking, behavior and ability to execute. Consider the following three stories, classic examples of the cost of compromise.

STORY ONE:**Hates numbers — big ego**

Bob's architectural business was in dire financial straits and bleeding cash badly. Bob was on vacation. The bookkeeper faxed him a current set of financials and the accounts-payable aging report. She also included three options and asked him to get back to her on which one to execute. Option one was to find \$80,000 immediately so she could run payroll checks. There was

an addendum to option one; find more money so she could pay the rent and the bank loan. Option two was to tell the employees to go home and shut the business down. Option three suggested that Bob file for bankruptcy.

Got the picture? It was ugly. Like a two-by-four hitting Bob in the head, his business finally got his undivided attention because it was not only in pain, it was on life support and fading quickly. Bob was looking for a cure, or at least a sign of hope, that his business could be saved.

Bob's business didn't get in that shape overnight or while he was on vacation. The condition of Bob's business was fueled by his compromising behavior and thinking. He totally ignored his numbers. He was tough to work for and often allowed his ego to get in the way of making the right decisions for the company. And when it did, it demoralized staff. The business culture was contaminated. Productivity was dismal and client dissatisfaction was obvious. Under Bob's leadership, compromise was everywhere.

STORY TWO:

Avoids difficult conversations — Avoids tough decisions

Rick just hired a new general manager for his distribution company. He had done business with this individual before when she was the general manager of a major product supplier. She had an impressive resume that included sales management, project planning and goal achievements. As this was his company's first general manager, hopes were high for remarkable results.

Their new GM got right to work in her office. She was one of the first to arrive every day and the last to leave. Piles of detailed reports quickly grew in her office, where the GM spent most of her time. She would come out to lead a few meetings and occasionally talked about some projects. But as the months went by, the piles grew and talk about those exciting projects continued, but nothing seemed to be implemented.

In a small company without all the corporate camouflage to mask it, the GM's deficiencies were glaringly obvious. Rick now realized that he hired a report-generating, wheel-spinning, nothing-ever-crosses-the-finish-line, general manager who just could not execute. Rick attempted to pull in the reins by giving specific timelines to all of the GM's projects. Still, nothing got done. No progress on anything. Nada. Zilch.

The general manager's inability to implement became obvious to employees. The failure to engage on the part of the owner was compromising the company's culture. The trickle effect of not holding the GM accountable, while acknowledging the negative behavior and failing to address it, is compromise of the highest order.

Rick was suffering from a common leadership blockage where emotions interfere with one's ability to see and confront reality. He knew the GM needed the job and the money. However, the owner chose to compromise by avoiding what he perceived as a difficult and confrontational conversation. Only after great expense, distraction and prodding did the owner engage in a long overdue crucial conversation. He quickly discovered that the GM was frustrated, too, and knew she was ineffective and costing the company precious money. It was mutually agreed to part company. Rick wondered why he waited so long.

STORY THREE:

Lacks vision alignment — entitlement behavior

Susan and Jessica decided to merge their graphic design firms and create a new company with broader, more competitive offerings. A year into the merger, the business has grown but is beginning to sputter, as challenges grew within the partnership. Whenever the partners met, there were constant references to "at my old business" and "my employees" (meaning those employees who worked for each owner prior to the merger). The turf

battles between the partners created similar divisions in the employee ranks.

Although a partnership existed on paper, the partners never merged their thinking and their business cultures into a larger and more dynamic entity. Despite the fact that they were under one roof, each partner was fiercely territorial. It was dysfunctional leadership at its best.

For example, Jessica was a master of leadership entitlement. She would rearrange project assignments, buy new equipment or adjust prices without the thought of consulting her partner, Susan. She was chronically late for work. She regularly missed appointments with customers, partnership meetings, staff meetings and vendor meetings. Whenever Susan broached the subject, Jessica would justify her tardiness with, “I’m the owner and I can do what I want.” You could almost see the compromise freight train barreling through this business.

It’s there — find it

Those three stories might appear as extreme examples of compromise at the leadership level. However, while it might not be as obvious in your

In a no-compromise company, compromise is easy to identify. It’s the elephant in the living room.

company, compromise in some form is alive, thriving and doing damage. It’s your responsibility to identify and eliminate it — especially if you’re the one compromising.

Compromise spreads through a company like a virus. The compromising behaviors of the leaders in the preceding stories demonstrate the damage they can inflict on a business in terms of lost productivity and increased costs, as well as decreased levels of customer and employee retention. The impact is not merely subjective, because it can be measured in extreme detail in a host of performance and operating reports, and most definitely, in financial reports. Compromise is real and it’s costly. It infects and degrades everything, everywhere. It burrows in fast and deep and hunkers down

for the long haul. It can kill change initiatives and be resistant to efforts to weed it out.

Still not convinced that compromise exists in your business? Well, think again. Perhaps the compromise isn't as severe as the examples just shared, but rest assured, compromise is lurking in your company. And you don't have to look very far to find it. So buckle your seat belt and get ready for a reality check. Here is a hit list of compromising behavior that is as common as employees surfing the Internet and sending personal e-mails on company time.

Have you ever experienced any of these common compromising behaviors?

- ✦ Creating a double standard for you versus your employees.
- ✦ Creating separate standards for different employees.
- ✦ Not maintaining and following ethical standards.
- ✦ Procrastinating.
- ✦ Agreeing to do something and not delivering what was promised when it was promised.
- ✦ Being late for work or meetings.
- ✦ Not following the budget.
- ✦ Failing to address obvious problems and issues.
- ✦ Not responding to employee suggestions.
- ✦ Believing that "it" cannot be done.
- ✦ Talking "empowerment" but never letting go of control.
- ✦ Giving up too easily.
- ✦ Not creating opportunities to listen to what employees have to say and their insights to make things better.
- ✦ Focusing on the negative.
- ✦ Failing or a personal resistance to disclose and share key information that employees need to do their jobs.
- ✦ Withholding positive feedback.
- ✦ Not rolling up your sleeves and pitching in.
- ✦ Reprimanding in public.
- ✦ Talking about, gossiping or degrading an employee with others.

- Stereotyping and making assumptions about people.
- Not listening to customers.
- Accepting inferior performance or quality service.
- Playing the “blame game.”

As you can see, the compromise list is extensive, but it’s only the tip of the iceberg. Yes, we’re all guilty as charged when it comes to compromise. *You cannot condone, tolerate or ignore compromise.* The more we, as leaders, practice and adhere to a no-compromise mandate for ourselves and the companies we lead, the more difficult it is for compromise to surface.

In a no-compromise company, compromise is easy to identify. It’s the elephant in the living room.

Running through minefields

Ever wonder why it's so difficult to change behavior or implement new systems in your business? The answer becomes clear when you understand how deeply rooted compromise is in your culture. Getting change initiatives to stick when compromise is present can be agonizingly slow and painful. It's like trying to run a race through a minefield. It doesn't take long for the change initiative to hit a few mines before it's either blown up or retreats to status quo. Old compromising behaviors will return in an instant if an opportunity presents itself.

Even when change initiatives appear to have finally taken hold and it's full speed ahead, compromise can derail it. In his book, *Leading Change*, change guru John Kotter details how behavior and thinking associated with the old culture continue to lurk below the surface just waiting for the slightest crack to occur. Even years after a seemingly successful change initiative, compromise at the leadership level can create a crack sufficient enough to create a new set of minefields, as compromise surfaces and regains a foothold.

A no-compromise culture is a formidable deterrent that can prevent cracks in your culture from occurring. And when a crack does occur, no compromise quickly stops it from expanding, then seals it with focused attention and accountability.

And just because a leader identifies compromise, it doesn't necessarily translate that front-line employees see it the same way. You may have to get creative to convey the concept of compromise to your staff. Here's an interesting story that John Kotter shared with Strategies about how one leader communicated a major compromise sighting to his staff:

He was new in his job and was meeting with one of his biggest customers for dinner. He knew that the plant was going to have to change to be able to become more competitive. He knew that the people in the plant

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had been there forever. They had their own “pride” in their workmanship, but they also had a great deal of complacency.

So, he meets with this large customer. My guess is after a drink or two, the guy started to leak out more of his dissatisfaction. The customer had to take their products and redo them. When the factory people were confronted with that, they had nodded their heads but hadn’t done anything about it. The costs of switching [to another factory] were high or difficult; it’s not like buying butter.

Instead of getting defensive, the guy drew the customer out and let him get more explicit and let his frustration out. He said, “My people need to see just what I’ve seen.”

This guy was interested in videotape, and asked, “Would you mind if I send someone around tomorrow with a video camera and would you say what you said tonight?”

And he talked him into it. The next day, he sent over a guy with a video camera and he got the customer talking. He filmed maybe 30 minutes and edited it to 15 minutes. Then, he started calling work groups into a conference room in the factory to view the video. Afterwards, he said, “What do you think?” He got some defensiveness, of course. Any number of people almost had their jaws on the floor. They simply didn’t realize. That shook things up enough and got rid of enough of the complacency to get things rolling.

Confronting your leadership blockages

Compromise thinking and behavior emanate from bad habits, procrastination and insufficient leadership skills. Collectively, it’s like all that annoying stuff you or employees do. It’s when you avoid or knowingly ignore something, while that voice inside you is screaming, “Hey, you gotta do this.” It’s when you know that you should engage and be accountable, but something inside you compels you to turn away and disengage. This is where the real damage to leadership careers, employees and business cultures is done. Be assured, it’s lethal enough to derail any company.

I use the term “*leadership blockages*” to describe this avoidance behavior.

Leadership blockages defined

Leadership blockages are quite common. Even the best leaders have their quirks that trip them up and result in compromise. Here are a few examples of leadership blockages to get you started:

- You need to address an employee's behavior or performance but avoid it because you view it as confrontation and not a coaching opportunity.
- You never liked numbers, so you avoid your responsibilities to plan and monitor your company's financial performance. You know getting a handle on the numbers is vital — you just don't do it.
- You avoid making tough decisions out of fear or how they will impact others. The entire company pays the price for your failure to act.
- You have a friend or relative in a key position and he or she is not performing. It's having a negative impact on the company, but you refuse to act. Problem is, everyone else sees this, too.
- You see problems, even acknowledge them, but fail to act. And when you do act, you turn to quick fixes rather than long-term solutions that might require some tough decisions or sacrifices.
- You don't like structure and systems, so you lead like a shoot-from-the-hip cowboy. You give excuses and the problems continue.
- You want employees to think and act like owners, but you refuse to let go of the controls. You override decisions. You violate levels of authority. You meddle in everything. As a result, you stifle employee growth — and frustrate the heck out of those you seemingly empower to lead.
- You overflow your plate with projects, tasks and responsibilities like some superhero, because you can't or won't say "no." Your perpetual state of being overwhelmed or overworked is affecting your ability to lead. You can't lead when you're fighting fires and trying to keep things from falling off your plate.

When you avoid or fail to act on an issue or problem, you are dealing with a leadership blockage. Like the fear of flying or public speaking, these behavior patterns are embedded into one's core thinking and take time, practice and determination to overcome. In business, especially at the leadership level, leadership blockages create drag. When blockages cause essential



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Giving into a leadership blockage today gives you a bigger problem tomorrow.

leadership accountabilities to shut down, the drag can stall forward momentum. In acute cases, blockages can create so much drag that it can cause a business to wobble, crash and burn. If you did a forensic analysis

on the problems you are currently experiencing in your business, at some level of your organization, leadership blockages would be identified as the root cause. You, or someone in your company, failed to be accountable to step in and engage an issue or challenge, demanding attention and action.

This is a good time to give you the first Neilism of the book: "Giving into a leadership blockage today gives you a bigger problem tomorrow."

Leadership blockages create an interesting concoction of compromise that can do all sorts of damage to a company's performance and culture. And just like having a fear of flying or public speaking, the causes for such leadership blockages can be varied and deeply rooted in one's behavior.

The good news is that any leader can choose to overcome and work through his or her blockages. You can learn to improve communication skills and control the flow and outcome of crucial conversations. You can learn and master numbers, strategic planning, decision-making, system design, delegation and time management. It begins by making a no-compromise decision to overcome your blockages. *Remember, 100% is a breeze, 99% is a bitch.*

Begin by acknowledging what your leadership blockages are and how they are creating drag in the company. To create no-compromise results, you need to develop new behaviors and productive habits. What are the blockages that keep you from getting the results you want? Get them down

on paper. Once you identify them, start replacing them with behaviors and habits that will get the results you want. *A no-compromise business culture cannot be achieved with leadership blockages getting in the way.*

No room for compromise

When I started Strategies in 1993, my goal was to build a highly efficient company driven by a small and dedicated team. Although my “no-compromise” battle cry didn’t emerge until a few years later, it was clearly the mandate and the most sacred of our governing values. Yes, we have had encounters with compromise, but they were rare and always short-lived, like failing to thoroughly plan for an important meeting or not following up on a hot customer lead. It’s easy to use the “we didn’t have time” excuse when the real reason is not planning our time. How we addressed those compromises is a testament to our culture and behavior. No, we are not perfect, but we work hard at living no compromise every day.

I wanted a company with a high sense of urgency. Urgency is no-compromise energy. Focus a sense of urgency at a crisis, challenge or behavior, and it’s like channeling an army of antibodies at an infection. It surrounds it, stops it from spreading — then kills it. I can’t remember one compromise or crisis at Strategies that we didn’t work through in short order.

When creating my vision, I knew precisely what I wanted and the type of culture it would require. More than anything, I wanted a company that would allow me to do the work I enjoy and not get bogged down by the traditional employee productivity issues. I wanted an open company with free-flowing information. I wanted a high sense of urgency to grow revenues and control costs. Open-book management was a given (*a system of sharing financials with employees so everyone can make better profit-driving decisions*). I wanted mutual responsibility and accountability. Integrity and trust would be the foundation of our core values. Customer responsiveness and building enduring relationships

Neilism

If I can't sleep at night,
no one sleeps at night.



with clients and vendors were non-negotiable. I wanted us to work hard, have fun and balance it all with personal and family growth. And at the end of the day, every team member at Strategies should feel fulfilled and

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rewarded for our individual and collective accomplishments. If work isn't fulfilling and enriching, then it truly is work — and that makes getting out of bed each day a task unto itself.

Looking back at the first 15 years of Strategies and all we have accomplished is proof that no compromise is a powerful mode of thinking. Our small but focused team manages three highly profitable revenue divisions. Visitors to our corporate offices and Business Academy are quite surprised when they don't find rows of cubicles. No compromise drives efficiency. *I'll take it one step further and label "no compromise" as a new and powerful business design and structure.*

For example, Thursday is numbers day at Strategies. That's when the weekly balance sheets, profit and loss statements, statement of cash flows, accounts receivable and payable reports are run. I get a warm glow inside when I hear my staff ask if the reports are ready yet and then watch as they dissect them. No one hesitates to ask tough questions. It's really cool when someone spots something that needs to be fixed, reclassified or given immediate attention. It's truly inspiring when employees fight for both top- and bottom-line growth while seeking ways to build our cash reserves. *By the way, I hate referring to those I work with every day as "employees." The reason is simple. We are all accountable for the success or failure of Strategies. Our company is totally open and we measure our performance by our financials. We have a culture where everyone thinks and acts like an owner.*

A Neilism: "If I can't sleep at night, no one sleeps at night." From a leadership perspective, there is a ton of no-compromise thinking in this Neilism. Over the years, I've seen too many leaders and entrepreneurs who, during tough times, can't sleep at night. Out of fear, they elect not to share the severity of the crisis with employees — not even key employees.

They rationalize that sharing bad news, even dismal news, could be the signal to “abandon ship.” Well, there’s nothing like a good business crisis to inspire and bring out the best in a leader to rally the troops, get them focused and fix what needs to be fixed.

It’s about choices

It is important to understand that leaders make choices on how they want to lead and behave. I’ll let the psychologists of the world offer up their scientific explanations on why people behave like they do and make the decisions they make. In business, in leadership and in life, there are only two choices. You can choose to lead to the best of your ability or you can choose to do it at a level of something less. *To do your best is no compromise.* Something less is a compromise. If you choose to do it (anything) to the best of your ability, then you are also committing to improving and honing your abilities. That’s no compromise. It’s beyond continuous improvement. It’s striving for the highest levels of performance and achievement. It’s a sacred commitment to be your best in the game you’re playing.

Neilism
If you’re not striving for no compromise — you’re striving for mediocrity.



Here’s another Neilism. “If you’re not striving for no compromise — you’re striving for mediocrity.” That is a choice many leaders make. Those who do pay a terrible price in terms of stress, lost opportunity, employee turnover, inefficiency and financial loss, all of which spill over into their personal lives. That’s not why anyone ever goes into business, but sadly, it is the outcome that results from compromising decisions and behavior.

It is so much more fulfilling to go no compromise. Is it more work? You could argue that it is. But here’s my take. There are non-negotiable rules in business. There is work that must be done. So from my vantage point, no compromise simply means doing what needs to be done, working through your leadership blockages and following the rules. *No compromise.*

By design, no-compromise leadership requires accountability at all levels of your company. But, it can only begin with you and your commitment

to a higher standard of leadership think-

ing and behavior. Just as a new coach can dramatically raise the focus, intensity and consistency of a losing team into one capable of winning a championship, so can the leader of

Neilism
*Success is an outcome.
No compromise is the true
essence of success.*



a company. First you must look inward at how you allow compromise to influence your thinking and behavior. *You'll be setting your company up for failure if you attempt to create a no-compromise culture if you don't change first.*

I'll end this chapter with a Neilism: "Success is an outcome. No compromise is the true essence of success."

Action steps before reading on...

1. Set aside 30 undisturbed minutes to identify compromise in your leadership behavior. The telltale signs to look for are:
 - ✦ Procrastination. Is there is a pattern you can identify, such as not doing reports, making sales calls or starting projects?
 - ✦ Leadership blockages, such as avoiding thorough reviews of your financial reports, avoiding difficult conversations or making necessary but unpopular decisions. Leadership blockages stall progress through avoidance behavior.
 - ✦ A bread crumb trail of failed projects, programs, procedures and change initiatives. If so, compromise is alive and well, and breeding in your company.
2. Of all the compromising behaviors you just identified, which one do you believe is most crucial for you to address? You'll learn how in the coming chapters.
3. Take a slow walk around your company to identify and record every sighting of compromise you see. Look for behavior issues, inappropriate language, customer-service deficiencies, safety issues, wasteful practices and sanitation problems. Bring a fresh note pad. You're going to need it.
4. Effectively communicate your compromise sightings to employees and decide on a plan to remedy the compromise.

CHAPTER 2

YOUR JOURNEY TO NO-COMPROMISE LEADERSHIP BEGINS

Becoming a no-compromise leader is truly a road less traveled. Not because it's necessarily long or difficult, but because of the unwavering commitment and perseverance to be such a leader.

No compromise is not a leadership style you can conveniently slip in and out of. There is no room for dabbling, middle-ground or fence-sitting. You cannot fake it, nor can you put it on like some power suit to appear as an authoritative commander in chief. It's certainly not something you morph into only when your company needs fixing or is in trouble. To become a no-compromise leader is an all-or-nothing proposition. You want it or you don't. Anything less is a compromise.

Your personal road to no compromise will vary based on where you are right now as a leader. For example, those with more leadership blockages will have to work harder than those with only a few. Like diet and exercise programs, commitment and perseverance are essential to making new leadership behaviors stick. Yes, you will slip. We all do. But learning to identify and acknowledge those slips is key to getting yourself back on course. No-compromise leadership is not an absolute state of being. It's a process and discipline to refine your thinking and behavior to become the most effective leader you can possibly be. It's working to achieve a higher standard of leadership performance for you, your company or area of responsibility.

To better understand your journey, I assembled a list of 10 requirements that you must understand and agree to before you can begin the journey to becoming a no-compromise leader. Each requirement raises the bar higher

to make you stretch. Collectively, they provide the thinking and behavioral foundation to support what you will learn in the chapters that follow.

Let's begin.

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 1:

Clarity: Have absolute clarity on where you're taking your company.

OK, I need to do a little rant on *vision* and *mission* before continuing. I could have used company "vision" (where are you going) or "mission" (how will you get there) in Requirement Number 1, but they just don't evoke the no-compromise thinking at the level we need here. Now I must admit, having said that vision and mission don't make the grade may sound like blasphemy to management purists. But think about it. In more than 38 years of studying, teaching and coaching business, I've seen an endless parade of companies with some of the finest and meticulously crafted vision and mission statements you could ever see. I'm talking top shelf "meet and exceed — relentless pursuit of quality" statements that make you want to stand up and salute the company flag. I've seen these grand statements on everything from etched on the granite walls of the company lobby to laminated pocket-sized versions for employees to carry around for daily inspiration.

Vision and mission statements are absolutely essential. Together they point the way and offer insight into the desired culture of the company. But vision and mission do that on a grand scale with broad brush strokes. Within the words, there is ambiguity and room for individual interpretation. And that means a company can wander off course while the leader perceives that it's still moving toward its vision. After all, it is the leader who interprets the vision and determines the way. Also, factor in that reality can and will dictate that course changes be made. If the leader fails to identify new threats or opportunities and adjust course as needed, a price will be paid for such a compromise. Given that, the no-compromise leader needs to do more.

Having absolute clarity on where you're taking your company is what distinguishes the no-compromise leader from other leaders. Having

absolute clarity of objectives, direction and action plans brings the vision and mission of the company into the highest level of alignment. Here's a Neilism to lock in my point on absolute clarity: "Absolute clarity is like business GPS. It sets the where and the how."

In a Strategies interview with Ken Blanchard; he shared the following insights on the importance for a company to know where it's going.

They're really clear on what they're trying to accomplish. All good behavior starts with clear goals. If you don't know where you're going, what you're doing doesn't matter. We wrote a book called Full Steam Ahead!™ about the power of visioning.

Great companies have a clear vision, no matter what business they're in. I see mission statements all the time. I ask if they mind if I put them by my bed in case I can't sleep! I'm working with a bank. ... I told them I would hope they're in the peace of mind business. If I gave them money, they would take care of it and grow it. Walt Disney said, "We're in the happiness business not the theme park business."

Secondly, you have to know what your picture of the future is. For Walt Disney, it was to have every guest leaving the park with the same smile they had when they entered.

No-compromise leaders must be grounded in their understanding of where they are taking the company. Absolute clarity ensures that the company doesn't wander off course or make decisions that are not in alignment with its vision, such as expanding too fast or entering unknown markets. Decisions or course changes remain true to the vision and mission. I must drive this point home because entrepreneurial leaders are notorious for justifying whatever it is they want to do. *Compromise resides within that justifying behavior. Absolute clarity deters this behavior.* If it's not taking the company toward its intended vision, it doesn't happen.

Neilism

Absolute clarity is like business GPS. It sets the where and the how.



REQUIREMENT NUMBER 2:**Values: If you want them, live them.**

Syndicated columnist, Bruce Weinstein, Ph.D. is The Ethics Guy and author of *Life Principles: Feeling Good by Doing Good*. In a *Strategies* interview, he defined how vital it is for a company to maintain its values and ethical center.

“When we take the low road, we not only cheat our customers, our company, and the company’s shareholders — we cheat ourselves. At the end of the day, all we really have is our integrity. Once we give others a reason not to trust us, it is often hard, if not impossible, to regain that trust. Only by taking the high road consistently can we prosper in the long run.”

When you admire a business for its uncompromising quality, relentless customer service and delivering what was promised when it was promised, what you’re actually admiring is the culture created and governed by its values. That level of refined values-based behavior doesn’t just happen; it’s designed and meticulously cared for. Most importantly, it begins at the top. The structure, discipline, values and guiding principles are the granite blocks that a company’s culture is built upon. That doesn’t mean a company is so rigid that it is incapable of changing, just that the core behaviors that allow it to be consistent are deeply rooted. In contrast, the entrepreneurial dark side is much like a cowboy wandering from one shoot-from-the-hip gunfight to the next with the dream of riding off into the sunset on a successful business.

Tampering with the values of a business is much like tampering with the forces of nature. Compromise values anywhere in your company and minute changes, often called the butterfly effect, can cause a tidal wave of otherwise avoidable issues, problems and drama.

Here are some common examples of compromising behavior that will degrade the values of your company:

Stealing or embezzling from your own company: You would fire an employee for stealing. Just because you’re the owner or leader, it doesn’t

give you a license to steal. Double standards compromise the values of a company. Taking cash, fudging expense reports, taking supplies or running personal expenses through the company are willful values and ethics breaches. *Oh, one more thing: Tax evasion is against the law.*

Making up the rules as you go: Nothing does more damage to a business culture, staff morale and performance than assuming that everyone knows the rules of the game, and then suddenly announcing, via a new rule, policy or procedure, that they didn't. Making up new rules when things go wrong immediately places the company's values on the hot seat. All of the issues, frustrations, lost productivity, lost respect and lost trust in leadership can be avoided by mapping out processes and outcomes before hitting the launch button.

Not keeping your word or outright lying: A leader earns the trust of others one day at a time. You can't build a dynamic company around a compromising leader who breaks his word, lies or says whatever is convenient at the time.

Overriding the authority of others without their knowledge: Why empower others or share accountability if you see nothing wrong with going behind their backs to get things your way? The wish of every leader is for employees to think, act and make decisions like an owner. That cannot occur if the leader is meddling, overriding and "snoopervising" all over the place.

"Do as I say, not as I do." Leaders lead by example. Demanding one set of standards for everyone else and a lower set for leaders is the cardinal sin of leadership. So much so, that many in leadership roles would be better placed among the rank and file. Failure to live the company's culture is a values compromise.

A well-defined set of values should handle the occasional dart with ease. But when it's the leader who is hurling the darts, the governing values will fail taking with it the vitality, productivity and profitability of the entire company.

If it's your entrepreneurial dark side that is hurling darts at the values and ethics of your company, you must address your own leadership and communication styles without delay. Changing your leadership style takes

time and discipline. The services of a qualified leadership coach can be a worthwhile investment to ensure that your new leadership style is a worthy, appropriate and permanent fix. If compromise is coming from a leader below you, address it without hesitation. Preventing the degrading of governing values is so much easier than fixing the damage done to a company's culture.

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 3:

Accountability: If it needs to be done, get it done.

I received a call from Jacque to let me know that she could not attend the Strategies' seminar series she was registered for. When I inquired why, Jacque began describing cash-flow problems and other seemingly insurmountable business challenges. There was no mistaking her frustration over the state of her business. This seminar series was just what she needed, so I offered this struggling entrepreneur a seat and that we would figure out a payment plan that would make attending possible.

We had a long discussion about her business and how her leadership behavior, attention to detail and follow-through needed to dramatically improve. Jacque had to become a no-compromise leader if she wanted to turn her business around. There was a positive air in her voice and a reassuring determination to get to work on re-building her business.

At the first of the four sessions, she was totally engaged. However, as she returned for each succeeding session, I could see compromise creeping back into her behavior. Together, we addressed her fading sense of urgency and backsliding. Although there were some gains, many of her most pressing challenges remained. Not because they weren't identified, but because she failed to commit and be accountable to execute the clearly defined solutions she now had in her possession. Compromise was alive and well. Nothing really changed, because Jacque, the leader, didn't change.

Jacque's story is a simple lesson that it takes more than "showing up" and talk of change to be a no-compromise leader. It takes resolve, tenacity and courage to begin and stay the course. Jacque did the talk but not the walk. She wasn't ready to commit and failed requirement number three: If

it needs to be done, get it done. When the seminar series concluded nine months later, Jacque's business was still aimlessly wandering around the starting gate. She eventually sold the business but at a price far short to clear up the debt. Had Jacque embraced no compromise, you could have been reading a nice success story here instead of this obituary.

Call it procrastinating, leadership blockages, lack of knowledge or whatever — failure to be accountable and do what needs to be done is the ultimate compromise for a business leader. It contaminates the very fabric of the business culture, because the leader's propensity to compromise, and sets the behavior standard for the entire company.

Procrastination, or simply avoiding difficult decisions or actions, are behavior traits that breed compromise.

Procrastination, or simply avoiding difficult decisions or actions, is behavior that breeds compromise. Living by requirement number three is non-negotiable for the no-compromise leader. A leader is defined by his or her resolve, tenacity and courage to get things done.

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 4:

Transparent: No excuses when you compromise. Own it.

You would have to be living under a rock not to understand that doing business today demands focused leadership, teamwork at its highest level, the ability to rapidly adapt to change, relentless innovation, uncompromising customer service and fiscal accountability. Business today is an unforgiving and high-risk game. And if you're an entrepreneur, it's likely that your home and personal guarantee all hinge on the decisions and actions you take. Given this, being a leader in business is about getting things done, working through challenges and dealing with those raise-your-blood-pressure issues that are all part of the game. That's doing business that no-compromise way.

But what happens when excuses enter the mix? In my work as a business trainer and coach, I encounter a steady stream of excuse makers. I started calling them "excuse manufacturers," as they always appear to be

in full production mode. From “I don’t like to look at the numbers” and “I think the performance problem will go away if I give it more time,” to “The economy is not good — everyone is feeling the pain.” And just as the sun always rises, you can count on excuses being backed up with concocted reasons why goals were not achieved, why expenses are so high or why a project wasn’t completed. Here’s a Neilism: “Excuses will never explain away compromise.”

Growing a business is like raising a child. If the diaper needs changing, you change it. If the baby needs to eat, you feed it. When it misbehaves, you

coach it. As it matures, you lead the child by showing growth paths and to master the disciplines to achieve his or her full potential. As a parent, there is no option. It must be done.

Then why is it that otherwise respon-

sible people compromise their businesses, and the livelihoods of all those who depend on it, by manufacturing excuses rather than taking action — even when their personal assets are at risk? True, business can be difficult and challenging at times, but wearing blinders to shield you from reality is not an option.

Excuses are an easy way to justify and explain away compromising behavior. The true no-compromise leader rises above the masses to openly acknowledge and take responsibility for his or her compromises. They own it. “I screwed up. It was a bad decision. I was wrong.” Owning their compromises creates a level of transparency that reveals their human side, that they are not infallible — that they have no hidden agenda. Owning it ends the drama and related stress, much like hitting a huge pressure release valve. More than anything, it builds trust.

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 5:

Culture: Don’t destroy from within.

“Don’t destroy from within” is the first of a two-line mission statement at SRC Holdings Corp. of Springfield, Missouri. (The second line is, “Don’t



Neilism

*Excuses will never explain
away compromise.*

run out of cash.”) When I heard Jack Stack, SRC’s CEO and author of *The Great Game of Business*, utter these words, their simplicity and profoundness stuck with me. Why? Because time and again I see leaders who refuse to confront the reality of what’s happening in their own companies, as negative behaviors contaminate their cultures. Even worse is when leaders see the problem and fail to act. It doesn’t matter how successful your business is or how wonderful you believe your culture to be, it is vulnerable. As a leader, it’s your responsibility to protect its culture and to do so at all costs. *Leaders cannot allow the company to be held hostage by an individual’s talents and abilities versus his or her behavior.*

If you trace the origin of most business challenges, crises and missed opportunities, you will discover they were created internally. Someone wasn’t paying attention or being accountable and the blame game begins. Destroying from within has everything to do with behavior and how negative behavior contaminates a business culture. To be a no-compromise leader, you must strengthen, nurture and protect your business culture from contamination.

To be a no-compromise leader, you must strengthen, nurture and protect your business culture from contamination.

Your business culture is...

- ♦ a truly dynamic entity that embodies the heart and soul of your company.
- ♦ the energy source that not only powers your business, but links all behaviors and thinking to a common purpose.
- ♦ what attracts and retains the best employees.
- ♦ what rallies the collective energy of the business to achieve breakthrough goals and to drive growth.
- ♦ what carries the business through those inevitable tough times.
- ♦ what touches customers in that special way that keeps them coming back for more.
- ♦ what communicates the who, what and why of your business to every employee and the world around it.

Just as computers are vulnerable to virus attacks, so are business cultures.

Culture contamination can be devastating to a business. Consider it a toxic poison that can seep in at any time from any direction — internally or externally. Contamination reveals itself in the form of negative behavior, meaningless drama and decreased productivity. However, unlike computers in which you can install firewalls and virus protection, your business culture is always exposed. *Always.* Economic downturns, fierce competition, headhunters preying on your best talent, even the weather, can seed contamination in your culture. But those external attacks on your culture are nothing compared to attacks that destroy from within.

Protecting the culture is hard work and must always be done with integrity. I am by no means suggesting that leaders walk around with pink slips at the ready. I am suggesting that leaders keep the lines of communication open at all levels and invest the time and energy to protect and maintain their business cultures. Great leaders aren't great because they're innovative, understand numbers or have good communication skills. They're great because they design, build and fiercely protect the cultures they are empowered to lead. They identify, coach, and, when necessary, cut loose the anchors creating drag and impeding forward progress before their behaviors contaminate the culture. *That is the work of leadership. Failure to do so, no matter how difficult, is a compromise.*

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 6:

Unity: Don't be dictatorial and inflexible.

No compromise *is not* a leadership style void of compassion. When I do a presentation on no compromise, someone always seems to say something like, "No compromise sounds like I have to become a Marine drill sergeant." The discussion conjures up images of dictating leaders who hone their ability to shout commands and to say "no" to just about every request. Becoming a no-compromise leader doesn't mean that you must become an imposing messenger of darkness who demands unquestioned, unrelenting and absolute obedience. Frankly, anyone flipping to the drill sergeant style of leadership would likely find stacks of resignations on his or her desk. *Count on my resignation to be the first.*

If you think about the bulk of performance issues that plague business today, compromise has a hand in it. Often, it's due to lack of structure, poor information flow or just plain laziness. The personality of the leader also comes into play. Many leaders believe that saying "Yes" to everything makes them popular and well-liked by employees. Others are perfectly fine being dictatorial and inflexible and have little concern for how well liked or popular they are — just as long as the job gets done.

When integrity, trust, compassion, ethics, tenacity, and courage merge, they form the framework for no-compromise leadership.

If your first reaction to no compromise is hesitation for fear of shifting to a leadership style that is too dictatorial and inflexible, ponder this. When integrity, trust, compassion, ethics, tenacity and courage merge, they form the framework for no-compromise leadership. That framework would be torn apart by the dynamics and warp-speed pace of change in business if it was incapable of flexing. Everything changes. One set of behaviors might work fine today but not tomorrow. The no-compromise leader must be open to and ready to embrace change, no matter how fast it comes.

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 7:

Focus: Avoid *office-itis*.

Office-itis is simply a term I use to describe what happens to leaders at any level who lose their focus on their company's vision and objectives. It's when they get bogged down in day-to-day minutia or other projects that tend to keep them busy but disconnected from the current reality and performance of the business.

Dennis, the owner of a construction company, had just made a major change in his role at his company. For years, in addition to managing the business, he spent much of his time at construction sites overseeing progress and working alongside employees. He recognized that his company was growing, and decided it was time to channel his efforts on managing that growth from the office. He hired a general field manager and completely removed himself from construction site work. Three months into

his “lead from the office” transition, Dennis became afflicted with a full-blown case of office-itis.

This otherwise bright and energetic business leader admitted that he was frustrated in his new role and often found himself bored and looking for things to do. Dennis spent most of his time making calls,

paying bills, placing orders and some systems development. At the same time, he expressed concern that his employees were getting lethargic and that teamwork performance was just not at the level it once was

Neilism

Give your company a break — manage what's on your plate.



when he was out there with them. I asked Dennis a question to help him see how his office-itis was compromising his company: “If you got out of your office and asked each of your employees what the vision of your company is, how many would be able to answer?” I could sense by the silence that my question hit its mark. Like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, Dennis answered, “I don’t think any would be able to get our vision right.” His office-itis was exposed. He thought he was working on his business when, in reality, he was disconnected and unplugged from the real work of leadership. And his business was responding accordingly. While Dennis was in his office counting ceiling tiles, the sense of urgency that drives team performance was compromised. *No business can run on autopilot.*

It is essential to not only identify office-itis but to create a business culture that makes it difficult for office-itis to creep in. If you feel bored, unproductive, disconnected or find that you’re spending your day majoring in minor tasks just to keep busy, you’ve got a case of office-itis.

Think you’re immune to office-itis because you don’t work in an office? Think again. Whenever your daily work routine disconnects you from the action and dynamics of the business to the point where your leadership effectiveness is compromised — you’ve got a case of office-itis. Leaders who are also doctors, engineers, hair stylists, consultants, programmers and similar types of hands-on occupations, can all suffer from office-itis.

If you have a case of office-itis, you need to give yourself a huge wake-up call and get back in the action. Likewise, leaders need to look for signs of office-itis in others. Believe me, I've seen productive and responsible employees fall into office-itis work modes that could have been avoided if leadership was paying attention. *Office-itis is a compromise.*

The best prevention for office-itis is to consistently maintain the sense of urgency of the business. Communication, information flow and accountability must never be compromised.

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 8:

Strategic: Manage what's on your plate.

If you had to pick one word to describe your leadership work style, would it be *superhero*? Do you just love to pile on the work and the projects? Is so much crammed into your daily schedule that it's a challenge to give your focused attention to conversations and tasks? Are you juggling a dozen balls at a time — and begging for more? If you answered “yes” to any or all of those questions, this is your superhero mantra, “Bring it on; I can handle it all.” Unfortunately, the truth is you can't handle it all. Before you say, “Oh, yeah?” take a reality check on how well you've been executing all that work.

In reality, superheroes resemble an overloaded speedboat. Rather than gaining speed until it planes over the water, an overburdened speedboat leaves nothing but an impressive wake in its path, as it struggles to push through the water. That impressive wake then becomes an obstacle that others are forced to deal with every time their superhero passes by.

Many individuals confuse no-compromise leadership with “I must do it all.” Well, you can't do it all — and when you try, you create that impressive wake that throws everyone in your company off balance. Simply put, the superhero leader becomes the disturbance that creates drag rather than lift.

I always enjoy the first consulting session with a new client because, it's like the beginning of a great mystery novel. I say this because the initial

When you try to do it all, you create that impressive wake that throws everyone in your company off balance.

issue for hiring a consultant isn't always the issue that is causing the client's pain. The client might think the issue we need to work on is that dead elephant in the living room and how to get rid of it. Actually, the dead



Neilism

The dead elephant in your living room is a symptom of a bigger problem.

elephant is just a symptom of a host of potential problems. It's my job to discover how it got there, what was the murder weapon and who actually did the nasty deed. That's what makes each consulting assignment an intriguing mystery to uncover the compromise.

One such mystery began with a call from Shelly. Her company was suffering from stalled growth and spiraling from one cash crisis to another. The call was like a desperate plea for relief from her chronic business stress. Shelly took on every project and task that came her way. And if a morsel of space on her plate cleared, she'd fill it in a nanosecond. Shelly made all the decisions in her company, and when she empowered others to make decisions, she corrected those she didn't like. Shelly complained incessantly that her managers never displayed initiative or took accountability. (She never gave them a chance to perform.) She was so overburdened that the only impressive outcome was the massive wake she created in her company. As Shelly's coach, my challenge was to help her see that wake she was creating.

It was a struggle for Shelly to look objectively at her plate and to comprehend that the inefficiencies that were stifling her company's growth were emanating from her. *Shelly's effort to do it all was actually a major source of compromise.* After months of coaching, Shelly was making progress. Morsel by morsel, her plate became more manageable. Shelly's newfound focus on the business accelerated growth and the perpetual cash crisis eventually faded away. By managing what she allowed on her plate, Shelly became an extremely effective leader — a no-compromise leader.

I understand that it's just the nature of some leaders to take on anything and everything — that they're just not "happy" unless they're running flat out. *If you're one of these pile-it-high leaders, you are compromising.* The

frenzy you build around yourself makes you unapproachable, irritable, short-tempered and quite unpleasant to associate with. And if you think your superhero antics create urgency in your company, how wrong you are! Just remember how that overloaded speedboat casts out a huge wake that creates turmoil for everyone else to deal with. Time for a Neilism: “Give your company a break — manage what’s on your plate.”

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 9:

Resolute: Be tenacious and courageous.

In 1991, I had the opportunity to buy a small commercial printing company. Having been involved in business magazine publishing since the early 80s, I enjoyed the whole process of creating a printed piece. From writing and design, to film, plates, ink and paper, to see a print job go from idea to finished product was a fun and fulfilling experience. It still is.

So, touched by an entrepreneurial seizure, an old high school friend and I bought a local printing company. I had done business with the former owner for many years and knew that the business was generally stable and had a good customer base. The big customer was a local company that had about 80,000 subscribers for its monthly collection of five crossword puzzles. That’s five times 80,000 crossword puzzles every month — a dream job for a commercial printer. This one account represented 25 percent of the printing company’s annual revenues. *Translation: This account was key to making the acquisition work.*

So we bought this company and got to work. Since the printing equipment was old and basic, we immediately went out and purchased a big, shiny new press and computerized the graphics department with the latest Macs, color scanners and imaging units. These upgrades were essential in order to go after larger clients and more lucrative jobs. I must say, we had a blast buying all this new stuff. (*Hey, it was a big entrepreneurial seizure.*)

Neilism

A healthy cash reserve is “sleep good at night” money.



Remember that one big customer? You know, the one who for years paid the previous owner the day it received the invoice? Well, two and half months into our new venture, that one big customer ran up almost six fig-

My mind flashed to the moment I signed that collateral mortgage on my home to secure the bank loan. It was a surreal moment I will never forget.

ures on its account. It kept sending us work and we kept printing — it just never sent a check. Finally, I had to make my first accounts receivable collection call. The owner asked for a private meeting.

Instantly, the mother of all knots formed in the pit of my stomach.

Well, we had that private meeting in which I was informed that they had bet the ranch on their last major holiday mailing — and it bombed. They were broke. To make matters worse, I was told that 80 percent of their annual sales came from their holiday promotions. Then, the owner of the company asked if we could float them for nine months until their next holiday selling season. My mind flashed to the moment I signed that collateral mortgage on my home to secure the bank loan. It was a surreal moment I will never forget.

Needless to say, our fun little acquisition turned into our worst nightmare. Our biggest customer was going under — and owed us a ton of money. We made a major investment in new equipment. We had a huge monthly loan payment. Oh, I guess I might as well tell you that we really didn't know enough about running a commercial printing company. We were seriously in over our heads. *And this, my fellow entrepreneurs, became the bleakest and most desperate business situation I had ever been in.*

I wish I could tell an incredible story of how I pulled the company out of this mess and went on to become the greatest printer of all time. Unfortunately, with the combination of losing a major customer, the cost of new equipment (all of which was financed) and the loan payment, we just couldn't find a spec of daylight at the end of the tunnel. After two very ugly and stressful years, we worked out a deal to return the company to the previous owner. Financially devastating as it was, it was time to move on.

Personally, I had never been through anything so stressful and draining than those two ugly years as what I now describe as being “a pretty bad commercial printer.” Yes, I was drained mentally and physically and my sense of pride had taken some serious body blows, but I was ready to get back in the game. *I needed to get back in the game.*

The one positive thing to come out of the printing debacle was the initial concept for *Strategies* magazine, including cover and page design. (For me, part of the reason to buy the printing company was to print *Strategies* and all of the promotional pieces on my own presses.) So, on September 13, 1993, I moved my office furniture and computers from the printing company four miles away to a small office on the first floor of 40 Main Street in Centerbrook, Connecticut.

For the first few months, I worked by myself writing *Strategies*, doing all the graphics, promotional mailings and taking subscription orders over the phone. For me, it was the best and only way to purge the printing company fiasco from my system. Yes, it was long days, but I enjoyed it and looked forward to going to work again. I was having fun. I was feeling that wonderful sense of fulfillment and accomplishment. More importantly, my pride and confidence returned. *Little by little, the nightmare of the printing company faded into a collection of leadership lessons that remain permanently part of my thinking.*

Fast-forward to today and *Strategies* occupies the entire second floor of 40 Main Street. Since year one, we’ve had double-digit growth on both the top and bottom lines. We fiercely maintain and protect a healthy cash reserve. So much so, it deserves a simple yet profound Neilism: “A healthy cash reserve is ‘sleep-good-at-night’ money.”

By design, the no-compromise leader must be tenacious and courageous. As much as I wanted that printing company to succeed — for me to lead it into daylight — it was not to be. I was tenacious until the end. I refused to give up. However, after 24 months of business hell, reality posed that dreaded question no entrepreneur ever wants to hear, “*Is there a reason for this business to continue on?*” Personally, I was on the verge of losing everything I had. There was only one decision and that was to

muster the courage to confront reality and admit it was over. That was one of the toughest decisions I ever had to make. I ached not only for myself, but also for all of the employees who depended on the company for their livelihoods. Although it was the darkest period of my business life, I had resolved to begin my quest back to success. I yearned to look forward to going to work and for work to be fun again. *No compromise.*

I learned a lot of business lessons in those 24 months. I also learned a lot about myself. Looking back, if it were not for my tenaciousness, the printing company would not have lasted as long as it did. I learned how tenacity and courage take you through the tough times. More importantly, how these qualities are a requirement to be a no-compromise leader.

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 10: Inspiring: Lead with passion.

There is a dividing line that separates leaders from no-compromise leaders. On one side, “leader” is something that describes a title or job. It’s simply the work you do. This leader says, “I lead.” On the other side of the dividing line is an inherent and unmistakable *emotional intensity* radiating

Passion fuels a higher calling and a natural enthusiasm to all that you do. So much so that others can sense and capture that same passion.

from the no-compromise leader. It’s like a gravitational pull to higher calling that converges on the vision and greater purpose of the company. It’s intense passion and it’s impossible to be a no-compromise leader without

it. Why? If you don’t have passion for what you do, it’s just too easy to give up — to compromise. The no-compromise leader says, “We’re going to make the world a better place for all,” and believes this with every fiber of his or her being. Here’s a Neilism for leading with passion: “Without passion, work is work. Who wants to follow a leader with no passion?”

Passion fuels a higher calling and a natural enthusiasm to all that you do. So much so that others can sense and capture that same passion. The no-compromise leader’s passion attracts and engages others in the most positive way. That shared passion then lifts the performance of the entire company.

Consider any great leader in history, business or otherwise, and you will find an innate passion as the driving force behind his accomplishments.

In his book, *Small Giants: Companies That Choose to Be Great Instead of Big*, Bo Burlingham talks about that special “mojo” that’s present in all great businesses. It’s that special something you feel as a customer, employee or vendor. As Bo explained it to me, while researching the 14 companies he wrote about in *Small Giants*, he began to understand the true meaning of mojo and the role it plays in the success of a business. When a company has mojo, it has something uniquely and distinctly special. Likewise, if it loses its mojo, it’s just another business that’s indistinguishable from the competition.

Neilism

Without passion, work is work. Who wants to follow a leader with no passion?



My take is that the mojo that makes a company unique and great begins with the passion of its leader. I believe Strategies has a special mojo and it began forming the day my passion for writing and training others about business inspired me to sign a lease and start my company. And I knew the success of Strategies would depend on finding others who shared my passion and vision.

Passion is rightfully the 10th and perhaps most important requirement to be a no-compromise leader. If you have the fire in your gut to achieve your dreams against all odds, you have passion. If you get excited and light up when you tell others about your work, you have passion. When you hear your employees talking about their work and the company with the same passion as you — your company has mojo.

As you can see by the 10 requirements, there is a higher level of behavior and thinking that is woven into the DNA of no-compromise leadership. Rather than rigid, no-compromise leaders are compassionate and flexible with an unwavering sense of purpose to be the best, inspire the best and to win the game. They earn respect through consistency, integrity and trust. They create unflappable and dynamic cultures. They are certainly tenacious and courageous. They get things done because they expect nothing less than the best from themselves and those they lead.

One last additional requirement

For the no-compromise leader, having fun is essential. Fun puts bounce in your step. Fun gives you energy. And when you're having fun, it's infectious in the most positive way possible to everyone you come in contact with. The leader's mood and demeanor set the tone for the company. A moody, crotchety and miserable leader will create a moody, crotchety and miserable culture to work in. That's compromise.

Of course, not every day will be full of blue sky and popcorn clouds. Business can change like the weather and sooner or later, you'll have to deal with a storm or two. I'm always saddened when I meet a business owner or leader who just isn't having fun. Their energy is sapped and the company's performance pays the price. *Their perpetual funk is spinning off compromise*

in every direction. In such cases, only a major wake-up call or change of job will snap them out of it. Interestingly, when I've coached business owners through an exit strategy, I often see them brighten up and have fun. For

Neilism

Life is too short to work hard at something you hate. Find your calling.



some, the best strategy for burned-out leaders is to move on and seek out work that will reignite their passion and bring fulfillment and fun. Here's a Neilism: "Life is too short to work hard at something you hate. Find your calling."

Many entrepreneurs discover that the business they built thrust them into a leadership role they're totally unprepared for. Others find themselves in leadership roles that they never truly aspired to, such as having to take over the family-owned company after the passing of a parent. Making peace with your role as leader can be a difficult transition. For those reluctant leaders who never made peace with their role, shifting to the no-compromise leadership style can be a challenge. Reluctant leaders tend to resist, and sometimes fight, the transition. Only through a deeper understanding will they allow the leader inside them to emerge. A personal leadership coach is invaluable in such situations — if the desire to change is authentic.

Herb created no-compromise fun

Herb Kelleher, co-founder of Southwest Airlines, is one leader who totally embraced the fun part of leadership. Starting a commercial airline was a daunting task and the odds of success were stacked against them. A lot of what made Southwest successful was its “have fun” culture. They ran advertisements for employees saying things like, “If you like coloring outside the lines, Southwest is for you.” The picture in the ad was a dinosaur from a coloring book. Southwest celebrates damn near everything, often with balloons and balloon arches that are works of art.

Kelleher became known for his high publicity antics, like settling a trademark lawsuit by arm wrestling the president of the other company. He did it again when he announced that Southwest won the “Triple Crown Award” for on-time departures, baggage handling and the fewest customer complaints. The president of a major airline called to find out what the heck the Triple Crown Award is. Kelleher simply took an FAA report and turned it into a PR winner. He made up the “Triple Crown Award.” Kelleher just knows how to have fun. Plain and simple, a fun culture will show up on your bottom line. No compromise.

Action steps before reading on...

Take this fast little quiz to see how you match up against the 10 no-compromise requirements. Circle the number that best reflects you. Number 1 is least like you. Number 10 is most like you.

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 1:

Clarity: You have absolute clarity on where you're taking your company.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 2:

Values: You want them and you live them.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 3:

Accountability: If it needs to be done, you get it done.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 4:

Transparent: You don't make excuses. You own it.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

REQUIREMENT NUMBER 5:

Culture: You never engage in behaviors that will destroy from within.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Requirement Number 6:**Unity:** Your leadership style is not dictatorial and inflexible.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Requirement Number 7:**Focus:** You avoid office-itis.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Requirement Number 8:**Strategic:** You manage what's on your plate.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Requirement Number 9:**Resolute:** You are tenacious and courageous.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Requirement Number 10:**Inspiring:** You lead with passion.

Least like you					Most like you				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Scoring and Recommendations:

Add each of the circled numbers and enter the total here _____ .

If you scored 10 – 30: Not qualified to be a no-compromise leader.

You are going to find your transition to no-compromise leadership a serious challenge, because your current behaviors will be working against you. *Simply put, you compromise too much.*

RECOMMENDATION: Review the requirements with the lowest scores and select one or two to work on. Practice behaviors that will move your score to the “most like you” range. Be tenacious and courageous, and you will see positive results.

If you scored 31 – 55: You must truly want it to qualify.

It’s time to look in the mirror and make the most important career decision of your life. You must be committed and willing to go the distance by adjusting your behaviors and locking them in for the long haul. You have a tendency to compromise, especially when it really counts. *You must change, or your desire to become a no-compromise leader will elude you.*

RECOMMENDATION: This is the time to decide what kind of leader you want to be. It’s time to get off the fence and take action. You have a lot of leadership disciplines to master and catching up do to. *So what will it be, become a no-compromise leader or get comfortable on those lower rungs of the leadership ladder?*

If you scored 56 – 70: You show promise and may have what it takes to be a no-compromise leader — if you commit yourself.

Your score shows that you might have the potential to transition into a no-compromise leader. However, scores in this range indicate that you have a tendency to display inconsistent leadership behavior and that you have issues with accountability. *Becoming a no-compromise leader is your decision if you choose to step up to the plate.*

RECOMMENDATION: It's time to work on your follow through and commit to strict a regimen of no-compromise accountability. When you feel that urge to quit, compromise or drop the ball, trigger your no-compromise commitment to cross the finish line. And remember, just crossing the finish line doesn't cut it. Whatever you do now, do it to the best of your ability. Most of all, you must confront your leadership blockages. *The more you work through your blockages, the more you become a no-compromise leader.*

If you scored 71 – 90: You have what it takes.

Your score indicates that no-compromise leadership is within your grasp and it's yours for the taking. You are generally consistent, accountable and determined. You govern yourself well and try to set a good example for those you lead. *What stands in the way is your tendency to become complacent, which allows compromise to derail consistency, momentum and progress.*

RECOMMENDATION: Closing that gap between where you are now and no-compromise leadership all comes down to your desire, commitment and personal discipline to adhere to a higher standard of leadership thinking and behavior. *No compromise must become your personal mandate and guide all that you do.*

If you scored 91 – 100: You can be a no-compromise leader.

You definitely have all the characteristics of a no-compromise leader. It is largely a case of you mastering the disciplines, behaviors and systems of no-compromise leadership. *Go for it!*

RECOMMENDATION: No-compromise leadership is not something to wear or tout to others. It doesn't automatically make you a super-leader. *Allow it to evolve and you will begin to notice your effectiveness improve — as will others. Don't flaunt it. Just focus on it and enjoy the process.*

If you scored 100 – I wish I had met you while writing this book.