

TURNAROUND AMID CHAOS

Leadership Tools to Transform Your Organization

by Wayne Fields

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to Hollywood, most of us are familiar with the story of the *Titanic*, the supposedly indestructible ship that sank in 1912. By the time the captain acknowledged the iceberg in his path, it was too late to turn the ship around. The rest is tragic history. There are similarities between the captain who tries to turn a wayward ship toward a safe path and the leader who tries to steer a dysfunctional organization in a healthy direction. Unfortunately, corporations – like ships – are destructible. Organizations can veer so far off course that they are no longer salvageable. However, leadership can often successfully reroute a failing organization by applying proven principles.

In *Turnaround Amid Chaos*, CEO Tom Peterson navigates the rocky waters of a job offer from Second Chances, an organization on life support. He grapples with everyday leadership issues like fear, delegation, board/CEO relationship dynamics, and confrontation. Like all leaders, Tom rises to some challenges, faces them head on, and wins. At other times, he fails the leadership test, struggles with the consequences, and has to press the reset button.

While Tom’s story is of a fictional non-profit company, the leadership insights come from decades of actual business experience and will work for any company. Each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of leadership, highlighted in the chapter’s subtitle. As the story plays out, multi-layered issues unfold. Reflection questions provide a genesis for personal contemplation or group discussion. The Appendix contains additional resources and practical tools that leaders can immediately employ. Log onto www.turnaroundamidchaos.com to engage with leaders from around the nation.

CHAPTER ONE

Tom Peterson

Focus. Breathe.

Tom Peterson inhaled the warm August air heavy with the scent of freshly mown grass. From the third tee, he visualized the ball flying straight onto the green. Feeling the early morning breeze on his shaven head, he adjusted his stance.

Wind's coming from the south. 192 yards to the green. Okay, I can do this.

Slowly, he lifted his five iron, storing up energy for the release. He shifted his weight onto his right leg, rotated his trunk, and initiated his smooth backswing.

Vvvvmmmmmm

The vibration in his pocket caused his tall, athletic frame to jerk. The pristine shot he imagined resembled one of his son's early, uncoordinated attempts when Tom first taught him to play. Even at seven years old, Adam had managed better results than the forest lie Tom just handcuffed himself with.

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He yanked out his phone. "Tom Peterson here." At least now, his friends would know why he was taking the scenic path on this hole.

"Tom, this is Hal Martin from Second Chances."

He hadn't spoken to Hal Martin in two months. Tom held up an apologetic finger to the guys waiting impatiently to return to their game. He knew just how they felt. Turning his back to his friends, he tried to focus on the caller's words.

Moments later, Tom concluded the conversation. “Thank you for considering me for the job, Mr. Martin. I’ll get back to you by the end of next week.”

Why did he wait so long to call?

He wrestled his attention back to his friends. “Sorry, guys. I forgot to turn off my phone. Let’s get back to business.”

Through six holes, Tom already had his usual score for the front nine. His dismal showing on the course stood in stark contrast to the impressive surroundings.

“What in the world is going on with you, Tom?” Mark asked.

Mark wasn’t one to mince words. Some thought the sexagenarian had a Napoleon complex, but those familiar with his mountainous dad and brothers knew that brashness just ran in the family.

“I’m having trouble keeping focus.”

“I’ll say,” Gary quipped. “Your golf balls are going places my retriever couldn’t find.”

Paul, the group’s oldest member, motioned to Gary. “I think you’re up, funny man.”

The youngest of the foursome by two decades, Gary had taken his dad’s place when heart problems forced him off the course. Tom, Paul, and Mark adopted the teenaged Gary, treating him like a baby brother – a role he never outgrew.

As much as Tom hated to admit it, Gary was right. He hadn’t seen this much of the course – or this little of the fairway – since ninth grade. Hours on this very course with his high school coach earned Tom the number two position on the varsity golf team

at the United States Military Academy at West Point – unheard of for a freshman. Though he never made the PGA tour, he never lost his love of the game. The course was his happy place, and he protected this weekly tee time like a mama bear protecting her cub.

In the eighteen years since he and his friends began convening at this palatial sanctuary, Tom could count on one hand the number of times he'd cancelled. Momentous events like births and deaths were the only reason any of them missed their weekly diversion. They'd been with each other through all life had to offer, and those trials had forged a bond that created a safety net of trust. While today's call wasn't in league with the most extreme, it was the kind of life-changing turn during which they'd rally around each other and offer support.

“Tom, you're up.” Mark's voice interrupted Tom's thoughts.

Tom stepped up to the tenth tee, determined to turn around his game on the back nine. He found a flat spot between divots and thoughtfully teed his ball. *What am I going to tell Linda? We'd already accepted this opportunity wasn't going to happen. We'd made plans, and now...*

“Seriously, Tom, *what* is going on? It's like you aren't even here,” Gary chided.

“Sorry, guys. I should've left after I got that call. My head's just not in the game.”

Tom glanced at the parking lot and spied his silver Highlander. He needed to be alone right now. He picked up his ball and set his driver back in the bag. “I'll leave the back nine to the three of you.”

“Are you sure a few more holes wouldn't help get your mind off of—”

Before Paul could finish his invitation, Mark interrupted, “We'd all like to know

what your mind *is* on. What was that phone call about anyway?"

An onlooker would undoubtedly take offense at Mark's tone. But those who took the time to get to know him quickly overlooked his lack of social graces because of his generous heart.

"I need to talk to Linda first. Then I'll let you guys in on it," Tom promised. Turning to Paul, he continued, "Thanks for the offer, but have you been watching the last six holes? Nine more holes like that will only convince me I should never golf again."

Tom opened the hatch and lifted his clubs into the SUV. A smile stirred on his lips as he remembered Gary and Mark giving him grief about the purchase a few months earlier.

"An old man like you ought to be getting a sports car," Gary teased.

"Your kids are out of the house," Mark added. "Why are you buying a soccer mom car?"

When Tom went to purchase a vehicle to replace the faithful family minivan, he was thinking more of grandbabies than Corvettes. He and his wife, Linda, had amassed a host of accomplishments, but they considered family their crowning glory. Although they were enjoying this time together without children in the house, they anticipated a life that would soon be full of grandkids. Zack, the oldest of their three children, had already given them their first granddaughter.

The day Zack graduated from his dad's alma mater, wisps of sadness eclipsed Tom's pride as he thought of what life in the military would mean for Zack and his new bride. Tom remembered those days all too well. Though Army life for him ended over

two decades ago, at moments it felt like yesterday.

With her love for new adventures, Linda handled the relocations well; but after eight years of being uprooted and replanted, Tom couldn't take it anymore. He resigned his commission. Now, he couldn't imagine starting over that way: new house, new community, knowing no one. A part of him had been relieved when Hal Martin hadn't called back about Second Chances.

Initially Tom had been excited by the opportunity: President and CEO of a world-class nonprofit organization. The company's reputation preceded it. For the last eighty-five years, Second Chances had served Charleston, South Carolina, with distinction.

He admired the organization's commitment to helping people reclaim their lives rather than giving handouts that only served as temporary patches. Tom knew his corporate experience with nonprofits made him a good fit to lead Second Chances. He went to the interview enthusiastic about the possibilities that lay ahead. Overwhelmed by the insurmountable obstacles that seemed to fuel the organization's current dysfunction, he left Second Chances disappointed that the staff chose to enable the homeless rather than embrace the founder's vision to empower them.

Tom drove around aimlessly for close to an hour. Although driving usually helped clear his head, today it wasn't working. He couldn't put it off any longer. He had to make the call.

"Hi, honey. What are you doing for lunch?" he ventured.

"I was hoping you'd have plans for us on your day off."

Linda's voice sounded as young as when they met thirty-two years ago. Her

cheerful reply made Tom wince. *Do it quickly. Rip off the bandage.*

“We need to talk about Second Chances.” *That ought to take the lilt out of her voice.*

“I thought that door was closed.” Linda offered more of a question than a declaration.

The lilt was gone. She remembered.

“I thought so, too,” Tom admitted. “Hal Martin called today.”

“So, what did Hal Martin have to say for himself? As I remember, you left the conversation telling him Second Chances was a disgrace that would have Glenn Riddell turning over in his grave.”

Preparing for his interview, Tom read the history of Second Chances’ founder, Glenn Riddell – a man who knew first-hand how easily someone could end up on the streets. After losing his job, he and his young family spent months in a Chicago homeless facility. He expected handouts but instead received hope, as they equipped him for a new life. Decades later, the successful business magnate relocated to South Carolina and discovered Charleston had forgotten her homeless. Championing their cause, he opened Charleston’s first shelter. His guiding principle of hiring the homeless followed Second Chances through the decades and still set the organization apart today. At least it had up until a few years ago.

Tom’s statement had been harsh, but true: Glenn Riddell would surely turn over in his grave if he could see what had become of Second Chances.

“I thought perhaps that was a quote you’d forget,” Tom mused, knowing better.

“Do you think Mr. Martin forgot?”

“I’m not sure whether he forgot, or whether he realized it was true and decided to do something about it. At any rate, he’s put an offer on the table. I’ve been driving around trying to clear my head, but I need to process this one out loud. So, lunch?”

“Sure. How about that little café on Main Street at 12:30?”

CHAPTER TWO

Fear is expressed in many ways.

Tom arrived early and sat at their favorite table. Well, his favorite table. He was more given to routine than Linda. She enjoyed spontaneity and adapted easily.

“You look beautiful,” Tom complimented Linda as he rose to pull out her chair. He never tired of seeing her smile, so easy and natural. Brown curls cascaded onto her shoulders, revealing hints of gray. Highlights, she called them.

“You look tired,” Linda replied.

“That’s my girl. A woman who knows how to woo her man.” He realized a grin crept over his face, and his muscles began to relax. He took a long, deep breath and released a soft sigh. Seeing her always took the edge away.

“Let’s have it. I’m not getting any younger.”

That statement felt like a lie. Her five-foot, six-inch toned frame looked much younger than its forty-eight years; and her light complexion escaped the sun’s damage with the envious result of satin smooth skin – except for the few laugh lines she wore proudly.

“Out of the blue, Hal Martin called. He said they’ve considered all of the candidates, and they want me. They’d like me to start as soon as possible, assuming we can agree on the terms.”

“So, what are your terms?” Linda’s crystal blue eyes smiled at Tom as she cupped his hand in hers. That never got old either. In the midst of any drama, she could make him feel like he had just put on his favorite pair of jeans and curled up with a good book by

the fire. They had the familiar comfort that comes from years together. He had that kind of history with GreenFields, too. He'd been CEO for seven years. Did he really want to give that up?

"I'm not even sure I want terms. We've already talked this through. Two months ago, remember? We decided Mr. Martin not calling was for the best." Tom tried to sound convincing.

Linda saw through his façade. "This is going to take much longer if you insist on pretending that call didn't get your juices flowing. If it was really settled in your mind, we wouldn't be having this lunch."

"You know I don't like uprooting," he protested. "We've been storing up memories in this city for twenty-one years. We have community with friends. This is home to all of our children."

"Yes, and before this we had a different home. Tom, you know that home is wherever our family is together. And we aren't *all* together anymore. None of our kids lives in the same state. It's just you and me, kid." Linda's eyes twinkled as a smirk formed on her lips. "Continue."

"GreenFields. I have ten years of seniority."

"Tom, you're the CEO. I think that trumps seniority."

"You know what I mean."

"Maybe." She tipped her ear toward her shoulder and smiled. "But I'm here so you can process out loud. So, process."

"Linda, I'm fifty-one years old. Execs my age aren't taking new jobs. They're taking early buyouts. I have a track record at GreenFields. They know what I've done and

what I can do. I've established value with them. What happens if I go to Second Chances and can't meet their expectations?"

"So, now you're ready to talk about your terms."

"What? No!" he sputtered.

She was a smart woman, a capable woman. *How could she be so daft?*

"Have you even been listening?" His voice mirrored his agitation.

"Yes, of course I have," she said softly, glancing around the restaurant. "You don't like change. But, if there was ever a time for change, that time is now. For the past twenty-seven years, our adventures have centered around our children. It might be nice to have an adventure all our own. So, those are my thoughts on leaving home. Any questions so far?"

She was an understanding wife, but not above using her motherly tone when his impatience got the better of him.

"No, ma'am." Tom smiled. "Continue."

She'd been listening. He should have known.

"You're faced with the opportunity to take on a new challenge," Linda continued. "A challenge the board feels you're equipped to handle. A challenge both you and I know you're qualified for." She sipped her water. "You're concerned the board will fire you before you have the chance to implement the necessary changes that will bring about the transformation Second Chances so desperately needs. Have I missed anything?"

"No," Tom admitted sheepishly.

"So, then. You're ready to talk about the terms. The terms will protect you from a shortsighted board. With the right terms you can accept the challenge with minimum

risks.”

How did she do that? Tom didn’t know whether to be elated or irritated. He’d been stewing over this for three hours, and she nailed it in a few minutes.

Reflections

1. Tom and Linda’s conversation reveals how fear can affect our perception of reality. Evaluate each concern Tom voiced. How do his fears find expression through imagined problems, excuses, and indecision?
2. Explain a current challenge you face. Describe at least one associated fear.
3. What steps will you take to view your challenges and fears from a healthy perspective?