

CHESS NOT CHECKERS

ELEVATE YOUR LEADERSHIP GAME



MARK MILLER

Coauthor of the international bestseller *The Secret*

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MARK MILLER



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Chess Not Checkers

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*This book is dedicated to Truett Cathy.
It was my privilege to watch and learn from
him for almost four decades as he created
his own high performance organization.*

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Introduction

Leading has never been easy. From our first experiment trying to get our classmates to follow us or receiving our first official assignment at work, leadership has always demanded our best effort. That hasn't changed—but something else has: the complexity of the problems we face and the organizations we lead has increased exponentially.

Perhaps this complexity finds its energy in the scope of your enterprise, or it may merely be a function of increased volume. These are great problems to have . . . if leaders can orchestrate an appropriate response.

Unfortunately, for many leaders, our past successes just don't translate. The game has literally changed before our eyes. The methods that worked extremely well in the past no longer have the same effect. In many cases, the tried and true has become the tired and tarnished.

Most of us began our leadership journey utilizing an approach with striking similarities to the game of checkers, a fun, highly reactionary game often played at a frantic pace. Any strategies we employed in this style of leadership were limited, if not rudimentary.

2 Chess Not Checkers

The opportunities in our world for leaders to play checkers and be successful are dwindling.

The game today for most leaders can better be compared to chess—a game in which strategy matters; a game in which individual pieces have unique abilities that drive unique contributions; a game in which heightened focus and a deeper level of thinking are required to win.

Although *Chess Not Checkers* provides a rich metaphor for leaders, it is much more than that. The game of chess contains four specific parallels that can inform and transform any organization seeking new levels of performance. I've positioned each of these ideas as a "move" your organization can make to draw closer to your goals. Collectively, these moves can be your blueprint for sustained high performance.

I hope this simple story will resonate with you. The company Blake leads is not real, although the situations he faces are as relevant as today's news. I've intentionally omitted details about his organization, leaving it largely nameless and faceless. Hopefully, this approach will make it easier for you to think about your own organization. Is it possible you may be playing checkers when the game is chess? If that is your situation, today can be the day you start learning a new game.

It's your move!



The Decision

If you miss the “opportunity of a lifetime,”
do you ever get another one?

Blake wrote these words in his journal, put down his pen, and stared out the kitchen window. He had gotten up early; he couldn't sleep, anyway. His mind was racing as he reflected on his life and career up until this point.

The last decade had been a whirlwind. After his father died, Blake had invested five years trying to live up to his dad's expectations. Jeff had always believed his son could lead. Blake had never been sure, but he pushed through his doubts and dedicated himself to learning the skills of leadership.

Blake's leadership journey had been frustrating. After learning to cast vision, build teams, get results, and more, he had been passed over for formal leadership positions. Confused by this turn of events, he reached out to his longtime mentor, Debbie Brewster. She helped him gain the greatest insight of his life thus far: *If your heart is not right, no one cares about your skills.*

4 Chess Not Checkers

This revelation led Blake to the next phase in his journey. Armed with the skills he had learned, he began working diligently to strengthen his leadership character. According to those closest to Blake, it was working. Blake was becoming a leader people wanted to follow.

Now, a decade into his career, he finally felt like he understood leadership. The men and women he worked with seemed to agree. There were rumors Blake might someday move into senior leadership. But still, Blake was skeptical about his future at Dynastar, and he had lingering doubts about his own leadership. If he had so much potential, why hadn't he already been given a position of leadership? All these thoughts made Blake's current decision even more difficult.

The options were clear: stay at Dynastar with the *hope* of a bright future, or take an offer to be the CEO of a small business in a nearby community.

"Small" was a relative term. The business had annual sales of several million dollars and employed more than fifty people. Blake's income would be more than he was currently making, but that was not what excited him. Based on what he had learned, he believed the business had tremendous untapped potential. He was convinced that in a few years, he could double the sales—and profits. The upside opportunity was significant.

There were still two lingering issues. The flat sales had not escaped the notice of the parent company. They were eager for a turnaround. In his conversations with senior leaders, Blake had the distinct impression he would need to make things happen quickly or the business could be closed or sold. His challenge would be to get it back on a growth trajectory as quickly as possible.

The other issue was Megan. Happily married to Blake for just over ten years, she had been with him every step of the way. Blake knew she was unsure about him making this move.

Blake went to the counter to get another cup of coffee as Megan came into the kitchen. "Good morning," he said.

"Morning," Megan mumbled as she made her way to the coffee maker. Blake handed her a cup, and she cradled it with both hands and held her face six inches over the cup to breathe in the warmth. Now somewhat awake, she said, "Today's the day you need to make a decision, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Have you decided?"

"I'm going to do it."

"What tipped the scales?" Megan asked.

"I see this as a huge opportunity for us. It looks to me like the business has been over-managed and under-led."

"You know you have my full support, and I hate to mention it, but I have one last question," Megan said reluctantly.

"Okay." Blake leaned forward.

"You have never led a company." She looked at him lovingly, "Do you know how?"

"I think so," Blake confessed.

"Your confidence overwhelms me," she smiled.

It looks to me like the business has been over-managed and under-led.

"Well, you're right—I have never led a company. However, I do know a lot about leadership. That's what I've been doing the last decade—learning to lead."

"Yes, I know, and I can see, even here at home, you are a much better leader than you were then. But leading a cross-functional team and leading a multimillion-dollar organization seem," she paused, "well, different."

"I've thought about that, and I agree—but I believe I can figure it out."

"Okay," Megan gave a forced smile.

"With your support, I know this can be a good change for us," Blake said, sensing her hesitation.

"I'm all in." She reached across the table and grabbed his hand.

"Me, too! I'll make the call this morning."



Harder Than It Looks

Blake made the call and signed the papers. He went to his boss at Dynastar and announced his decision. Then he told his teammates. He shared that he had stumbled on the opportunity of a lifetime and felt like he needed to give it a try. All these conversations went surprisingly well, and everyone was extremely encouraging.

On Monday morning, Blake drove to his new company. He arrived early—early enough to be the first one there. With a little convincing, a security guard finally let him in since Blake didn't have keys yet.

While waiting for the day to officially begin, he sat at his desk and stared at his new laptop. Just as he realized he didn't know the password, his thoughts were interrupted by a knock.

"Good morning, sir. I'm Suzy, your assistant." She stopped and then added, "Or I hope I will be." Her voice trailed off.

A middle-aged Asian woman, Suzy was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt, handmade beaded necklace, and sweat pants; she finished off her ensemble with large glasses with bright red frames. She was clearly

underdressed for the office by Blake's standards. However, he chose not to say anything about her appearance on their first meeting.

"Come in, Suzy. Have a seat. Can you repeat what you just said? I didn't quite hear you."

"I said I'm your assistant." She paused.

"Yes, I heard that, but did you say something about hope?"

"Yes," she looked at the floor and fidgeted with a file folder in her hand as she spoke. "I said I hope I'll be your assistant."

"What does that mean?" Blake was puzzled.

"Well, sir, I was the former CEO's assistant, but HR has warned us all we may not have a job after you arrive."

"Why would they say that?"

"I guess you'll have to ask them."

"Okay, I will, but why do you think they would say that?"

"I assume . . . it might be because our performance needs to improve, and to improve performance, you'll have to make changes. Or . . . maybe it's because the last CEO fired several people on his first day."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't want people to be fearful they might lose their jobs—but it sounds like it's too late for that."

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid it is. So, am I still your assistant?"

"Of course."

"Outstanding!" Suzy flashed a huge smile of relief. "How can I help?"

"I'd love to know what you did to serve the previous CEO."

"I did whatever he asked me to do."

Blake was waiting for Suzy to continue, but she was obviously finished.

"Okay, we will want to talk more about that later. For now, can you help me with my password?"

"Yes, it's THE_MAN, in all caps."

"You're kidding."

"No, sir."

"Okay, we'll want to change that."

"Yes, sir. As soon as someone from IT gets here this morning, I'll make sure it's done. What do you want it to be?"

"I don't care. Something simple."

"Okay, when you decide, let me know." Suzy turned and walked away.

Blake started to call her back to resolve the issue but decided to wait until later. For now, he wanted to quickly check his email before his first meeting.

He typed in THE_MAN and when his email opened, he was shocked. He had over two hundred messages. Quickly scrolling through them, he noticed at least 25 percent had the words *Decision Needed* in the subject line. He knew this was going to take some time and focus, so he shut down his computer and

asked Suzy to give him a quick tour of the facility and show him the conference room where he would meet his executive team.

As they walked, Blake noticed the place looked cluttered. There were boxes everywhere, and most of the desks had piles of file folders and papers on them. Blake also realized no one was at work even though it was now approaching 8:45.

When Blake asked Suzy about this, she said, "We start slow around here. Today, since it's Monday, most people will probably be in by 9:15."

Blake thought that was odd, but once again didn't say anything.

When they arrived at the meeting room, Blake said, "Thanks for the tour. When you get back to your office, please start going through my email for me and do what you can with it."

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm not comfortable doing that."

Blake, a little frustrated, said, "Okay, we can discuss it after this meeting."

At 9:00, the scheduled start time, only three of the five invitees were present: John Roberts, Vice President of Marketing; Angie Stevens, Vice President of Purchasing; and Brad Montgomery, Vice President of Finance.

Blake met each one at the door as they arrived and introduced himself. As everyone took their seats, he asked, "Who's not here who would typically be in a meeting like this?"

The three looked at him and one another. Initially, no one said anything. Then, finally, Angie raised her hand. “Yes, Angie, and you don’t have to raise your hand. Who’s not here who should be?”

“Well, Mr. Brown, . . .”

Blake interrupted, “You can call me Blake.”

“Okay, Blake. It’s kind of hard to answer your question.”

“Why is that?”

“I’m assuming you invited Charles and Elizabeth, but I’m not sure. And, when you say ‘typically at a meeting like this’—there’s nothing typical about this meeting.”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t meet,” Brad said.

“Okay, that’s fine.” As Blake was contemplating a further response, a middle-aged woman wearing jeans and a sweatshirt stepped into the room.

“You must be Elizabeth. I’m Blake. Nice to meet you.”

“Sorry I’m late. I’m not used to starting my days so early.” She smiled at the group, and Blake noticed John and Angie nodding in agreement with her comment. He decided the best thing to do in the moment was to keep moving. Turning toward the group, Blake asked, “Anybody know if Charles is going to join us?”

“Did you send him an email?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes, I did.”

"Then he's probably not coming. He doesn't really do email. I'll be sure he gets any notes from this morning."

Blake was having some difficulty taking all this in. He hadn't been on site an hour, and he was already seeing major issues—starting with his own team.

"Thanks for taking notes for Charles. This should be a short meeting."

"Thank goodness," Brad said in a hushed tone but loud enough for everyone to hear.

Still trying to orient himself, Blake said, "I only have three objectives for this meeting: I want to get to know each of you a little better, and I want to hear about our goals and understand our challenges."

"That could be hard," Angie said.

"Why?"

"Well, we can do the get-to-know-you part and explain our challenges, but the goals . . . I'm not sure what they are. Anybody else know?" She looked around the table. All she got in return were blank stares from her co-workers.

Angie added, "I think we have some; unfortunately, I believe Charles may have written those down, and he's not here."

"Okay, let me ask another question: It's June. How are we doing against our plan?"

"Our plan—what plan?" John asked.

"We really don't have one, but we have some financial data," Brad offered as a consolation.

“Great!” Blake said. “How are we doing?”

“Last month’s profit and loss statement is in your inbox. So far, we are slightly behind where we were at this point last year,” Brad offered in a matter-of-fact tone.

“That’s why we’re here. We’re going to improve our performance over last year.”

“And how are we going to do that?” Elizabeth asked.

“That’s what we need to decide.”

“We?” John was confused, and so was everyone else.

**I want to get to know each of you
a little better, and I want to hear
about our goals and understand
our challenges.**

Elizabeth frowned and said, “That’s not what we do. That’s your job. You figure out what we need to do, and we do it. If it works, outstanding; if it doesn’t, well, . . .” her voice trailed off.

“If it doesn’t work, what?” Blake decided to lean in just a little.

“Well, if history repeats itself,” John began, “we’ll be meeting the next CEO.”

“Thank you for your candor. I need to know what you’re thinking—not just today, but every day. If we

are going to accomplish what I believe we can, we'll need everyone to say what's on their mind. We will talk more about our performance and our plan in future meetings. Now, let's take five minutes each to share our stories. I'll go first. . . ."

Over the next half hour, the men and women on Blake's "executive team" discovered things they had never known about each other, even though they had worked together for a long time. Elizabeth had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, Brad was one of nine children, and Angie collected butterflies. They learned interesting bits of biographical information from everyone on the team. From Blake's perspective, it was a small victory.

After the meeting, Blake went back to his office to look at his email. When he asked Suzy for the password, she said, "Since you didn't tell me what you wanted, I chose Boss#5."

"What's that mean?" Blake asked.

"You're the fifth CEO."

"Really? This company is only ten years old."

"Ten and a half, to be precise."

"That doesn't sound healthy to me."

"Who said we were healthy?" She turned and walked out.

Blake shook his head in disbelief. He turned his chair and opened his email. As he read the messages, they fell roughly into four categories: requests for

decisions, messages from the headquarters, customer complaints, and junk.

Not knowing what else to do, he started responding to the messages. To the customers with issues, he apologized and promised a quick resolution. To the requests for information from headquarters, he asked for more time. Regarding the decisions, he made the ones he could and forwarded others to his leadership team members.

Blake was feeling some sense of satisfaction as the inbox got smaller and smaller. He was so focused, he lost track of time. It was Suzy once again who broke his trance.

"Mr. Brown?"

"Call me Blake, please."

"Yes, sir, I'll try. Old habits are hard to break. Is there anything you want me to do for you before I leave?"

"Leave? Where are you going?"

"Home, sir, unless you want me to stay."

"What time is it?"

"Five o'clock."

"Seriously? I can't believe I've been sitting here all day."

"Well, sir, it's a big job, answering all those emails."

"Does this happen every day?"

"Like bats out of hell. They just keep coming. Every day it looks about the same."

“Really? How did the former CEO handle it?”

“I screened them, and he did the rest.”

“Yes, yes. We talked about that this morning, and you said you weren’t comfortable with that approach.”

“Well, I thought we needed to talk first. You have to tell me how you want me to respond.”

“Give me an example.”

“Previously, I was told to delete messages from the headquarters. Is that what you want?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure. That’s why I thought we should talk. Once I know what you want me to do, I’ll do it.”

“That’s fair. Can we meet about that first thing in the morning?”

“Yes, sir. What time?”

“Let’s start at 8:00.”

“Yes, sir, and thanks for not firing anyone today.”

“Thank you for not quitting after having five CEOs in ten years. One more thing—what’s the dress code around here?”

“Dress code? I don’t think we have one.”

“Well, we’re going to establish one. Business casual will be our standard. I’ll communicate that with the leadership team. Let’s you and I start tomorrow. We’ll set the pace for the others.”

Suzu understood Blake’s message. “Yes, sir. Got it.”

“Thanks for all your help today. I know this is a big job, and there is no way I could do it without you. I’m glad you’re on the team. See you in the morning.”

Blake stayed another half hour or so; he finished the emails he could and was able to see what Suzy had described—his inbox was growing right before his eyes. Before he left the building, he walked the floor. Everyone was gone. Not that he expected a lot of people to work into the night, but the office was a ghost town, and it was only 5:30. At Dynastar, there would have been much more activity at that time of day. All he’d observed on this first day gave him a sinking feeling—there was much to be done.



When Blake got home, Megan met him at the door. She gave him a big hug and a kiss. “Welcome home, my favorite CEO. How was it?”

Blake knew better than to try to fool her. He smiled, “It’s going to be a challenge.”

“Harder than you thought?”

“Probably so. I’m just used to Dynastar. And, although we weren’t perfect, we were way ahead of what I saw today.”

“You love a challenge.”

“I guess,” Blake managed a forced smile.

“What’s the biggest challenge you saw today?”
Megan asked.

“There were several, but the biggest may be the way we are doing the work—I think it’s all wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know exactly. It seems like every decision and every problem comes to me. You should have seen some of the emails I responded to today. It’s just not working. And, I’m convinced responding to urgent emails is not going to fix anything.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to call Debbie. I haven’t talked to her in months. She doesn’t even know about my new role.”

“That sounds like a good idea to me,” Megan said.

Thank You For Reading

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