

# THE FRONT-LINE LEADER

Building a  
**High-Performance Organization**  
from the Ground Up



CHRIS VAN GORDER

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## Praise for *The Front-Line Leader*

“*The Front-Line Leader* by Chris Van Gorder is a profoundly straightforward and commonsense approach to effective leadership. Chris is a leader who exemplifies the content of this book. The chapters exude wisdom that can be utilized by any discipline or profession. I saw his leadership ability first hand when during Katrina our nation needed additional resources to manage this unprecedented catastrophe. It was Chris who stepped up and successfully led a very large Scripps team to oversee the care and evacuation of thousands of victims of the Katrina disaster. I would strongly recommend this book to both seasoned and aspiring leaders, for it will challenge you to take your leadership to the next level.”

—**Richard Carmona**, RN, MD, MPH, FACS,  
17th Surgeon General of the United States

“As a leader, developing an employee-focused work culture is a challenge that requires daily attention and effort. In *The Front-Line Leader*, Chris Van Gorder outlines a set of practical, easily implemented strategies for leaders at every level to stay connected to their workforce. Having worked with Chris directly in his role at Scripps, and having been a patient at Scripps, I have seen first hand how this approach works. Success, whether in baseball or in business, requires a team mentality, shared commitment to a common goal, and the daily practice of winning strategies.”

—**Mike Dee**, CEO, San Diego Padres

“For the past eight years, I have had the extraordinary privilege of working for Chris Van Gorder, who is not just an exemplary leader in American health care but responsible for the dramatic turnaround of Scripps Health to make it one of the best health systems in the world. In *The Front-Line Leader*, Chris shares his successful philosophy for transforming an organization from the ground up.”

—**Eric Topol**, MD, chief academic officer, Scripps Health; author,  
*The Creative Destruction of Medicine*

“Chris Van Gorder is a man of service and purpose. When disaster strikes, Chris refuses to collaborate with hopelessness but rather confronts affliction with action. Like so many great leaders, Chris has built sustainable infrastructure one front-line leader at a time, sending messages to the future that reflect his values and health care’s endowed promise of a better life for all.”

—**John Bardis**, president and CEO, MedAssets

“The title of *The Front-Line Leader* says it all. Chris Van Gorder’s message may seem simple, but that’s just the point. In this rapidly evolving tech world, it’s easy to forget the basics. It doesn’t matter what business you’re in; Van Gorder’s genuine life and business experiences will lead you to the front.”

—**T. Denny Sanford**, philanthropist and chairman,  
United National Corporation

“At the San Diego Sheriff’s Department, we know first hand the effectiveness of Chris’s front-line leadership model. He leads our Reserve Deputy Sheriff program and our volunteer Search and Rescue team, an effort that takes him into the mountains, canyons, and desert to look for folks who have lost their way. Success or failure can mean life or death. Chris Van Gorder’s leadership is direct and straightforward, and so is *The Front-Line Leader*. He shows the way to become a leader who has real impact on your organization and in the lives of those around you.”

—**Bill Gore**, sheriff, San Diego County

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*To Rosemary, David, and Michael*





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## Acknowledgments

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Finally, I seek to honor my deceased parents, Harold and Mary, for their love and support and for instilling the ethics and principles on which this book is based.

# Introduction

In 1973, I was a hospital security officer working the graveyard shift in the basement. One night when I was the only one on duty, it was lonely and dead quiet, until I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. I looked up to see a man walking toward me. It was the CEO of my hospital. I had never met him before, but I had seen his picture; as a security officer, I was expected to know the administrators by sight.

Who knew what the CEO was doing walking around in the basement at that ungodly hour, but it didn't matter: This was my chance to meet the big boss. I thought how cool it would be to chat a little bit, make a connection. I grew up under modest circumstances in nearby Alhambra, and I knew this CEO lived in San Marino. As a teenager I had delivered newspapers in the same plush, upscale neighborhood where the CEO now lived.

Checking first to make sure my uniform was crisp, I straightened my posture and cleared my throat, readying to say hello and shake the man's hand. Instead, the CEO walked right by me, like I didn't even exist. Without making eye contact or even acknowledging my presence in that empty hallway, he turned the corner and was gone.

It was a demoralizing moment, one that clearly I have never forgotten, but it helped shape me and my views on being both an employee and a leader. That CEO saw me as "only" a security guard, but if a crime were being committed, who would have

intervened? I would have, which would have made me, at that particular moment, among the hospital's most important employees. An organization's first priority, I reasoned, was to take care of its customers, and front-line staff were the ones doing that work. I resolved that if I ever took on a leadership role, I would remember this and treat employees accordingly.

I've since had that chance. After college, I went into law enforcement and spent several exciting years on the front lines as a police officer. When a devastating on-the-job injury ended my police career prematurely, I had to find a new path, so I went back to school to get a graduate degree in health care management. Over four decades I have served as a clerk in an emergency room, a manager of a hospital lab, and in higher-level management and leadership roles at several California hospitals.

In 2000 I became president and CEO at Scripps Health, one of America's most prestigious health systems. Since then my team has presided over the most dramatic turnaround in the organization's history, catapulting Scripps from near-bankruptcy to a dominant market position. While hospitals and health systems nationwide have laid people off or closed their doors, we've become financially healthy and added almost five thousand employees. Facilities in our system routinely appear in the *U.S. News & World Report* ranking of America's best hospitals. In 2014, we opened a \$220 million proton therapy center, one of only a few cancer treatment centers of its kind in the United States. We also continued building a \$450 million cardiac facility on our campus in La Jolla, among other major projects we are pursuing throughout our region. Best of all, we've solidified our reputation as a marquee employer, recognized year after year by *Fortune*, *Working Mother*, *AARP*, and other national news sources as one of America's "Best Places to Work."

People congratulate me on my success and ask how I did it. I tell them I didn't do anything; the people around me have made me successful—first and foremost, our front-line staff. All I do as a

leader is take care of our people so they can provide superior care for our patients. Our leadership team spends time regularly with clerks, secretaries, doctors, nurses, IT technicians, environmental services personnel, front-line managers, parking lot attendants, and others, listening to their concerns and bonding with them on a personal level. It may sound unbelievable, but I respond to every single employee email I receive, often within minutes. I get out in the trenches to resolve staff issues through dialogue and the exchange of information rather than by dictating a solution from on high. At Scripps, we use systems that push authority, responsibility, and accountability as far down the chain of command as possible. All this amounts to a comprehensive, “front-line” approach to leadership, one that extends to every action our leadership team takes.

When our team makes a decision—whether it’s about access to capital, investment in new technology, organizational change, the hiring of executives, or anything else—the first thing we consider is the implications for front-line staff. Likewise, and perhaps most important, we have made a public commitment to use layoffs as a last resort as opposed to a quick fix. This forces our leadership team to become more disciplined in our planning, so that we can ensure that we have the financial resources required to retain our employees, as well as systems in place to use employees effectively as our business changes. It forces us to become more innovative, so that we can anticipate market trends and protect jobs.

It is easy to talk about connecting with front-line workers, but many executives I meet tell me they don’t know how to bridge this divide in practice. Beyond lip service and rhetoric, executives at some companies still remain removed from those employees as well as from the managers who oversee staff performance. *The Front-Line Leader* seeks to change this by showing executives not only how critical it is to connect with line personnel but also, in practical terms, how we have done it. Organizations could become far more successful if executives only understood what it

is to lead authentically from the ground up, and if they committed themselves, as we have, to that approach. If connecting with front-line workers could yield success for a large health care company, just imagine what leaders in less volatile and less regulated industries could accomplish.

You may wonder whether our intense focus on front-line workers is too rigid or narrow. Can it really be wise to avoid layoffs at all costs or to spend so much time listening to employees' daily concerns? It's true that focusing on front-line workers requires sacrifice; for instance, the time I spend with employees means less time with other senior executives or community leaders. Yet the sacrifice is worth it. Paying attention to workers isn't only helpful—it's essential. Engaging with front-line employees emotionally, intellectually, and financially produces incredible loyalty. This in turn improves the kinds of metrics important to any business: retention, employee satisfaction, productivity, quality. It's not rocket science. When you have employees who feel cared for, they tend to care more themselves for the organization that provides their paycheck.

Beyond the business benefits, front-line leadership is simply the right thing to do. Do you find yourself thinking that we leaders today are losing sight of our true purpose? Rather than take care of our people, we're taking care of ourselves and our investors. Surely leaders have an obligation to increase stockholder and customer value, but we also must accept a profound responsibility to our people and their families. This responsibility goes beyond simply providing a fair paycheck, to also include some promise of job security and a real future. People say that the traditional, paternalist employment covenant between companies and employees is dead and buried, and with it the guarantee of a lifelong career at one employer. Maybe so, but we would do well on many levels to recover at least some of the moral sensibility that has made American industry the world's best.



You know, I never saw that CEO again after crossing paths with him in the basement. But if I could meet him today, I'd ask him if he liked his job. One of the greatest benefits of all in connecting with the front line is the significance it brings to the work of leadership. Sure, it's nice to turn around a failing organization, but it feels even better to see our people excited to do their jobs and willing to place their trust in our executives. Every day we're inspired to work even harder to earn their trust. Every day we feel that what we do has meaning.

We do need to work hard, because focusing intensely on front-line personnel isn't easy. It's a more challenging way to manage, requiring new levels of effort and thoughtfulness. If you're not willing to commit more of yourself over a period of years, this book is probably not for you. If you are willing, then give our approach a try. The following chapters are each organized around a principle and underlying tactics. Chapters One through Four cover basic practices of spending time with employees, communicating, and opening up psychologically. Chapters Five through Eight address corporate culture, covering concepts of advocacy and accountability as well as the culture-building role of middle managers. The final two chapters, Nine and Ten, suggest how strategy can be formed to support and benefit workers. Throughout, I draw on episodes from my career—especially my police experience, which strongly shaped how I view front-line interactions.

When it comes to the specific tactics, not everything I suggest will feel genuine or applicable to you. Industries and leaders are all different. Adapt the tactics to your circumstances and personality. Find your *own* authentic leadership style; your own unique way of listening to, helping, and engaging with your front line. Reconnect with any experiences you may have had working front-line jobs, and challenge the often formidable psychological distance between basement and boardroom. Your people will thank you, and so will your customers or patients. Your organization will gain new vitality that will ultimately translate to the bottom line.



## Chapter One

# Know Your People

I have this old, embarrassing photograph of myself wearing a Native American headdress. It's shoved into my desk drawer. Even though the corners are bent and I've got this big, silly grin on, the picture means as much to me as any of the framed images featuring famous people that line my office walls. The photograph dates from 1987, when I was vice president for support services at Anaheim Memorial Hospital in Anaheim, California. It was my first vice president job, and it put me in charge of an array of departments including environmental services (or housekeeping, as it was called back then), food services, engineering, and construction.

I made a practice at the time of meeting regularly with all of my staff, including the environmental service (EVS) workers. I'd go down to the EVS break room and say hello when employees were coming on duty and getting assignments for the shift. I wanted to know what my employees did; otherwise, I felt, I couldn't be an effective manager. I had learned as a police officer that if you wanted to get information about your beat, you had to be on the street talking to people. You had to develop rapport and trust, and after a while people would naturally start talking to you and telling you what they knew.

Sometimes I just sat and talked with the EVS staff; other times I went out and accompanied them on the job. They taught me how to use those big, circular floor polishers, and every time

I grasped the metal handles I was bucked around, much to their amusement. I didn't mind making myself a little vulnerable. Given how hesitant the employees acted around me and also how happy they seemed to see me, I surmised that I was probably among the few people from senior management to ever pay sincere attention to them.

As time passed, we built a relationship. The staff invited me to potlucks and other gatherings. "My boss's boss's boss knows more about what I do than my boss does," they would joke. They also challenged me to see if I could find dirt after they cleaned. "You guys are so good," I said, "I bet I can't find any." But I would still put on white gloves and poke around. A couple of times, to be honest, I did find a little bit of dirt on the gloves, but I never let them know. The point of this exercise was not for me to evaluate their performance. It was about going out there, showing I cared, and thanking the team for its hard work.

One day, a couple of the workers knocked on my door and asked me to accompany them to the break room. When we arrived, I found that all the employees had gathered. With smiles on their faces, they presented me with a Native American-style headdress they had made out of fur. It had two pointy horns protruding out of the top, a blue and red beaded design running across the front, and fluffy white feathers streaming down each side.

I held it in my hands and admired it. "This . . . is very nice. What is it?"

"This is for you," they said proudly. "Our chief."

Everyone applauded, and I didn't know what to say. What an incredible honor. Today, in addition to keeping that photograph in my drawer, I display the headdress in my office as a reminder of what I learned: that you can't be a distant boss and hope to be effective as a leader. You have to *connect* with people. You have to put time and energy into getting to know them and their work. Not just once. Or twice. Or three times. But regularly, month after month.

## Fly-Bys Don't Count

Advice like this may sound familiar, but most CEOs and senior leaders don't do the kind of deep outreach I'm describing. More commonly they do what I call "fly-bys"; they flit in and out in a cursory manner—looking the part of the political candidate, shaking hands and kissing babies—not really bothering to *truly* engage with workers. Maybe they feel uncomfortable around line staff. Maybe they feel they have more important things to do. Maybe they're overwhelmed by the sheer size of their organization. Whatever the case, I doubt their attempts at outreach are doing as much good as they might think.

Here's an example. I once hired a chief nurse whom I'll call Marsha for one of our hospitals. Marsha's job was to oversee all nursing operations at her facility. Unfortunately, she became occupied with outside obligations, paying insufficient attention to her core duties. This led in short order to low morale among her workforce. Things got so bad that she had to leave the organization. Shortly after her departure, I happened to be in her hospital visiting my sick father-in-law. One of the nurses caring for him asked me to accompany her into the hallway for a private chat. "Chris," she said to me, "I wanted to thank you. I'm glad Marsha is no longer working with us."

"Why? You didn't like her?"

"No, because she was never here. Every so often she would throw on some scrubs so it would *look* like she was one of us. She would come up here and sweep through the units and smile and kind of talk to everyone a little bit. Then she'd disappear for months and you'd never see her. It was never real. We're glad she's gone."

Employees aren't stupid. They know a fly-by when they see it. By satisfying herself with fly-bys, Marsha was highlighting for her staff how *little* she cared about them. She wasn't bothering to listen, talk, and build relationships. She wasn't engendering trust. She was pretending to be one of the team—and, I would add, pretending to be a leader too.