

HOW EXTRAORDINARY LEADERS ACHIEVE LASTING SUCCESS

M A T T T E N N E Y

SERVE TO BE GREAT

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM

A PRISON, A MONASTERY,

AND A BOARDROOM

WILEY

Praise for *Serve to Be Great*

“Matt Tenney has a clarity about the world that is remarkable. His experience and the lessons he learned need to be heard by as many people as possible.”

—Simon Sinek, optimist and author of *Start with Why* and *Leaders Eat Last*

“*Serve to Be Great* draws you in with one of the most powerful stories you'll ever hear, and offers an inspiring path to true greatness as a leader. I encourage anyone who wants to be great to read this book.”

—Jon Gordon, bestselling author of *The Energy Bus*, *The Carpenter*, and *The Seed*

“*Serve to Be Great* is an engaging book about the power of focusing on others. With a gripping narrative about his journey from prisoner to monk to social entrepreneur, Matt Tenney shows how leaders can elevate those around them and make everyone better off in the process.”

—Adam Grant, Wharton professor and bestselling author of *Give and Take*

“I love a true story of redemption, and Matt Tenney shares a powerful one in this book. He transformed a massive mistake into a magnificent obsession with servant leadership. Learn how you can be of greater service and make a bigger difference as a leader whether you have a title or not—read this book.”

—Mark Sanborn, bestselling author of *The Fred Factor* and *You Don't Need a Title to Be a Leader*

“Serve to Be Great is one of those rare books that is an enjoyable and inspiring read, and also quite useful for helping you and your team succeed. Applying the ideas in this book will help you and those around you to achieve better long-term results, and make your lives more meaningful and enjoyable along the way.”

—Chip Conley, Founder and former CEO of Joie de Vivre Hotels and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Peak* and *Emotional Equations*

“Serve to Be Great provides you with powerful tools for becoming an extraordinary leader who gets results and makes our world a better place. This inspiring book is a must-read for leaders at all levels.”

—Chade-Meng Tan, Jolly Good Fellow of Google and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Search Inside Yourself*

“Serve to Be Great is both inspiring and practical. Matt Tenney delivers a powerful narrative that takes you on an incredible journey. The insights from that journey and the examples he shares of truly great leaders will improve your performance, widen your perspective, and raise your leadership game.”

—Skip Prichard, CEO of OCLC and blogger at www.SkipPrichard.com

“This is an outstanding book full of truly powerful ideas, tools, stories, and advice. I strongly recommend that you read and apply the lessons of *Serve to Be Great*, because in today's business world *only* those who are devoted to serving and inspiring greatness in others will be successful as leaders.”

—John Spence, named one of the Top 100 Business Thought Leaders in America by Trust Across America and author of *Awesomely Simple*

“In a mere four words, Matt Tenney lays down the clearest guidance to anyone seeking to excel as a workplace leader: *Serve to Be Great*. Matt has lived an untraditional life—and brings forth untraditional wisdom that's perfectly timed. Instead of taking as much as we can from employees, it's time to do as much as we can for them.”

—Mark C. Crowley, change agent and author of *Lead from the Heart: Transformational Leadership for the 21st Century*

“In *Serve to Be Great*, Matt Tenney courageously reveals his journey from being self-serving to serving others, and lays out a world of infinite possibilities that awaits the servant leader. In addition to his own story, Matt shares illuminating stories and lessons from many great leaders and their organizations in his inspiring and useful book.”

—Jeff Klein, producer of Conscious Capitalism events and author of the award-winning book *Working For Good*

“*Serve to Be Great* brings a simple yet profound truth brilliantly alive: Great leaders inspire the best in others, and all of us can do this anywhere, anytime. The moving stories and the ideas Tenney shares provide both the inspiration and the tools to help you become an extraordinary leader.”

—Michael Carroll, author of *The Mindful Leader* and *Fearless at Work*

“In *Serve to Be Great*, Matt Tenney reveals his greatest failure and how he was able to turn it into something great and beautiful. This book is engaging and inspiring, and it will help you become a great leader regardless of your current position in life.”

—Ted Prince, Founder and CEO of the Perth Leadership Institute and author of *The Three Financial Styles of Very Successful Leaders*

“In *Serve to Be Great*, Matt Tenney invites us into his personal journey of transformation—one in which he found value for our workplaces. Tenney leaves little doubt that when we embrace the notion that ‘others’ matter, we set in place a chain reaction for good. He has provided us a new set of lenses to view old challenges and new opportunities.”

—Clifton L. Taulbert, author of *Eight Habits of the Heart*

“*Serve to Be Great* will expand your thinking about leadership. Matt Tenney provides powerful case studies and practical advice about what it takes to be a highly effective leader today.”

—Dan Black, author of *The Leadership Mandate* and blogger at danblackonleadership.info

“There's so much to enjoy about this book. With inspiring examples and guidance, Matt reminds us that every moment matters, and that choosing to serve others in these moments is an act that not only makes our work more meaningful but also produces awesome outcomes.”

—Chris Marcell Murchison, Vice President for Staff Development and Culture, HopeLab

“Matt Tenney's story of temptation, self-discovery, and rejuvenation will uplift your heart and renew your faith in humanity.”

—David Marquet, author of *Turn the Ship Around!*

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MATT TENNEY

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To my parents—For your unconditional support

Foreword

For the past several years, I have been implementing a practice that has been very powerful for me. It has also been very powerful for many of the clients with whom I work. The practice is to simply find a word that represents my core focus for the year to come. Three years ago my word was *purpose*. Two years ago it was *surrender*. In 2013, I didn't choose my word. The word chose me.

While driving in my car in late December of 2012, I was listening to the radio and heard the word *serve*. It really stood out to me. When I changed the station, I heard the word *serve* again. I immediately knew it was my word for 2013. Serving others had always been important to me, but 2013 would be the year that my main focus was to serve more frequently and selflessly.

I met Matt Tenney a little more than halfway through 2013. We were both flying from Houston to Jacksonville and ended up sitting next to each other. As we got to know each other, I noticed that Matt used the word *serve* quite frequently.

He spoke of his passion for improving his ability to serve others. He spoke of his vision of a world in which the vast majority of leaders realize that the best way to achieve lasting, high levels of success is to make serving and taking care of others their main focus. And he mentioned that he was working on a book called *Serve to Be Great*.

Needless to say, I did not see this meeting as coincidence. Matt reenergized my focus on serving. And, as we chatted, I realized that one way I could be of service to many people was to help Matt share his message.

In *Serve to Be Great*, Matt draws you in with one of the most powerful stories you will ever read. He helps us see, through his journey, that we can all make the shift from being self-centered to other-centered. He also makes a compelling case that the best way to achieve lasting success as a leader is to focus on serving and taking care of the people on your team.

I certainly agree. Through my work over the years, I have had the honor of working with thousands of leaders of almost all types of organizations. I've worked with coaches in the NFL, the NBA, and at colleges; leaders at many Fortune 500 companies; leaders of school districts; leaders at hospitals; and leaders of nonprofits. Regardless of the type of team or organization, I can say without hesitation that the most significant factor that separates great leaders from the pack is their desire and ability to be of service to others.

I feel honored to have learned from many great leaders of great organizations about the importance of being a leader who serves and takes care of others. But the teacher who had the greatest impact on me was my mother.

Eight years ago, I was taking a walk with my mom near her home in south Florida when I noticed that she was getting tired. My mom and I walked together a lot. She was a fit, walking machine and never got tired, so I knew something was wrong.

"Let's go back to the condo so you can rest," I said.

"No, I want to walk to the store so I can get some food to make you a sandwich for your drive home."

I was headed back to my home in Ponte Vedra Beach and my mom didn't want me to make the drive hungry.

"Okay," I said, knowing she had her mind set. Growing up in a Jewish-Italian family, the one thing you didn't do is

argue with Mom about food. To her, food and love were one and the same.

We continued walking and made it to the supermarket. As we walked back, though, I could tell she was getting increasingly tired. By the time we arrived back at her condo, she was exhausted. Nevertheless, the first thing she did was walk into the kitchen to make me a sandwich.

On my drive home I ate the sandwich she made for me, but I didn't think much about it. Now, eight years later, I think about that sandwich a lot because it was the last time I saw my mom alive.

My mom was battling cancer, which was why she was so tired. She didn't tell me how bad it really was, nor did she mention how bleak the odds were for her survival. She was fighting for her life and yet on that day, her biggest priority was to make me a sandwich.

Looking back I realize she wasn't just making me a sandwich. She was showing me what selfless love is all about. She was showing me the essence of leadership.

At her funeral, many of her real estate clients and colleagues came up to me and shared countless stories of all the selfless acts of love my mom showed them as well. Turns out she served her team at work and her clients the same way she served her family.

We often think that great leadership is about big visions, big goals, big actions, and big success. But I learned from my mom that real leadership is about serving others by doing the little things with a big dose of selfless love.

I feel very confident that after you read *Serve to Be Great*, you will know what my mom knew: Big success is a natural side effect of serving others.

I'm also very confident that you will be deeply inspired to become an extraordinary leader who inspires greatness in the people around you, and that you'll have some powerful tools to help you get there.

Jon Gordon

Bestselling author of *The Energy Bus*, *The Carpenter*,
and *The Seed*

Introduction

Do you aspire to be a highly effective leader who guides your team or your organization to lasting success? Would you like to wake up excited to face each day because you truly enjoy your work and know that you are having a significant positive impact on the world around you?

This is possible for everyone, regardless of title or position. In fact, you can actually train yourself to make this a reality. Although it's not necessarily *easy*, it's a very simple process.

By making a shift in your approach to leadership, you can become a highly effective leader who enjoys your work and makes the world a better place. The shift is simply a matter of gradually becoming more focused on how you can serve others and increasing your capacity to do so. This is great news because it means that being an extraordinary leader does not require you to have an MBA or a PhD. You don't need to be the leading expert in your field or a charismatic “natural-born leader.” As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve.”

In this book, you'll find numerous examples, ideas, and tools for applying this simple shift to improve nearly every aspect of your team or organization. This book will focus on helping you create a team culture that:

- Attracts and retains the most talented people in your industry
- Increases team member engagement and productivity
- Increases your team's capacity for innovation
- Delivers world-class customer service

- Achieves a better return on investment from your marketing efforts

A great team culture is arguably the only sustainable competitive advantage that remains in the new economy. After conducting a large study that included over 6,000 managers, Ed Michaels, a director at the consulting giant McKinsey & Co. who helped manage the study, made the valid point that products, ideas, and strategies can all be copied quickly and cheaply in the transparent world in which we live today. His conclusion from the study was that, in the new economy, “all that matters is talent. Talent wins.”¹

But it is not so easy to create and sustain a team culture that talented people want to be part of, and one that stimulates and encourages improved engagement, innovation, customer service, and marketing efforts. We can only create and sustain a culture like that when a fundamental shift occurs in our approach to leadership: the shift we'll explore in this book. Without the sincere aspiration to serve and care for the people around us, any effort to simply copy a great workplace culture cannot be sustained. The heart of such a culture will be missing.

This book will provide a plethora of inspiring examples and ideas for creating a great team culture. You will also find both inspiration and tools for making the shift in your approach to leadership that allows such a culture to be authentic and sustainable. The book is divided into three parts:

Part One: I share the story of how, through rather extreme circumstances, I discovered the power of a life devoted to serving others and how what I learned led me to where I am—helping organizations to develop highly effective leaders who serve and inspire greatness in others.

Part Two: We'll explore the business case for being a leader who is more focused on serving others, and see how such a leader achieves the improved business outcomes previously described.

Part Three: We'll explore ideas and tools for making the shift and for becoming a highly effective leader who is devoted to serving and inspiring greatness in others.

I'm honored to be able to serve you with this book. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Note

¹ www.fastcompany.com/34512/war-talent.

Part 1

My Journey Fromprisoner to Monk to Social Entrepreneur

Chapter 1

My Greatest Failure

For much of my life, I believed that the definition of success was financial freedom—not having to work for a living. There is some logic to this belief. If we're financially free, we've made it. If we don't have to work for a living, we're free to do all the things that we enjoy or whatever is most important to us.

As I got older, this belief became stronger and stronger. By the time I finished college and began my career as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, achieving financial freedom became a very high priority for me. In fact, I had a goal of achieving financial freedom by the time I turned 30.

With this goal of financial freedom in mind, I became very focused on money. I spent a lot of my spare time studying investment in stocks, bonds, futures, options, and real estate. I studied entrepreneurship and business and management. If I thought it could help me become financially free, I was interested.

Then came the conversation that changed the course of my life.

It was the fall of the year 2000, and I was on deployment with my unit, headed for the Middle East. On this fateful day, I was on liberty in Singapore, hanging out with a friend of mine who I hadn't seen since officer candidates' school. My friend, who we'll call “Bob,” was a finance officer. He was in charge of all the money we had on ship.

We were both talking about how although we liked being Marines, we weren't really enjoying our jobs, and we weren't really happy. Suddenly, Bob drastically changed the

direction of the conversation. He said, "Well, one interesting thing about my job is the procurement of funds for deployment. You wouldn't believe how easy it was for me to procure the \$4.5 million in cash that we have on the ship." Of course, being focused on money, this caught my attention. I immediately asked, "Really? How easy was it?"

Bob explained the process. It sounded too easy.

Curious, I asked him, "Did you ever think about running off with the money?" He said of course the thought had crossed his mind, but he could never actually *do* something like that. I didn't think I could either, but I sure thought it would make a cool story—running off into the sunset with millions of dollars.

My first thought was, "Maybe I could write a bestselling novel about this, and that would be my ticket to financial freedom." Over the next couple of weeks, I asked Bob a lot of questions as different ideas came to mind. I soon realized that I had enough information to write a really good book. In fact, I realized that I had enough information to actually *live* it.

Initially, I didn't seriously entertain the idea of actually trying to do something like that, so I just stuck to writing about it. But over the next four months, things started to change. I had a habit of focusing on what was wrong with my life, instead of appreciating all that was good. I also had a habit of looking for quick solutions to problems. I almost always sought the easy way out of unpleasant situations.

The more I dwelled on the problems in my life, the more appealing a quick and easy solution appeared to be. And because I was already so focused on money, I found lots of ways to rationalize why attempting to defraud the government wasn't such a bad idea. I told myself things

like, “Well, you aren't taking anything from a person. This would be a victimless crime.”

Eventually, I convinced myself that I should at least find out if it would be possible to arrange the delivery. Once I knew if it was possible, I would still be able to decide whether or not I wanted to go through with acquiring the money.

About a month later, in January of 2001, I took the steps needed to arrange the delivery. I forged two documents and faxed them to the Federal Reserve Bank. I followed up with a phone call to ensure receipt, impersonating a finance officer from another unit.

I was told that everything was in order, and that I simply needed to arrange the delivery with Brinks (the armored car company). I faxed the required document to the company, and followed up with a phone call to ensure receipt. The staff at Brinks also told me that everything was in order.

At that point, I had arranged the unauthorized delivery of \$2.79 million from the Federal Reserve Bank of Los Angeles to Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base.

A few days before the delivery was scheduled to take place, I called Brinks to confirm one last time. The person with whom I spoke informed me that he had forgotten about a new policy they had in place. He said that I would need to come to their office and sign a contract for the delivery. So, I had a nametag displaying the name of the officer I was impersonating made and sewn onto one of my uniforms, and went to the office wearing that uniform. I signed the contract—which promised the delivery of \$2.79 million the next day—and took a copy with me.

Although this might sound like the script of some thrilling movie, the actual experience was terribly unpleasant. I was almost overcome by anxiety. With each subsequent act of

dishonesty came an increasing amount of sickness in my stomach.

Once I had the contract from Brinks in my hand, reality finally hit me in the face. I said to myself, “What the heck are you doing, man?! You aren't a criminal! You don't even have a plan for picking up this money! Are you crazy?!” At that point, I abandoned the whole idea and shredded the contract with Brinks on my way home.

I knew that it wouldn't be long before someone figured out that this was all a hoax. Fear set in. Since I had been to Brazil a couple times and knew the language, I decided to go there and find out from a nice, safe distance whether or not I was in any trouble. I bought a one-way ticket, packed as though I was going on vacation, and went to the bank and withdrew all the cash I had, which was less than \$5,000. I went to Walmart to pick up a suitcase and some warm-weather clothes.

After leaving the store, as I approached my Jeep, some girls pointed to a man standing by a parked car and said, “That guy is following you.” When I started to walk toward the man, he got in his car and sped away. Because I didn't think there was any way authorities could have been aware of what I had done—and because of the way the man drove off—I didn't think that he was with the authorities. But authorities *were* aware of what I had done. While I was signing the contract at Brinks, FBI agents had placed a tracking device on my Jeep, and it was actually an FBI agent who was following me at Walmart. As I was on my way to the airport the next morning, the FBI began following me again. When I was within a couple of miles of John Wayne Airport in Orange County, I was pulled over by unmarked cars, yanked out of my Jeep at gunpoint by an FBI takedown team, and arrested.