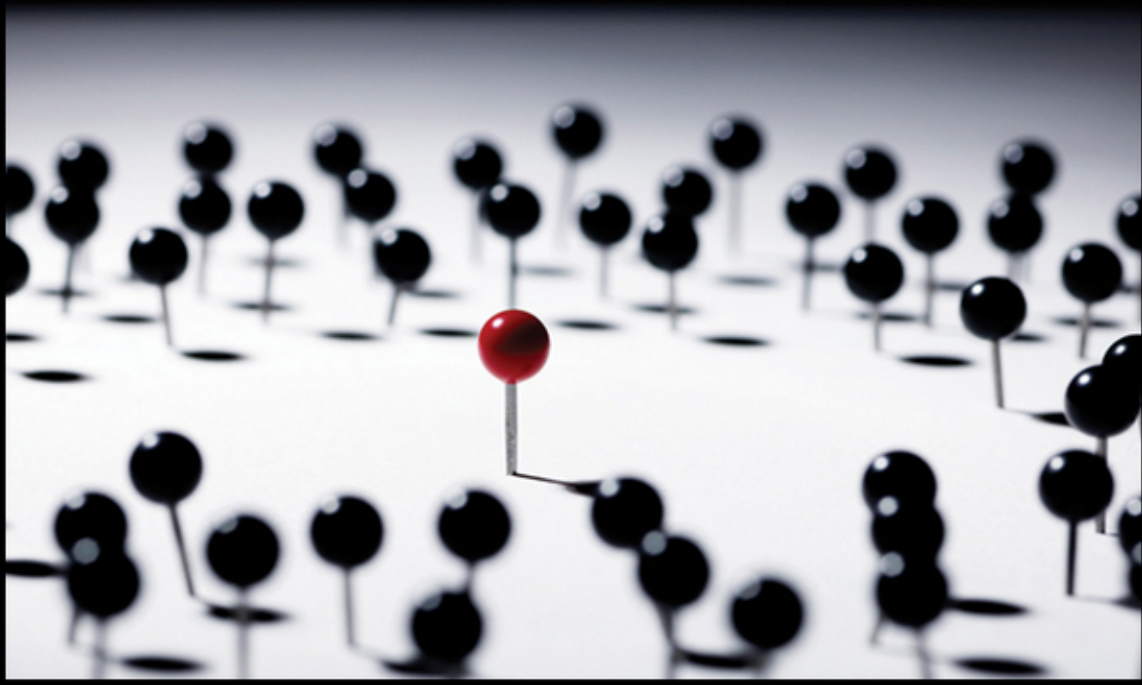


THE

mike thompson CEO of SVI

ANYWHERE leader

How to LEAD AND SUCCEED in *Any* Business Environment



THE ANYWHERE LEADER

THE ANYWHERE LEADER

**How to Lead and Succeed in Any
Business Environment**

Mike Thompson

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*To my dad, Terry Thompson,
for showing me the world below the sun and the life above it.*

Part One

INTRODUCTION TO THE
ANYWHERE LEADER



THE ANYWHERE LEADER

Instability and change are nothing new. John F. Kennedy said, “The one unchangeable certainty is that nothing is certain or unchangeable.” But those words seem especially relevant in the second decade of the twenty-first century. A severe recession, high-tech bubble, real estate bubble, the crash of those bubbles, tough global competition for low-wage jobs, and aggressive cross-border deal-making have all changed the status quo for businesses and employees. Managers manage crisis to crisis, day to day, quarter to quarter. Long-term goals keep receding into the distance. People wonder how trade wars, unemployment, and partisan bickering will change their employment and economic security. They want to know how to adapt to tough new rules of a progressive yet turbulent universe where people are misplaced, replaced, and displaced.

Anyone in business today must be able to lead through uncertainty and disruption. He must become that person who lands on

his feet and moves forward no matter what the setting or situation presents. He must become what I call an Anywhere Leader.

As the CEO of an organizational development firm called SVI, I have seen first-hand the business landscape turn upside down in recent years—and business leaders scramble to keep up. The power structure has changed entirely. In the global economy, research and development is no longer limited to the corporate headquarters. Ideas are coming from the field because companies are collaborating with their markets and their communities much more than with the central office. Power is not centralized, but distributed. In other words, Headquarters has lost a large amount of its punch; it has been replaced by conversations in all corners of the globe, generating new ideas and new growth. Change definitely brings opportunity. But it can also bring an entire organization to its knees.

Over the past decade, I've been immersed in the research and study of leadership. In the course of my work—after thousands of interactions, interviews, and observations—I've found that the managers who have advanced their careers through tumultuous times are the ones who find a way to fit in, build trust, and contribute quickly in any setting in which they are placed.

The Anywhere Leader was partly inspired by first-hand experience. My team and I work with some of the world's largest and most complex companies. We're asked to help them build talent, solve managerial problems, increase organizational productivity, provide talent development systems and tools, and assess organizational and leadership effectiveness. In any given week, we may be immersed in ten different initiatives at ten different companies with ten distinctive corporate cultures.

SVI has a distinctive culture, as well—one that is entirely comfortable and familiar to me. But in order to succeed, I have to be able to land in any one of those other corporate environments

and quickly understand how things get done there. The same holds true for any manager or business owner striving to succeed in a market where collaboration and worldwide understanding are key. When our team works with multiple clients, it's clear that we'll be highly ineffective unless we can navigate well across many different work environments, structures, standards, expected behaviors, rules, routines, and norms.

In fact, the only time I've been fired from a client was when I failed to recognize their culture—and therefore failed to behave in an acceptable and productive manner. I came into that organization like a bull blindly charging forward, with little concern for anything but my own ego. I had no curiosity, wrong motives, and lots of wrong assumptions. And because of this, my perspective was off and my advice was dead wrong.

Anywhere Leaders don't make such mistakes. Those highly adaptable and resourceful leaders easily navigate and succeed wherever they find themselves, and that is their profound advantage.

I wasn't supposed to be a businessman. I was supposed to be the next Chuck Yeager, breaking bounds as a test pilot. That's why I started my career in the Air Force, not in a corporation. The Air Force gave me some intense training, but none as extreme as Survival and Tactical Evasion training in Spokane, Washington . . . in December. Over seventeen days, I learned how to hide, find water, signal for help, stay warm, identify safe areas, cover my tracks, and set traps. I was trained to survive in the harshest, most unfamiliar (to say the least) environment, and I thought I was doing pretty well—until my comrades and I were captured and taken to a “prisoner of war camp.”

Not quite the desired result, but what I learned from that exercise, and from the military in general, was how to navigate the unknown. I learned how to adapt to new terrain and the challenges

it presents. I discovered that if you want to survive, you must be aware of your surroundings, know what personalities you're dealing with (that is, who can help you and who's going to stab you in the back with a bayonet), and be amazingly resourceful. You can't throw anything away, because everything could be a valuable tool. It was incredible training that I'll never forget. But what I didn't realize back then was how vital those skills would become to surviving in today's business world—one of the harshest environments around.

To succeed in our turbulent economy, you've got to become a leader who can land in foreign territory, fit right in, and immediately contribute—moving the work forward using whatever tools are available to you. You have to be able to put progress over politics and be open to new ideas. Those leaders who can't adapt and drive progress—who resist new ideas, lack social savvy, and are afraid to take risks—lose their relevance and edge.

Take Thomas, for example. He's a director of product development for a worldwide consumer packaged goods company. Thomas has achieved superstar status in his organization as an "idea guy" and has had an incredible twelve-year run, with one success followed by another. In fact, under his leadership, his company launched two new product lines that have generated double-digit growth in market share.

Thomas has become very comfortable with his role, and he knows how business is done in his organization. You might say he's cracked the code—showing up at the right meetings, using the right resources, getting involved in the right projects, and making the right promises. He's savvy, too. He looks good, presents well, and can easily dial up the humor when necessary. He's got lots of promise, his team is the best in the company, and his career path looks strong.

Except for one thing.

Thomas isn't an Anywhere Leader. He may be successful in his current work environment, but drop him down in Brazil, put him

in with a team of Millennials, or have him lead a newly acquired company, and he'll sink. Why? Because although Thomas excels at what he knows, he lacks the necessary traits to lead in the unknown and in the uncertainty. Success in a familiar environment, with familiar people and a familiar product, doesn't equate to success in new territory—whether it's down the hall, across the country, or halfway around the world. For Thomas to open up more career opportunities for himself, he's going to have to spread his influence and succeed beyond the work that's familiar to him. He needs to broaden his experience so that he can mirror, on a personal level, the worldwide mindset and contribution of his organization. Because his company operates cross-culturally, Thomas will have to lead cross-culturally in order to advance.

Beth is a different story. She's already found herself in unfamiliar territory—and she's not happy to be there. Beth leads a team that has been dramatically downsized, from twenty-five people to just five, following her company's merger with a competitor. Sure, the merger will bring a few new people to the team to help out with capacity, but everyone will be asked to do a lot more with a lot less. And there's bound to be some animosity with the newbies—after all, up until now they were the competition. Beth has very little confidence in this new direction. She's against it—in fact, she feels like the company is making a big mistake.

Beth has a couple of choices in how she responds to this shift. She can either resist the change or commit to it. If she resists, her career with the company will likely be short-lived. After all, plenty of others would be happy to take her job. For as long as she remains in her job, her resistance will surely be unproductive—if not downright destructive. But if Beth were to develop the traits of an Anywhere Leader, she could help her newly formed team move beyond animosity toward camaraderie. By bringing an exploratory mindset and a passion for progress, Beth would build trust. She'd become a go-to leader, which would escalate her career. Beth's response to the situation is her choice, but adopting *anywhere*

tendencies would turn a tough circumstance into a valuable opportunity for Beth, for her team, and for her organization.

The Anywhere Leader is for Thomas and Beth and every manager who needs to develop the traits that will allow them to lead—and succeed—in any business environment. It gives leaders the insight and skills to take their career to the next level, no matter where they are. Anywhere Leaders are effective managers to begin with. Like Thomas and Beth, they’ve had a good track record of success at whatever level in the organization they are placed. But unlike Thomas and Beth, they have also developed core traits and behaviors that help them successfully lead in work environments and cultures that may be quite foreign to them.

So just who is this business champion? He’s a highly regarded, chameleon-like manager or independent professional who can change his colors and adjust his approach without losing his identity. Anywhere Leaders are socially savvy and sensationally curious. They rarely envy the success of others—quite the contrary. They’re content with their position and inspired by anyone’s success. But don’t misinterpret their sense of ease and genuine good nature for a lack of drive. Their drive sets them apart.

He’s Kent Thiry, a health care executive who was ninety days away from a well-deserved and much-anticipated retirement when he was asked to interview for the top job at Total Renal Care (TRC)—a company dealing with enormous disruption and uncertainty. This nationwide kidney dialysis provider could barely make payroll at the time and was experiencing a mass exodus of executive talent. Fast-forward ten years. Kent is still far from retirement. His talent for uniting individuals under hard times, crafting an engaging culture, and eradicating cynicism through lead-by-example honesty transformed that company from a two-months-from-failure cautionary tale to a textbook example of turnaround. Now renamed DaVita (“to give life” in Italian—a name picked by TRC employees), Kent’s organization stands as a leader in the industry. What makes Kent an Anywhere Leader? He had the ability to

succeed through disruption and ignite a culture because of his drive for progress.

She's Anne Livermore, who saw that HP was lagging behind its competition and decided that the best way to regain lost ground was to buck its legendary (and loved) decentralized culture. Today she serves as executive vice president of HP's Enterprise Business—the division that consolidates and aligns HP's hardware, software, and service solutions to customer needs. But bucking trends (and being right) isn't all it takes to be an Anywhere Leader. Although many would say that Anne's success stems from her ability to make quick decisions and foresee industry trends, her Anywhere Leader status comes from her commitment to the organization above the other compelling opportunities. Despite thrice being shortlisted by industry experts as next in line for the executive office, yet being passed over for outsiders, Anne remains ardently committed to HP—what it stands for and what it can be for its customers. In a world where organizational interests take second place to career advancement, her values-centric leadership style and sheer determination make her definite Anywhere Leader material.

He's Donnie Smith, who led the turnaround at Tyson Foods by inspiring a culture where everyone has a voice and everyone participates. Donnie knows how to leverage an entire organization. Even as the CEO of one of the world's largest protein providers, Donnie is extremely open and inclusive, using every relationship, every resource, and any idea to improve the business. His ability to connect with others and push for improvement makes him extremely resourceful, as he uses every component of Tyson to attain business excellence.

These Anywhere Leaders have distinctive styles and missions, but they share one critical skill: the ability to adapt to, and broker, positive change in any environment.

To carry out such positive change in any environment, the Anywhere Leader has developed three core traits. These traits are depicted in Figure 1.1.

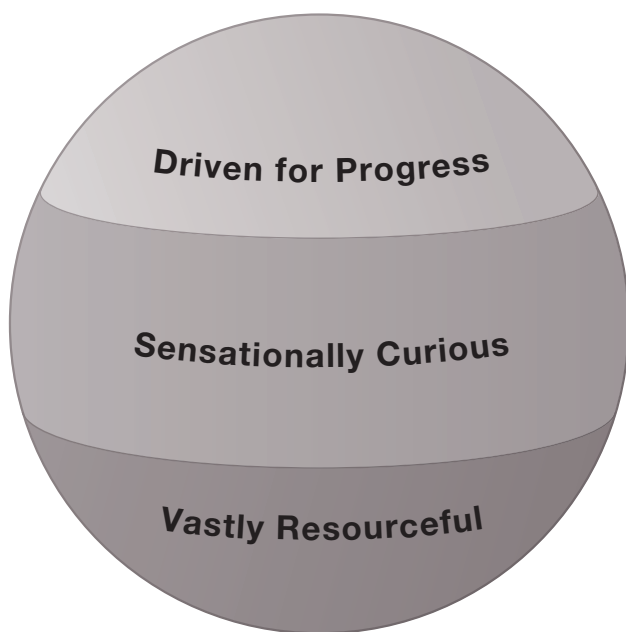


Figure 1.1 Three Core Traits of the Anywhere Leader

Driven for Progress

The Anywhere Leader succeeds because he's driven more by the push for progress than by politics.

What's the value of playing politics in a world where things are hardly stable, where connections are temporary, and where ideas race through their lifecycle at record speed? The Anywhere Leader's loyalty is to the work. He operates within established processes, but will defend the progress, not the party line.

I'm always impressed when politicians are bold enough to cross party lines behind an idea. As I wrote in my previous book, *The Organizational Champion*: "... champions will occasionally transcend partisan perceptions and move forward even under the most extreme circumstances. Who shook Gorbachev's hand in Reykjavik? 'Archconservative hawk' Ronald Reagan. Who signed the first legislation to seriously rein in welfare? 'Bleeding-heart liberal' Bill

Clinton.” In those moments, these leaders’ drive for progress bridged entrenched ideological rifts. They were willing to inflame the anger of their supporters by making decisions that did not yield short-term benefits but would contribute to big-picture goals such as nuclear disarmament and economic growth.

The Anywhere Leader earns respect from his team because he will move in front of an initiative before the initiative has been fully proven or embraced by others. Although others are hesitant to adopt an idea before they understand its impact on their image, the Anywhere Leader is an early adopter of a great idea—and therefore willing to champion the idea and the people who came up with it.

Bill and Bob Gore are examples of Anywhere Leaders who championed great ideas before they actually got legs. If you’re familiar with GORE-TEX, then you should know this father-and-son duo. They invented it. When no one else—including his own employer, DuPont—believed in the utility of plastics and the wide potential for its use, Bill left to start his own company to explore the possibilities. The rest is history. Today, GORE-TEX is a leading product in the outdoor wear category. But few know that the Gores are also behind today’s smoother, nonshredding, plastics-based dental floss. Bill Gore loved this dental floss because it didn’t hurt his gums. Others, including Johnson & Johnson and Colgate-Palmolive, felt like consumers wouldn’t buy it because, at the time, everyone believed that dental floss *should* hurt. If it didn’t, people thought that it just wasn’t working. I’m glad the Gores championed their ideas despite criticism and resistance from the industries. So are my gums. The Gores weren’t working to win a popularity contest. They were working to drive progress. Like all Anywhere Leaders, they were aware of the business opportunities and in tune with the work at hand. People want to work with progress-minded leaders who champion great ideas without bending under the pressure from perceived experts. That’s why these leaders are trusted wherever they go.

Being progress-driven brings with it a set of related strengths. We'll get into them in greater detail in later chapters, but in a nutshell, our research shows that Anywhere Leaders who are driven toward progress are *discerning*, *daring*, and *determined*. Fueled by those characteristics, Anywhere Leaders know what's valuable and worth pursuing, and what's a big waste of time. They are resilient in the face of setbacks, determined to press on and succeed. And they are not afraid to take chances and fail—even when the stakes are high—because the work is right and good.

Anywhere Leaders may be all about the work, but their drive for progress has the added benefit of being hugely motivating to the people around them. When you mix discernment, a willingness to dare, and determination, you get a leader who stirs change within a team or organization. People trust a leader who knows right from wrong, who commits to the right in spite of potential consequences. The Anywhere Leader fuels this charge because he remains engaged and passionate despite the barriers. He makes a lasting impact on the business because his bold moves create competitive advantages and change the game in his company's favor.

Sensationally Curious

It's interesting how, as a society, we think about curiosity. We don't like our kids asking "Why?" five times in a row when we tell them to "get away from that." In an office environment, it isn't uncommon to hear, "Don't question it; that's just the way we do things around here." Curiosity is a vital trait that many view as annoying—even dangerous. The saying goes that curiosity killed the cat . . . but as far as I know, cats always land on their feet. And because the Anywhere Leader's curiosity leads to valuable insights and understanding, she lands on her feet as well.

Thinking about today's business landscape: many companies are so desperate to keep up with rapid change that they blindly rush into new initiatives and processes—bullishly believing that it's the

only way to go. But if you lack curiosity—and the understanding that comes from it—the only change you’re likely to see is increasing irrelevancy for both you and your company. Panic leads organizations and managers to make changes for the sake of change, without any insight behind it. The desperate leader says, “Something’s wrong—quick, do something—anything.” The Anywhere Leader asks, “What’s wrong? Where did the problem begin? And how did we get here?”

I recently had the opportunity to observe an emergency room and see how doctors and nurses respond to critically ill patients with dire prognoses. I learned that even in the most extreme circumstances, the critical care team’s first response is to assess, not to act. A wrong move would only make things worse. The right move would make all the difference toward a hopeful recovery. In an emergency room, quick and decisive actions save lives, but understanding the issues is the crucial starting point. Why do we want our doctors to be curious about our illness, understanding of our history, and aware of our vitals, but we want our employees to go straight to the answers—to the solutions? Like the ER doc, the Anywhere Leader assesses before acting—which is why her actions are usually productive.

Curious leaders would rather pose the right questions that give them a deeper understanding than compete to deliver answers in hopes of acknowledgment. Curiosity allows the Anywhere Leader to adopt an exploratory mindset in everything she does. When she finds herself in a new role or leading a new team, she’s quick to gain meaningful insight into the people around her, the organizational culture, and the processes of the business. And she’s able to discover and maximize all available resources. She starts by asking who, what, where, when, and how—not by stating new ground rules and implementing new procedures right out of the gate.

Sensationally curious leaders have the additional strengths of being *reflective*, *receptive*, and *perceptive*. They’re able to dissect any issue and get to its core because they keep asking themselves—and

others—that vital question: “Why?” Being open to new ideas allows them to seek and use the insights of others to make progress. And because they observe people and processes, they have a deeper understanding of the situations they’re in. Curious leaders use their reflection, reception, and perception to tackle challenges head-on.

Vastly Resourceful

In addition to curiosity, the Anywhere Leader is successful because he’s *vastly resourceful*. Resourcefulness is an essential trait of the Anywhere Leader because it means he can do a lot with a little—or a lot with a lot. Some of you may recall the TV series *MacGyver*, back in the ’80s. (If you missed it, you might know the spoof *MacGruber*, a recent *Saturday Night Live* sketch turned movie.) The series features a cool and collected secret agent who is constantly facing life-threatening challenges. Normally he has only a few seconds to find a solution, or he and whoever else is with him are toast. In every tight spot, MacGyver finds whatever tool is readily available to him—a rubber band, a paper clip, a pencil—and in a matter of seconds figures out how to turn it into a lifesaver. He takes the rubber band and uses it to tie knots, lock doors, create a diversion, whatever. The point is that MacGyver is resourceful. He can do amazing things with only a few items.

Like MacGyver, the Anywhere Leader can look at a tool, an opportunity, or an issue and see much more than most people can. He looks at things more deeply. When a psychologist puts a picture of an ink blot in front of him and asks what he sees, the Anywhere Leader comes up with a pretty exhaustive list. This trait lets him successfully shift from places where resources are abundant, budgets are big, and information is plentiful to more challenging areas where resources are greatly limited. Good thing, too, because that’s an increasingly common scenario these days.

A brand manager from Chicago may have a multimillion-dollar budget to work with to drive consumer interest, but later may be asked to lead a recently launched product line that has only a sliver of that amount. Imagine yourself in that situation. You've successfully increased market share with your company's primary product. In fact, you did too good a job, because now your company wants you to do the same thing with a struggling product that has faltered practically from its launch. Your reward for a job well done in your previous assignment is a shoestring budget, an untested and randomly organized team, and an incredibly tough uphill battle to turn a profit with an unproven product. What are you going to do when such a shift happens? Will you obsess about how unfair the situation is and how you deserve better, or will you be resourceful with what you've got in order to achieve greater success?

Just as the Driven for Progress and Sensationally Curious traits have related strengths, so does the Vastly Resourceful trait. Resourceful leaders are *imaginative*, *inclusive*, and *inventive*. They don't get stuck when the cards are stacked against them. Instead, they're off putting together resources and thinking up their next move so they can get themselves unstuck. They don't quit when the burden increases. Because of their imagination, they can capture those "Aha!" ideas and think up some pretty cool solutions. Inventive leaders also don't mind tinkering. They're comfortable in their "laboratories," testing idea after idea until a "Eureka!" moment strikes. But they don't operate alone; they assemble teams of smart, capable people with diverse backgrounds. Their labs are very collaborative and inclusive environments where ideas abound and progress—not a self-serving agenda—is the priority.

The Anywhere Leader's resourcefulness allows him to get more out of whatever he has to work with—and to stretch it further than most people could ever have imagined. It gives him the edge over others when leading new and less-than-established initiatives, or when he's asked to rescue a sinking ship when everyone else has

already bailed. This potent combination of strengths behind their resourcefulness gives Anywhere Leaders resolve. When others quit, they don't. They are able to see the plan through even when things get tough.

Some managers start out with Anywhere Leader characteristics, but lose them once they become successful in a given environment. Thomas, the director of product development we met earlier in the chapter, is a perfect example. Because he's worked in the familiar for so long, his curiosity has atrophied. Convinced that he knows his work, he has stopped asking questions. He's become more charged by personal ambition than by progress. Moreover, Thomas's group is profitable and has money to spend. So Thomas rarely, if ever, does without. If something doesn't work out initially, he just throws more resources at it until the initiative takes flight. A new role in a new work environment would truly be a rude awakening for Thomas. But that's exactly what he needs in order to move forward.

The Anywhere Leader gives managers like Thomas and Beth the tools they need to make that leap. My first book, *The Organizational Champion*, described how our concept of leadership often seems outdated, given the complexities of our times. It emphasized the core principles of a company champion—enlightened and connected change-makers who are opportunity-minded. *The Anywhere Leader* offers additional ideas and insights that reflect the increasing uncertainty under which leaders are expected to operate. To that end, *The Anywhere Leader* seeks to answer these key questions:

- Who are the most effective and successful leaders for today's business environment?
- How can you be an effective leader in unstable business environments?
- How can you drive progress in uncertain times?