

# THE ZEN EXECUTIVE

Gems of Wisdom  
for Enlightened  
Leadership

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JIM BLAKE

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Unity Village, MO 64065-0001

## *The Zen Executive*

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# Introduction

Like so many, I came from humble beginnings. I grew up in the lower middle class, and my early family life was tumultuous to say the least. When I was 7, my father left my mother and me. We struggled mightily. It wasn't long before she met someone new, the man who would become my stepfather. He was retired from the Marine Corps after more than 20 years and had served three tours in Vietnam. Looking back, I can see that he suffered from undiagnosed PTSD for most of my formative years. Our relationship was one of soldier and commander. I was always kept in my place, and his idea of motivation was extreme verbal assault. Chores, discipline, and standards of perfection became my new reality. Anything less than perfection was met with damaging criticism and in some cases corporal punishment. This was my first experience of leadership—fear and intimidation.

Despite the unhealthy and dysfunctional upbringing, I was the first person in my family to go to college. I used a football scholarship to get an undergraduate degree in computer science, and while in college I was exposed to a world religions course. I had only ever experienced the Baptist form of Christianity, so this was an eye-opening experience for me. I was like a sponge. It was there I discovered that, at heart, I was a seeker.

Since then, I have spent my life searching for truth and wisdom in various religions, yoga, New Age modalities, and numerous Eastern philosophies. It was through this seeking that I began to see the array of universal truths found in all religions.

After college I went straight to work. I built a 20-year career in the tech industry and was blessed to work for some extraordinary organizations. During this time, I experienced many corporate cultures and various leadership styles. It turns out the seeker in me not only applied to my curiosity about life, God, and mysticism, but it drove me to study different leadership styles and approaches to culture building. It also motivated me to constantly seek improvement and evolution in my own performance and development. Once I entered leadership, I was on a quest to become the best leader possible. As a result of my commitment to constant evolution and improvement, I was afforded the opportunity to serve at some of the largest and most innovative and successful companies in the country.

More than anything during this time, I was a witness to cultures and leadership styles that mostly didn't work. They were more damaging than inspirational, and there was little regard for people or life outside of organizational success. These experiences coupled with my inner seeker left me wondering whether there was a better way. With each larger role I accepted, I began to experiment with leadership styles based on inspiration, kindness, and compassion as well as the

overall well-being of those on my team. Many of those same themes ran through the ancient teachings I had studied all my life.

This book is a culmination of all that learning. I discovered there is a different way to lead and still have great success. There are areas where spiritual teachings and principles can overlap and lead us to great leadership and organizational success. We can lead from the heart and bring our spiritual path to work. Ultimately what began to drive me was to form a culture and leadership style that I would want to serve under, one that balanced people with a meaningful mission. After years of study, research, and practice, I have assembled in this book a few gems that I hope will help any leader who is looking for a better way to lead, one that uplifts people and increases performance but is also rooted in some of the most ancient spiritual traditions in the world.

After years in the tech industry leading teams as large as 200 people, I was given an opportunity for what I considered to be my dream job. A decade before, I had served as the chief information officer and vice president of operations for a large, spiritual nonprofit just outside Kansas City, Missouri. It is called Unity Village and serves as the world headquarters for Unity, part of a spiritual movement and philosophy that has several branches under the umbrella term *New Thought*. Unity was founded in 1889 by a husband and wife, Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, mystics who were way

ahead of their time. Through their own miraculous healing stories, they began to form a set of teachings that would later become this global movement. They explored the nature of God and the universe in all world religions, assembling their learnings and teachings into a nondenominational philosophy that they began to share with others. This has culminated in a large 130-year-old publishing house, a cutting-edge prayer ministry based on affirmative prayer, and a stunning and sacred 1,200-acre campus. The campus is filled with Mediterranean-style architecture and amenities like a hotel, golf course, walking trails, fishing lakes, Airbnb cottages, and a magnificent 100-yard-long fountain in the central courtyard.

What I learned at Unity, both working there and studying the New Thought philosophy, has shaped and informed my leadership style. I want to tell you briefly about Unity teachings, not to convert you but so you will know where I'm coming from when I talk about spirituality in leadership.

New Thought teachings are for people who might call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” It is for those who sense the depths of their own being and celebrate the awareness of a power greater than themselves.

The teachings in Unity bring together ancient wisdom with new interpretations of what it means to be alive and human. Unity inspires different ways to think about the force of love and intelligence that many people call God.

Some of what you'll find in Unity might sound familiar and other parts brand-new. Although the principles of healing and prosperity taught in Unity have now been scientifically explained, the ideas must have seemed radical a century ago.

Unity has no dogma. The Fillmores were reluctant even to issue a statement of beliefs. They wanted to remain in constant exploration. Throughout the years, they pulled together teachings of Truth that flow through all the world's great religions (thus the name Unity). Later, leaders of Unity boiled them down to five fundamental principles that are universal, meaning they apply to all people everywhere at any time.

### **The Five Principles**

1. God/Source/the Universe is all there is and present everywhere. This is the force of love and wisdom that underlies all of existence.
2. Human beings are individual expressions of this underlying presence of the Divine and therefore inherently divine and good.
3. Thoughts have creative power to determine events and attract experiences.
4. Prayer and meditation keep us aligned with the one great power in the universe.
5. It is not enough to understand spiritual

teachings. We must live the Truth we know by demonstrating and practicing these principles in our daily lives.

These basic principles gave me permission to see myself in a new way. By embracing myself as an expression of Source and learning to connect with this divine intelligence through prayer and meditation, I was able to transform years of embedded insecurities and lack of self-worth into feelings of worthiness and empowerment. A clear understanding of how our thoughts influence our experience of life helped me change my unproductive thoughts to those that were uplifting, supportive, positive, and productive. I had greater control (and responsibility) for how I was experiencing life. Using affirmations—positive statements focused on the outcome you seek—and other tools and resources, I began to heal some of the abuse and dysfunction I encountered in my youth.

Studying the works of Unity writers and teachers changed my life, so much so that I was compelled to attend the Unity seminary in a quest to achieve a Master of Divinity degree. This allowed me to feed the seeker within, while also serving in an executive capacity for this large and complex nonprofit.

Fast-forward a few years, and I had left Unity World Headquarters to pursue other opportunities in a couple of the most innovative and successful companies in the U.S. Then the CEO I had served under at Unity Village

retired, and I was invited to apply for the role. This opportunity would open the door for me to implement across an entire organization the culture and leadership philosophies I had been cultivating and experimenting with in my various, more limited leadership roles. Many of the gems in this book come from the resulting success my leadership team and I have achieved using these new paradigms in leadership.

I finally did earn my Master of Divinity in 2020 from the Johnnie Colemon Theological Seminary and the next year was ordained a Unity minister. I have spent my career and life with one foot deeply rooted in seeking and learning spiritual truth and the other in corporate leadership, honing and sharpening my leadership skills. This book is a result of that journey and what I have learned along the way in merging the two paths.

The first half of my life, I thought of myself as a successful corporate guy who was deeply spiritual. What I have come to learn about myself with age, maturity, and wisdom is that I had it backward. I am a deeply spiritual man who has the gift of corporate leadership. This was a profound shift in how I viewed and understood myself. Truthfully, I am still learning to embrace this new realization even now. But this understanding has allowed me to accept and utilize my spiritual gifts and spiritual nature—and to value them just as much as I do my corporate leadership gifts. I have learned that it is not just one or the other but the

combination of the two that has led me to experience success. The recognition (and acceptance) of this also created an opening for me to honor the balance of both. It offered me permission to feel whole and complete by integrating these two gifts into my identification of self. Throughout the remaining chapters you will find techniques and philosophies that merge head and heart so that we may lead and work from our fullest expression.

I have come to understand that any task can be made spiritual because our spirituality originates within our consciousness. We can bring a spiritual mindset or spiritual practices to any task, no matter how mundane or how pivotal. Strategy meetings can be spiritual. Contingency planning can be spiritual. Crafting a mission statement can be spiritual. Testing software can be spiritual. As I studied world religions and ancient teachings from around the globe, I began to see how easily their beauty and truth could be incorporated in—even function in alignment with—best business practices.

Throughout this journey I have continued to explore the spiritual principles I've learned throughout the years, and they have come to guide both my personal and professional lives. There is still tragedy, pain, and frustration to witness, and there is still a need to participate in the mechanics of running a large organization—managing the budgets, upgrading the technology, staying on top of deadlines. But there is an

opportunity for us to face all of these realities of life with the knowledge that our thoughts create our experience and that we can find spiritual fulfillment even in our busy, modern lives. I have come to understand just how essential these practices for life are to creating career success, to being a leader of people, and to finding peace as a person.

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## Identifying Your Mission

We're learning how to trust our intuition when it comes to our own personal or professional decision-making, but how do we check in with the inner voice of an organization? This is the importance of having a clear mission and an explicit value statement because it offers a guiding light when we face difficult choices, big decisions, or questions of priority.

Before we can identify how to develop such guidance, we must make sure we're clear about what we want that guidance to help us attain. Like so many things, we need to answer the *why* before we can answer the *how*. If you haven't identified the true *why* behind your organization, it's going to be very difficult to create a meaningful mission statement or to highlight the values that matter most. Just setting your sights on being the biggest or the best is a hollow mission that can easily be tripped up when your team faces obstacles or if your intentions are thwarted by factors outside your control. If your team is facing an important question and turns to organizational guidance that merely says, "Be the best," that isn't likely to help very much. We need to know what specific end we're seeking.

As author and speaker Simon Sinek says, "The *why* is the purpose, cause, or belief that drives every one of us." I'm reminded of someone who once asked, "When

walls without acting accordingly leaves those words empty and meaningless. If what you're doing doesn't prove what you believe, no elaborate mission statement is going to fix that gap. Developing a meaningful mission statement based on your *why* isn't always easy work, even if the direction seems simple. It often takes real work and focus to drill down to the primary driver behind *why* you do *what* you do.

So, *how* do we do that? Let's begin with what might be the most important (and maybe the most challenging) practice: getting inside your own head. You may be wondering what your own thoughts have to do with your organization's mission. You might even be thinking, *Jim, life does not happen inside my head; life is what occurs on the outside*. True, but how we experience life depends on what we think about those things that are occurring before us, near us, and to us. We witness what is happening then form our thoughts and judgments almost instantaneously.

The mind is the generator of the seemingly endless voice we hear in our heads every day all day. Since we are all much more than our minds, we can actually choose to observe these thoughts or change them to something completely different. Try it right now. Instead of thinking, *Jim has really lost it*, reread the last few sentences and immediately change your thoughts to, *I understand what he is saying, and I can change my thoughts that quickly!* See? You did it!

Are you still wondering why we're doing this? There is a popular saying, "Your mind is a garden; your thoughts are the seeds. You can grow flowers, or you can grow weeds." It is always a good time to begin the practice of tending to the garden of our minds, especially when we're endeavoring to create something meaningful out in the world. Just as we depend on our thoughts to create our reality and drive our experience of life, a mission statement helps create our organization's reality and drive how each of our stakeholders—whether internal or external—interacts with it.

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## Finding Your Calling

Today millions of people have jobs or roles that are unfulfilling, sometimes woefully so. You might be thinking, *Yeah, so? No one really likes their job.* To which I reply: That doesn't make it okay! Consider for a moment the profound impact of spending the majority of your time in a role that is ungratifying. Every day it is affecting your mood. Every day it is causing mental and physical stress, negative thinking, and a habit of dissatisfaction. If you don't find any fulfillment at work, those feelings can build to despair and seep into all the facets of life.

We know scientifically that our thinking has a direct impact on the cells in our bodies. This means that doing something we don't feel inspired or called to do affects our overall mental health and physical well-being. Think about how much influence those eight hours or more you spend working most days have on everything else, from your quality of sleep and energy levels to how many resources (time, money, energy) you have available to pursue your passions. There is no doubt your work has an impact on your sense of vitality. When your work isn't working, it can create a snowball effect in which even your rest time, including time with family and friends or hobbies that previously felt joyful, no longer fills your spirit. That kind of negative feedback loop can be tough to break, and an unhappy work situation can go from bad to ugly in a hurry.

Now think about the ripple effects felt throughout your entire organization if there's no sense of fulfillment in the very work you're doing to begin with. How can any member of your team possibly hope to find satisfaction in their work if they don't have a strong and purposeful foundation to lift them up? The good news is that we can leverage that snowball effect for good. Encouraging your team to find meaning in their work leads to a sense of purpose that can go beyond feeling motivated to complete the day's required tasks. Being fulfilled at work will seep into the rest of life just as much as being unfulfilled at work will, creating a positive feedback loop instead of a negative one.

I happen to work in a role that allows me to interact with ministers and clergy from many faith traditions. Often in coffeehouse chats, we have discussed the life of service, which frequently includes a reference to a “calling,” a deep knowing within of what needs to be done, which path to take. While not all of us want to be ministers or even work in spiritual spaces, I’d like you to consider that we all have a deep calling from within. And I think it is important to honor that calling. That doesn’t mean we won’t have tough days, but when we do, the bigger picture of honoring our calling will move us through those days with much less resistance and suffering.

There’s the old saying that when you do what you love, you never work a day in your life. When we are able to find and live out our true callings, we enjoy every minute of it. We take great pleasure in the work we do and have a sense of satisfaction and joy. Think about the best roles you’ve ever held. I bet they honored, at least in some small way, your true calling. Even when things got tough or there were bad days (and there always are), a purposeful position offers an opportunity to find passion, gratitude, and fun. Life is short. Every one of us deserves to do what we truly love. When we are doing what feeds our spirit, we will arise each day with enthusiasm and optimism and be our most successful and joyful selves.

It is also important to note that your calling may not be your paying job. Throughout the years, I have seen

a movement toward celebrating the call to “do what you love” and “honor your calling.” These maxims can be uplifting, inspirational, and even life-changing. They can and do create a ripple effect throughout our experience, drawing us to greater purpose. However, it is essential to recognize that many people may not be able to make a living doing what they love.

Many people may not even *want* to turn their passions into their careers. Sometimes when we turn what we love doing into a means of income, we lose some of the joy that drew us to that field, activity, or skill in the first place. As a result, it’s easy to feel pressured to realign our priorities or make drastic changes in our work. It can even feel like failure when we’re unable to both do what we love *and* make a living at it. But that’s a false sense of failure.

It is possible, and sometimes actually preferable, to have a job that allows you to pay the bills while also making room in your life for the things you’re most enthusiastic about. When you find yourself on such a path—or actively choose it for yourself—you still get to create the same positive ripple effect in your life. The key here is to honor your calling no matter what, even if you have other means of supporting yourself and your family financially. Remembering this when we say “do what you love” can help remove the guilt, shame, or pressure we might otherwise feel from these well-intentioned life messages.

For instance, I love my yoga practice. It brings me great peace and is super healthy for me. Since I was introduced to it more than a decade ago, my mat and my practice call to me just as being hungry does when I need to eat. It has become a foundational pillar of my existence. There was a time early on when I loved my yoga so much that I thought about becoming an instructor and doing it all the time. But as a young parent then with school-age children, it was simply not a practical means for me to contribute financially to our family at the level we needed. I chose instead to make time to do the yoga I loved in the form of classes, retreats, and even yoga trips, while choosing a more financially stable path to sustain our family. Similarly, I have friends who love to garden but don't necessarily want to open a nursery, or who relax by cooking an elaborate meal but would never choose to open a restaurant. Doing something we love doesn't mean we have to make a living at it. It just means we need to make time for it as a part of our commitment to healthy, balanced self-care.

When we honor our calling in whatever form, we will find that we more naturally live in the flow of life. We seem to be always in the right place at the right time, with the right people and solutions showing up to help us along the way. We allow and are more tolerant of change and things that happen in our lives, rather than being in a constant state of resistance. Passion is awakened when you feel connected, bringing energy

and verve to even the most mundane aspects of your work. That passion is the fuel to achieving your most extraordinary life, and it's ignited when you are in alignment with what you have been called to do. Doing what we have always wanted to do creates focus, like sunlight through a magnifying glass, allowing you to avoid distraction. This is how you can build a life with a feeling of satisfaction, how you can nurture an overall sense of peace and well-being. This is how you fulfill your sense of spiritual connection.

The truth is that any job, task, or activity can be made spiritual. In almost everything we do, there is power in *how* we do it. We often think about the things we do as having an inherent nature of their own, separate from how we ourselves approach it. Spiritual activities, then, aren't just attending a service or engaging in prayer or studying a religious text. They can be anything that we do with a spirit consciousness, with a sense of love, service, or kindness. The *spiritual* part comes from us.

This is a practice I'm working on with myself, bringing this evolution in ideology into my own life. I'm learning that my own deepest inner calling is to be of service. This resonates with me as I start to look at everything through this new lens. Within the confines of any task on any day, I can honor my calling by approaching it with the intention to be of service. In my daily work routine, I can prioritize actively listening to a coworker, holding doors open for others, offering to get someone a drink, or pick up lunch. In these small

but important ways, I have the opportunity to support myself and my family with my job while honoring my calling to serve each and every day. Another example is to take my professional and intellectual gifts and apply them at an organization that has a powerful mission or is doing some form of good in the world. Reframing how I think about these activities proves my capacity for making a living at the same time I honor my calling to make a difference in the world through service.

Now imagine that every person on your team benefits from that central purpose in their work. Everyone feels committed to the higher aims, fulfilling a broader goal. That is the power of a mission statement. When an organization does the work to define its *why* and can integrate that with the mission, it is naturally aligned with its organizational calling in the world. And now you have something to measure your success against. Rather than ending up in a position of drifting in one direction or another, or only vaguely heading toward a generic goal, you have a purpose that informs your strategy.

It's been said that what can be measured can be managed. Knowing where you want to end up—whatever your organization's mission—is the most surefire way to set your team up for success. You can't generate a blueprint if you don't already have the end result in mind. Getting that part ironed out can make identifying key milestones, pinpointing potential gaps or problem areas, and defining team-level objectives (as well as individual goals) go much more smoothly.