

Three
Chapter
Excerpt

the
gift
of
struggle

Life-Changing Lessons
About Leading



Bobby Herrera

CEO, Populus Group

About the Author

Bobby Herrera is cofounder and CEO of Populus Group. With annual revenue of \$500 million and many Fortune 100 customers, it is one of the fastest-growing HR services companies in the United States.

Bobby grew up on the outskirts of a small town in New Mexico. As one of thirteen children in a migrant family he learned the value of hard work, rising early and putting in long hours in the fields. After high school, boot camp became his ticket of opportunity.

He serves on national community organization boards and is a regular speaker at corporations and service groups. He is a proud Army veteran.

Bobby is most proud of his family. His wife Roslyn and their three children Santino, Griffith, and Sofia live in Portland, Oregon.

The Gift of Struggle

by Bobby Herrera

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Chapter 1

The Bus Story

When I was 17, my brother Ed and I played on the same high school basketball team. Returning from an away game one night on the team bus, we all talked excitedly, reliving the highlights of the game we had just won. Along the way, the bus stopped at a restaurant so the team could unload and eat dinner. Everyone filed out—except for Ed and me.

My brother and I couldn't afford to buy meals on school trips. Instead, our mom would send us off with her legendary burritos so we could still participate in sports with the other kids. Eating on the bus was routine. We were long past any embarrassment we might have felt.

Minutes after the team had gone, we were about to dig into our dinner. Unexpectedly, Mr. Teague, the father of a teammate, reboarded the bus. He didn't say much at first—just teased me a bit because my younger brother had outscored me in the game. But I'll always remember what he said next.

“Bobby,” he said, “it would make me very happy if you would allow me to buy you boys dinner so you can join the rest of the team. No one else has to know. To thank me, you just have to do the same thing in the future for another great kid like yourself.”

That small gesture had a profound impact on me. As a family of migrant workers, I had felt from a very young age that we were socially invisible. I lived in a country that relied on my family's work for readily available food, but no one acknowledged what we did. Our family traveled six months of the year to work in the fields, and I inevitably returned home to find that my friends' lives had moved on, leaving me anxious to reconnect and catch up on the fun-filled summer I had missed.

As a high school junior, I couldn't imagine that I would live a life different from the one I

had, but I was dead set on not getting stuck where I was. As a resilient kid with the desire to take control of my own story, I realized I had to get my life together—and fast. When my dad would tease that he would “break my plate” when I graduated, it wasn’t really a joke. I would soon be on my own.

That day on the bus I was seen in a new and important way. I knew my parents loved me. I had teachers and coaches who had taken the time to encourage and cultivate me. But Mr. Teague was different. He was a successful businessman in our town. In my eyes, he was someone who had made it big—definitely not the type of person I expected to pay attention to me. And yet he not only acknowledged me but also offered kindness and gave me a purpose. In a simple statement, Mr. Teague said that I could one day help somebody else who really needed it, like I had.

I’ll never forget the gratitude I felt as Ed and I joined the team for dinner that night. It changed the way I looked at my life and what I wanted to achieve.

STRUGGLE:

(v)

TO STRIVE TO

ACHIEVE

OR ATTAIN

SOMETHING

IN THE FACE OF

DIFFICULTY OR

RESISTANCE

Chapter 2

Struggle and Gifts

I have told the bus story to countless groups, and people always come up to me afterwards to tell me how much hearing that story mattered to them. Many tell me they have a bus story of their own. Maybe you do too.

As a kid from the wrong side of the opportunity divide, I can tell you that there was only one thing that mattered to me: I wanted to get off the bus. I wanted the same opportunities that I saw all around me. That was my struggle.

Struggle is painful. Whatever our individual circumstances, we all understand struggle as part of the human condition. It can be demoralizing and defeating when you make a mistake or simply

become stuck and don't know where to turn. It's publicly humiliating when you can't hide your failure from others. Nonetheless, my advice for anyone with the courage to do so is to **make struggle your best friend**. Although it's uncomfortable, it's the most honest and revealing measure of progress toward becoming the leader you desire to be.

To understand my journey with struggle, I would like to tell you a story about my dad.

His Struggle

In the spring of 1954 my dad, Jorge, waited in line at a reception center in northern Mexico as he had been doing every spring for years. There were millions more like him across Mexico, waiting day after day to be selected as a *bracero*. Braceros were manual laborers, their name coming from the Spanish word meaning "one who works with his arms." The Bracero Program was an agreement between the United States and Mexico that began in 1942 and continued until 1964. It was created to supply temporary labor to the United States,

offsetting worker shortages during World War II.

While millions waited, only 300,000 were chosen to become contract workers that year. As a teenager, my father had set his heart on joining the military, but family hardships had made it impossible. After missing that opportunity, he was determined to become a bracero. He had to wait for nine years, but my father was finally selected.

As a bracero, my dad performed long hours of backbreaking work harvesting produce throughout the western United States, leaving his wife and young children behind in Mexico for months at a time. Enduring harsh conditions, he earned less than \$1 an hour. Though he always tried to protect me from knowing the worst of his experiences, I know now that housing and sanitation were typically substandard (if not squalid) and food was inadequate—conditions that violated the braceros' contract agreements. But that didn't seem to matter. Treatment of laborers in the field was often brutal.

During the last days of his life, my dad told me that the day he became a bracero was the day he won *la lotería*—the lottery. Knowing what he had been through, I was more than a little confused

by his words. I would have expected anger at the deprivation, ill treatment, and low wages he was forced to endure. But my dad had a different perspective. His mother, my abuelita, was rescued off the streets after being orphaned as a baby girl. Growing up in Chihuahua, mired in intergenerational poverty, my dad's single-minded aim was to end his family's cycle of impoverishment. He would offer his own children something more than he had. There was no sacrifice too great and no condition too harsh for him to bear when it came to providing for us.

Our Struggle

In 1964, my mother, Martina, and my brothers and sisters immigrated to the United States with my dad when the Bracero Program ended. I joined the family four years later and was the first sibling to be born in the United States. My parents settled in southeast New Mexico, where my dad worked on a sheep ranch. We lived in a small two-bedroom home filled with love but very few luxuries. Of the thirteen kids in our family, I was one of the youngest.

From an early age I grew accustomed to waking at 5:00 a.m. to work, whether in the fields with my siblings as a migrant farm family or with my dad in our small ranch community. Working before and often after school was our way of life.

Every spring my family left school in April and headed to Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho. We harvested onions, potatoes, and pears and weeded sugar beet fields. By September, we were back in school, wearing the new school clothes we bought with money we earned, trying to catch up on the lessons we had missed. As a young child, I began working to contribute to the family. I would still get time to play and roam with my younger brother Ed, but work eventually evolved to six days a week and ten hours a day in the cotton fields of New Mexico and Texas as I grew older. What was normal for me seemed as if it was normal for everyone.

By the time I reached junior high, though, I was aware that while my hardworking parents were doing their best, the difference between our family and others around us was plain to see. Though I never felt ashamed, I was very defensive of what

others might know or say about us. When my mom sent me to buy milk, I hid behind the grocery store dumpster and only went in to buy what we needed right before closing so no one would see me pay with food stamps. When I stood in line for school lunches, I devised a comical routine of distracting the kids around me so they wouldn't notice the attendant checking my name off the free lunch list. It was a game of saving face, which I played in order to make our family look the same as everyone else's.

Struggle as a Gift

It wasn't until I was eighteen, in the Army and three weeks into boot camp, polishing my boots by flashlight at 11:30 p.m., that I began to re-evaluate my upbringing. Surrounded by members of my new platoon, I found that most of the others were unprepared for long hours of drills, the sergeant's demeaning profanity, and the systematic breakdown of everything we thought to be true about ourselves. As everyone around me that night complained about waking up at 4:30 a.m. to start the next

torturous day of training, I realized it was not that different from the life I had lived at home. I had already endured years of labor in the fields, rising before dawn. I had already encountered blatant racism, and I was already accustomed to living without material comforts or much free time.

That night it occurred to me that what I had already experienced was as tough as what I would face in the next few months. For the first time, having struggled early in life was turning out to be an advantage. It felt like a gift not to worry whether I would make it through basic training. I never questioned whether I could handle the grueling physicality and mental strain demanded from new recruits. I simply needed to draw on the persistence, strength, and resilience I already had.

I was grateful for the sacrifices my parents had made, but it took longer to internalize that my dad—a humble, powerful peasant—had accomplished his goal for our family. Even though it didn't feel like it as a kid, he had succeeded in providing opportunities for his children that were never available to him.

Eventually I began to study in earnest what struggle had taught me, why I should be grateful for it, and how I could apply the lessons it offered. **In each case, struggle gave me a gift.** I realized that I could often look back to an event from my past to find the clarity I needed. When I found myself facing a new challenge, my life experience could provide a new story and a crucial lesson to add to what I knew.

You Never Know . . .

Years later I called Mr. Teague to share the life-altering impact of that moment of altruism on the bus. I shared the inspiration I drew from that experience to pay forward his kind act. He was deeply touched. A few days later a note arrived from him thanking me for the call and admitting it had brought tears to his eyes. He told me that my call made him feel that his life had mattered.

Many people have told me that they see themselves as that kid on the bus; they remember how it felt to be invisible. Even more people tell me about becoming the generous, observant

person who notices a kid being left out. You might offer something as simple as listening to their story and taking the time to recognize them for who they are. We never know how a single kind act might alter the day—or the life—of a struggling kid who crosses our path.

Part One

Who Am I?

Your Leadership Journey

Tell Your Story

The Phone Call

Choose the Hardest Right

Road Trip

Share What You Imagine



Chapter 3

Your Leadership Journey

In this book, I share my stories of struggle and self-doubt, but this book is really about *your* journey. Although your path will be different, in the end we all want the same thing: to believe our life matters. We all want our potential to be recognized, and we all want to be given the opportunity to excel.

I also believe that most of us have a pivotal story—an experience containing the gift of struggle that begs to be told. The story may be a turning point or an “Aha!” moment that gave us purpose. For most leaders, their ambition stems from something profoundly personal, something much deeper than the prospect of financial gain.

But because it's so central to who they are, it's intimidating to broadcast and share that struggle.

The Magic of Story

I cofounded Populus Group (PG) in 2002, a service firm that helps companies better manage their non-permanent workforce. Populus is the Latin word for “people,” and at our core we believe everyone deserves an opportunity to succeed. The trouble was I had never helped the people at PG understand *why* I had such an intense passion to succeed.

Several years ago I was in the middle of a huge project, creating a presentation to explain and codify our culture—why we exist, how we behave, and what we are committed to as a company. As I was filming the video portion of the presentation, I recited one of our core principles: “We believe everyone deserves an opportunity to succeed.”

The videographer, a quiet guy named Ben, looked up from his camera and asked, “Why do you believe that?” For reasons I still don't completely comprehend, I answered the question. I told

him the bus story as the camera kept recording. Telling the story, unrehearsed and unplanned, was an enormous relief to me.

The next year, the entire company heard the bus story for the first time as part of the presentation. The story resonated in a remarkable way, and people began telling their own marker stories to one another. In time, sharing those stories deepened workplace bonds as empathy and compassion grew, making it easier for people to connect and work together.

Once everyone understood my purpose for creating PG, it gave their work purpose too. Everyone saw the value and promise of a company committed to underwriting opportunities for kids who started out like me. The detachment I had felt from my employees started to diminish as we all aligned around a common goal. To the people of PG, my intensity finally made sense; sharing my story had humanized me. They knew who I really was, what I cared about, and what I wanted to be known for.

I've been asked many times why I didn't share my story sooner. Part of my reluctance had stemmed from the idea that no one needed to

hear it or that no one would want to know. My real struggle was opening up, being vulnerable, and letting everyone see the real me. Sharing the bus story revealed my own deepest doubts: Am I worthy? Will I ever be more than that struggling boy on the bus? To me, the stakes seemed perilously high. If I worked up the nerve to tell my most foundational story and was rejected, where would that leave me? However, it's a leader's responsibility to tell that story and to allow the narrative and its significance to work its magic and give greater meaning to the work people do.

Leadership Is an Inside Job

As a leader, this is your responsibility. Your job is to recognize that the people you lead want to participate in meaningful work. They want to feel that their role is respected and contributes to the advancement of a greater good. To supply that, you must see them the way Mr. Teague saw me. When an employee knows they matter, you inspire them to become better at what they do and more confident in who they are.

It was immensely difficult to start a business and gain footing as a leader. Believing worn-out clichés only made things harder. I put ridiculous pressure on myself to have all the answers. I thought I needed to cultivate the façade of executive detachment, that I had to be the guy at the top of the organizational chart that always had his act together. Previous work experiences and cultural stereotypes provided no shortage of bad or unrealistic examples to follow. I emulated the ego-driven, self-important alpha boss for far too long. I would have been better served in those years had I simply been guided by my dad's example of humility and sacrifice.

With time I found generous mentors who helped me identify my knowledge gaps. They asked tough questions and called on me to account for my thickheaded assumptions. I still rely on the indispensable wisdom of my trusted advisors. But as leaders, our dreams, our organizations, and our choices are unique. Every successful leader will be required to leave the familiar behind and strike out on their own in order to realize their vision. Inevitably, we all feel the heavy weight

we carry on our shoulders and realize how lonely it can be.

Leadership is not a function of gender, color, wealth, or education. As my own story makes clear, I didn't come from a privileged background. No matter their starting point in life, every leader soon discovers what we all share—struggle is the most honest and revealing measure of progress toward becoming the leader you desire to be.

Patrick Lencioni, bestselling author and founder of The Table Group, says the true work of leadership is always an inside job; it's all about building character. For this reason, the most important question we can ask ourselves is, “Who am I becoming?”

We all struggle.

Inside every struggle is a gift.

Leaders share their gifts with others.

The Gift: **Tell Your Story**

If you don't step up and tell the story that gives you identity and purpose, your people will be left on their own, trying to guess what matters to you and why. Without fulfilling work, they will make assumptions about your mission—or lack thereof—and leave when they find a competitor who offers what you've withheld. Until then, they'll give you just enough to check the box and get through the day.

For those of you who choose to take the leap, you have to be all in. Your story must be clear, and your message must be honed. People will know the difference between the truth and a bluff. Only transparency will pay the dividend of stronger connections and shared goals within an organization.

It won't happen overnight, but the whole idea is to overcommunicate your story. Take every opportunity to share with your team how they are helping to achieve your biggest dream. This will give them a new level of engagement

and pride in being part of something greater than themselves. In return, acknowledge and honor the stories that your people share with you and with one another. Celebrate the milestones they achieve. Just like you and me, they want to be seen and know they are worthy.

Questions to Guide Your Journey

1. Do the people you lead know the story that drives you?
2. How is this story embedded in everything you do?
3. How are you encouraging your people to share their most important story?

Flash-Forward

The project I was working on when I first shared the bus story became the first version of PG's "Culture Code." Our Culture Code shares principles and values that everyone in PG agrees to live by in order to bring the story we want to create to life. My role is to narrate the story. I must guide the journey and tell that story over and over again. Eight years have passed since that initial project, and we are now on Version 3.0 of our Culture Code. Following it can be a challenging endeavor; like any good story, there is the unpredictable element of human behavior. In Chapter 5, I share more about my inspiration for our Culture Code.

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One Final Note

Dear Reader,

It would be great to hear from you.

If you want to share one
of your gifts of struggle,
send me a note at:
hello@bobby-herrera.com

All Hail the Underdogs,

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Bobby" with a stylized, wavy flourish extending from the end of the name.

the
gift
of
struggle

**Life-Changing Lessons
About Leading**



Bobby Herrera

CEO, Populus Group

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