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THE GRINDERS:

3 REASONS WHY CERTAIN LEADERS WIN CONSISTENTLY





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“It’s like any other job. You don’t gamble. You grind it out. Your goal is to win one big bet an hour, that’s it. Get your money in when you have the best of it, and protect it when you don’t. Don’t give anything away. That’s how I’ve paid my way through half of law school. A true grinder.”
— from the movie “Rounders” (1998)

It is predictable how the latest business success story will often lead to an avalanche of media coverage - books, magazine articles, interviews - that outlines the “new” rules of success adopted by this most recent corporate moonshot.

That may sound like a criticism, but it’s not. Just an observation.

Clearly, there is a ton of information to be gleaned from *any* successful company or individual. But, at the same time, it is important to understand that “one-off” or “one-time” business success may be quite different than the success created over the long-term.

Different lessons. Different applications.

In looking for long-term success principles, there is perhaps no better place to search than the world of sports.



Yes, I know, some people are not sports fans. But I'm not sure why that matters. If you can learn to compete and win in business more consistently just by paying attention to the sporting arena, why wouldn't you?

As a perfect example, let's take a quick look at the current sports landscape and observe the similarity that exists between these coaches of their respective championship teams:

- NCAA Men's Basketball – Mike Krzyzewski (Duke Blue Devils)
- NCAA Women's Basketball – Geno Auriemma (UConn Huskies)
- NCAA Football – Urban Meyer (Ohio State Buckeyes)
- NFL – Bill Belichick (New England Patriots)
- NBA – Greg Popovich (San Antonio Spurs)
- MLB – Bruce Bochy (San Francisco Giants)

See the connection?

No?

OK, let's do it this way:

- Krzyzewski: 5 NCAA titles in 12 Final Four appearances, 1,018 wins (1st overall)
- Auriemma: 10 NCAA titles (tied for 1st with John Wooden), 917 wins (1st overall)
- Meyer: 3 National Championships (1 of only 8 coaches with three or more)
- Belichick: 4 Super Bowl championships (tied for 1st) in 6 appearances (tied for 1st)
- Popovich: 5 NBA Titles (one of only 5 NBA coaches with five or more)
- Bochy: 3 World Series titles in the past 5 years (one of only 10 managers in MLB history with 3 or more)



LET'S TAKE A QUICK LOOK AT THE CURRENT SPORTS LANDSCAPE AND OBSERVE THE SIMILARITY THAT EXISTS BETWEEN THESE COACHES OF THEIR RESPECTIVE CHAMPIONSHIP TEAMS."

See the obvious point now?

The one thing that ties these six coaches together is their **consistency** in winning.

With the possible exception of Urban Meyer, each of these coaches is undoubtedly the very best coach (or manager) in each of their respective sports (I suspect 'Bama fans would *gently* suggest Nick Saban as a strong candidate for that distinction in college football).

Regardless, my interest in all of this is pretty simple: Is there anything to learn from the fact that in baseball, basketball, and football - at both the pro and college level - the current (2014-15) champion is coached by someone who is at the very top of his game and consistently wins more than just about anyone else?

Is there something to learn about the methods these coaches employ that might help you and I create *consistent performance* in the workplace?

The answer is, not surprisingly, yes.

My research reveals **three specific leadership ingredients** that form the backbone of consistent winning by these sports coaches. You can decide if they make sense in the workplace, but I'll be shocked if you don't think they do.



MY RESEARCH REVEALS THREE SPECIFIC LEADERSHIP INGREDIENTS THAT FORM THE BACKBONE OF CONSISTENT WINNING BY THESE SPORTS COACHES."

1. CONNECTION

The first and perhaps most significant lesson to learn from these great coaches is the degree to which they work to connect with players. Lest you think all coaches do so, let me assure you that, from both experience and observation — you would be WAY wrong.

Instead, many coaches are the sports equivalent of the workplace micro-manager, or the 'my-way-or-the-highway' tyrant. Rarely a year goes by that some coach doesn't get sacked for isolating and/or berating players.



But, as it turns out, a coach can be “tough” on a player as long as there is a strong personal strong connection with the player, and the coach has adequately demonstrated a care and concern for the welfare of the player.

All six of the coaches in the list above are highly successful in connecting with their players, but I'll use MLB's **Bruce Bochy** and the NBA's **Greg Popovich** to illustrate.

Bruce Bochy is the Manager of baseball's San Francisco Giants. He describes his approach to managing players this way:

“I don't believe in showing up players. If I have an issue with them, I bring them in. I want to treat players the way I would want to be treated. If the manager has a problem with me, bring me in. You don't have to embarrass me and show me up.”

(Henry Schulman, SFgate.com, March 11, 2007)

Perhaps you consider that to be trite or insignificant. If so, you might check up on



the current stats on workplace bullying, particularly by managers.

Many coaches - much like their equivalent positions in the workplace - care very little if they embarrass their players or criticize them in public.

But Bochy understands value of player connection to team culture and performance. As Sports Illustrated writer Chris Ballard noted, in winning three World Series championships in the past five years

Bochy has certainly demonstrated his skills as a baseball technician, but he has also shown incredible savvy in connecting with his players:

Indeed, plenty of managers excel at game strategy. And plenty are good with personalities. Few are as adept at both as Bochy.

He abides by certain rules. Approach each player as an individual. ("You learn one size doesn't fit all.") Cajole, criticize in private. (You can search 20 years of news stories, and good luck finding Bochy saying anything bad about a player.) And remember that in the end, "for the most part they all need your support."

That support — genuine and given freely — is part of why Bochy becomes close to so many of his players.

(Sports Illustrated, December 15, 2014)

Seems to be working out pretty well for the Giants. The franchise is valued at \$2 billion,



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fourth overall in the Majors behind the Yankees, Dodgers, and Red Sox.

Gregg Popovich, the coach of the NBA San Antonio Spurs is another seemingly “tough” coach. His on-court interviews are legendary in sports media.

But Popovich recorded his 1,000th win earlier this season (one of only 9 coaches to do so). In addition to his five NBA titles, he has also put together an NBA-record 15 consecutive seasons with 50 or more wins.

Last season, the Spurs scorched the highly-acclaimed (and most would say favored to win) Miami Heat in just five games to claim the NBA title. Oh, and in knocking off LeBron & Company, the Spurs outscored the Heat by the largest average point differential in Finals history (14.0 points per game average).

Turns out, although Popovich may look like a tough coach, his focus is on creating strong connections with his players:

“So if you’re just brutally honest with guys, when they do well, love them and touch them and praise them, and if they do poorly, get on their [butt] and let them know it and let them know that you care. And if a



player knows that you really care and believes that you can make it better, you got the guy for life.”

(Scott Davis, Business Insider, October 10, 2014)

Love them?

Touch them??

Praise them???

All of this “touchy-feely” stuff may sound a bit over-the-top, but as Spurs General Manager R.C. Buford told NBC Sports columnist Joe Posnanski, “The key is relationships. He’s the best I’ve ever seen at building those relationships.”

Oh, by the way, the value of the Spurs has increased from an estimated \$122 million in 1998 to over \$1 billion in 2015.

That's a pretty decent 'return-on-connection.'

Take a look at the very best leaders in sports, in business, or even in the military, and you will almost always find someone who demonstrates a tremendous amount of care and concern for the success of players.

Without question, it definitely takes great players to win consistently.

But great players don't play long for coaches that don't care about their welfare.

ACTION STEP:

Creating relationships is a function of time and communication. Adopt a "one-on-one" approach to communicating with those employees that report directly to you. Meet weekly and spend most of the time listening. Avoid solving all the problems presented in these meetings; instead, try to understand the challenges that exist and ask for your employees' input. That's how relationships develop.



2. FANATICAL PREPARATION



In my own experience, preparation and planning are huge factors in what sets great players and teams apart from their average counterparts.

As it turns out, the very best coaches in the world are not just concerned with adequate preparation, they are *fanatical* about it. Like other successful coaches, they are outstanding on the “Xs and Os” side of the game — the tactical aspects of the sport —

but, more importantly, they prepare their teams for every conceivable situation.

Again, all six coaches are known for this quality, but I'll use Ohio State's **Urban Meyer** and UConn head women's basketball coach **Geno Auriemma** as examples.

Urban Meyer and his Ohio State Buckeyes faced enormous obstacles this past season. Prior to the season, a troubled player

apparently took his own life, an event that was both tragic and disturbing and cast a pall over the entire team. On the field, the team suffered season-ending injuries to both of their starting quarterbacks — first, their veteran starter before the season, and then to his replacement late in the season.

Which meant the Buckeyes entered the most important part of the year with a third-string, untested, freshman quarterback.

Despite these challenges, the Buckeyes not only finished the regular season at 12-0, but also overcame a 15-point deficit against Alabama to win the Sugar Bowl and advance to the National Championship game.

Their opponent?

The Oregon Ducks. An incredibly explosive offensive team led by Marcus Mariotta, the Heisman Trophy winning QB projected as the potential first pick in the upcoming NFL draft.

The Ducks: 45 points per game. 547 yards per game. And an offense that plays

incredibly fast. Ohio State's final opponent, Alabama, averaged one point scored every 51 seconds of offensive possession. Oregon? They scored one point every 36.5 seconds of possession. **FAST.**

Recognizing that adjusting to Oregon's speed would be the biggest challenge the Buckeyes would have to overcome, Meyer focused all of his time and energy leading up to the game preparing for the unprecedented pace and performance of the Oregon squad.

“Everywhere Ohio State football players went for the past two weeks, they saw the No. 16. They saw it in the locker room. They saw it in their meeting rooms. They saw it on the practice play clock. They saw it from Columbus to Dallas, from the team facility at the Woody to the team hotel off I-35.

Meyer distilled the defensive game plan to the simplest possible form for his players: “Eliminate 16.” Forget



MEYER FOCUSED ALL OF HIS TIME AND ENERGY LEADING UP TO THE GAME PREPARING FOR THE UNPRECEDENTED PACE AND PERFORMANCE OF THE OREGON SQUAD.”

the Heisman winner at quarterback, the hype of the title game and the millions watching on TV. Eliminate 16, and you'll win.

The play clock in practice was set to 16 after every snap, with the scout team having to get the ball off before it hit zero. There were two scout teams that alternated turns: The first team ran six plays in around 90 seconds, then the second jumped on and ran six more. Defensive starters battling the scout-team offense were gassed, but the scout-teamers helped defeat the numerical demon.”

(Pete Thamel, Sports Illustrated, January 13, 2015)



It's not enough to know what to do. It takes relentless preparation to be ready to perform when the stakes are high and the pressure is greatest.

Oregon's first drive produced an 11-play scoring drive. But, Ohio State responded with three consecutive touchdowns to take the lead, 21-7.

Then, with 6:39 left in the 3rd quarter, Oregon had fought back to trail by only a single point, 21-20.

But that was all the Ducks could muster. They would not score again, and ultimately lost the National Championship to the Buckeyes, 42-20.

Geno Auriemma is the head women's basketball coach at the University of Connecticut. His winning record is absolutely crazy. He has *averaged* an astounding 30 wins every single season for 30 years.

It's such a ridiculous number that it is hard to put it into perspective. Here's another: UConn has been to the Sweet 16 for the past 22 consecutive seasons, dating back to 1993. The second best streak is a *mere* eight consecutive trips. The very epitome of consistency.

This season, the Huskies faced the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame in the NCAA women's basketball championship game, another consistently successful team. It was Notre Dame's fifth consecutive Final Four, and the fourth time in five seasons to make it to the final game.

All told, these two teams have faced off 44 times during Auriemma's career, including twice in the NCAA championship game.

There have been other great women's teams over the years as well. Most notably, the Tennessee Volunteers, coached by the legendary Pat Summit, whom Auriemma has faced 22 different times, including 4 times in the NCAA championship game.

Auremma is nothing if not fanatical about game preparation. *Hartford Courant* columnist, sports writer, John Altavilla, details Auriemma's approach to the season:

"What fills Auriemma with the most frustration is when he senses one of his players doesn't make the



connection between preparation and performance.

"Anyone who accomplishes great things does it because they want to," he says. "Anyone who doesn't, doesn't because they also want to."

"Kids need to understand that it's here [practice] where you learn to be a good player. I don't want to hear



IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO KNOW WHAT TO DO. IT TAKES RELENTLESS PREPARATION TO BE READY TO PERFORM WHEN THE STAKES ARE HIGH AND THE PRESSURE IS GREATEST."



anymore of this crap about how some guys are game players, not good practice players.

"I've never met anyone that was a great game player who didn't have tremendous work ethic and practice habits. The challenge for everyone, at least those who come here, is learning how to practice with such consistency that you know you are going to perform consistently when you go into a game."
([Courant.com, November 11, 2014](#))

Fanatical preparation is what it takes to perform when the stakes are the highest and the pressure to perform is the greatest.

And it is what the very best coaches in the world do day-in and day-out.

Doris Burke faced UConn as a player, and she currently works as an ESPN



basketball analyst. Intense preparation, as she notes, is not optional for Auriemma-coached teams:

“If you want to understand why UConn is successful, just go to one of their practices. There is a commitment to excellence every day. The habits build over the course [of time] from the very first time a player shows up at Storrs. They require a level of excellence.”

(Pete Dougherty, Times Union.com, March 27, 2015)

Oh, by the way, care to take a guess at Auriemma’s record against Notre Dame and Tennessee?

33-11 vs. Notre Dame.

13-9 vs. Tennessee.

I’m sure you can find a lot of coaches - and workplace managers - that spend a great deal of time in preparation but still fail to produce winning performance over the long haul. So, this one component is not a recipe for success in and of itself.

But, I would challenge you to name any consistent top performer that is lacking in the area of fanatical preparation.

The competition is too fierce to just wing it.

ACTION STEP:

Preparing your team requires your own personal “fanatical preparation.” It is very difficult to teach others what has not been standardized and documented. Assess your current on-boarding efforts. Have you created a system to adequately train each employee? Do you routinely assess individual performance? If confronted with customer issues, are employees effectively prepared to respond well?



3. ADAPTABILITY

Unquestionably, preparation is a critical component of success, but the interesting thing about being a champion is that it paints a target on your back. No competitor willingly cedes victory to another team based on past performance or reputation. The fact is, every single competitor spends the off-season with one thing in mind - to replace the team at the top.

Which means, of course, that coaches cannot afford to be lazy or complacent. And, quite clearly, the same holds true in business.

The average life span of a Fortune 500 company, according to best-selling author, Jeremy Gutsche, used to be 75 years. Today? It's only 15 years — and shrinking.



Every one of these championship coaches has demonstrated the ability to consistently adapt to changing conditions, changes in personnel, and innovation from competitors. They understand that you can adapt or you can become irrelevant.

I'll use the NFL's **Bill Belichick** and **Mike Krzyzewski** from NCAA Men's Basketball to illustrate the point.

With the dramatic win over the Seattle Seahawks back in February, **Bill Belichick** now has four Super Bowl titles to his credit and owns an NFL-best 22 play-off wins. His New England Patriots have only failed to finish first in the AFC East *once* in the last 12 years.

You cannot possibly stay on top that long without great talent (particularly a great QB) AND the ability to continuously adapt to innovation on the field. Sports writer Chad Finn said this about Belichick:

"Belichick's deep reservoir of knowledge regarding the sport's past and present leads to him seeking further information and intelligence,

leads to him still trying to innovate and learn from the innovators. The intellectual curiosity never wanes.

It's why he spent significant time with Chip Kelly at Oregon a couple of years ago. It's why, soon thereafter, you saw the Patriots accelerate the pace and tempo of their offense in a similar way.

It's why the offense has changed and changed again during his time here, from the efficient, conservative approach in Tom Brady's early seasons to the give-it-to-Corey Dillon period to the explosive Randy Moss years to the Gronk/Aaron Hernandez two-tight-end approach to...well, maybe back around again to the approach of a dozen years ago."

(Boston.com, October 11, 2014)

The NFL game has changed dramatically since Belichick assumed the coaching reins in New England in 2000. Arguably, however, no coach in the NFL has adjusted more

fluidly to those changes than Belichick. Patriots' defensive lineman, Vince Wilfork, has been with the Patriots for 11 seasons, and he referred to Belichick's ability and willingness to change course in an interview prior to this year's Super Bowl:

"I think when you get so used to having a certain quality of players and it changes, it's hard for you to adapt to change. And I think Bill had to do a good job of that ever since I've been in the league because we've changed so much."

(Jordan Raanan, NJ.com, January 28, 2015)

Columnist Mark Petraglia also noted Belichick's ability to adapt his strategies as needed in a January 2015 article:

"But, on the brink of his sixth Super Bowl, there's another quality that stands out to many other veterans on the team with the Belichick experience - adaptability."

(WEEI.com, January 29, 2015)



EVERY ONE OF THESE CHAMPIONSHIP COACHES HAS DEMONSTRATED THE ABILITY TO CONSISTENTLY ADAPT TO CHANGING CONDITIONS, CHANGES IN PERSONNEL, AND INNOVATION FROM COMPETITORS."



Here is a stark comparison: During Belichick's 16-year tenure at New England, the Cleveland Browns have had eight head coaches.

Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Washington and Miami have each had seven.

And how many play-off games have all SIX of those teams played in that time period combined? Eight.

Super Bowl appearances? *Zero*.

By comparison, since joining the Patriots, Belichick is 21-8 in the play-offs with six Super Bowl appearances and four rings.

And, as might be expected, on-the-field success has translated into business success for owner Robert Kraft. In 1994, Kraft purchased the Patriots football team for \$175 million. According to Forbes, New England is now the second most valuable franchise in the NFL.

The team valuation is estimated at \$2.6 billion.

Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K) inherited a Duke basketball team that had won 73 games and lost only 24 in the previous three years prior to his arrival on campus. In addition, the Blue Devils had appeared in the NCAA tournament in each of those three seasons.

So, it wasn't a surprise when Coach K won 17 games and advanced to the NCAA tourney in his first season as head coach. But, the next two seasons were both losers. In fact, in his first three seasons combined, Coach K won just 38 games, lost 47, and played in only two NCAA tournament games.

Since that rather inauspicious start, however, Duke has been to the NCAA Tournament every single year but one ('94-'95). They have averaged 27.5 wins per season, claimed 5 national titles, and won three of every four games played in the NCAA tournament - the record.

In 2015, the Blue Devils raced out to a 14-0 start, but then suffered two consecutive blowout losses. With three *freshmen* on the floor for the BlueDevils, it appeared opponents had figured out how to exploit Coach K's young team.

College basketball insider, Gary Parrish, described the challenges Coach K faced in an article for CBS Sports:

"The first question -- What's wrong? -- was simple to answer for anybody with even a surface-level understanding of the sport..."

"Teams had gotten, I think, 36 points, 36 points, 38 points and 40 points in the paint against us in our last four games," Duke assistant Jeff Capel said. "They were spreading us out and pulling [freshman sensation Jahlil Okafor] away from the basket. So we just said, 'We can't let them do that anymore.'"

The staff concluded quickly one solution would be to stop extending their aggressive man-to-man defense because Duke's guards, for one reason or another, were struggling to keep attacking guards -- like the ones they had just played and the ones they were about to play -- out of the lane. But Krzyzewski took it a step farther, at some point between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m., and suggested something he'd literally never suggested before: Zone [defense].





He suggested they commit to a 2-3 zone. Were his assistants surprised?

“Yes and no,” Capel answered. “I say, ‘Yes,’ just from the standpoint that, obviously, nobody thinks of Duke as playing zone. But I say, ‘No,’ because I know Coach is willing to adapt. His big thing has always been, ‘It’s not his way. It’s whatever way is best.’”

(CBSSports.com, January 17, 2015)

Like all great competitors, Coach K changed gears to better utilize his team’s talent and to adapt to emerging changes in the game. And the change yielded immediate results.

Duke upset [then No. 6 ranked] Louisville, 63-52, in the next game and went on to finish the season with 34 wins, only 5 losses, and his fifth NCAA men’s basketball title.

One would think that adapting to market forces and competitive pressures would be at the very top of the list of company priorities. Again, you would be surprised.

Change is taxing. Change is stressful. Change is difficult under the best of circumstances.

And for many successful companies, it is actually seen as unnecessary. That’s why Jim Collins opened his best-selling book *Good to Great* with this memorable line:

“Good is the enemy of great.”



EVERY ONE OF THESE CHAMPIONSHIP COACHES HAS DEMONSTRATED THE ABILITY TO CONSISTENTLY ADAPT TO CHANGING CONDITIONS, CHANGES IN PERSONNEL, AND INNOVATION FROM COMPETITORS.”

Consider this list of former business successes: Netscape. Blackberry. Kodak. Blockbuster.

The inability (or unwillingness) to adapt to changing market conditions crushed these powerhouse companies.

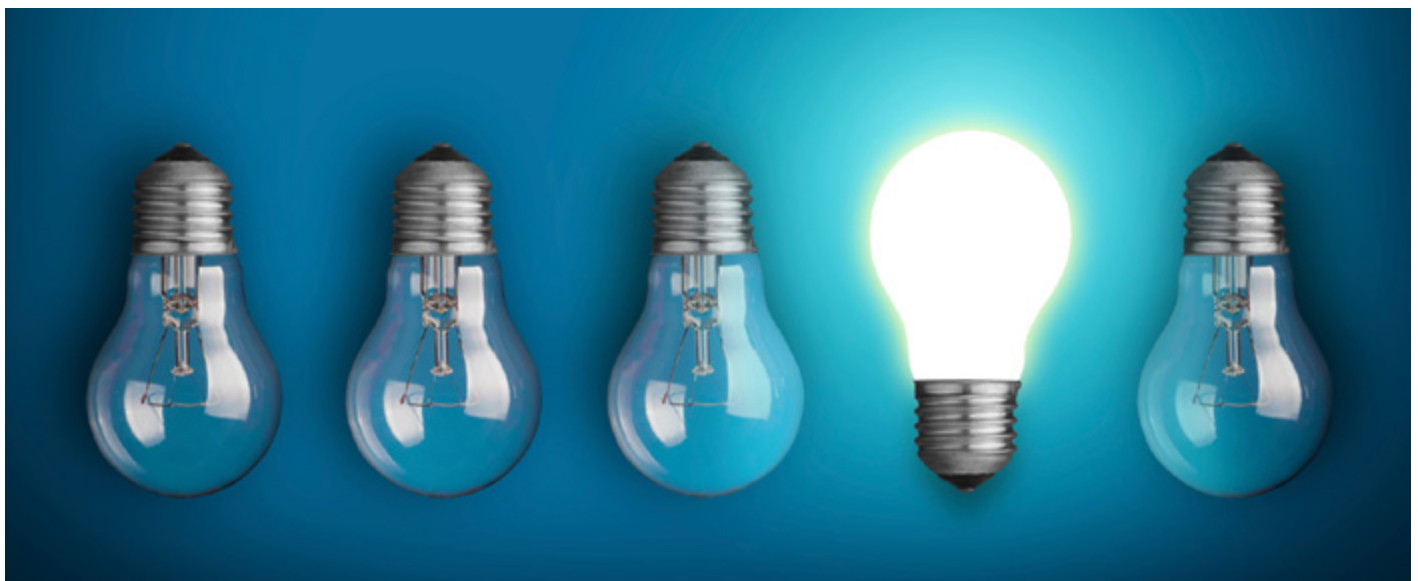
Marvel, on the other hand, saw no future in comic books and pivoted to animated movies. CBS went from worst to first by dumping aging sitcoms and diving into hip programming. Nintendo dominated the video game landscape (remember the Game Boy?) before getting thrashed by Xbox and PS2, but responded with an entirely new interactive console called Wii.

The lesson is simple. *Adapt or die.*

ACTION STEP:

Are you (or your team) satisfied with just being “good” and protecting the status quo? Have your team brainstorm around this question: “What would the very best person/team in the world (in your industry) do differently if they were to analyze our company?”

Ask people in the organization this question: “What is one thing that we are doing (or not doing) that could seriously jeopardize our long-term success?”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A highly acclaimed platform speaker, Kelly is recognized as a dynamic thought leader in the fields of leadership, sales development, and strategic planning. He is a business performance coach for executives and companies throughout the United States, working with organizations that range in size from \$3 million to over \$5 billion in annual sales revenue.

A national award-winning sales representative and sales manager, Kelly has spent the last nineteen years teaching and training organizational leaders in sales and executive management.

He has written two books: *1-on-1 Management™: What Every Great Manager Knows That You Don't* (2008), and *Quit Whining and Start SELLING! A Step-by-Step Guide to a Hall of Fame Career in Sales* (2013).

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