

## PROLOGUE

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I LEARNED ABOUT BULLSH\*T and acquired a desire for straight-talk the same way most people do: as a child growing up in a family where what people said they were doing and the reasons they gave failed to match-up with what I saw taking place. In my family the disparities were extreme and this turned out to be an advantage. Had they occurred less often or been more subtle I might have been taken in. Early on I sensed deception and I struggled to talk explicitly about what was plainly apparent to me.

I derived comfort thinking my parents were unaware of the duplicity and their unwillingness to speak candidly about our lives. Pushing them to do so made me the family irritant. My much older sister was no help; she accepted and practiced the family's go-along-to-get-along ways. As a result, I alone was held to blame for family discord. The family's unspoken message: if only I would knuckle under, accept what I was told, and control myself, there would be calm. School was no better. The teachers' typical reaction to my mother being called in to

discuss my department was, “How could a boy like you have such a lovely mother?”

My mother suffered depressive episodes that apparently began with my birth. No one ever talked about her paralyzing lows or called attention to those terrifying occasions when her spirit seemed to be absent. Through Christian Science she developed an ability to appear upbeat even when she was down. She observed surface protocol and outwardly gave what was socially expected. The times she was authentically present were treasured moments for me. Then I experienced support and felt loved. But I wanted to talk about the abandonment I felt when her persona was mostly pretense, when I found myself alone without love, guidance, or protection. On the other hand, her down episodes forced me to develop a great deal of independence. Out of necessity I learned early on to fend for myself.

My father was a heavy evening drinker and strong-willed disciplinarian. I rebelled against his attempts to control me whenever I could. Fortunately he often fell asleep just as family conflicts were heating up. Ironically his drinking was my best defense. His half-drunk attempts to “rein Sam in for his own good” were so obviously outrageous that most punishments were rescinded. My need to talk straight in the midst of all this pretense couldn’t be stifled. For bolstering I sought support and “reality checks” from others, often people from outside my immediate family. I found outsiders were often able to grasp what insiders couldn’t see. In the process, I developed a distrust of authority, a questioning attitude about anything for which I couldn’t see the basis, and the ability to read behavioral clues that might help predict what was coming next.

My mother’s condition gave me unusual freedom. I would leave the house in the morning and return just before dinner. By the age of 10 I had access to anywhere I wanted to go in Chicago.

My father was a middle-income earner and my mother made sure I always had carfare, allowing me to hop a bus, a street car, or the El at my whim. I could go almost anywhere—crosstown movies, a park to play ball, downtown to see the eye doctor, Evanston to buy stamps for my collection, and, with increasing frequency, to Wrigley Field. Being a die-hard Cubs fan partially accounts for my intrepid, dogged optimism. I tend to view adversity and setbacks as veiled opportunities. You'd be amazed how much stuff I've sorted through looking for the pony.

In those days even children could get permits to work in the summer. Turning 12 I got a "plum job" in my uncle's asbestos factory. It paid 85 cents an hour with time and a half for overtime. Reaching the factory required taking a bus to the elevated train and then walking half a mile through an African American neighborhood where neighbors routinely sat talking on their porches and stoops and children played games in the streets. This was prior to affordable air conditioning so, in the summer, the streets bustled with people seeking refuge from the sweltering indoor heat. This exotic-seeming neighborhood was the antithesis of my silent, cloistered one, and every aspect of it fascinated and instructed me.

At work I was fortunate to be guided and protected by a wise and generous "Negro" foreman. He was the first authority I felt I could trust. Watching Tim Matthews I learned the benefits of picking your moments and how to avoid being labeled "the troublemaker." He showed me how to sidestep harsh treatment by the factory boss, a war-damaged refugee who referred to himself as "The Big Litvak." Precious were the invitations to accompany Tim, along with his wife, three young children, and extended family on picnic outings. Tragically, Tim died an early and ugly asbestos-related death. But to this day I have poignant memories of what I learned from time spent with him and his family.

Cut to the present. I have a bachelor's degree in systems engineering, a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, and a career spent exposing and demystifying the bullsh\*t far too common in corporations and other organizations. Looking back on my youth, I wonder if I have spent most of my life working out my childhood dilemma. Now, as then, I have a need to talk straight about what most people are too willing to ignore.

I've now spent almost forty years as a university-based researcher and professor with the world of work as my laboratory. Part-time consulting engagements have given me ready access to phenomena I choose to study—and “carfare” for doing so. My purpose has long been to expose bullsh\*t and misguided behavior in the workplace and then, using what I have learned, to show others—students, managers, and readers—how they might be more effective, both personally and professionally. This book is a natural successor to my last one, *Don't Kill the Bosses!*,<sup>1</sup> which told how to recognize and avoid the pitfalls of boss-dominated relationships. That volume followed naturally from my *Mind-Set Management*,<sup>2</sup> which probed the little understood role that each individual's personal life history plays in every aspect of corporate life.

My own journey has taught me a great deal about what people need to live and work more effectively, including how to function successfully as part of a team. What I've learned has taught me to ask myriad questions of the people I want to know. I probe to understand what's important to them so I can react appropriately in light of what their words and actions *really* mean. If I have a creed, it is that no one is exactly like me and that everyone is different from everyone else. This is in stark contrast to an assumption that many people make: that everyone else thinks just as they do or, even worse, should think just as they do. In my experience those people make lousy managers and bosses.

In the course of cutting through mountains of bullsh\*t and pretense, I've learned to recognize those occasions when straight-talk is neither possible nor desirable. I have come to respect the truth that people sometimes need the façades they so artfully construct. And I have come to appreciate the WD-40 function some institutional bullsh\*t plays, keeping dissatisfaction from escalating and maintaining enough civility that painful differences can sometimes be worked out. A case in point: the \* (asterisk) in my use of the word "bullsh\*t." Many readers will see this as pretense and think "how can I believe a guy who writes about bullsh\*t and won't even spell out the word?" Be assured that I am fully aware of the compromise I made. I mulled the alternatives for months. In the end, I decided the somewhat coy usage was the best way to ensure readership among those people who need that \* in order to seek what might be useful to them in this book.

This book is full of short anecdotes that illustrate its main points. Each and every one is rooted in events I have personally experienced. In the course of my ongoing research, I encounter new examples every day. Of course I know you encounter them as well. You may even think you know some of the people I've described. To avoid embarrassing individuals who have done the best they could and would like to learn from their mistakes, I've changed names and camouflaged locations. Sometimes you have to protect the guilty. What's more, I like when their lawyers stay away. Now to the book.