

BY VAL RIES

CHIEF INSPIRATION OFFICER

HOW TO LEAD A TEAM THAT
EVERYONE WANTS TO BE ON

CHAPTER ONE

Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer



In 2005, I'd just been promoted from medical device sales representative to regional manager, and I was excited. I was going to lead a ten-person sales team at an animal health diagnostics company. I was replacing my boss, which meant I didn't have the opportunity to hire or train any of my employees, but I figured, how hard could leadership be?

A few weeks into my new role, I was outside an airport waiting for one of my employees, Toby, to pick me up so I could ride along with him while he demonstrated our products to some prospective customers. It concerned me that Toby was late, but what surprised me the most was his appearance. His clothes were disheveled, and he was sweating profusely. I quickly glanced around his car and noticed it was littered with gum wrappers and soda cans. I was taken aback by the lack of professionalism, but I decided not to say anything about it. Perhaps he was just nervous.

Off we went to the client's office, and Toby launched into one of the sloppiest presentations I had ever seen. He missed cues, scattered stacks of paper everywhere, and constantly mopped his sweaty forehead. Toward the end of his demonstration, he dropped his pen on the floor, and when he turned around to pick it up, his pants and underwear slipped down, and he mooned the audience!

At that point I began to suspect managing a team wasn't going to be as easy as I had anticipated. I was irritated and disappointed with Toby's presentation. I wanted to scream, "What on earth are you doing?" but I obviously couldn't do it in front of the client. The truth was, even after we left I didn't know how to express my concerns without crushing this man's morale. I had no idea how to strike a balance between correcting him and motivating him, so I said nothing. I hoped that the embarrassment alone

CHAPTER ONE

Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer



would encourage Toby to step up his game and conduct himself more professionally. But, of course, saying nothing only made things worse. Before long more red flags appeared in his performance and in the performance of other members of my team as well. I was unprepared to handle these problems, and I was embarrassed to admit it.

After a while I found myself dreading phone calls. What new disaster was about to be dropped on my plate? Would it be Shelly yelling about how the company had messed up another one of her orders? Justin telling me he'd let another easy deal slip away? Stephanie talking in circles and never getting to the point? My boss demanding better results? Just how long would it be before I encountered another “mooning” incident?

Sure, I had some employees who were easy to communicate with and did their jobs well without much direction from me. But the majority of the people on my team had at least one quality or habit that concerned or irritated me—from insubordination to drama to laziness. I began to wonder, How do you really inspire people to be the best version of themselves?

Determined not to fail, I began to seek advice from others. My boss listened to my concerns and said, “You’ll figure it out. Just keep going.” That was encouraging, but what I really needed from him was more coaching. Human resources was an option, but it felt like escalating my challenges to HR would be admitting that I couldn’t handle them. On occasion I turned to my fellow managers for their perspective, but I felt there was this unfriendly competition among us. When I reached out to friends in other industries, I found out they were struggling with engagement issues, communication challenges, and questionable behavior

CHAPTER ONE



Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer

too. I sought out books that helped me be more organized, more mindful, or more focused. These all helped a bit. But overall, I *felt alone on management island*.

Like most managers, I'd been promoted because I did well as an individual contributor. Like most individual contributors chosen to move into management, I was expected to just “know” how to lead others. In the beginning, I did receive a two-day training, but then I was expected to apply everything I had just learned with no preparation time. The thing is, the skills and disciplines that make someone a great individual contributor—focus, drive, attention to detail, obsession with quality, organization, dedication, constant learning—don't always translate to a situation where your main job is to motivate and bring out the best in others.

I had assumed leading was going to be all about being supportive, answering questions, running meetings, and forecasting. But after the adrenaline rush of being in a leadership position faded, I realized that being a boss meant more than just assuming people would do things the way I did. My successes as an individual contributor were irrelevant; this leadership thing was a whole new ball game, and I wanted better results!

What I craved was a mentor—someone to guide me, hold my hand, and talk out the challenges with me. I wanted someone or something to inspire me to be different. It was at that moment I had an epiphany:

I needed to become my own muse.

CHAPTER ONE

Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer



In classical literature, muses were divine beings whose jobs were to inspire artists, poets, musicians, and the like to create works of great beauty. To this day, we talk about someone being a “muse” if they inspire someone else to create something amazing. Well, I’m no artist, but I definitely needed inspiration to become the kind of leader I knew I could be. And if I couldn’t find anyone to inspire me, I would have to do it myself. But how?

After one particularly difficult quarter, exhausted and unsure of what I could do to turn things around, I did the only thing I could think of: I took out a piece of paper and wrote down everything that was on my mind—all the blame and irritation and resentment toward my people that was churning around inside me. When I reviewed what I’d written, I couldn’t believe how frustrated, judgmental, and angry I had become! Underneath all the judgment, it was clear: I was terrified to fail. Ironically, the more my fear of failure increased, the more bitchy and punitive I behaved toward my team—ouch!

Seeing all those toxic thoughts and feelings laid out on the page finally made it clear to me why I wasn’t getting the results I craved. I was treating my people like disposable parts that were only there to help me achieve my goals. I was ignoring the truth that they were real human beings who had goals and challenges of their own.

If I wanted to be a real leader and get great results, I had to treat my people as valued assets. If I helped them grow, enjoy their work more, and reach their personal goals, they would thrive. As a result, my team would thrive, which was what I wanted. After all, like anything in life, we get out what we put in.

CHAPTER ONE

Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer



I gave myself a pep talk and asked my fear of failure to step aside. I then took every negative statement I wrote and replaced it with a positive sentiment about the company, my boss, and my staff. I began to imagine what my ideal team would look like by the end of the year. The more positive statements I wrote, the more I saw that I was surrounded by genius and talent. I just wasn't acknowledging it. There were so many strengths in my boss, my employees, and my coworkers that I had been too blind to see. Now I needed to start seeing those strengths not only in my team but in myself as well. In that moment, everything began to change because I realized something:

People are not disposable parts; they are gifts. It's the leader's job to nurture those gifts.

Right then and there I stopped being consumed with deadlines, meetings, and housekeeping. I switched my focus to my people. I vocalized more frequently what I appreciated and valued in them. I spent time understanding what they needed and empathized more. I listened more intently and encouraged more enthusiastically. All these changes made it easier to have high standards. I asked for more from them—more results, better attitudes, more consistency, more camaraderie—and they began to respond and deliver. Mutual respect was growing, and our team was uniting. People were collaborating more, supporting each other's ideas and celebrating each other's success. Our unique microculture was forming, and I went from dreading leadership to loving it!

The real test of this new microculture came when I went out on maternity leave. I was worried that while I was gone the team would slip back into old habits. But I had underestimated my people. They were

CHAPTER ONE

Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer



even more resilient, self-sufficient, and confident in their skills than I thought. They knew what I expected of them and were driven to perform even when I wasn't watching. They were empowered to make decisions, lead meetings, and celebrate each other's wins to keep the momentum going. With one sales success after another, we closed the quarter at 156 percent to plan—the highest in the company. When I asked them their secret, they said, “We just wanted to make you proud.” That might be the best compliment I've ever received.

Encouraged by the results, I took on other management roles. The higher I climbed, the more ugliness I saw. Managers cut off employees, barked orders, or did not communicate at all. Employees fled other departments at record speeds because of blaming, finger-pointing, and cutthroat competition. After one of my higher-ups eviscerated me in a meeting, I began to understand the saying, “People leave their boss, not their company.” At that moment, I realized I wanted to teach others how to lead.

Eventually, I left corporate management to start my own leadership coaching and training company, Executive Muse. Since then, I've further tested and refined the methodologies I used to turn around my struggling team, and from what I've seen, the world of corporate leadership needs a fresh approach. Too many managers are stressed out trying to take on everything. Too many employees hate their bosses. Too many teams loaded with talent are dysfunctional. According to the World Health Organization, we spend a third of our lives at work. That time shouldn't be miserable but challenging and fulfilling! I've taken my passion for this work and used it to develop the techniques you'll find in this book.

CHAPTER ONE



Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer

They've helped not only me but thousands of leaders *“build the team everyone wants to be on.”*

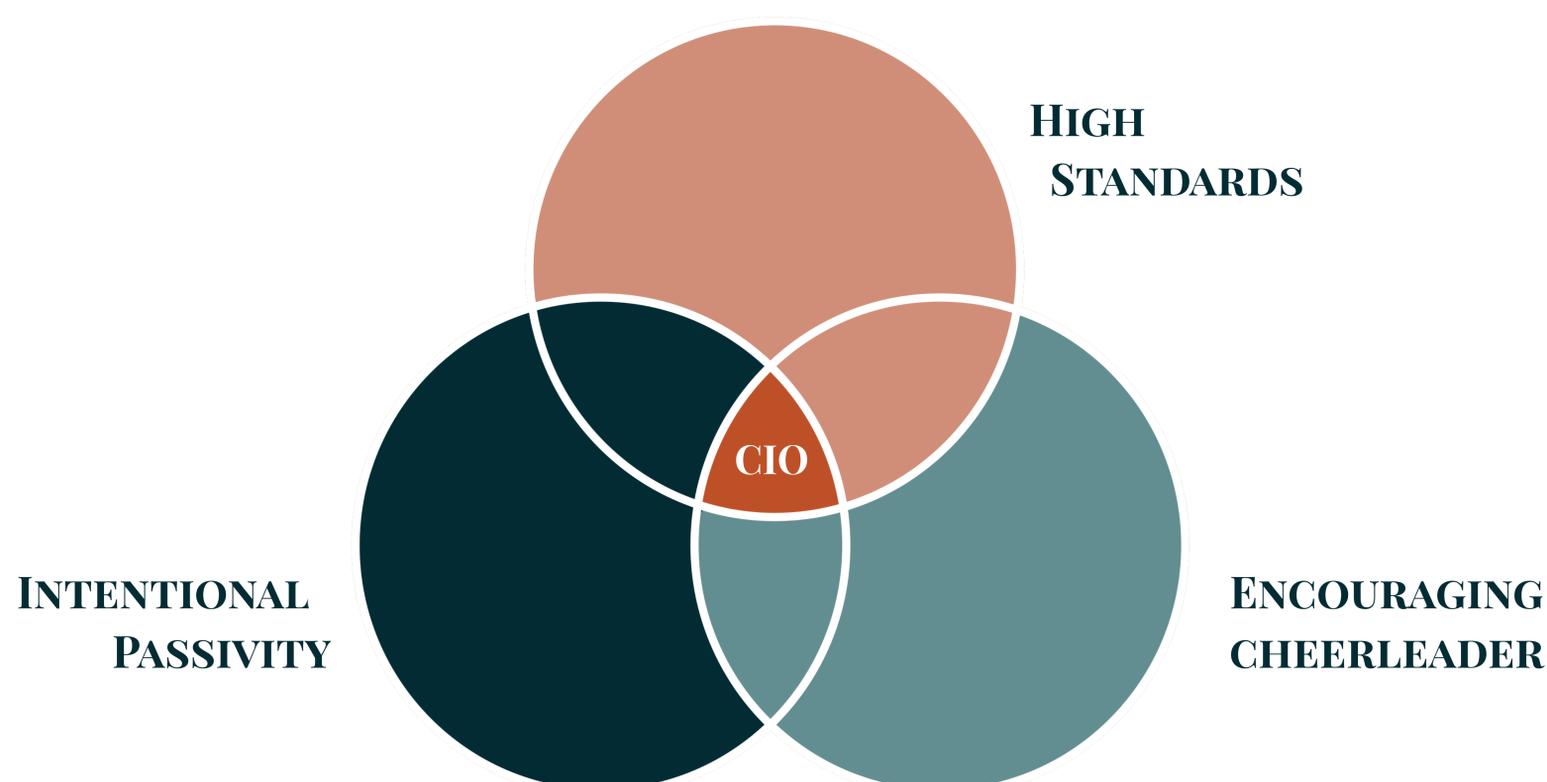
What does “everyone” mean? Of course, you’ll never have a situation in which everyone in your organization loves you, agrees with you, or promises to never leave your team. But what you will have is the confidence, techniques, and tools to attract more people—and more of the talented, high-achieving potential stars—to your team, which will boost loyalty, mutual respect, and productivity. In other words, your team will be more desirable than ever.

Those kinds of teams are the work of highly skilled leaders, and you’ll see the stories of those leaders sprinkled throughout this book. I’ve changed the names to protect the confidentiality of the clients and companies that hire me, but the bottom line is this: leaders want to inspire their people, but they don’t always know how. Once they figure out what it takes to be a chief inspiration officer (CIO), their teams change.

My clients who learn what it means to be a CIO tell me they are more approachable, flexible, and encouraging. They are less stressed and worried. They’re not as quick to step in and solve everyone’s problems when they should be letting people find their own solutions. Their teams are getting along better and are more engaged. I’ve had clients increase their new hires success rate by 50 percent, decrease attrition by 30 percent, and increase sales by more than 200 percent. After one training, a participant asked if there was a book they could read that could help them reinforce everything they had learned. I knew I needed to take everything I was teaching and make it accessible to all. You’re reading that book.

What is a CIO?

A CIO is a muse. It's a leader who, rather than giving orders and telling you what to do, inspires you, guides you, encourages you, challenges you, and then gets out of your way so you can find your own path and grow doing it. Take a look at the Venn diagram below, and you'll see the three traits that make up a CIO. Right in the middle, where those three meet, is the CIO:



✧ *Intentional passivity*: The leader knows when to step back and let employees make mistakes and try new things, even if they fail. They allow subordinates to come up with their own answers. This requires balance. Remain too hands-off, and the employee may feel abandoned. But if you step in too often, you risk creating a codependent relationship in which your team doesn't feel like they can make any decision without you. The CIO hangs back, encourages, and teaches, but they let people find their own way.

❖ *Encouraging Cheerleader:* A CIO knows how to motivate, encourage, and recognize team members' strengths and successes without seeming glib and inauthentic. A CIO knows how to unify a team through multiple communication channels, including meetings, private conversations, emails, and memos.

❖ *High Standards:* The CIO pushes people beyond their comfort zone and encourages them to stretch and find new capacity. They challenge their people to think bigger, more creatively, and push past “good enough” to find excellence. They know what they want, communicate their vision clearly, and lead people toward a common goal without being unreasonable and demanding.

In the center, that's the CIO, the leader who knows when to step back, affirm people's strengths and talents, and communicate when they expect more. Who wouldn't want to work for a leader like that?

Okay, so that's what a CIO is, but what does a CIO do? Good question. A CIO's job is to establish, grow, and protect something I've already mentioned: a thriving team microculture.

What's a Microculture?

At one point in my career, after my boss had been fired, I temporarily reported to my company's chief operating officer (COO). One day he sat down with me and asked me to tell him everything that was going on in my department of thirty-two people. I told him how the team had redesigned the onboarding process, changed how we hired, and how we gave celebratory kudos when deals closed.

I described changes based on feedback I received from the department, meetings and trainings that were run by top performers, “thank-you grams” delivered to other departments, and a lot more.

The COO took all this in and said, “Wow, it’s like you have your own unique culture.” That’s when it hit me: Strong leaders create strong microcultures within their teams. Sure, in a perfect world, every company would have a high-functioning executive team that communicated the organization’s values and directions clearly. Every company would have detailed engagement surveys, its own diversity and inclusion managers, and VPs of people and culture. But in the real world, the senior executives in the C-suite don’t focus on people’s heads and hearts. They rely on their departmental leaders for that.

Chief inspiration officers, the leaders who build the teams that employees yearn to join, do everything I’m going to teach you in this book with one goal in mind: to build and grow their own team microcultures. A unique team microculture will empower your team to perform optimally, even if your company as a whole sits on an island of mediocrity. In this book, I will teach you how to create a rich, healthy team microculture that will take your team’s results to new heights.

What you’ll learn:

✧ *How to get you and your people out of CAVE:* You know those times where you are triggered, having an off moment or a frustrated day? Those times when you may snap at a co-worker, or curtly address your subordinate and then immediately know you could have dealt with the situation better? You are not alone! The normal up and down emotions

of everyday life can hinder our positive influence you (and your team) without even realizing it. That's why I developed the CAVE method.

This tool helps leaders recognize the negative thoughts, behaviors or emotions that may be unintentionally hindering their ability to inspire in challenging times. Once you're free from CAVE, you'll be free to focus on vision, authentic communication, and team cohesion—the bones of a strong microculture.

✧ *CRAVE*: Over the years I've found that team members desperately want five things from their leaders: connection, reliability, appreciation, to know that their work has value, and effective communication. As luck would have it, those five items form the acronym CRAVE. This tool helps you deliver what your team members need most, leading to increased engagement, collaboration, and productivity.

✧ *Real Ideal*: Too often not only do leaders fail to tell their people what they expect and what their long-term goals are, but they don't even know those things themselves. The Real Ideal tool helps you look to the future to unlock your vision and chart a course to get there so you can inspire others toward the same goal. Establishing a team microculture is easier when everyone is working toward a common goal based on common values, vision, and understanding.

✧ *Challenging Conversations*: This is an area in which even the most experienced leaders get cold feet: how to have those difficult talks about performance or discipline. I'll share with you an incredibly simple tool that even works with teenagers! You'll have a framework to put into your own words so your messages are delivered in an authentic way while still

CHAPTER ONE

Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer



being encouraging and redirecting behaviors that get in the way of success. Challenging conversations teach you how to keep the lines of communication open in good times and tough times, leading to a microculture in which people understand what you want—and you understand them.

I want you to feel inspired and confident so you can manage any behavioral or performance situation with ease. I want you to leave a leadership legacy and know that you've had a positive influence on the people around you. I want you to know when to be encouraging or intentionally passive while also maintaining high standards. I want you to be your own muse and a muse for your people—the person who inspires them to show up as their best selves every day, even as they (and you!) grow through the challenges

With those goals in mind, I'm going to show you how to get the most out of your team; how to lower your stress level along the way; and how to create a team microculture that leads to wins, even if the rest of your company is struggling. Since you can't always count on having someone to mentor you, I'll show you how to coach yourself out of counterproductive behaviors and mental habits using the CAVE methodology. I'll teach you how to redirect toxic judgment of yourself and others, communicate high expectations without micromanaging, and inspire your team and organization without becoming a dumping ground for everybody's problem.

I know these methods and tools work because I used them to turn my team from underachieving to the team everyone else was clamoring to join. Within the year, we went from 24 percent below our sales goal to 36

CHAPTER ONE

Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer



percent above it. I also know they work because since 2013 I've been using them to coach and train thousands of leaders and employees at Fortune 500 corporations. I've been brought in to help toxic teams become productive, help leaders learn to have difficult conversations with their subordinates, and show managers how to get past their own self-imposed limitations and triggers. I've been fortunate to have a lot of success. My net promoter training scores—client ratings of my work—average between eighty-five and one hundred—well above the industry average.

But the best indication that these techniques are effective is what my clients say to me. Managers, vice presidents, and senior executives have told me that the methods you're going to learn have made their departments more productive than ever, changing the way they communicate and helping their entire workforces become more engaged. Helping people become better leaders and enjoy their work more is why I do this. I hope to do the same for you.

Consider me your muse.

I've been in your shoes. I know leaders don't always get the tools and mentorship they need to give them confidence. I know what it's like to want to succeed but not know how to get out of your own way. I know you want buy-in, engagement, and collaboration from your team, but you don't want to dump more work on your plate. You want your people to show up ready to lead themselves and be the best they can be, and they can.

I'm here to tell you it's possible. I'm going to show you how to inspire people, motivate them, and help them deal with day-to-day frustrations

CHAPTER ONE



Becoming a Chief Inspiration Officer

without getting bogged down in negativity. You'll learn how to stoke team morale and connection, weed out toxic players, and hire the right people. You'll learn how to set high expectations without being punitive, demanding, or micromanaging, and you'll develop the skills to get your people to truly engage with their work every day.

You can be their muse—their chief inspiration officer. I'll show you how to lead the team everyone wants to be on. Consider me your muse.

Now let's get to work.

I hope you enjoyed your introduction to Chief Inspiration Officer.

Connect or stay in touch with me at:

 @executivemuse

 @executivemuse

 [linkedin.com/in/valries](https://www.linkedin.com/in/valries)

Val Ries



WWW.EXECUTIVE-MUSE.COM