

THE FORT LIFE

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THE FORT LIFE

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Little Better

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STANDARDS TELL THE TRUTH

Shortcuts, Coincidences & The illusions of Both

**What you tolerate can define you.
What you compromise will bill you.**

These are lessons your host has painfully learned and inadvertently taught, all whilst trying to figure out the most efficient way to do this thing called “Business Life.”

Looking back at the starting line, I recall the feeling of being beyond happy just to be in the race. After an eventful seven-year period of hitting brick walls, I had finally found, rather stumbled, into my niche for the world. Once again I had something worth chasing after.

That innocence was refreshing but also nerve-wracking.

Trying something new in any discipline will always create a sense of renewal, a fresh start, an opportunity to reinvent yourself. But it also creates uncertainty, and it certainly opens you up to errors and ill choices, all part of the learning process, so I reckon.



Humanly written by:
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During FORT's infancy years, I took on all the customers we could get, even the ones where the margins were razor thin, sometimes almost at zero, primarily because I needed the purchasing power to fight for more aggressive COGS.

This was great until open invoices became collections.

My strategy was justified. I needed the leverage. But the real invoice came calling when revenue became money I had to chase.

As the company grew and we began expanding our footprint, another lesson presented itself: getting transportation costs at the lowest rate possible became a priority.

However, as we all know, in this life and the next, when it comes to quality, we will **ALWAYS** get some equivalent of what we are willing to spend.

I wanted the "Triple B's"...**Bueno, Bonito y Barato**. Good, Pretty, and Cheap. I wanted Unicorns.

The issue was that making sure I hired drivers and transportation companies who could extend the same level of service to our customers didn't come cheap. I learned that in order to keep the standard of service we extended via the telephone throughout the different branches of the company, I had to raise my own standard when it came to the people completing the last mile.

One uncommitted delivery driver who is rude, careless, or simply doesn't take pride in his work can jeopardize a \$200K customer.

These individuals are not just some randoms delivering boxes to our customers. They are an extension of FORT, often interacting with our customers on a daily basis.

That was the lesson. The standard could not cease to exist when the merchandise left our docks.

Is a standard truly a standard if it's not flowing through the veins and arteries of your business?

I came into this having something extremely clear; Our survival depended (still does), on our ability to solve problems, not create them. The people we serve already have their own operational struggles to deal with, and to them, anyone delivering on our behalf, whether employee, contractor, third-party carrier, UBER Eats or Santa Claus...it doesn't matter. There is no distinction. To them, that person is FORT!

Once FORT hit puberty and our palms and knees had sufficient battle scars, our high customer standards began to yield exquisite fruit... Referrals.

We gained a reputation for getting things done. Product delivered with speed and execution.

We implemented same-day delivery on all orders before 9 a.m. at all our locations and we coupled this with a 99% stock fill rate and customer specific allocation. Practices we honor to this day.

This caused another wave of growth, which of course came with another lesson, an internal operating one.

More revenue requires more hands, and if you are reading this, you most likely feel my pain. Good people who care and are committed to your operating principles are hard to find.

This is one of the biggest transitioning hurdles for small businesses attempting to hit multiple millions in revenue and scale into serious enterprises.



How could I refuse?
I had to answer the door.

At this stage, the point of no return was long gone, so I focused my energy on securing revenue rather than dealing with potential labor shortages, and deliberately chose to deal with the consequences of inadequacy.

Murphy's Law: the bill came due at the most inconvenient time... during the process of expansion.

At first, any shortcuts these team members were taking were not easily detected. As more opportunities came, we began implementing more robust systems of checks and balances for all departments. However, it was during this transition that errors which could have cost us tens of thousands of dollars began to surface.

Don't get me wrong. I took a hit. Actually, I've taken many. However, the one thing I thank GOD for when it comes to this is the experience of being broke.

Shortage of any kind will teach you to be a better steward of what you don't have when you finally earn it.

It forces you to operate with foresight, with discipline, to not overexpose yourself financially, and to recognize when the machine you built is not performing as efficiently as it should.

In our case, having an operator who did not have the capacity to maintain the new required pace of the team translated into inventory issues, forcing additional operational expenses, just to ensure our customers continued to receive the level of service we are known for.

Experienced and skilled hands are usually taken. The ones who are free agents command a higher pay grade, and more often than not, are only capable of being afforded by much larger players with much larger bankrolls. So I hired "potential" rather than experts.

Luckily, 90% of the time, discernment saved the day and the conservative investment paid off. Many of our team members came from completely different industries, but they had hunger and the drive necessary to learn, so to work we went. Training, teaching, developing. Driving the car while changing the oil and the tires... But every once in a while, my decision to bet on potential horribly backfired.

I compromised my own internal operational standard because technically the work was still getting done, and I kept individuals who might have been great people, but underperforming professionals far too long.

They were truly not a good fit for the role, but growth was knocking and she wanted to dance.

But add-on operational expenses were the appetizer. The additional stress of now having to resolve unnecessary issues ripples through the limbs of the departments connected to it, and that was truly the main course.

Other people now needed to get involved to align the ship, pulling their required attention away from tasks of their own.

Effective decision-making is a critical component in certain positions, and retaining the wrong individual one day too long can impact you drastically.

That was my lesson at this junction. One I still revisit and study diligently.

Having the right people in the right roles will make you or break you. I compromised my own operational standard and learned the true meaning of walking before running.

You can't chase every opportunity. You have to scale according to your capabilities in the same manner you wouldn't try to squat 350 lbs when your max is 225.

You build towards your goal, adjusting at every step. Respecting the time and the process.

It may be boring, but it's sustainable.

In business, one must set in place multiple pillars to remain consistent. You have to make sure your foundation is solid enough across all departments, so when, not if, but when one of these pillars takes a hit, it doesn't succumb to the blow. The other pillars can carry the weight while you reinforce and correct.

It all starts with the standards you operate from inception.

We all have them. Time exposes their weaknesses and it is up to us to raise them, not only professionally, but also personally.

Your business, your operation, the way it navigates the intricacies of daily operational flows is essentially a reflection of your leadership and the standards tied to it.

Movement is determined by motion, not words. You can't change the way people move. But you can certainly change the way you operate.

Raise the Standard. Force growth from within. Examine the self first and by default you will be improving the energy of the organization. The right people will flourish in your ecosystem. The ones who simply may not be a good fit will often remove themselves from it. Just keep in mind that occasionally, you will have to make tough choices as it is part of the game we chose to play.

Compromise is often a solution. Compromising your standards should not be on the table.





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TRAVEL

Travel Standards Reflect Leadership

The way a leader travels often reveals more than personal preferences.

It reveals how they prepare, how they allocate their time, how they respond to uncertainty, and what they consider important when circumstances move beyond their control.

Travel is frequently viewed as an escape from responsibility. A temporary departure from schedules, expectations, and the demands of everyday leadership. Yet the habits that define someone in the workplace rarely disappear when they board an airplane.

They simply become easier to observe.

A leader who prepares carefully, respects the time of others, and remains composed when plans change is demonstrating more than good travel etiquette. They are revealing standards that extend beyond the office.

The same is true in the opposite direction.

Someone who consistently arrives unprepared, disregards commitments, or allows inconvenience to dictate their behavior is communicating something about the principles they follow when accountability becomes less visible.

Travel introduces a unique environment because control is never absolute.

Flights are delayed. Reservations change. Luggage disappears. Meetings begin before the body has recovered from the previous time zone. Circumstances emerge that no itinerary could have anticipated.

These moments test something more meaningful than patience.

They test preparation.

Preparation does not eliminate uncertainty. It creates the capacity to respond to it without immediately sacrificing judgment. Experienced leaders understand this distinction. They recognize that a well-structured plan is not designed to guarantee that everything will go according to expectation. It is designed to provide direction when circumstances inevitably change.

That principle applies equally to business.

Organizations cannot control every market disruption, customer demand, supplier delay, or unexpected challenge. What they can control is the quality of their preparation and the standards they maintain when conditions become difficult.

Travel also exposes how people treat time.

A delayed departure may create frustration, but it does not justify disregarding the commitments made to others. A demanding schedule may require flexibility, but it does not eliminate the responsibility to communicate clearly.

Leadership is often revealed in these seemingly insignificant moments.

Not when everything is convenient.

When it isn't.

There is also a deeper connection between travel and perspective. Moving through different environments challenges assumptions. It introduces new cultures, unfamiliar systems, and ways of solving problems that may differ from our own.

Leaders who remain curious are more likely to recognize that their existing methods are not the only methods capable of producing results.

Yet curiosity requires humility.

The purpose of travel is not simply to confirm what we already believe. It is to encounter enough difference to reconsider what we thought we understood.

The strongest leaders carry that perspective back into their organizations. They listen more carefully. They question familiar assumptions. They recognize that experience does not automatically create wisdom unless it is followed by reflection.

Travel, therefore, becomes more than movement.

It becomes an opportunity to observe the standards that guide our behavior when no one is evaluating us directly.

Because leadership is not defined only by the decisions made in conference rooms or the instructions communicated to a team.

It is reflected in how we respond to inconvenience, how we honor commitments, and how we conduct ourselves when circumstances fail to match our expectations.

Every journey eventually ends.

The question is what our behavior along the way reveals about the person leading it.

And whether those standards remain consistent long after we return home.



SALES

Standards in Client Selection

Every business wants more customers.

At least, that is how growth is often described.

New accounts create optimism. Proposals generate activity. Signed agreements provide visible evidence that the sales organization is moving forward. When revenue is increasing, the decision to accept another client can appear almost automatic.

Yet there comes a point when growth requires a different question.

Not whether the customer is willing to buy.

Whether the relationship is worth building.

This distinction is easy to overlook because the financial benefits of a sale are immediate, while the consequences of accepting the wrong client often emerge gradually.

A customer may appear profitable during the first month. The contract is signed, the order is processed, and the revenue is recorded. The organization celebrates the result without fully understanding what the relationship will require over time.

Then the exceptions begin.

Additional requests. Unclear expectations. Repeated changes to agreed terms. Delayed decisions.

Pressure to prioritize one account at the expense of others. Individually, these issues may seem manageable.

Collectively, they can reshape the business.

Client selection is therefore not simply a sales responsibility. It is a leadership decision that influences operations, finance, employee morale, and the quality of service an organization can consistently provide.

Every customer enters the business with expectations.

Some are aligned with the company's capabilities and values. They understand the importance of communication, respect established agreements, and recognize that a successful partnership requires responsibility from both sides.

Others may expect the organization to continually adapt its standards to accommodate demands that were never part of the original agreement.

Both customers may generate revenue.

The operational consequences, however, are not necessarily the same.

This is where discernment becomes essential.

A disciplined sales organization does not evaluate an opportunity exclusively through its potential contract value. It considers the resources required to serve the account, the

complexity it introduces, the risks associated with its expectations, and the likelihood that the relationship can develop into something sustainable.

Revenue remains important.

It is simply not the only consideration. The challenge becomes more difficult during periods of financial pressure. When sales slow down, declining an opportunity can feel irresponsible. Leaders may convince themselves that temporary compromises are necessary and that the organization can resolve the resulting problems later. But later often arrives with a cost.

Operations inherits commitments it did not help establish. Employees are asked to compensate for promises that were difficult to fulfill from the beginning. Customer service becomes responsible for repairing expectations that should have been addressed during the sales process.

The sale may have been completed.

The relationship may already be failing.

Strong client selection requires the courage to communicate boundaries before a contract is signed. It requires asking difficult questions about fit, expectations, payment behavior, and organizational capacity.

It also requires recognizing that declining a customer is not necessarily a rejection of the customer.

Sometimes it is an acknowledgment that the partnership would not serve either party well.

The most sustainable sales organizations understand that their reputation is built through the relationships they choose to maintain. They do not pursue every opportunity simply because it is available.

They focus on customers whose expectations align with the value they are capable of delivering. This approach may reduce certain opportunities in the short term.

It can also protect the organization from commitments that gradually weaken its standards.

Because every customer contributes more than revenue.

They contribute expectations.

And those expectations eventually become part of the business they are allowed to shape.



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OPERATIONS

Standards as Culture



Image by alexsander/tittlewolf on Magnific

Culture is often discussed as though it exists separately from daily operations.

Organizations publish values, conduct meetings, develop mission statements, and communicate expectations about the kind of workplace they want to create. These activities have value, but they do not establish culture on their own.

Culture becomes visible through repetition.

It is reflected in what employees are expected to do, what leaders choose to address, and what the organization continues to accept when circumstances become inconvenient.

A standard written in a handbook has limited influence if the daily operation consistently rewards behavior that contradicts it.

This is where many organizations experience a gradual disconnect.

Leadership communicates the importance of accuracy, but errors are overlooked when deadlines become tight. Teams are encouraged to communicate openly, yet difficult information is discouraged because it may create discomfort. Processes are described as essential, but exceptions become routine whenever someone considers them inconvenient.

Over time, employees learn from the difference between what is said and what is practiced.

And practice is what they remember.

Operations plays a central role in this process because it translates organizational expectations into repeated behavior. Every receiving procedure, quality inspection, inventory reconciliation, approval workflow, and customer service protocol communicates something about what the organization considers acceptable.

The procedure itself is important.

The consistency with which it is protected is even more important.

A process that is followed only when conditions are favorable does not create reliability. It creates uncertainty. Employees begin making individual judgments about which standards matter and which ones can be ignored when pressure increases.

That uncertainty eventually spreads.

One department makes an exception to resolve an immediate problem. Another adjusts its workflow to accommodate the decision. A third team receives incomplete information and creates a workaround of its own.

No single decision appears especially serious. Yet the combined effect is a culture built around accommodation rather than consistency.

This does not mean operations should resist change.

Strong organizations must continually evaluate their processes. Markets evolve, technology advances, customer expectations shift, and systems that once served a purpose may eventually create unnecessary friction.

The difference lies in how change is introduced. Improvement begins with evaluation. It asks whether a process remains effective, whether its purpose is still relevant, and whether a better method can achieve the same objective with greater reliability.

Compromise often begins with convenience. It removes a requirement because following it feels difficult in the moment, without considering the consequences of making that decision repeatedly.

One strengthens the organization.

The other gradually weakens it.

Leaders have a particular responsibility in this area because employees observe what happens when standards are challenged. If a manager protects a process during a difficult period, the team learns that consistency matters even under pressure.

If the manager immediately abandons it, the team learns something else.

They learn that urgency has the authority to redefine expectations.



Over time, these lessons become part of organizational identity.

Culture is not created by what an organization claims to value when everything is working well. It is created by what people experience when deadlines are tight, resources are limited, and the easier decision competes with the correct one.

That is why operational standards deserve more than documentation.

They deserve conviction.

Because every repeated decision teaches the organization how to behave.

And eventually, the behavior becomes the culture everyone is expected to live with.



PHILANTHROPY

Standards of Stewardship

Giving is often measured by what is contributed.

The size of a donation. The number of people reached. The resources distributed through a particular initiative. These measurements provide useful information, yet they do not fully explain the responsibility that accompanies generosity.

Because philanthropy is not simply about having resources.



Image by Adobe Express

This is where stewardship becomes essential. Stewardship recognizes that resources should never be treated as though they exist without purpose. Every contribution represents an opportunity to create value, but it also carries an obligation to use that opportunity thoughtfully.

A donation made quickly may create immediate assistance.

It is about how those resources are entrusted, managed, and directed toward a meaningful purpose.

As organizations grow, the opportunity to create impact expands. More financial capacity allows businesses to support educational programs, community initiatives, scholarships, and organizations addressing important social needs.

But greater capacity also introduces greater responsibility.

The decisions become more complex. More requests require evaluation. Different priorities compete for limited resources. Leaders must determine which initiatives align with the organization's values and which ones can produce meaningful, sustainable outcomes.

A carefully evaluated commitment may create lasting change.

Neither approach should be dismissed entirely. Emergencies require responsiveness, while long-term initiatives require patience and planning. The responsibility lies in understanding the difference and ensuring that the decision reflects the purpose of the contribution.

Effective philanthropy requires more than good intentions.

It requires accountability.

Organizations must understand where resources are going, how decisions are made, and whether the intended beneficiaries are receiving meaningful support. Transparency is not a limitation on generosity.

It is what allows generosity to remain credible. Without accountability, even well-intentioned programs can lose direction.

Resources may be distributed without clear objectives. Initiatives may continue because they have existed for years rather than because they remain effective. Attention may shift toward visible achievements while less measurable, but equally important, outcomes receive less consideration.

The challenge is not simply to give.

It is to remain responsible for what giving is intended to accomplish.

This principle extends beyond financial contributions.

Time, expertise, mentorship, and professional relationships can create opportunities that money alone cannot provide. A scholarship may open a door, but guidance and encouragement can help someone develop the confidence to walk through it.

The most meaningful forms of stewardship recognize that people are not projects to be completed.

They are individuals whose circumstances, potential, and needs deserve thoughtful consideration.

That perspective changes the way organizations approach impact.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the number of initiatives completed, leaders begin asking more meaningful questions.

Are the resources reaching the people they were intended to serve? Are the partnerships creating sustainable value? Is the organization remaining faithful to the purpose that originally inspired its commitment?

These questions may not produce immediate recognition.

They create discipline.

Philanthropy also requires consistency. A single contribution can provide valuable assistance, but lasting impact frequently depends on commitments that continue beyond the moment when attention is highest.

Communities develop gradually. Educational opportunities take time to produce results. Institutions become stronger through sustained support rather than occasional visibility.

The organizations that understand this do not treat giving as an activity added whenever circumstances permit.

They build stewardship into the way they operate.

Because resources are temporary.

The responsibility to use them well extends beyond the moment they are received.

And the true measure of philanthropy is not simply how much an organization gives, but how carefully it protects the purpose behind every contribution.



TECHNOLOGY

Technology Standards Prevent Chaos

Technology is often introduced as a solution to complexity. New platforms promise greater efficiency. Automation reduces manual work. Integrated systems improve visibility.

Artificial intelligence offers opportunities to accelerate decisions and transform how organizations operate. Yet technology does not automatically create order.

Without clear standards, it can make existing disorder more difficult to understand.

Every organization eventually accumulates systems.

Applications are introduced to solve specific problems, platforms are adopted by individual departments, and processes evolve as new requirements emerge.

At first, these decisions appear practical.

A team selects a tool that meets its immediate needs. Another department introduces a different solution. Employees create workarounds to connect systems that were never designed to communicate with one another.

Each decision may be reasonable in isolation. Together, they can create a fragmented operation.

Information becomes difficult to locate. Responsibilities become unclear. Data is duplicated across platforms. Employees spend time determining which system contains the correct information rather than using that information to make decisions.

The organization is still operating.

But the cost of operating continues to increase. This is where technology standards become important.

Standards establish consistency in how systems are selected, implemented, maintained, and used. They provide a framework for ensuring that technology supports the organization's objectives rather than becoming a collection of disconnected solutions.

The purpose is not to prevent innovation.

It is to ensure that innovation remains aligned with operational needs.

A new application may offer impressive capabilities, but those capabilities have limited value if the system creates unnecessary duplication, introduces security concerns, or requires employees to develop processes that conflict with existing workflows.

Technology should solve problems.

It should not create new ones that the organization must eventually learn to manage.

The challenge becomes greater as businesses grow. Different departments begin selecting tools according to their own priorities. What improves efficiency for one team may introduce complications for another.

Without shared standards, these decisions can gradually weaken organizational alignment.



Image by Magnific

A finance department may require reliable data controls. Operations may prioritize workflow speed. Sales may seek flexibility and immediate access to customer information. Each objective matters, but technology decisions must also consider how the systems interact across the organization.

Integration is not simply a technical concern. It is an operational responsibility.

Strong technology leadership begins by asking questions before approving solutions.

What problem are we trying to solve? Does the system integrate with our existing infrastructure? Who will be responsible for maintaining it? How will employees be trained? What happens when the platform fails or the provider changes its terms?

These questions may slow down implementation.

They can prevent much greater disruption later. Standards also create accountability.

Employees should understand which tools are approved, how information must be handled, and where responsibility lies when systems do not function as expected.

Technology cannot eliminate human judgment. It can, however, provide the structure that allows judgment to be applied consistently. This is especially important when organizations introduce automation and artificial intelligence.

Faster execution does not guarantee better outcomes. If the underlying data is inaccurate, the process is poorly defined, or the decision-making authority is unclear, technology may simply accelerate the consequences.

The goal is not to adopt every available solution.

It is to build an environment where technology contributes to clarity, reliability, and sustainable performance.

Because chaos rarely begins with one major failure.

It develops through small inconsistencies that remain unaddressed.

One unauthorized application. One undocumented process. One disconnected system. One exception that becomes permanent.

Eventually, the organization discovers that it is not managing technology.

It is managing the consequences of having no standards.

And by that point, restoring order often requires more than implementing a new tool.

It requires rebuilding the discipline that should have guided the tools from the beginning.

Word Search

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			7	6	8			
6		5	3			7		2
	9		1				3	
						3		4
	6						5	
2		9						
	2				1		7	
8		1			3	4		6
			4	5	9			

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