Business Lessons FROM THE BOYS IN THE BOAT

By Matt Bradley

Introduction: "It Has to Be About the Boat"

Before I joined the hearth industry in 2021, I was an English teacher for a decade. During my last two years at Sisters High School—at the height of the COVID pandemic—I designed a course called Fortitude, Life, and Literature. The curriculum for this class included several of my favorite books, including *Man's Search for Meaning, Hidden Figures, Unbroken,* and *The Boys in the Boat.*

The last book on that list is especially important to me, and I always find myself thinking about it in the fall. I'm guessing that's because most of the book revolves around the academic year, as the story focuses on a group of young men who rowed crew at the University of Washington during the Great Depression.

If you've never read the book, you should. Not only because it tells the true story of how eight genuine guys from the Pacific Northwest managed to beat a bunch of Nazis at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. But also because it's full of lessons that can help you run a better business.

Most of these lessons revolve around what the main character, Joe Rantz, consistently calls "the boat." When Joe talks about "the boat" throughout the book, he doesn't simply mean the racing shell—the *Husky Clipper*—that he and his teammates sent surging over the water. Instead, "the boat" is a symbol for something much more.

Here's how the book's author, Daniel James Brown, describes what Joe meant by "the boat":

> "It was when [Joe] tried to talk about 'the boat' that his words began to falter and tears welled up in his eyes. . . . Watching Joe struggle for composure over and over, I realized that 'the boat' was something more than just the shell or its crew. To Joe, it encompassed but transcended both—it was something mysterious and almost beyond definition. It was a shared experience—a singular thing that had unfolded in a golden sliver of time long gone, when nine good-hearted young men strove together, pulled together as one, gave everything they had for one another,

bound together forever by pride and respect and love. Joe was crying, at least in part, for the loss of that vanished moment but much more, I think, for the sheer beauty of it."

Brown had this epiphany during his first lengthy conversation with Joe, who coincidentally happened to be his neighbor. Near the end of that conversation, Brown—who was already an established author at the time—mentioned that he'd like to write a book about Joe and his rowing days. Joe told Brown that he'd like that, then gently "admonished" him. "But not just about me," Joe said. "It has to be about the boat."

That last sentence encapsulates two of the best business lessons you can learn from the book—namely, that struggles can promote independence, and that independence is a powerful prerequisite to what rowers call "swing."

With all that in mind, let's take a deep dive into each of these lessons and explore how they specifically apply to those in our industry.

Struggle, Strength, and Independence

Like many parents in 2024, I'm often tempted to shield my children from struggle. If my 2-year-old daughter gets her head stuck in her jammies while she's putting them on, I'm tempted to help her find her way out instead of letting her wrestle with the fabric. If my middle son falls off his bike, I'm tempted to pick him up off the ground instead of letting him dust himself off. If my oldest son feels nervous about going to school, I'm tempted to let him dawdle and delay instead of seeing him out the door.

Of course, I do all these things because I love my children, and I instinctually want to serve and protect them. I also live in a culture that tells me that pain should be avoided—and pleasure should be pursued—at all costs, and I'm certainly not immune to that messaging.

Fortunately, I'm married to a strong and intelligent woman with multiple degrees in early childhood education. And whenever I'm tempted to shield my children from struggle, she gently sends me the same message over and over again: "*Let them do hard things*."

The reason my wife constantly reminds me of this is simple: Children who do hard things are more likely to become independent adults. And this reality, in turn, points to an even more fundamental truth: Struggles can be incredible sources of strength.

Evidence for this axiom abounds throughout *The Boys in the Boat*. Joe Rantz, for example, lost his mother to throat cancer when he was just four years old. This tragedy plunged his father, Harry, into a deep depression, and he retreated to the Canadian wilderness to process his grief. Before he left, Harry put his *four-year-old son* on a train that ran from Spokane, Washington all the way to Pennsylvania, where he lived with his aunt Alma for the next year. Shortly after arriving, Joe got scarlet fever, which forced him to stay isolated in bed for months on end. After recuperating, the now

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five-year-old boy got on *another* train in Pennsylvania and rode back west to Washington, where he reunited with his father and met his new step mother, Thula, who never took a liking to him. Over the next decade, Thula and Harry had two more children, and the economy collapsed due to the Great Depression. In November of 1929, Thula and Harry decided to abandon their family farm, pack up their two youngest children, and leave Joe behind to fend for himself.

He was 15.

To be clear, I don't wish a childhood like Joe had on anyone, and I don't think that humans have to go through such extreme struggles to become strong adults. At the same time, the book reveals that Joe took all of his struggles as opportunities to gain strength and become independent. Despite being abandoned during his sophomore year of high school, he managed to support himself financially by working odd jobs, and he graduated with good enough grades to get into the University of Washington. At that point, his main problem wasn't passing his classes. Instead, it was figuring out how to pay his tuition—and that's why he tried out for the crew team.

At the time, college athletes didn't get full-ride scholarships or NIL deals. Instead, they got *guaranteed jobs*. That's right: One of the major benefits of being on a college team in the 1930s was that athletes had jobs they worked *while* going to school *and* training for competition. This may not seem like much of a perk now, but it was an absolute game-changer for Joe, who wouldn't have been able to find work due to the Great Depression and didn't have any other way to pay for college.

So it was necessity that drove Joe to try out for the crew team—and it was incredible that he didn't get cut. After all, he had never rowed before. He didn't know the first thing about racing shells, rowing techniques, or stroke rates. He just knew that he had to find a way to pay his own tuition—because no one else was going to do it for him.

Herein lies the first business lesson from *The Boys in the Boat*: Struggles can produce the sort of strength that's required for independence.

Such was the case with Joe Rantz. The serious struggles he faced throughout his childhood made him self-motivated and self-reliant. They taught him to do more with less and to work for what he needed. They forced him into arduous jobs—splitting wood, digging ditches, cutting hay—that built his stamina and strength. All told, they turned him into a college kid who was mentally tough, physically strong, and internally motivated. So even though he'd never rowed a day in his life, his past experiences made him a perfect fit for crew—a sport that works every muscle in the body, requires tons of mental fortitude, and tends to garner very little glory.

But how does this portion of Joe's story connect to your hearth business? Well, if you're looking for new people to join your team—as many leaders in our industry are—then you don't need to find candidates with perfect résumés or polished pasts. (If you need evidence of that in our industry, just remember that Tim

Reed was once a selfish and irresponsible kid playing punk shows at dive bars—and I was his idiot friend.) You also don't need to find professionals who have been selling, installing, or servicing fireplaces for 25 years. Instead, you just need to find people who are determined to make their own way, willing to learn from their life experiences, and ready to draw strength from their struggles.

In other words, you don't need a bunch of five-star recruits who already know how to row. You just need a few independent farm kids who are motivated enough to get in the boat and tough enough to keep coming to practice.

Independence, Interdependence, and Swing

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey writes that "the current social paradigm enthrones independence. It is the avowed goal of many individuals and social movements. Most of the self-improvement material puts independence on a pedestal, as though communication, teamwork, and cooperation were lesser values."

Given this cultural trend, it's tempting to think that creating a team of independent individuals is the key to building a successful business. But that's actually only the first first step—at least according to Covey, who came up with the concept of the "Maturity Continuum." Simply put, the Maturity Continuum starts with dependence, progresses to independence, and culminates in interdependence. While Covey acknowledges that independence is vital for self-reliance, he also insists that interdependence—working together to achieve more than one person could alone—is the highest form of maturity. He writes, "If I am physically interdependent, I am self-reliant and capable, but I also realize that you and I working together can accomplish far more than, even at my best, I could accomplish alone."

Of all the lessons that Joe Rantz learned while he was in the boat, this one gave him the most trouble. His early life was a crucible of hardship that forged him into someone who could fend for himself under any circumstances. But the same challenges that made him incredibly independent also made him immensely wary of others. Trust didn't come easily to him; he believed that survival depended solely on his own resolve. In rowing, this mindset eventually became a barrier. As Brown observes, "Great oarsmen and oarswomen are necessarily made of conflicting stuff. . . . The sport offers so many opportunities for suffering and so few opportunities for glory that only the most tenaciously self-reliant and self-motivated are likely to succeed at it. And yet, at the same time—and this is key—no other sport demands and rewards the complete abandonment of the self the way that rowing does."

When Joe arrived at UW, he had the prerequisite personality of an exceptional oarsman: He was self-motivated, self-disciplined, and self-reliant. But he lacked the second half of the equation—the ability to abandon himself and give everything he had to other guys in the boat. This was Joe's greatest challenge—not rowing itself, but learning to trust his teammates enough to find what rowers call "swing." Here's how Brown describes it in the book:

> "[Swing] only happens when all eight oarsmen are rowing in such perfect unison that no single action by any one is out of synch with those of all the others. It's not just that the oars

enter and leave the water at precisely the same instant. Sixteen arms must begin to pull, sixteen knees must begin to fold and unfold, eight bodies must begin to slide forward and backward, eight backs must bend and straighten all at once. Each minute action—each subtle turning of wrists—must be mirrored exactly by each oarsman, from one end of the boat to the other. Only then will the boat continue to run, unchecked, fluidly and gracefully between pulls of the oars. Only then will it feel as if the boat is a part of each of them, moving as if on its own. Only then does pain entirely give way to exultation. Rowing then becomes a kind of perfect language. Poetry, that's what a good swing feels like."

Joe's ultimate test of letting go came during the final race of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. After pushing himself to his physical limits, he reached a moment when his pain peaked and the crowd became a noisy blur. As Brown describes in the book, it was during that final, furious sprint that Joe realized with "startling clarity" that he had already given everything he could as an individual. The only way to win was to "finally abandon all doubt, trust absolutely without reservation that he and the boy in front of him and the boys behind him would all do precisely what they needed to do at precisely the instant they needed to do it." He understood that victory required throwing himself into each stroke "as if he were throwing himself off of a cliff into a void, with unquestioned faith" that his teammates would be there for him, giving their all with every pull.

And you know what? *They did*—and that's why they won the gold.

This is the culminating scene in Joe's story, and it

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offers some powerful business lessons. Because while it's essential to have independent individuals on your team, building a thriving business means inspiring them to come together to fight for the greater good. Creating a team with this level of interdependence—with this version of swing—requires a deep trust that's cultivated through small, everyday moments. Before the big race in Berlin, Joe's team spent countless hours together on Lake Washington fighting their frozen oars, puking after tough practices, and laughing over inside jokes. That's why they trusted each other so much. That's also why you should make the most of the small, daily interactions that you already have with your team. So engage in candid conversations after serious setbacks; listen to the frustrations that others are facing; enjoy shared laughs after long days; and watch how these small interactions nurture an unspoken understanding that everyone in the company is pulling for each other.

Once you've earned this level of trust through your actions, you're in a great position to provide your team members with a sense of shared purpose—something beyond a bonus check or the bottom line. Remember, Joe and his teammates weren't just rowing for individual glory. They were rowing for their school, their city, their

country, and, ultimately, for the love they had for one another. In a similar way, businesses that want to find their swing need to think beyond individual paychecks and financial incentives. As Daniel Hammer highlighted in a recent *Fire Time* article, a compelling purpose statement and a set of core values can give team members a reason to go all in. His experiences at Sutter Home & Hearth—where their mission is to show that "business can be a force for good"—illustrates that sharing a virtuous vision can align a team's efforts and inspire them to work toward a common goal.

Ultimately, creating a business with swing isn't about training plans or project checklists. Instead, it's about showing team members how their individual efforts contribute to the greater good. When that happens, daily struggles become opportunities to grow, and the business becomes more than just the sum of its parts. It becomes a boat in perfect swing, surging through the water with eight oarsmen rowing as one.

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Conclusion: Your Life Is Not About You

On the back of my phone, I have a sticker with a refrain that's been popularized by Bishop Barron: "Your life is not about you."

Essentially, the line means that all humans—including you and me—aren't meant to cave in on ourselves. Instead, we're meant to get outside ourselves by using our individual strengths to promote the greater good.

To be clear, I don't keep this sticker on the back of my phone because I consistently live this way. Trust me: I can be self-centered and self-absorbed with the best of them. But that's actually *why* I keep the sticker somewhere I often see it—because in a selfish and skeptical world, I need constant reminders that making my life about me will lead to my own self-destruction.

Of course, this runs counter to what we hear from most internet influencers, business moguls, and pop stars, who constantly command us to put our individual urges and desires above everything—and everyone—else.

But they've all got it wrong—and Bishop Barron and Joe Rantz have got it right.

Because your life isn't about you. It's about *the boat*.

And if you remember that as you lead your business, then you and your team will get a lot more than gold.