

# **The Sponge & The Magnet**

*What your culture is doing to your  
people*

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## Introduction

# What did you name it?

**B**efore we walk through the doors of Drystone & Partners, I need you to sit with a question.

Not a comfortable one. The comfortable ones don't change anything.

When was the last time you asked yourself — honestly — whether the people around you are growing or drying out?

Not performing. Not hitting targets. Not showing up. Growing. Absorbing. Staying soft enough to learn, flexible enough to adapt, present enough to

actually give something back when the pressure comes.

Because here is what I have learned coaching individuals and organizations across this country: most leaders cannot answer that question. Not because they don't care — but because they stopped looking. And while they were looking at the numbers, the strategy, the next initiative — the most important thing in the building quietly started to dry out. This book is about that. All of it.

Bert chose the name Drystone & Partners because he wanted people to know exactly what they were dealing with. Something solid. Something permanent. Something built to outlast the trends and the market shifts and the economic seasons that come and go.

Drystone construction is an ancient technique — walls built without mortar, held together purely by the weight and placement of the stones themselves. No binding agent. No adhesive. Just structure and gravity and the intelligence of how the pieces are laid.

Bert loved that. He put it on the sign and never looked back.

What he didn't know — what none of us know when we name the thing we are building — is that the name we choose sometimes knows more about our future than we do.

Dry. Stone.

The very words he chose for strength would one day describe the crisis inside the walls. That is not a coincidence. That is a foreshadow. And this story is the unfolding of it.

Whoever you are — whatever seat you are sitting in right now — this book was written for you.

If you are the leader who built something real and can feel it slipping without being able to name why, you are Bert at the window.

If you are the employee who shows up every day with everything you have but can't figure out why the environment around you feels harder to move in than it used to, you are Absoro in the lobby with a notepad and a gut feeling you haven't learned to trust yet.

If you are the mentor who hasn't fully stepped into what you carry — who has been watching from the corner of the room, waiting for the right moment — you are Pullard at the

coffee machine. And the right moment is now.

And if somewhere in the quiet honesty of reading these first few pages you have recognized something in yourself that has gotten hard, that has stopped absorbing, that has been running on history instead of hunger — then you are Crusty. And this book has a chapter for you too. One that does not end where you think it ends.

A sponge that dries out is not dead.

It is just waiting for the right exposure.

The characters in this story are cartoonish on purpose. The lessons are not.

What happens inside Drystone & Partners happens inside every organization that has ever existed long enough to forget why it started.

The names are different. The fluorescent lights are the same.

So let's go inside. The fountain is in the lobby. Bert is at the window. And somewhere on the work floor, a young man with a paper notepad is about to change the temperature of the room.

— Demorrious D. Robinson

CHAPTER ONE

# The View From the Top Floor

**C**onference Room B — also known as "The Fishbowl" — sat directly above the main work floor of Drystone & Partners. Floor-to-ceiling glass. The kind of room that made you feel important going in and deeply uncomfortable staying too long.

Bert stood at the window the way he always did.

Hands clasped behind his back. Chin slightly lifted. The posture of a man surveying something he built — and he had built it. Thirty years ago

this was a folding table, two phones, and a dream held together by ambition and bad coffee. Now it was four floors, two hundred and twelve employees, and a lobby with a fountain that nobody had asked for but Bert had insisted upon.

"You know," he said, fogging the glass slightly with the warmth of the memory already forming, "I remember when we rang the bell at the IPO. Ticker tape. The whole floor went absolutely —"

Pulse said, "Bert."

He kept going. "— the team was unbelievable that year. Thirty-two percent growth. We took everyone to the islands. You remember the islands, Pulse? Ledger, you remember the islands."

Ledger said, "We remember the islands, Bert."

Pulse said, "You've told us about the islands for the last two years, Bert. In this exact room. Standing in that exact spot." A beat of silence.

Bert turned from the window. Slowly. The way a man turns when he knows what's waiting behind him isn't nearly as good as what he was looking at.

Pulse and Ledger sat at the far end of the conference table, their backs to the floor below, folders open, faces steady. They had the particular expression of two people who had been preparing for this conversation for considerably longer than Bert had been avoiding it.

Bert sat down. He pulled his chair in. He looked at both of them the way

he used to look at the numbers when they were good — like they owed him something.

Then he said it. The question that had been sitting in his chest for months, taking up the space where the good feeling used to live.

"What happened?"

Not a dramatic outburst. Not a fist on the table. Just two words, worn down to the bone from being thought about every morning in the elevator on the way up.

He already knew the stakes. No fourth quarter turnaround meant no Christmas party, no bonuses, no New Year kickoff to fire everybody up for the year ahead. It meant taped-up boxes and hand trucks and the very particular silence of cubicles that used to have people in them. Bert had built

this place. He was not about to watch it become a storage unit.

Ledger opened her folder first.

Ledger said, "Two years ago, revenue started fluctuating. Not crashing — fluctuating. The kind of thing that feels like weather until you look back and realize it was never weather at all."

Pulse said, "And two years ago I started noticing something in the people. Small things. The kind you don't put in a report. Fewer lunches together. Quieter hallways. The energy in a room when someone walks in and the energy when they leave. I kept notes, Bert. I kept a lot of notes."

What happened next took the better part of an hour.

The three of them went back through Drystone & Partners year by year, hire by hire, quarter by quarter. Ledger laid out the numbers. Pulse laid out the people. Together they built a picture on the conference room table — not in charts or graphs, but in names and moments and decisions that had seemed small at the time.

The further back they went, the clearer something became. This wasn't a market problem. This wasn't a strategy problem. This wasn't even a product problem.

Drystone & Partners had a culture problem. And like most culture problems, it hadn't arrived with a bang. It had arrived the way a sponge dries out — slowly, quietly, completely — until one day you pick it up and

realize it stopped being useful a long time ago.

Bert stared at the table for a long moment.

Then he looked up at the work floor below — at the people moving between desks, pouring coffee, laughing at something on a screen — and for the first time in two years he didn't see the heyday.

He saw the problem.

Down on the work floor — three desks from the window, four rows from the back — a man named Crusty was explaining to a new hire why the way things had always been done was the only way they should ever be done. He had been explaining this for the better part of twenty-three years. He was very good at it. The new hire

smiled politely and quietly decided to find another desk.

## **The Squeeze**

Let me talk to you for a minute — not as the narrator of this story, but as someone who has sat in that conference room. Maybe not the one with a fountain in the lobby, but one just like it. The one where the numbers finally stopped lying and the real conversation had to begin.

Here is what Bert's question — "what happened?" — actually is. It is the question every leader eventually has to ask when the gap between where the company was and where it is right now gets too wide to ignore. The hardest part is not finding the answer. The hardest part is admitting that the answer was in plain sight the whole time.

Culture doesn't crash. It dries out. Slowly. The way a sponge left on the counter loses its moisture — not all at once, not dramatically, but degree by degree until one day someone picks it up and it crumbles. That's what Pulse was tracking in her notes. That's what Ledger was seeing in the fluctuations. They weren't measuring a crisis. They were measuring a drying.

And here is the uncomfortable truth this chapter is pointing at: the most dangerous moment in any organization's story is not when things fall apart. It is when things are still working well enough that nobody feels the urgency to stay soft, stay curious, stay absorbent. Pride doesn't announce itself. It just slowly makes you harder to reach — and harder to teach.

## **Sit With These:**

When was the last time you genuinely absorbed something new from someone at work — not skimmed it, not nodded at it, but actually let it change how you do something?

Is there a Bert moment in your organization? A question sitting in someone's chest that hasn't been said out loud yet?

What does your culture feel like right now — damp and flexible, or dry and brittle? And how long has it been that way?

## Keep Reading

*This is the free sample — the Introduction and Chapter One of **The Sponge & The Magnet.***

The rest of the story is waiting: Crusty's slow restoration, the counterfeit magnet who never leaves, the coffee-machine mentorship that changes everything — plus the diagnostic and the Field Notes that turn the story into a tool for your team.

Get the book — and bring it to your team — at **[iamdemorrious.com/spongeandmagnet](http://iamdemorrious.com/spongeandmagnet)**.