



The Box You Got

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD YOU LIVE IN

STEVE BIGARI

As featured in *The World is Flat* by Thomas Friedman



Play a Bigger Part

A Word from Steve Bigari

Thank you for downloading this **free** chapter of my book *The Box You Got*.

For the PLAY A BIGGER PART fundraiser, I wanted to share with you a little more about how America's Family came into existence while I was a McDonald's restaurant operator.



I worked with thousands of struggling families during my time with McDonald's. It's downright un-American when someone can work full-time and still not provide for their family. America's Family is about ensuring that everyone who is willing to work hard gets connected to the services in our community that are already here to help them!

Thanks for playing a bigger part in our community here in Colorado Springs. We can do this, and thank you for being a part of the team.

- ***Steve Bigari***

Founder, America's Family & CEO, Mr. Biggs

P.S. **Want a free copy of the whole book?** For a gift of \$10 or more to America's Family, I'll send you one! Give online at www.playabiggerpart.com.

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Chapter 7

Collaboration and Teamwork

Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.

Andrew Carnegie

The Emergency Room of Life

There are 39 million Americans classified as “working poor.” You’ve probably heard that phrase, “working poor.” I happen to hate it. Poor is a mentality—not an economic condition. The people we quickly classify as the “working poor” are really ***hard-working Americans just like you and me.*** They have dreams and passions, and for whatever reasons, the only jobs available to them are entry level positions, such as those in the fast-food industry. When you think of these great people, I want you to begin seeing them as individuals and families—hard-working men and women who want to make a difference in their lives. There is no such thing as “working poor,” because people with the guts to get up every morning and work to provide food, clothing, and shelter for their families are anything but poor. No—they are some of the most inspiring people I have ever met. Through them, I have learned a lot about collaboration and teamwork.

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It is no secret that fast-food restaurants rely on workers who can quickly learn a simple model of food “production.” Because of the relatively low cost of labor, most fast food restaurants have high turnover, 200 to 400 percent per year. Building a good team is hard work; these dynamics make it nearly impossible. It’s not uncommon for people to start work and then quit after seeing the size of their first paycheck. “I can get more money on welfare,” is what many of them tell us. That kind of turnover was unacceptable to me, so I started looking for the roots of this problem. What I found is no surprise. Those 39 million Americans need the same things we all do: healthcare, transportation, financial planning, housing, computer skills, loans, education, and opportunities for advancement. The difference is that our economy doesn’t reward a person for having a low-skill job, bad credit, and no education. The result is a system that spits out lots of people pursuing the American dream in a game that’s rigged against them. Realizing that these motivations are common to all of us, I set out to find a way that I, as a fast-food franchisee, could do my part to help my employees have a better quality of life.

I did a couple of studies when I started America’s Family. I considered raising prices to provide what my employees needed, but I would have had to raise prices 400 percent—and I would have lost all my customers. Or I could have given up everything I made, but then my staff would get less than a 50 cent raise. Really—I took every dime I was making and said, “What if I do this work for free?” In reality, who would take millions of dollars worth of risk and work 70-hour weeks for free? Neither idea was practical or fun! I had the inspiration. I only required the instigation and innovation. I had a heart for these folks but no way to

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solve the problem myself. I knew I needed help from the entire community. From this inspiration American's Family was born (www.amfol.com).

The problem I just described is complex and multifaceted and it is further complicated because the children in these families are trapped in generational poverty. Consider this example: You're a single mom and just one paycheck away from total disaster. You work two jobs. You rent an apartment in a poor neighborhood. You have no car, and the only place you can shop for groceries is 7-Eleven—which costs you twice as much as shopping in Wal-Mart. You have a high school diploma, and the only job you can get is in a low-skill service industry. When your children get sick, you've got no choice but to miss work. You have no bank account, so when you need cash you borrow from a payday lender at over 500 percent interest. After missing work a few times because of “emergency room of life” issues, your employer fires you. So you have to go out and find another low-wage, entry-level job that puts you one paycheck away from this whole scenario. But, you're a boot-strapper, so you go out and make it work. How do you get out of this trap?

I believe this problem can only be resolved through education and relationships. In order to get them, a number of things have to come together. The folks who are “working poor” find themselves that way because they do not have the right education or the right relationships—and don't have the resources to get them either. So, they need to get help from the community, especially from their employers. Most folks see the problem as being one of resources. But typically, that's not the problem.

For instance, in the area of healthcare, there's no reason on God's earth why any child in America lacks adequate healthcare coverage. There are literally

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millions of dollars—real money that exists today—that remain unspent on child healthcare because the children who need care cannot be found. It’s not a resource problem; it’s an issue of distribution. What I’m telling you is that there is a fundamental disconnect between the people who need services and those who are able to provide them for low or no cost to the families. To fix this, you need all three sectors—government, business, and nonprofit—working together on this issue.

Fundamentally, the problem goes back to the failure of the “Great Society” programs of the 1960s. At that time, the government told us they would take care of the less fortunate in our society. And many churches and businesses said, “Thank God! Somebody else is going to take care of them.” The fact is that the problem is so huge, the government alone could never provide all the resources for every impoverished American family. Instead, you need to leverage the power of collaboration and teamwork between the government, private, and nonprofit sectors in a new strategy where each party is independently pursuing its vested self-interest. Through this model, we can reach many more families who need help without placing an undue burden on any one area of our economy. It sounds simple because it is.

My first attempt at achieving this level of collaboration was called the “We Care Fair.” I invited banks, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, and government service providers to host tables and enroll my employees in their free programs. You see, credit unions are required to lend to low-income families. States like Colorado have free immunization and healthcare programs for children and poor families. Communities have hundreds of nonprofits that provide vital social services *for free*, but many of them are underutilized. Why? Information. Many

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people simply do not know what benefits exist and how to properly access them. The “We Care Fair” brought together all of these service providers in one place. We had no idea what we were getting into.

We packed my parking lot with booths from providers all over the state. Government officials from Denver came down on a Sunday afternoon to enroll kids in the healthcare program. Loan officers from the local credit union were there. My employees came—and they brought their neighbors, friends, family members, and a whole bunch of other people, too.

Not long after this fair, I got a call from Ken Barun, then-CEO of Ronald McDonald House Charities. Joan Kroc—philanthropist and wife of Ray Kroc, McDonald’s first franchisee and later Chair of McDonald’s Corporation—had just donated \$100 million to the Ronald McDonald House Charities, and I was invited to help them figure out how to spend the grant. I said, “Send it to me, and I can spend it over the weekend.” That should show you how foolish I am, because it takes a lot more work to give away \$100 million than it does to make \$100 million. Don’t believe me? The world’s second-richest guy, Warren Buffett, had to give his fortune to the richest guy in the world, Bill Gates, to figure out how to give it away! Over the next 18 months, I was able to work closely with a team that included McDonald’s board member, Don Lubin, and Ronald McDonald House founder, Dr. Audrey Evans, in figuring out what to do with these funds. This process culminated with a major presentation in Chicago, where we invited some of the nation’s largest charities and foundations to come and pitch us on how to spend the grant. What I realized at this event was that even with this \$100 million grant, the problem wasn’t just money—it was distribution. Most of these places already had the solution figured out, but didn’t have the right channels for getting the

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resources where they needed to go. That's when I began to see the "disconnect" between service provision and service delivery. A better fusion was needed, so we decided to start America's Family as a resource center for low-income families to connect with the free services already available to them.

America's Family works directly with employers and community leaders to help hard-working but impoverished people gain financial skills, access to loans, quality medical coverage, and other vital resources. The idea is to help them change their lives by rewarding their hard work and self-sufficiency in ways that help them become better workers, more disciplined consumers, and givers rather than takers in their communities. Cooperating employers recruit workers who utilize payroll deductions and develop financial planning skills so they can accumulate the money they need to invest in their own futures. The key to success is our collaborative community partnerships among nonprofits, public agencies, and private businesses. Millions of Americans who work at entry-level jobs in the service industries are one paycheck, one medical emergency, or one busted radiator away from financial collapse. Through the wise application of social entrepreneurship, we can help these workers have their first taste of financial security, which is good for employers, too.

Michelle, one of the best employees I've ever had, exemplifies the type of teamwork and collaboration that America's Family creates. Seven years ago, she joined the team as a crew person in one of my McDonald's stores. Her last position before leaving the company was at the desk right outside my office as one of our call center managers. In that role, she operated one of the most sophisticated restaurant software applications in the world. When we created the call center—which is capable of processing fast-food, drive-thru window orders for

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any restaurant in the world—she was there helping me iron out all the details. She worked day and night alongside my staff and me to make sure we had the most technologically advanced, customer-oriented call center on the planet. She was essential in the innovation of this call center, one that eventually was profiled by Thomas Friedman in *The World is Flat*, a book about the global economy.

Michelle was an invaluable part of my team, and I was excited to show her off when our call center was visited by 30 executives from McDonald's. Reggie Webb orchestrated this visit. He is an operator from Los Angeles and is the best instigator I have ever met. I call him the Martin Luther King, Jr. of McDonald's! These visitors were people from the top leadership of McDonald's, and it was a big deal for us to host them. When they came into the call center, I asked Michelle to give them the "tour" and a demonstration of how the system worked. For the next of couple hours, Michelle was unflappable. She answered questions about how the software and hardware interacted to create a new call center experience for restaurant operators. She spouted facts, figures, statistics, technical information—you name it. She hit every ball out of the park.

But what those executives didn't know about Michelle is that only a few years ago she considered herself physically handicapped and mentally slow. I have the video to prove it—and the next morning I showed it to these McDonald's guys. You see, Michelle didn't work her way up through my company because she was the most talented or best educated. She worked hard every day to provide for her family and is still driven by that passion. A victim of rape and domestic abuse, Michelle has always had to fend for herself and take care of her two kids at all costs. In the interview from years back, Michelle is hunched as she talks humbly about the prospect of one day owning a computer, having a reliable car, and living

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in an apartment with a bathtub in it. This woman never thought in just a few short years she'd be running a call center and sitting right outside my office every day. In fact, she had decided she wants to have her own call center one day. She didn't let her circumstances talk her into laziness—or worse, a victim mentality. She got up off her ass and did something. Today, she works for Checks Unlimited, one of the largest personal check companies in the U.S. She's moving up, and I believe she's one step closer to fulfilling her dream.

Michelle had every reason not to get up. Life had kicked her down, hard. But she did, and she used her gifts. She couldn't do it alone. Michelle needed to leverage other people, her “team,” to help her accomplish her goals.

Collaboration and Teamwork

To borrow from Thomas Friedman, the “flat world” has made collaboration and teamwork much easier. *The World is Flat* is full of stories about collaboration and teamwork made possible only by the extraordinary technological advances of the 1990s. In fact, on page 40, you can read about “Flat Burgers and Fries,” which talks about the call center where Michelle worked. I suspect that people's fascination with collaboration comes from the economic realities forcing us all to do more with less. Collaboration is seen as a way to boost productivity through more efficient working relationships. It's a powerful paradigm, and it's really too bad that most people hopelessly mess up collaboration. When you understand the essential nature of collaboration and teamwork, you might find it's a lot different from your current opinion. What do you think it is? Write up a quick definition, and later we'll compare notes.

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My definition of **collaboration** is the process of identifying resources *outside* of your organization that you need to create a more efficient result for your customers. The potential for collaboration exists inside any group of people—it's not limited to businesses. The principle here is that someone else has something you need to improve your productivity.

Teamwork is the process of working together with other people to achieve a common goal. It's not limited to businesses—we need teamwork to accomplish most things in life.

There's a story in *The World is Flat* that reflects the kind of collaboration I'm talking about. Although I am profiled in the book, I thought I'd highlight two other great companies: UPS and Toshiba. Friedman explains how Toshiba was able to significantly improve turnaround time for laptop repairs by partnering with the shipping giant, UPS. Now, with only that as an introduction, you might think that the two companies came up with some great pricing structure to get the computers to and from Toshiba with greater speed. That's a reasonable hypothesis. If Toshiba gets the computers faster, it can repair and ship them back more quickly.

Instead of simply speeding up the shipments, Toshiba and UPS came up with a brilliant strategy. UPS agreed, as part of their contract with Toshiba, to train laptop repair specialists who would work from UPS's domestic hub in Louisville, KY. These new employees work for UPS, but are trained by Toshiba to repair computers to their company standards. It's more efficient for UPS to receive all Toshiba computers at their hub, and much easier—and quicker—to repair them there and then immediately ship them back out to the customer. It cut days off of their turnaround time and resulted in thousands of happy customers who didn't have to live without their laptops for several more days.

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My interpretation is pretty simple: **Sometimes two different problems share a common solution.** Toshiba and UPS don't share much in common, and their problems were very different. However, the common solution met the needs of each company in exactly the right way. Toshiba was looking for ways to speed up laptop repair for customers so they could cut costs and boost productivity. On the other side, UPS needed to find ways to compete against FedEx for market share—especially on big lucrative contracts. UPS knew that trying to out-ship FedEx probably wouldn't work, so, instead, they developed a completely new idea to create a whole new income stream. Now, we have two companies with one solution that meets the needs of each. UPS gets the contract with a new model for their business-to-business commerce. Toshiba reaps the benefits of efficiently shipping packages to one central location for repair. Collaboration often means finding one solution that solves multiple problems.

Now, let's look at teamwork. In order for UPS and Toshiba to execute this plan, they needed a high degree of teamwork. UPS proposed that Toshiba outsource a major function, laptop repair, to a company best known for delivering packages. In order for this to work, both teams needed to work together in pursuit of their common goal. Andrew Carnegie, the great American industrialist and philanthropist, likened teamwork to fuel. Teamwork is never the end result, it is a resource to drive you toward your ultimate result. LA Lakers' coach Phil Jackson has coached incredible teams that have won many NBA championships. But no one would care about them if they didn't win that ultimate prize! Having a great team doesn't mean much if you cannot convert that fuel into results. In the UPS/Toshiba example, neither company could afford to confuse building a good team with attaining the proper result. Teamwork is a tool—not an end result. Getting to your result effectively means putting some real brain time into the

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following:

1. Define the need and explore every available avenue to meet that end.

Use the “The Whys” Drill exercise from Chapter 1 to make sure you really understand all the aspects and options associated with your task or project.

2. Establish the best people for the team.

Do you think Toshiba trained truck drivers to repair their computers? Of course not. They knew they needed trained IT repair staff and created their job descriptions accordingly.

3. Define success, then share it.

You’ve gotta know. In this case, success for Toshiba is faster turnaround of repairs and happier customers.

4. Ask yourself if you’re absolutely committed to the team’s success.

If any part of you answers no, you need to abort the mission. Teams do not work when the coach is not *passionately* invested in winning every game.

**BIGG IDEA: ALWAYS CONSIDER THE QUESTION
“WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?”**

What’s in it for Me?

Sounds like a pretty selfish conclusion for such a team-oriented chapter. But the bottom line to collaboration is that it works best when the people involved

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pursue their vested self-interests. What's in it for the credit union when they lend to a low-wage earner who just opened her first-ever bank account? Lots of things: good press, compliance with the Federal Community Reinvestment Act that requires them to lend to poor citizens in the community, and return on the mission that is established by their charter to help poorer communities. Did you know that about credit unions? It's one of their jobs to help low-income families. Finally, they earn customers for life! When you help someone become self-sufficient, they become very loyal to you.

I can get anyone to join something, but they are never going to put their hearts into it unless there is something in it for them. For this reason, any collaboration you are involved in must answer the question: **What's in it for me?** In the America's Family example:

- The employer gets someone to help them get their employees to come to work: Employees stay longer and are more loyal and productive.
- The employees get the benefits they need to be successful at their jobs and stay out of life's emergency room. They eventually graduate to a better life.
- The nonprofit organizations and public agencies get a more efficient way to deliver their goods and services.
- The for-profit companies get access to people who wouldn't otherwise be buying their goods and services.

Everybody wins. Teamwork and collaboration are powerful tools to achieve things you cannot reach on your own, but it all revolves around the question **“What's in it for me?”** You'll find that you can even exceed your goals when you've got people on your team who are committed to a corporate vision that reflects their individual interests.

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