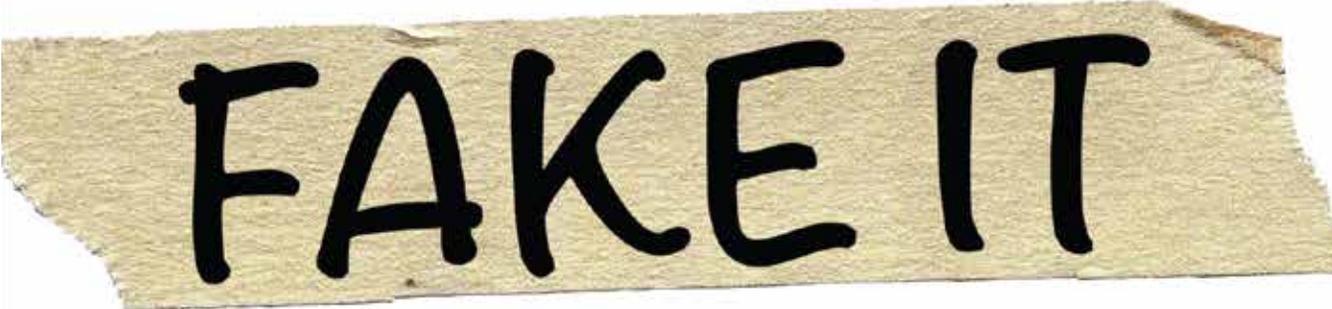


SAMPLE

SABRINA HORN

# MAKE IT, DON'T



FAKE IT

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LEADING WITH  
AUTHENTICITY FOR REAL  
BUSINESS SUCCESS

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Foreword by Geoffrey A. Moore  
Bestselling Author of *Crossing The Chasm*

# PRAISE FOR *MAKE IT, DON'T FAKE IT*

“Sabrina shares her insights and wisdom gleaned from years of working with tech executives, venture capitalists, and influencers about how doing the right thing results in the right thing to do. In *Make It, Don't Fake It*, Sabrina shows us that faking it is for losers. Learn how to make it with ethics, passion, confidence, pride, and resilience.”

—ANDY CUNNINGHAM, Steve Jobs' Publicist, bestselling author of *Get To Aha!*, and CEO, Cunningham Collective

“Sabrina approaches business and life from an integrity-first perspective and ‘keeps things real’—a strategy that I believe is fundamental to building successful and enduring products and companies.”

—DAVE DUFFIELD, Founder of PeopleSoft, Workday, and Ridgeline

“Whether you are a first-time entrepreneur or a seasoned executive, *Make It, Don't Fake It* is an essential guide for leading with purpose and integrity. There are no ‘growth hacks’ or short-cuts to success. Sabrina delivers a compelling message at a critical time.”

—JAY FULCHER, Chairman & CEO, Zenefits

“This is a no nonsense, straightforward guide to succeeding in business as well as life. Sabrina's insightful, commonsense approach to success has led her to it time and time again. Her book is a roadmap from which all can learn.”

—DAVID J. MOORE, Founder/CEO of 24/7 Real Media, President, WPP Digital, Chairman of Xaxis, IAB, and Co-Founder/CEO of BritePool

“Sabrina Horn's *Make It, Don't Fake It*, loaded with gems of leadership and stories of her personal growth as founder and CEO, is a required and meaningful primer for both budding and experienced leaders. Her emphasis on transparency, values, and culture is interwoven throughout. The impact this emphasis had on her decisions when the chips were down or up is as clear a lesson any leader or CEO should think about and implement.”

—RAY ROTHROCK, Venture Capitalist, Board Member, CEO, and Philanthropist

“Sabrina Horn offers up a pragmatic real-world approach for today's business leaders, which will increase their probability of success in navigating the complex labyrinth that will be required to achieve their goals.”

—PETER SOBILOFF, Managing Director, Insight Partners

“In a world of deep fakes, fly by night tech CEOs, and erosion of our key institutions, Sabrina's insights show why authenticity matters more than ever in business, life, and society. This is a must read book that gets back to basics!”

—R “RAY” WANG, Founder and CEO, Constellation Research, 2x Author

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# **LEADER AND LOSER BOTH BEGIN WITH THE LETTER L**

**A**ny book on leadership should consist, at minimum, of two parts: one on winning and the other on losing. The great majority of these books don't venture past part one. They focus mostly on winning, with some advice on how to avoid making mistakes.

The reality, however, is that you will make mistakes, and plenty of them, no matter how many books you read. To be a leader is to lose—more often than you would like.

That feeling you get when you know you negotiated a bad deal, missed the quarter, let the troops down, and generally failed, is like no other, especially when everyone is counting on you to lead them to victory. Bottom line? It is really hard to act like a leader when you feel like a loser.

Let's explore how to recover from failure, how to organize your thoughts, communicate effectively, and begin to put things back on track. How you come back from being a loser says everything about you as a leader. With time and practice, you will become more resilient. It might even keep you from making those mistakes again.

## **NO CEO IS BULLETPROOF**

No matter how airtight your organization is, or how experienced you and your leadership team are, you will make some mistakes. You will make bad decisions. You will also make perfectly good decisions that produce bad results or worse. Sometimes people who work for you will make mistakes. Those mistakes may not be your fault, but they are your problem, because they happened on your watch and you need to help fix them. Other times, unfortunate things will just happen that are out of your control. Whatever the scenario, you can always count on the timing to be bad.

No book or consultant or management guru can make you bulletproof. No leader is perfect, and even the best CEOs can't dodge every bullet. But they can develop the skills to quickly regroup, re-strategize, and live to fight another day. Effective leaders are resilient. They can stand in the middle of any disaster, find the least disastrous path through it, and come out on the other side, ready to bounce back.

Resilience pays dividends in endurance and confidence. It also throws in a bonus: Being resilient keeps you from faking it. It's like a shield. In your resilience, you realize you have no need to fake it. You've got this. There *is* a solution, and you *will* find it. Being resilient helps you make it.

How do you develop resilience? Going through the wringer enough times does give you a thicker skin. You've been to that rodeo before and you know how it's going to play out. As Gina Pacheco, our receptionist in San Francisco for many years, used to say, "Got the T-shirt, got the hat, got the key chain."

Experience teaches you that failures are *temporary setbacks* from which you can recover quickly. That's what makes you resilient. You bounce back. You take responsibility, analyze what happened, ask the right questions, learn, provide a path forward, communicate effectively, and set expectations. But most of all, you know—because experience has taught you—exactly when to move on. Those who are resilient have a bias for action. They don't wallow. They learn and then move on, beyond failure. They put it in the rearview mirror, where it belongs.<sup>1</sup>

## OLYMPIC TEARS

The scene is IBM's corporate office in Armonk, New York, at 1:00 p.m. on a clear Friday in April. We are pitching IBM for the 1996 Olympics information systems account, a prestigious piece of business. Winning it would put my five-year-old firm in a different league. We would be playing with the big boys, and if we did a good job, could win other big, brand-name tech clients.

I had flown in from San Francisco on a red-eye, just turning around from an intense four-day press tour for another client. In those days, press tours were like IPO road shows: a dozen in-person meetings per day with top analysts and reporters to introduce a new company and its products. Running on adrenaline and two hours' sleep, I went to a Kinko's in Queens, New York, to make copies of my overhead slides. We had gone all-out on those overheads, printing in color for the very first time (a big deal in the mid-1990s). The Olympic torch was a vibrant orange, and the Olympic rings appeared in their appropriate Olympic colors.

I was so proud of those overheads as I carried them into what must have been the shabbiest room at IBM headquarters. There was an overhead projector but no screen. We had to project our beautiful images onto a corner wall, which contorted the words, making them awkward and hard to read. At the appointed time, we were asked to begin, even though the key decision maker

had not yet arrived. When the big guy finally walked in, halfway through our presentation, he scowled at the odd presentation setup (as if it were our doing!) and flipped impatiently through a printout of the deck I had given him.

“Where are your *big* ideas?” he asked, interrupting me. “Just tell me your big ideas. What is your strategy? Where’s the budget? I don’t see the budget!”

In rapid fire, he asked one question after another, giving me no chance to answer any of them.

I could have stood up to Mister IBM, could have told him he missed *our* big ideas because *he* was late. Or I could have pointed out that the shithole of a room *his* people had put us in wasn’t big enough for our big ideas.

But I had lost control of the meeting. I had lost control of myself. I was suddenly so profoundly exhausted and rattled, I could not move. Standing there, looking down at my beautiful slides on the overhead projector, I started to cry. My tears dissolved the vibrant orange ink of the Olympic torch, bleeding into the black typed words to form a trail of ugly brownish liquid. It was all so grotesquely visible, projected, onto that corner of that miserable room.

The IBMers started glancing up at the ceiling, looking for leaks, as my teardrops continued to fall onto the bed of the slide projector. My colleague Elizabeth Orgel stood up, came over to me, and said gently, “Sab, I think it’s time to go.”

She led me to the bathroom, where I sobbed into the very hard paper towels I pulled, one after the other, from the wall dispenser. The only salvageable part of the day was drinking a good deal of chardonnay on the flight back to San Francisco. But then Elizabeth got the stomach flu and was incredibly sick for most of the six-hour flight.

For me, this experience remains a vivid memory of defeat. I had humiliated my firm and myself. But the fact is that it really happened, and you can’t fake yourself out of feeling like a total

loser. You can't fake yourself out of crying on your slides—or, for that matter, of throwing up on a plane.

## **NO EXCUSES**

This story has no surprise twist. We did not get the account. It was failure, flat out. But that did not mean it was valueless. If you face failure, you have to own up to it and analyze it. You might find it is rich with useful lessons.

I had failed *so badly*, I decided to do a formal postmortem, an investigation into what had happened and why. Like the National Transportation Safety Board sifting through the wreckage of a 747, I was hoping to find things that would prevent an Olympic-size disaster from ever happening again. Don't wallow. Learn.

I recommend doing a postmortem every time you make a big mistake or experience a big failure. Always include everyone who was involved in that failure, so that they can contribute and learn from it, too.

- What happened?
- Where and when did it go off the rails?
- What should we have done about it in the moment?
- What could we have done differently/better before?
- What have we learned?
- How should we proceed now?

The value of this exercise is that it makes you face reality and keeps you from laying the blame elsewhere. When you lose a big sale to your competitor, it's easy to say, "They won because their account manager is dating the prospect" or "They got the deal because they brought out their big guns from New York and put on a whole show for them." The truth is, while relationships and stunts do matter, intelligence, insights, creativity, passion, and

sheer effort can matter more. You lost, not because of what *they* did but because of what you *didn't* do.

This is the level of exploration and development that real leaders encourage, ask of themselves, and ask of their people. (By the way, I also recommend doing an after-action report following a big win, to understand and potentially repeat what went well, what you did differently, and the circumstances under which you were able to succeed.)

In our case, I learned to never again let desperation replace strategy. Yes, the guy from IBM was a jerk. Yes, they gave us a terrible room to present in. Perhaps we were doomed from the start. But I also could have exerted more control of the situation from the start.

I *should have* insisted that IBM respect us, provide a proper conference room, and have everyone show up on time, or reschedule the meeting. I should have simply stopped, gotten hold of myself, and put the toe tag on the meeting.

“It doesn't seem like this is a good time for you to be hearing our presentation, so perhaps we should reschedule for another day. We can come back and present the ideas you have asked us to share.”

That's what I should have said, and then politely excused myself and my team. On a personal note, I also should have managed my calendar better and not pushed myself to the point of exhaustion before such a critical meeting.

Would they have invited us back? Hell, no. But we would have stood up for our brand. We would have demonstrated how highly we valued ourselves and our services. We would have extracted from the experience at least a fragment of a moral victory. And I would have personally upheld my own integrity. After all, it is integrity, accountability, and emotional stamina that make a CEO durable. Had I done this, I might not have ended up in tears, though I suspect that Elizabeth still would have gotten sick on the flight home.

## TAKE RESPONSIBILITY AND PROVIDE A PATH

You might think that, as an executive, admitting mistakes shows weakness, but handled in the right way, it actually shows strength—strength in your integrity and accountability. It makes you more human and builds trust through transparency and the vulnerability of admission. It therefore helps you to build a culture of shared ownership that is nearly immune to politics, resists passing the buck, and frowns on fakery.

As a leader, the buck stops with you. Your company's, division's, or group's mistakes and failures are yours. Own them. The people around you—your shareholders, employees and teammates, customers, whoever is being affected by the blunder—need you to do this, and they respect it. But just being transparent about a mistake is never enough. People want a lot more. They want a solution, a fix, an improvement. A mistake should trigger a solution, a road to something better. Set a plan for improvement, turning adversity into advancement.

You certainly can start with “I’m sorry,” but you can’t ever leave it there. Claim ownership of the problem, apologize, and with your very next breath reveal the path forward. Find a way to make it better than before. Go back to the postmortem you conducted. This is how you preserve and defend your authenticity, your brand, your reputation, your everything. Here are a couple of examples.

### Scenario A

**WHAT HAPPENED?** The marketing campaign plan we implemented did not produce anywhere close to the sales leads we had promised. We missed the goal by  $x\%$ .

**WHY DID IT HAPPEN?** First, we had a slow start and did not achieve momentum soon enough. Second, we did not produce enough of the right kind of content with the frequency that the campaign needed to be successful.

**WHAT'S NEXT?** We have identified a new resource with some fresh ideas inside the company and will give the campaign another try for two months. Based on results at that point, we should fish or cut bait. Here is the new road map . . .

### **Scenario B**

**WHAT HAPPENED?** I have some difficult news. I'm sorry to say that we lost the Big Kahuna deal to Competitor X.

**WHY DID IT HAPPEN?** Upon review, we did not do enough research into Big Kahuna's future expansion plans, our pricing was off, and we did not address a crucial element of their request for proposal. I take responsibility for this because I now see that our company needs to devote more resources to large, complex RFPs.

**WHAT'S NEXT?** Effective immediately, we are forming the Big Kahuna RFP SWAT team, consisting of Joe and Tania from the product development group, to help us improve our win rate with these larger opportunities. Here is what the go-forward plan looks like . . .

### **WHEN THEY'RE JUST NOT THAT INTO YOU**

Life isn't fair sometimes. There will be those days when you brought your A game and your A team, where the terms of the deal were perfect, there was great chemistry, you crossed your *t*'s and dotted your *i*'s, and you *still* lost.

Maybe your prospect was told by his boss to just go with the bigger, more established vendor, the "safe buy." Or perhaps they loved your extended product offering but, in the end, your presentation helped them see that, actually, they just need a smaller solution. And then, my personal favorite: the prospect's CEO wanted to work with the firm she worked with before.

There are situations where there's just no winning. You can't fake your age or your size or manufacture relationships you

don't have. Stay grounded, align around your core values and mission, and remind your team what you stand for. There is a reason why you and your people work at your company, and why other people don't. Losing in these situations can be a blessing in disguise. The wrong partnership could have crushed your company, the deal might have been excruciatingly difficult to customize, or the hire might have been a terrible cultural fit.

Again, you don't want to make excuses for what you didn't do, but you can call a spade a spade, learn from the experience, share that information, and then—quickly—move on to the next opportunity better suited for you.

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Entering any new market, going after bigger fish or lots of smaller fry, means you will face new competition and different customer requirements. It is a conscious decision for which you have, it is hoped, done enough research to get you adequately prepared. But the reality is that you may lose more deals than you are used to losing, especially in the beginning. The sales cycle could be longer or harder, unexpectedly impacting your overall quarterly revenue. The key is to make allowances for the unknown and then to set and communicate realistic expectations accordingly.

Setting expectations early to avoid disappointment later is an important exercise, but also a delicate one. You want your people to feel confident going in, and you want to carefully choose who on your team is best suited to drive the effort with you. Yet you can also set the stage *anticipating* that the initial phase will come with some surprises. What you learn from the initial phase can be used to sharpen your approach and to win more over time. You also can set more reasonable, frankly conservative targets than you otherwise might. This isn't planning for loss or faking it by minimizing expectations to make outcomes look better. It's being realistic about a new situation.

The point in all this planning is that less than optimal outcomes do not necessarily mean that you or your people have to *feel* like losers or that you are less than optimal. Prepare for whatever results may come by communicating the proper perspective. Losing can ultimately be part of winning.

## ASK, AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

When problems come to you in search of a solution, the common expectation is that you, as the leader, will have all the answers. We have talked about how even the best CEOs don't always have the right answers, but they do have the right questions. "Knowledge" consists of knowing what you know and what you don't know. This is the inflection point at which the curve either bends toward fakery or finds another direction. Instead of trying to fake it till you make it, realize that *nobody* ever has all the answers and that you alone can't fix everything.

*Good* salespeople make the case for their merchandise by explaining benefits, features, and price. That's a push, and it can provoke a sale. But *great* salespeople get their prospects to talk about what *they* want and need. Great salespeople push with the right questions, and that can pull from the prospect the knowledge needed to close the sale. The best sales pitch is neither an explanation nor a declaration. It is a question. Sometimes lots of questions. It becomes a conversation and a relationship. Its objective is to hear the voice of the prospect, the customer—the voice of the *other person*.

Every successful communication converts *your* push into the *other's* pull. This communication tactic is a catalyst that activates any sound strategy. In my career as a CEO, I used it often, and it got me out of the loser corner many times. It is based, more or less, on three little words: "Tell me more."

ME: *(after an extensive presentation of ideas)* What do you think of our proposal?

JILL THE CLIENT: I hate it. This is just not what I was looking for.

ME: (*avoiding the temptation to appear defensive or offended*) Oh? Tell *us* more, Jill. What exactly is turning you off?

ME: (*after listening to and discussing Jill's issues*) Thank you for explaining all of this to us. It's really useful. I have to ask, if there's still an opportunity for us to come back to you with a different proposal, would you be willing to entertain that?

Here's another example:

JIM THE GROUP DIRECTOR: Sab, I just can't get behind this bonus plan. No one in my group likes it. So I'm just letting you know that we are going to go with a different bonus plan.

ME: (*hiding my irritation at Jim's total disregard for our compensation program*) I'm sorry to hear that. Tell me more.

JIM: It's an old-fashioned plan. It's not very incentivizing and not inclusive.

ME: (*wondering if it's just Jim who doesn't like the plan or if it's really his group*): Okay, can you elaborate? I'd like to get the CFO involved, so we can agree on something that works for everyone and our budget.

## COMPLAINTS ARE GIFTS

Objections, negative responses, complaints—all of these are gifts. They need to be unwrapped. Responding defensively only sacrifices the knowledge the person confronting you is trying to give. Instead, listen. Maybe you will find out how to do better.

Push with the right questions and you will pull that knowledge out of them.

In the examples above, and in most human interactions, people ultimately just want to be heard and understood, even though they may not go about it in the best way. As a leader, you must separate yourself from the emotions coming at you and focus instead on your goal. In the end, you may not be able to do better, and you may not be able to convert the loss into a win. But what you *will* have accomplished is far more important. You took the time to preserve, protect, and maybe improve a business relationship precisely when it was critically stressed and potentially ready to head further south. Inviting or continuing a discussion shows that the relationship has not yet broken.

At the very least, you have protected your brand. Customers talk to other customers and employees talk to other employees. Word gets out. If you fail to hear their voices, you can be sure that word of your failure will spread to others. “I hate it,” “This sucks,” and “We don’t like this plan” are opportunities to prove that yours is the brand that listens, hears, learns, and always strives to be better. That alone will carry you further than any one deal you may have lost. That is endurance and resilience. And that is business success.

## **WHAT GOES UP DOES, FOR A FACT, COME DOWN**

There was a period in our New York office when we won a new account every week. It was incredible. We became the go-to agency for any viable company in the very hot advertising technology sector. In San Francisco and in Boston, there were also years when literally 100% of our business came to us through our network, all referrals from VCs, board members, CEOs, and marketing executives. As a firm, we were in the very fortunate position of being able to choose which companies we wanted to pitch. It was hard work, long hours, and it

paid off. Across the board, we won far more often than we lost. It was great!

Until it wasn't.

Markets go through cycles. They consolidate, morph into new markets, or make a comeback later. The economy, of course, also has its cycles. During such cycles, fewer leads are coming in, the competition is tougher, and it can be harder to win. Markets notwithstanding, there are times when your sales presentations might just not be as fresh or as impactful as they need to be or you didn't come across as hungry enough for the business. It was raining, your lead person called in sick, and you just weren't feeling it. Whatever the reason, the losses become more frequent.

Along your journey as an executive, you may find yourself on a losing streak. When losing a deal that was yours to win falls hot on the heels of two or three other losses, you start to wonder if you've lost your mojo. Your people might start to feel like they are working for a loser company. Morale erodes, and the same old pep talk sounds like a broken record.

"We've hit a losing streak," I would say. "Every company goes through one."

I had to pop the loser bubble and redirect the energy to something new.

"I know you want to feel like you are part of a winning organization. No one wants that more than I do. Winning is up to everyone. Let's figure out how to get things back on track."

In our leadership team meetings, we problem-solved. We widened the circle of involvement beyond ourselves and our most senior teams to the rest of the staff, broadening our knowledge base. Everyone was asked for their top three business development ideas, and groups were formed in each office to lead the charge—in the right direction. We hired outside consultants. We also drew up a client survey. I spoke to clients directly and asked them, "What can we do better?"

Among a few other things, I learned that we needed to sharpen our social media expertise. We were an early leader in social media strategy, but our offering had become a little outdated. We also needed to get out there in a more modern way. We put together a sizzle reel of our recent work. We synthesized our skills and expertise into three markets where we had connections, and our teams in San Francisco, Boston, and New York went after them.

While we were always able to turn the corner, we sometimes found ourselves repeating history. What I realized was that those losing streaks were, in part, a function of getting a little too comfortable while we were enjoying our winning streak. It's what generals call victory fever. I wasn't looking down the road or across the street. All along, we should have been deploying some of the strategies I mentioned above, or at least applying them more frequently and proactively, rather than waiting to drag them out in response to a problem already well under way. The moment I focused on feeling like a winner, I put my blinders on to losing, and thereby let it creep in.

This was a hugely valuable lesson. When things are going well, almost too well, that's exactly the time you need to start planning for what's next. Losing can clobber you when you are already losing, but it can really sneak up on you when you are in the lead. This is another reason why achieving and maintaining a market leadership position for your company is so hard. There is no place to go once you get there, except down. Part of being a great leader is never losing sight of the possibility of losing. Such is the very thin line between loser and leader. After all, they both begin with the letter *l*.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sabrina Horn is an award-winning CEO, communications expert, advisor, and author. She founded Horn Group, a public relations firm, with \$500 and five years' job experience, becoming one of few female CEOs in Silicon Valley in the early 1990s. Over a quarter century, her firm advised thousands of executives and their companies—from the hottest startups to the Fortune 500—doing so with a special focus on authenticity.



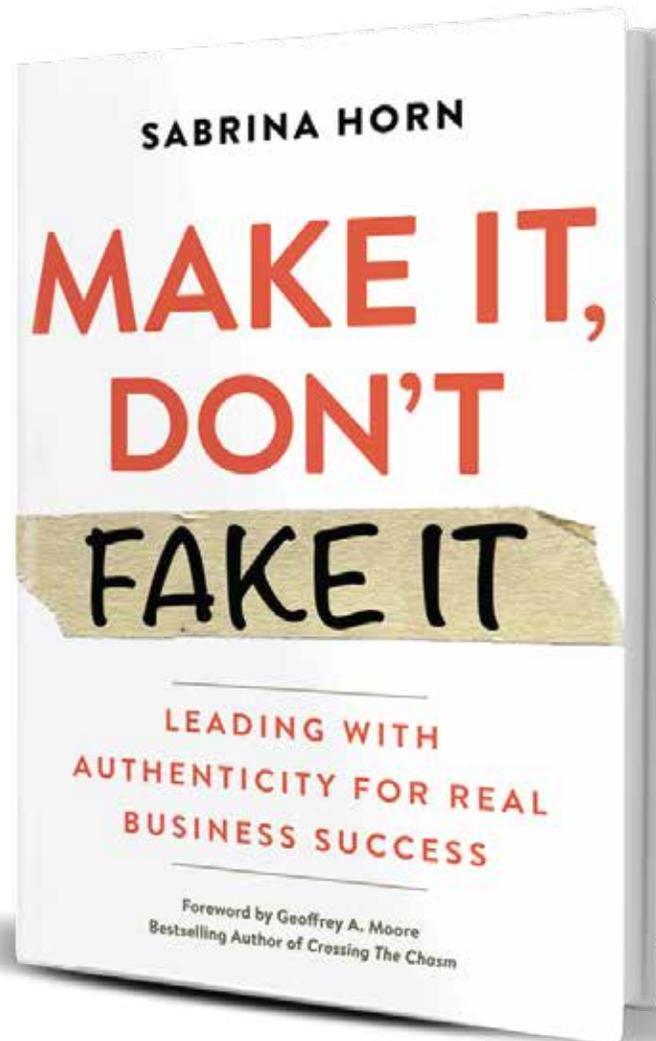
As a young executive, Horn learned about leadership on the job through two lenses: one, as CEO growing and running her firm, the other, as strategic advisor guiding her clients through their own unique business challenges. Facing countless difficult situations, crises, even failure, she came to understand that leadership is about making the right decisions at the right time based on the often very harsh, realities of the truth. Through her journey, she learned that there are no short cuts to achieving long term business success. Still, she confesses to having made many mistakes, and now in her first book, she shares what she learned about how to make it without faking it.

Horn Group became one of the most enduring, iconic brands in the tech world, with multiple offices in the US and global reach. It received national acclaim as best US employer, best US Tech agency, and as a Top 10 US Independent Tech PR Firm, among many other accolades for excellence in service and creativity. In 2015, Horn oversaw her firm's successful acquisition by Finn Partners, a global marketing company.

Today, Horn is CEO of HORN Strategy, LLC, a consultancy focused on helping entrepreneurs and CEOs navigate the early stages of their businesses. She serves as an advisor and board member for a number of organizations and is a frequent speaker at industry forums and leadership conferences.

Born in 1961, Horn is the only child of German immigrants, both survivors of the infamous fire bombings of Dresden in WWII. She has a BA in American Studies from Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and an MS in Public Relations from Boston University. She has two daughters, Grace and Christina, two extremely large golden doodles, and splits her time between New York and San Francisco.

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