

BUSINESS

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D Section 1



Is it time
for a

REBOOT?

Ralph Howard at his home in Random Lake.
Photo by Bruce Halmo/The Sheboygan
Press

Ralph Howard's new book tackles challenges facing business leaders, offers practical strategies

BY DEANNE SCHULTZ
Press correspondent

RANDOM LAKE — **Control + Alt + Delete. It's the keyboard command that reboots your computer, and believe it or not, that same command can also be used to "reboot" your business leadership skills.**

Businessman and author Ralph Howard's new book, "Control + Alt + Delete Leadership" takes a hard look at the issues facing business leaders of all levels and offers practical strategies that can be put to good use.

"The first thing you do when you go in the office is boot your computer up," Howard, 48, said. "Take two

minutes to get yourself organized ... boot up your personal operating system as well and make sure you have a course for the day."

Howard speaks from experience — he's currently the vice president of Specialty Brands for W.W. Grainger, Inc., living in Janesville and maintaining a home in Random Lake. Previously, he was president of Canac Cabinets, and held leadership positions not only at Kohler Co., but also at Master Lock Company in Milwaukee and Pella Windows and Doors in Iowa.

It's that experience, seasoned with the setbacks common to anyone climbing the corporate ladder, that gives the book its flavor, but it's Howard's model that provides the framework.

The book is divided into three sections, each following the "rebooting" format: The control of your own professional and personal development; modifying as needed, and deleting things that keep you from achieving goals.



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One of Howard's goals was to make the book manageable — he sifted through his notes, choosing significant lessons that were mixed with anecdotes for a real-life feel.

"I wanted to make sure I told the story the way I wanted and it didn't read just like another business book," he said. "I wanted people to con-

nect with the content right away."

The book has 136 pages, starting with an introduction that asks the tough questions Howard asked himself — such as "What do you stand for?" and "What do you want your legacy to be?"

Howard found a piece of that puzzle when he interviewed at Master Lock, meeting CEO Jim Beardsley, whom he called a "leader of excellence." Noticing how well Beardsley connected with his employees gave Howard a wake-up call.

"It sent an awakening to me about how important that is and how much more you can accomplish when you have an engaged workforce that really wants to grow and support the business collectively," Howard said.

That may be a tall order, but Howard said it starts with something very basic — proper manners.

"It sounds hokey, but it's the

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Reboot

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whole concept of being polite and being approachable," Howard said. "In business today, it's more important than ever before."

With Howard's Four Controls of Business Leadership, the concept of control is focused inwardly, using the idea of indirect influence to win employees' respect and support, rather than mandating it.

"Listening skills are really important, getting beyond spoken words to the root cause to understand what the true issue is," Howard said. When things go wrong, he encourages the reader to ask themselves, "What could I have done differently that could have changed or improved the outcome?"

And he said that's not always easy. Creatures of habit, people tend to resist change, preferring instead to hold to familiar

BOOK INFORMATION



"Control + Alt + Delete Leadership," written by Ralph Howard, is available through the following websites:

>> www.ralphhoward.com
>> www.amazon.com

courses of action. Howard warns that businesses that remain entrenched in current models "miss opportunities that could offer significant growth and success."

His book cites Kohler Co. and its development of its Purist Hatbox toilet as an example of challenging convention.

"It was a game-changer in how we approached new product development and design," Howard said. "We did everything different in terms of how it was developed, how it looked, and how we presented it to the market. It caused us to get out of our box."

Change also involves succession planning and future goals, but on an individual basis it can start with small steps, such as rearranging the workday to be more efficient.

"We all have more on our plate than we typically can deal with in a day," Howard said. "You need to sort through priorities and make sure you're investing your time in the right areas."

Part of that investment is the balance between work and personal life, which can sometimes get left behind as the demands of the office grow.

Howard openly shares his personal struggles, suggesting that communication and setting priorities have gone a long way in helping him navigate the sometimes-thorny maze of balance between work and life.

"I'm pretty open about the challenges I've had," he said. "I tend to poke fun of myself a little bit, and that makes it easier for people to come up and talk. They recognize it's not something I'm defensive about."

Roger Murphy, senior staff engineer at Kohler Co. and a former coworker of Howard's, recognized this, saying that Howard "gave all of the staff time, insight and leadership by example."

The book gave Murphy a new appreciation for the concept of leadership, saying "(it's) not a position, it's something that directs others into accomplishing a greater good," with the great leaders looking to raise the team's value above their own.

Murphy has since retooled his working day, using an urgent/not urgent formula to decipher the importance of each task facing him, which can still be a challenge.

"It's hard to do all

Ralph Howard bio

Past positions:

- President, Canac Cabinets, Kohler Co. (2006-09)
- Vice President Sales, Plumbing Americas, Kohler Co. (2001-06)
- Vice President, Sterling (2000-01)
- Vice President of Sales, Master Lock Company (1997-2000)

Education:

- University of Wisconsin-Platteville
- Harvard Business School General Manager Program, Boston

that's asked of you and still do it right," Murphy said. "My goal in life is to do things right and make sure they are right for others."

Howard hopes that others can receive the same inspiration, and shared some of the feedback he's gotten.

"There's really no wall between your professional and personal life unless you put it there," he said. "Younger executives have appreciated it as a guide for their paths and to miss some of the landmines, and even senior level executives have said it was a nice refresher."