

# From Accusation to Acquittal: A Journey of Faith, Resilience, and Redemption

Do you remember Top Gun: Maverick's climactic scene?

As Maverick flew away from enemy territory, his F-14 clipped the roof of a building and lost its front landing gear. With the odds stacked against him, Maverick, and his co-pilot Rooster, engaged in an epic dogfight with two enemy jets. After some heart-stopping maneuvers, Maverick and Rooster managed to take out one of the jets, but the other one seemed to be chasing him down with no escape in sight. Maverick knew this was his last mission. Suddenly, a miracle happened. A Top Gun pilot came out of nowhere, destroyed the enemy, and rescued Maverick, Rooster, and his plane. As the plane steadied after the enemy's relentless pursuit, Maverick asked, "Who was that?" The pilot replied with a grin, "Your savior!"

This movie scene is analogous to my last few weeks at my former company. After 21.5 years of service, I felt like I had lost my landing gear and was being pursued by an enemy. When all seemed hopeless, my savior saved the day, and I came in for a crash landing.

## **An Unforeseen Accusation**

It all began on a Monday morning, May 23, 2022. I'd just emailed my official retirement notice to my manager; I informed him my last day would be June 30<sup>th</sup>—a moment I'd been anticipating for years. In a few weeks, on June 26<sup>th</sup>, I'd turn 55 and be eligible to walk away on my terms with full benefits, just what I'd worked so hard for. I was on cloud nine.

But my mood changed on a dime.

Later that afternoon, I received a meeting invite from the Corporate Audit Department for the next day. The subject line read: Confidential Discussion. I got a sick feeling and a lump in my throat. What could this be about, I wondered.

As the virtual meeting unfolded the next day, May 24<sup>th</sup>, two ethics compliance investigators revealed with a heavy tone that I had been accused of a grave violation of the Business Code of Conduct. "You're the subject of a Business Code of Conduct investigation," said the lead ethics investigator.

A shiver of dread ran down my spine at the thought of the consequences of such an accusation.

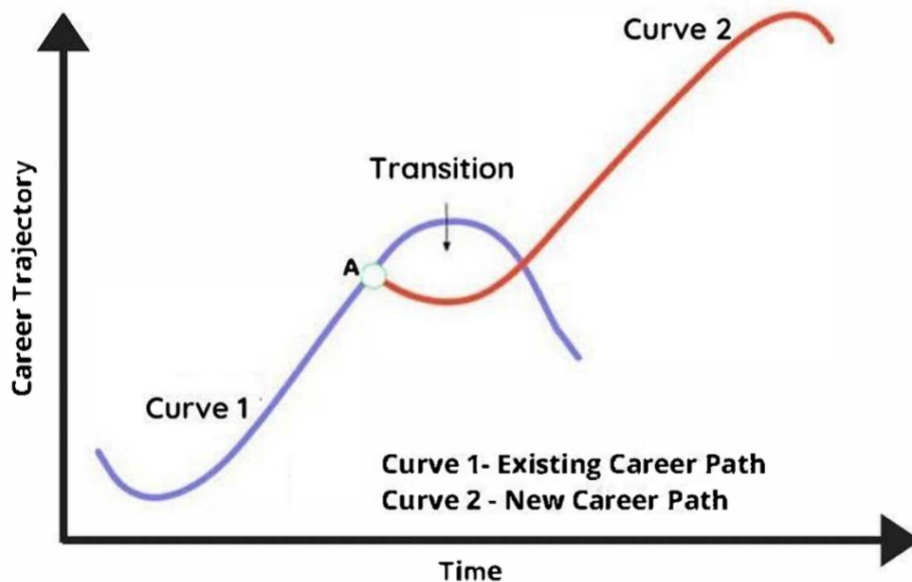
According to an anonymous source, the lead investigator claimed I was non-compliant on two fronts. Number one, I previously conducted a leadership workshop for company employees in Las Vegas and took advantage of the situation by charging my company for it. Number two, I was using previously conducted workshops to promote my platform.

## **Planning for the Second Half**

You may be wondering how I got to this point. How about a bit of background?

In 2015, I read Bob Buford's book *Halftime* and became aware of the *Sigmoid Curve* and the importance of planning for the second half of life before the apex of one's career (see the below chart). Seeing how many people retire without a plan and fail, I created content and built a platform before leaving my company, aiming for my own speaking, training, and executive practice immediately after retirement. I did this independently and with my resources.

# Sigmoid Curve



I obtained my John Maxwell Team Certification in 2016, granting me access to leadership and communication content which I used to build my platform. I also designed a website detailing my speaking, training, and executive coaching services and fees for external opportunities; all intended to be rendered during personal time.

In 2018, I moved into a capabilities role, designing and delivering company training for 500 internal associates. A peer familiar with my John Maxwell certification asked if I'd be open to facilitating some leadership training for one of the company's most significant partners. After receiving approval from my manager and the ethics office, and with travel expense support, I agreed. I conducted three leadership workshops for a significant partner in different cities for 150 mid-level managers. In 2019, my efforts were rewarded with an invitation to lead multiple workshops for 300 mid-level

managers. It was an excellent opportunity to leverage my John Maxwell certification and provide leadership training to a significant partner.

## **Vegas Shadow**

Fast forward to 2022. Post Covid, I was once again asked to conduct multiple leadership workshops as an extension of my capabilities role. The first request was an internal one, to deliver a session for around 25 of my colleagues in Las Vegas.

I'd never been to Las Vegas, but I had an inexplicable gut feeling that something wasn't right.

On April 13, I lead a workshop called "The Power of Influence". It was a highly interactive session exploring the concepts of influence, empowerment, and connecting with others. Before the workshop, I had a conversation with a few longtime colleagues and revealed to them that I was planning to retire by the end of June. I departed Las Vegas the day after, feeling fulfilled due to having the opportunity to assist a group of my peers, and came back home.

But what happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas; it stays with you like a dark shadow.

## **Conflict of Interest**

"You're the subject of a Business Code of Conduct investigation," said the lead ethics investigator.

The words sent shivers down my spine.

He continued, "the allegation stems from the recent workshop you conducted in Las Vegas. Someone complained that you've violated the Code's Conflict of Interest clause. The complaint inquired how you were able to charge the company for the workshop and benefit financially."

The company's Business Code of Conduct aims to protect its

brands and defines integrity standards. It's meant to help associates act honestly and ethically, uphold the company's values and protect its reputation. Employees, including me, participated in annual training, verified that they understood the code, and were expected to comply. Violations can lead to compensation penalties or employment termination.

Read that again. Violations can lead to compensation penalties or employment termination.

My heart sank, especially as I was nearing the end of my career.

A conflict occurs when personal interests interfere with an employee's business decisions, including outside speeches or presentations. The Code reads, "If the content discusses matters related to the company, approval may also be required from the manager, Public Affairs, Legal Counsel, and others. Conflict occurs if offered payment or reimbursement in connection with making a presentation."

I was perplexed when I heard that someone had accused me of gaining financial benefit from the workshop. After all, I had only included speaking, training, and executive coaching fees on my website, along with the workshop topics and dates, although not the audience. It seemed the accuser had taken it upon themselves to deduce that I had charged the company for my services.

What's more, the timing of the complaint was exceptionally suspicious, filed right after I announced my retirement. It left me wondering, why had someone gone through the trouble of filing a complaint against me?

### **Anxiety and Uncertainty**

To be crystal clear, the allegation was false.

I did not benefit financially from the company for the Las

Vegas or any other workshop I conducted beginning in 2018. If I had benefited, there would have been a master service agreement, a statement of work, management approval, a purchase order, an invoice, and a payment. In other words, a paper trail. None of these existed in any form or fashion, nor did the intent to benefit financially.

The investigator began asking about my writing, speaking, and publishing activities, involvement in my family company, and activities outside of work. I'll be the first to raise my hand and say I'm imperfect. But the investigator's questions seemed to be an invasion of privacy, had nothing to do with my job, and had no conflict of interest. Also, I'd gone above and beyond to always disclose my activities to ensure there wasn't even an appearance of a conflict of interest.

The investigator concluded the conversation by asking me to send some follow-up information to him and saying that our discussion was highly confidential. A gag order was issued – I wasn't allowed to speak to anyone, not even my manager, about the allegation. The investigation was ongoing and would include additional interviews. Lastly, he told me that the Business Code of Conduct Infractions Committee would meet on June 13 to rule on my case; three excruciating weeks to wait.

As I hung up, I realized the potential ramifications of the indictment. Georgia is an "At Will" state, meaning my employment could be terminated for any reason. The charge jeopardized my hard-earned retirement benefits, including health insurance and pension. And my reputation was at risk – if I were fired for wrongdoing, I'd lose all credibility, and my post-retirement plans would go down the drain.

The investigation results and final verdict were out of my hands. All I could do was pray and hope for the best possible outcome. But the anxiety I experienced was real – a tight chest, critical self-talk, and sleepless nights.

## **Finding Peace and Trust during Turmoil**

Amid the waiting period, my wife and I went to Greece to celebrate our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We planned the trip long before the conflict-of-interest charge was filed against me. Our time together was an interesting mix of romance and high anxiety. I'd vacillate between the two extremes. Let's just say it wasn't an easy time.

On top of everything, I discovered that my book, *Discipled Leader*, won the Selah Award's 2022 Best Nonfiction Book of the Year Award. Because of the cloud of suspicion I was under, I couldn't fully enjoy the honor.

Toward the end of the week, after much prayer and reflection, I remember floating in the Aegean Sea and hearing a still, small voice say, "Be still and know that I am God." At that moment, I let go of my anxiety and decided to trust God with the outcome, good or not-so-good. Then I heard him ask penetrating questions like, "What happens if you are cleared? How will you react? Will you be angry and resentful? Will you let the seed of bitterness grow into seeking revenge?"

## **An Unforgettable Moment**

We arrived home on June 10<sup>th</sup>, and after a weekend of jetlag recovery, I flew to Grand Rapids, MI, on June 13<sup>th</sup> for work – Infractions Committee meeting day. The news didn't come that day, or the next. I distinctly remember sitting in the Grand Rapids airport before my flight home, drinking a beer, and mustering the courage to reach out to the lead investigator. I typed an instant message inquiring about my case's status. The investigator immediately replied, "Have you not heard from your manager yet? He's been advised of your status. Please reach out to him."

Immediately, I sent my manager a note asking if he had time to talk; it was urgent! His delayed response was, "Is there

something wrong?" I replied, "Do you know the status of my Business Code of Conduct case and the Infractions Committee ruling?" Another delay. I stepped into the restroom. Then my phone buzzed. I received a message notification while standing at the urinal. I looked at my phone, and my manager responded, "You've been cleared of all charges." A moment I'll never forget.

Interestingly, my manager didn't know that I knew I was under investigation. He knew my case status but didn't relay it because of the imposed communication gap. Since there was a strict gag order, he mistakenly assumed that I was in the dark about it.

I was acquitted.

Thank God. Thank my Savior.

What a relief. I would retire with full benefits and an untarnished reputation.

### **Four Lessons Learned on Integrity, Peace, Attitude, and Victimhood**

But that's not the end of my story. Before I continue, allow me to share four valuable lessons I learned from this experience:

- 1. Putting Integrity to the Test.** Integrity's test is a great way to examine our character and moral standards. The Bible says, "Whoever walks in integrity will be delivered, but he who is crooked in his ways will suddenly fall." (Proverbs 28:18 ESV) It is essential to recognize that it is okay to be tested if we are honest and uphold our values. This can be a challenge in situations where we may be tempted to lie or act unethically for personal gain. However, it is essential to remember that integrity will always be rewarded in



the long run. People who remain true to themselves and their values will be respected and ultimately achieve greater success than those who choose to be dishonest. As a lesson, it is important to always remain consistent and honest in our actions, no matter the consequences.

2. **Peace is anxiety's antidote.** When life is hard, and anxiety levels are high, remaining calm and trusting in God is vital. We must have faith that the Lord will protect us and have a plan for our lives. It is important to remember that God has not abandoned us in times of distress and that we must continue to trust in His plan. A lesson to be learned is that no matter how chaotic or difficult a situation may be, we must stay grounded in our faith and trust that God has a plan for us. The Bible says, "Do not be afraid of sudden terror or the ruin of the wicked, when it comes, for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught." (Proverbs 3:25 ESV) A challenge is to practice daily reminders of peace, such as meditation or prayer, to help us stay focused on the love and peace of God, even when life is uncertain.
3. **Becoming bitter or better.** A lesson that can be learned from this is that no matter what happens, we have the power to choose how we react and respond to our circumstances. Remembering that we control our attitude and how we handle adversity is important. We can choose to become better, not bitter. It is up to us to make the most of our situation, no matter how difficult it may be. The challenge is to be mindful of our reactions to difficult situations. It can be easy to become bitter, but choosing positivity and resilience is much more beneficial. The Bible says, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled." (Hebrews 12:15) It is essential to take the time to evaluate our thoughts and feelings and ensure we are making the best decisions for our well-being. It is

also important to surround ourselves with positive people and environments who will help us focus on becoming better, not bitter.

4. **Rejecting Victimhood.** Rejecting Victimhood was my mantra for the last few weeks of my career. I appreciate that the company was following procedure and must address all Code of Business Conduct complaints. I hold no ill will and know the investigators were just doing their job. But I also believe I encountered spiritual warfare, and I can confidently say I was victorious. I believe God turned the evil that was intended against me into something good (ref Genesis 50:20). This experience has allowed me to develop a deeper trust in God, and I am now a witness to God's love, goodness, provision, and protection. It has become a story that I will be forever grateful to tell.

## **A Final Choice to Make**

As I boarded the plane in Grand Rapids to return home, anger consumed me. I felt my blood pressure rise as the plane ascended. Why would someone file a false accusation against me? I was engulfed by bitterness, resentment, frustration, and pride. My thoughts were filled with revenge, and I was determined to get justice for how I had been treated.

To blow off some steam a few days later, I rode my bike and listened to an *Insight for Living* podcast. Pastor Chuck Swindoll was teaching on "Life's Most Subtle Temptation" – revenge. He shared the Bible story of David and King Saul (ref. 1 Samuel 24).

David had been unjustly pursued by Saul, who believed David was out to kill him and wanted to eliminate him first. One day, David and his men were hiding in a cave, and Saul entered, not knowing they were there. David's followers encouraged him to kill Saul while he had the chance, but David

chose a different path. He cut a corner of Saul's robe and let him go, believing revenge was God's to take.

After Saul had left, David approached him and revealed the swatch from his robe. He confronted Saul and told him he could have killed him but chose not to. David also explained that the allegations against him were false. Saul was humbled and said, "You are a better man than I am." Then, they parted ways.

David's story reminded me to leave revenge in God's hands and to focus on living a life of integrity and truth. With the Lord's whispered questions still ringing in my ears, I faced a critical choice: bitterness and resentment or a better way forward.

On June 16, 2022, I committed to choosing joy and thanked the Lord for His help in guiding me in the right direction. I wrote in my journal, "I felt worn out, roughed up, hungover, frustrated, and angry. Pissed that I was treated this way. Under investigation right before I leave. Was hoping to leave without a bitter taste in my mouth. I need to choose joy and be thankful. No resentment. Lord, please help me work through this and fill me with your Spirit. May my thoughts and actions honor you."

With retirement right around the corner, I took a leap of faith and embraced a new outlook on life. With the Lord's help, I ditched the weight of resentment and took flight, soaring like Maverick with friends cheering me on. I let go of the past and embraced the future, determined to make the most of my life. Now it's time to take on the ultimate challenge: writing my next chapter and bravely facing the adventure that lies ahead.

Are you ready to join me on this journey of self-discovery and challenge yourself to overcome any bitterness or resentment you may be feeling? Can you find the courage to let go of the

past and move forward with your life? The choice is yours.

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**BONUS** – Watch or listen to my interview with my friend Steve Adams where we discuss the above story and the importance of cultivating integrity.

Embracing Brokenness Ministries Podcast w/ Host Steve Adams

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<https://spotifyanchor-web.app.link/e/8QvtKbBRSyb>

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Cheers,

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