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WHAT'S THE RUSH? 1999

# Whale Done!



## The Power of Positive Relationships

Ken Blanchard,  
Thad Lacinak,  
Chuck Tompkins,  
and Jim Ballard

THE FREE PRESS

*New York London Toronto Sydney*



THE FREE PRESS

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

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Designed by Lisa Chovnick

Manufactured in the United States of America

29 30

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-3538-9

ISBN-10: 0-7432-3538-X

*We dedicate this book to our unsung heroes—the many committed individuals who have been quietly and faithfully going about the business of catching people they know and love doing things right. After reading this book, we hope the list of people who fall under that dedication will include you.*

*WHALE DONE, friends!*



## Introduction

*by Ken Blanchard*

In 1976, when my family and I came to San Diego on sabbatical from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, one of the first places we visited was SeaWorld. Everyone we talked to urged us to see the Shamu killer-whale show. Since I was aware that killer whales are considered the most feared predators in the ocean, I didn't know what to expect. Would we just be watching them swim around? What a surprise when we entered Shamu Stadium and the show began! Before a minute had gone by, all of us were raving fans. As I watched these incredible creatures leap and dive, and even carry their trainers on their backs, I found myself fascinated. How had they been trained to perform such feats, and with such evident delight?

For years I had been talking and writing about the power of positive relationships and the need to catch people doing things right in order to develop produc-



tive work and home environments. And yet I'd become discouraged to see that the very opposite was occurring in most organizations and homes: catching people doing things wrong seemed to be the rule. I was firmly convinced that punishment was harmful in human relationships, and I realized instinctively that it wouldn't be a smart move with killer whales. That belief was borne out when I took a group of our trainers and clients on a behind-the-scenes tour of the Shamu show, and met Chuck Tompkins, head trainer at the Orlando SeaWorld. Chuck and I, recognizing each other as soul mates, made an agreement: he would teach me about whale training and I would teach him about people training. In the process we found we were teaching the same things!

Yet we also had important concepts to learn from one another. I was particularly fascinated by the ability of SeaWorld trainers to use *redirection*. Upon encountering any undesirable behaviors on the whales' part, they would immediately refocus those energies elsewhere. That very simple but powerful strategy permits the trainers to set up new situations to catch the whales doing something right. Everybody knows that accentuating the positive works best. But what do you do when somebody does something that has a negative impact? That's where Chuck and the SeaWorld trainers opened





my eyes. Instead of focusing energy, as most of us do, on what went wrong, they redirect that energy toward a positive outcome. When Chuck and I realized that the combination of redirection and accentuating the positive could make a major difference in work and family relationships, we began talking about writing a book together that would show how to apply these concepts.

That project remained a dream for several years until Chuck introduced me to his boss, colleague, and friend, Thad Lacinak. Now we had three dreamers determined to make it happen. A little later I invited Jim Ballard, an old friend, colleague, and writing partner, to join forces with us. With that critical mass, *WHALE DONE!* began to take shape. I am thrilled with this book and think it might be the most important book I have ever written.





## Chapter One

### HOW DO THEY *DO* THAT?

A collective gasp rose from a crowd of over three thousand spectators as they thrilled to the amazing performances of leaping killer whales. It was another show in Shamu Stadium at SeaWorld. All eyes in the grandstand were glued to the huge animals and their trainers, so no one noticed the wide range of emotions reflected in the face of a man in khakis and a blue shirt who sat in their midst. Each time the crowd exploded in applause and cheers as the animals performed one of their spectacular feats, the man's eyes would sparkle with surprise and delight. At other times his face would cloud over and his eyes assume a faraway look.

Wes Kingsley had come to Orlando to attend a business conference. Since the schedule left room for conferees to relax, play golf, or visit one of the area's attractions, he had decided that a visit to the



world-famous marine zoological park would help him forget his troubles for a time.

He was glad he had made that decision. Earlier, along with throngs of other people eagerly crowding the huge stadium, he had taken his seat above the blue waters of the large main pool. Following a welcome and a review of safety rules by an animal trainer, a mysterious fog had begun to shroud the surface of the pool. From behind and above them, the crowd heard the scream of a fish eagle. The mighty bird suddenly swooped over their heads, dove toward the pool, and took a lure from the misty waters. As it flew away, huge black dorsal fins broke the surface, and onlookers caught their breath when they saw monstrous black shapes circling deep in the pool. A wet-suit-clad trainer came through the mists paddling a kayak, to be instantly surrounded by the fins of enormous killer whales.

Following this dramatic opening, the crowd witnessed a series of astonishing acrobatic leaps and dives by a trio of whales—a 10,000-pound male and two 5,000-pound females. These marine mammals, among the most feared predators in the ocean, waved their pectoral fins to the audience, allowed trainers to “surf” the pool by balancing on their back, and with sweeps of their great tails splashed the first ten rows of spectators with cold water. The roars of laughter, the oohs and



aaahs, and the thunderous applause attested to the crowd's enjoyment.

Wes Kingsley also found himself entranced by the spectacle unfolding before him. By the finale, when the three finny costars hiked their gleaming black-backed and white-bellied bodies up onto a raised section of the pool to take some well-deserved bows, he had scribbled several entries in a small notebook.

As people exited the stadium, scores of them were still dripping from the soaking they'd happily received sitting in the "splash zone" of the first ten rows. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—their faces sparkled with smiles. Still in his seat in an upper row of the emptying stands, Wes Kingsley remained staring down into the pool. Its blue depths, recently awash with great waves but now still, seemed to echo his mood.

After the crowd had left and the place was quiet, an underwater gate opened and a giant black form moved into the pool and began circling it. A trainer came through a door and strolled out onto the lip of the pool, and the huge killer whale immediately swam over to him. "Nice going, big guy," he said, stroking its head. "Enjoy your playtime. You earned it." As the trainer rose and walked along the pool's edge, the whale moved with him. It seemed to be trying to stay as close to him as possible.



The blue-shirted man in the stands shook his head and thought to himself, *You'd think that after doing a whole show that whale would hoard its free time. But what does it want to do? Play with the trainer!* A question was forming in the man's mind, a need to know that had been building up in him ever since the start of the show. He had an impulse to go down there and ask the trainer that question, but fear of embarrassment held him back. Then suddenly he got up off the bench and quickly descended the stairs.

"Excuse me," Wes called as he reached the deck of the pool and started toward the trainer.

The trainer looked up in surprise. Then he gestured toward a door. "Sir, the exit is over there."

"I know. But I need to ask you something." As Wes approached, it was evident that he was not ready to take no for an answer.

"Sure," the trainer said. "What do you want to know?"

Pulling a wallet from his pocket, Wes offered two fifty-dollar bills to the trainer. "I'm willing to pay you for the information. What I want to know is probably what everyone who sees the show wonders: What's your secret? How do you trick these animals into performing for you? Do you starve them?"

The man in the wet suit controlled an impulse to



react angrily to his visitor's impertinent attitude. Patiently and quietly he said, "We don't trick them, and we don't starve them. And you can keep your money."

"Well then, what is it? What *do* you do?" Wes demanded. But after a long silence from the other, Wes's manner softened. Realizing he had given offense, he put his money away. "Sorry," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Wes Kingsley. I don't mean to bother you with this, but I really have to know how you get such a tremendous performance from these animals."

"Dave Yardley," said the trainer as they shook hands. "I'm in charge of the animal training here, so I guess you might say you've come to the right place. The answer to your question is that we have teachers. Would you like to meet one of them?"

Kingsley looked around to see if they were being joined by someone else. When he looked back, Yardley was pointing to the whale. "This is one of our teachers. His name's Shamu. He and all the other whales here at SeaWorld taught us all we know about working with these wonderful animals."

Wes squinted warily. "Come on. You mean to say you've been trained by an *animal*? I thought it was the other way around."

Dave shook his head. "Shamu is one of the world's largest killer whales living in a zoological park. As far as





who trains whom, let me put it this way. When you're dealing with an eleven-thousand-pound animal who doesn't speak English, you do a lot of learning."

Wes glanced down at the rows of enormous, two-inch-long teeth in Shamu's enormous mouth. "I think the only thing he would teach me is to stay on his good side."

"There's plenty of data to back that up," Dave said. "Killer whales are the most feared predators in the ocean. They can kill and eat anything in sight."

"I guess if he's not learning his lessons, you don't make him go and stand in the corner," Wes ventured.

"That's exactly right. One thing we learned quickly was that it doesn't make much sense to punish a killer whale and then ask a trainer to get in the water with him."

"Not unless you want your career shortened!" Wes exclaimed. Then, recalling the prodigious leaps Shamu had performed in the show, he added, "It's hard to believe a creature that size could get ten feet out of the water on its own. How *do* you get him to perform so well?"

"Let's just say it didn't happen overnight," said Dave. "Shamu taught us patience."

"How so?"

"Shamu wasn't about to do anything for me or any



other trainer until he trusted us. As I worked with him, it became clear that I couldn't train him until he was convinced of my intentions. Whenever we get a new whale, we don't attempt to do any training for some time. All we do is make sure they're not hungry; then we jump in the water and play with them, until we convince them."

"Convince them of what?"

"That we mean them no harm."

Wes said, "You mean you want them to trust you."

"You're right. That's the key principle we use in working with all our animals."

Wes took out his notebook and pen and began to write.

"Are you writing an article?" Dave asked. "Or doing research?"

Wes Kingsley smiled grimly. "I guess you'd call it research of a personal nature. I've got to learn some new things myself or else . . ."

Dave Yardley waited and watched. *It's hard for this guy to trust anybody*, he thought. *That's what his bluster act is about.*

After a long pause, Wes spoke, avoiding eye contact with the trainer. "I live near Atlanta and work for a big industrial-supply outfit. I came to Florida to get away for a few days, using a business conference as the





excuse. But over there at the hotel with my manager buddies, all I could think of was how I don't want to go back home to face the same old problems."

Dave was listening with evident interest.

"For a long time I've been having a hard time getting my people at work to perform well," Wes continued, then grinned. "Not to mention getting my kids at home to pitch in around the house and do better at school. When I was complaining to a friend of mine about it, he had a nice way of suggesting that since I was having management problems both at work and at home, we might look for the common denominator."

"What was that?" Dave asked.

"My friend said, 'Did you ever notice, when your life isn't working, *who's always around?*'"

Both men chuckled. "I know I'm not managing effectively," Wes went on, "and I might be about to lose my job. Frankly, I'm getting a little desperate."

Dave was aware of Wes's anxious, almost pleading tone of voice and said, "Let me take you on a little backstage tour. Then we can talk more about this."

Dave led Wes through a gate and over to a training pool where a few feet away the huge black backs and fins of two killer whales were gliding through the clear blue water. Their beautiful bodies exuded an air of calmness, and at the same time the promise of



explosive power. As the two men walked from one holding pool to another, the trainer identified each whale by name and supplied interesting anecdotes about them.

“It takes a long time to build trust and friendship with each of the whales,” Dave said. “That trust and friendship is the basis of everything you just saw in the show. These animals are not so different from people. They’ll show you when they don’t like how you’re treating them. You’re a businessman, so you know that the whole game these days is satisfying the customer—and a key ingredient of that is satisfying your own people. When our killer whales completely lose their fear of us, the positive vibes between them and us are transferred to the audience.”

“That’s true,” said Wes emphatically. “The show creates a lot of happiness in the audience. I could see it on people’s faces when they left the stadium. Half of them were soaking wet, yet there were big smiles on their faces.”

“You can see it in the whales, too,” Dave said, “They all crowd up to the gate when the show is starting. It’s plain they want to be in it. They know it’s going to be a positive experience.”

“Okay, I’ve got the principle. But what do you actually *do* with the whales to build that trust?”