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—MARSHALL GOLDSMITH
A Thinkers 50 Top Ten Global Business Thinker

{ SHARING SECRETS }

*A Conversation about the
Counterintuitive Nature of
Executive Leadership*

ERIN SOTO

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Counterintuitive Nature of
Executive Leadership*

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What people are saying about
{ SHARING SECRETS }

“For the first time, this book synthesizes three critical areas successful leaders must master: knowledge of proven leadership strategies, the good judgment that comes from years in the business, and acute self-awareness. Erin Soto gets you up to speed in all three areas in this highly accessible, simple-yet-brilliant book! I recommend *Sharing Secrets* to any new leader, or any leader want to make a new start!”

—MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

a Thinkers 50 Top Ten Global Business Thinker and top ranked executive coach.

“Erin is a natural leader who understands the guiding principle of transparency. *Sharing Secrets* is a great resource for aspiring leaders who endeavor to succeed.”

—HENRIETTA FORE

former Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development and Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance and Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Holsman International

“*Sharing Secrets* is a readable, practical roadmap for executive leaders in the public and private sectors. If I had Soto’s wise advice, my adventure in executive leadership would have been more effective, productive and enjoyable. *Sharing Secrets* is a must read for all who aspire to successful careers in executive leadership positions.”

—AMBASSADOR WILLIAM GARVELINK

Senior adviser for global strategy at the International Medical Corps and to the Center for Strategic and International Studies

“We all recognize a leader when we see one. But it is much less conspicuous to describe what it takes to lead. No single course, no particular book, no specific mentor can turn the aspiration to lead into an accomplished leader. But in her *Sharing Secrets*, author Erin Soto, take us up close and personal to some of leadership’s required characteristics. Experienced leaders will be intrigued with Soto’s insights while aspiring leaders will be both nourished and challenged. She liberally provides her readers access to the accumulation of observations (secrets) that her years of experience have afforded her. Read it; you will like it.”

—DAN PELLEGRAM

retired President of Pathfinder International and former Board Chair of InterAction

What people are saying about
{ SHARING SECRETS }

“A MUST READ for existing and aspiring senior executives -- one of the top five books on leadership, period. Erin Soto is a thinker, practitioner and real leader and now coach and advisor. She creates an easy-to-read, holistic and honest work in *Sharing Secrets*. Her book is a profound guide to thinking and cognitive exploration of self, others and organizations. Through personal anecdotes, colorful analogies and broad experiences, Erin talks about the demand by people and organizations for compassion, sincerity and truth. She upends common conventions as she discusses “counterintuitive” yet universal approaches to executive leadership, proven to work. *Sharing Secrets* should be on every leader’s desk and in global boardrooms; if read widely it could change stoic, greedy and callous workplaces into more productive contributors to society. For those already pursuing a happier-productive workforce there are areas Erin Soto can help hone through exercises and checklists. Already looking forward to her next book!”

—GUS OTTO
former Professor of Practice of Strategic Leadership, National Defense University, Washington D.C.

“*Sharing Secrets* stands to impact the success rate of first-time executives. Erin details the job of the executive – what it is and what it isn’t – and provides tools that will prepare the leader to succeed regardless of the sector or industry. This user-friendly book will help the executive optimize her time, lead with confidence and achieve balance.”

—AMBASSADOR LEWIS LUCKE

“We need this book. *Sharing Secrets* is jam-packed with profound insights. Although geared toward aspiring and first-time executives, all leaders will benefit tremendously from Erin’s *Secret’s*. She shares with such humility and sincerity, one can’t help but profit from her book.”

—JENNIFER B. KAHNWEILER, PH.D.
Author of Quiet Influence and The Introverted Leader

“The key to success in leading at the executive level is in your hands. Erin Soto ably offers the experienced-based secrets and the harder to learn counterintuitive aspects so that you will be prepared to lead and set to succeed. *Sharing Secrets* is sure to inspire reflection in leaders and those aspiring to be leaders. It is useful for the personal and professional development of all who lead and serve.”

—GERARD W. HALL, PH.D.
National Defense College, U.A.E

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{ WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK }

We aren't getting it right yet! A study from the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, found that 40% of executives who had changed jobs or gotten promoted failed in the first 18 months. Likewise, Kevin Kelly, CEO of Heidrick & Struggles, a leading executive search firm, pointed to Heidrick's internal study which found that 40% of executives hired at the senior level were pushed out, failed, or quit within 18 months. Batting .400 in baseball is good, but it is horrible in leadership, particularly when assuming stewardship of millions and billions of dollars and the lives of hundreds of thousands and millions of employees. Couple that with the fact that the average age of executive leaders has dropped. . Well-known leadership development experts, Michael Watkins and Peter Daly claim that 250,000 public-sector management positions turn over every year. Tenures for executive leaders—especially in the private sector—are shorter now than before. There is increased pressure to move quickly, yet a lower tolerance for errors. Crushing pressure from the media weighs on top executive leaders. Employees cite a lack of leadership near the top of their concerns and few executive leaders believe that they were adequately trained for their positions. As executive leaders, we haven't fully understood these trends and are not yet equipped to counter them. In writing *Sharing Secrets*, I hope to contribute to understanding these trends as a first step toward impacting them.

Sharing Secrets endeavors to offer explanations and help to leaders in countering these trends. By the time you reach the last pages of this book, you will have a comprehensive conceptual framework for leading at the executive level in any public- or private-sector position. You will

generation of leaders to be better at leading than I was. The issues and problems they face will most certainly be more complex. Increasing global elements in the workplace will, by definition, enhance the complexity of leading people and tackling problems. Even if you aren't an executive leader, by understanding aspects of the executive's job relative to your own, you can learn to better support and have a more positive relationship with your leader, as well as prepare yourself for executive leadership positions in the future.

The Structure of the Book

This book is written in two parts: In Part I, Chapter One, I outline the job of an executive leader and surface the counterintuitive aspects. In Chapters Two through Eleven, I explore the key aspects of an executive leader's job, including external and internal assessments, vision and strategy, culture, change agenda, communication, making executive decisions, taking care of oneself, reflecting, synthesizing, and allowing for contingencies. Each chapter covers what the responsibilities of the executive are and are not, and provides examples, charts, tools, and tips to understand the job and do it well. Believe it or not, many people in executive positions spend a lot of time doing things that simply aren't their responsibility. By the end of Part I, you will be clear about the parameters of your job and be able to approximate about how much time you should spend on each component. You will be armed with secrets and tips to carry out your job well. You'll have insights into the counterintuitive nature of these components of your job. In short, you will be equipped with the knowledge you need to succeed at the executive level.

Part II is designed to ensure that you are fully prepared to lead. Information about leader readiness in Chapter Twelve, leadership styles in Chapter Thirteen, and high-performing teams in Chapter Fourteen will amply prepare you for an executive leadership position. Chapter Fifteen details the first crucial steps in the career of an executive leader, especially a first-time executive leader. It will set you on the path to great leadership.

Sharing Secrets is full of stories and cases of both good and poor leadership. The depiction of poor leaders is not meant to incriminate or blame, but rather designed for all of us to learn from and grow. The contrast between good and poor leadership is a way for you, as a leader, to assess yourself and to see where you fall on the continuum of executive leadership.

Ultimately, an executive leader's job is to develop people. The best executives understand this and practice it day in and day out. They know that amazing results will follow if they invest in their people, that all of their expectations will be exceeded if they simply take care of their people and help them grow and learn.

My hope in writing this book is that it will help executives, aspiring executives, and high potentials become great leaders and show the necessity for all of us to help each other become successful if we are to be truly successful ourselves. I also hope this book strengthens your conceptual framework about leadership and, indeed, about people and life. Read on and discover the secrets that no one has shared with you before about what it takes to succeed at the highest levels of your company, your organization, or your government!

—ERIN SOTO
Washington D.C.

Chapter One

IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE WORK!

You've made it to the senior ranks. You are a well-respected, driven, intelligent achiever. You've worked hard to get to this level. Long days and weekends are finally going to pay off. Your paycheck is bigger. You'll have command over your schedule and can keep normal hours. The support for your position is greater. You may even have a driver. You probably have an executive assistant who runs your errands, keeps your schedule, and helps you to avoid missing birthdays. You probably don't know everyone in your company or organization. You will spend more time in the public eye speaking to larger groups. You will likely travel a lot more. You'll have access to senior peers and captains of industry with whom you'll wine and dine. It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Easy even: it sounds like a dream job.

The reality is that executive leadership is anything but easy. It is hard, really hard. It doesn't always look like work, but it is. All of a

sudden you have to be all things to all people. The demands on your time are enormous. Expectations are impossible to meet. Mistakes are visible to your peers, your superiors, and the public. They cost the organization money and they have the potential to damage your reputation and even end your career. Your decisions are consequential and impact an order of magnitude greater than what you have dealt with before. The stakes are high and the pressure is immense. You bear full responsibility for your organization, company, or institution.

What Is Your Job as an Executive?

If you don't thoroughly understand what your job is and what it isn't, you will likely be derailed, pushed aside, or replaced. Successful executive leadership starts and ends with understanding your scope. There is a reason to have a clear demarcation, a threshold to cross, between executive-level leaders and other leaders. The reason is that, unlike lower-level leaders, you are responsible for bringing value to improve the competitiveness of your company or the effectiveness of your organization: Full stop. It sounds simple. It is, of course, not. Repeat this out loud:

“My goal is to improve the competitiveness of _____.”
(if you are in the private sector)

“My goal is to improve the effectiveness of _____.”
(if you are in the public sector)

One of the statements above is your bull's eye (depending upon whether the organization you are leading is part of the private or public sector). It is what all your actions and decisions should be focused on achieving.

When you take an executive leadership position, you will likely receive direction from the board, CEO, secretary, or president. If you are lucky, that direction is explicit, e.g., increase market share by 4%, take

three new products through the proof-of-concept phase, or reduce costs in shipping by 7%. More than likely, however, the direction will be more general and full of ambiguity. You will get orders like, “fix the mess,” “turn the ship around,” and “beef up research and development.” Don’t be confused. Your job is either to increase the competitiveness of your company or the effectiveness of your organization by bringing your value to bear. Your value is your intelligence, training, experience, interpersonal skills, time, and networks. Your value should increase the competitiveness of the company or the effectiveness of the organization. How you apply your value is as important as your value itself. You have to bring clarity and certainty to the ambiguity you have been handed.

Your job is not to have all the answers, to make all the decisions, or to control all the aspects of the enterprise. This is, perhaps, where the counterintuitive nature of executive leadership begins. Making decisions and getting results is probably what you’ve done to get to the top, but this approach won’t work now because your job is fundamentally different. Your number one priority now is to develop your people. You apply your value through your people. Again, though it sounds simple, it is anything but.

Your time is a key asset of the company or institution you are leading. Think of it as an investment that should have big payoffs. It is a significant part of your value to the organization, and how you spend your time indicates to subordinates what you and the organization value. It’s also an indicator of how well you know your job and a consequence of this knowledge, i.e., how well you can lead. Let’s review in more detail how you should spend your time.

Executive Time Distribution

Let's first take a look at how executives should spend their time (see Table 1.1):

Table 1.1: Executive Time Distribution			
	Executive Role	Time Spent	Sharing Secrets Chapter(s)
1	Investing in staff growth and development	10%	Chapter 2
2	Assessing the external and internal environments to shape the vision and strategy	60%	Chapters 3, 4, 5
3	Communicating to stakeholders to guide the change agenda	10%	Chapters 6, 7, 8
4	Making decisions of consequence	5%	Chapter 9
5	Taking care of yourself	5%	Chapter 10
6	Reflecting, analyzing, and synthesizing information	5%	Chapter 11
7	Allowing time for contingencies and unexpected events	5%	Chapter 11

1. Investing in Staff Growth and Development

In interviews with executives, from CEOs to ambassadors to directors of major programs, I've found that there is a general consensus that if you take care of your people, help them develop and grow, the results will come, expectations will be exceeded, your company will be more competitive, and your organization will be more effective. These day-to-day investments in your people may not yield growth immediately. A delayed return on investment, coupled with the relatively short tenure of executives, make staff development counterintuitive perhaps, but without such investment, there will not be competitiveness and effectiveness.

“Develop your people? What do you mean? I send them to training, isn't that enough? What if they make mistakes? Should I just let them fail?” The answer to these questions varies, and this is the art of leadership. The best thing you can do is set a good example. Then empower your people to make decisions. Finally, allow space for mistakes; this is how people learn.

While investing in staff growth and development is job number one, it should occupy only about 10% of an executive's time. This “time spent” is a bit deceiving, because developing staff is indirectly reflected in how the executive conducts himself, in the way he makes decisions, and in the degree of transparency he exhibits in decision making, how communication flows, and so on. Among the very best executives, investing in staff growth and development holds the highest priority of all functions of the job, superseding all other elements. Investing in staff development includes mentoring through complex tasks, modeling positive skills and traits, coaching through stretch assignments and meeting regularly to discuss staff's growth and development.

Perhaps the biggest recruiting tactic is how you lead your company or organization. Word gets out. If you are known as an executive who develops and invests in staff, provides opportunities for growth, and allows people space to create, you will attract followers. If you consciously create a work environment that values both work-life balance and teamwork, these elements will be a powerful recruitment tool. People yearn to work for great leaders. Your actions and your leadership can be important factors in both recruiting and retaining talent.

2. Assessing the External and Internal Environments to Shape the Vision and Strategy

This may surprise you, but leaders at the top of an organization should spend a minimum of 60% of their time gathering information and engaging with people outside of the organization. While it may not look like work, the external networks executives build are critical to achieving their internal objectives.

In your executive leadership position, you will tap into your network of peers, captains of industry, and leaders of governments to obtain the best information possible to enable you to make the decisions that no one else can make. If you are to do this successfully, you must build trust between and among your networks.

You will spend a lot of time gathering information about trends or external forces that could impact your company or organization, as well as information about your competitors. You will analyze and synthesize this information with an aim toward predicting and shaping the future. Synthesizing this information is the basis for establishing a vision for the future and, equally important, a strategy for fulfilling that vision.

Similarly, executives need to have a finger on the pulse of their own company or organization. They must assess the internal environment and, in particular, the internal systems, focusing on determining the extent to which internal systems are aligned with each other and are consistent with the values of the company or organization. They must ensure that all internal systems support the overarching vision and strategy. They strive for systems that are lean and efficient. This kind of internal assessment takes a tremendous amount of time.

3. Communicating to Stakeholders to Guide the Change Agenda

As you draw conclusions from your assessment of both external forces and internal systems, you establish a vision and strategy. The gaps between where you are and where you want to be encompass the change agenda—the steps needed to bring internal systems into greater alignment with each other and with the overall vision and strategy. This change can be almost anything. For instance, you may see that the reward system is out of sync with the teamwork environment your company needs to achieve the kind of innovation that is required to remain competitive. In government, you may see new initiatives that are out of sync with budget systems or skill sets. The job of the executive, then, is to strive for greater alignment of the internal systems that support the larger vision and strategy.

In striving for such alignment, you'll find that the mother of all systems is the culture. Corporate culture is a strong and powerful internal force. Because it is invisible, it is sometimes difficult to assess; however, the executive who ignores culture won't achieve her objectives. Culture is that powerful. Questions arise initially, such as, should you assimilate to the culture or have the culture assimilate to your leadership style? That is jumping ahead! While shaping culture is an important element of your job and part of the larger change agenda, it takes a long time to change it. Additionally, before you can change a culture, you must understand it.

When communicating internally, you will want to tap into the existing, culturally appropriate means of communicating, at least initially. How you communicate is as important as what you communicate.

Essentially, your job as an executive is to communicate the vision and strategy of the organization and to relate successes to multiple audiences with varied frequency. You should spend about 10% of your time communicating. You will communicate with stakeholders both outside and inside the company or organization. External stakeholders include competitors, collaborators, and cooperators. Internal stakeholders can be the board of directors, peers, and staff at the edge of the enterprise. The communication can be one-on-one or to thousands. It can be face-to-face or through social media and the internet.

Most executives believe that they are communicating both more and more effectively than they actually are. In reality, they may be speaking, but not communicating. As a result, subordinates often cite a lack of communication from their leaders as a chief complaint. Great leaders communicate with clarity and frequency. They have connected and earned the trust of those with whom they communicate. They listen closely and empathetically. They are able to tailor messages readily and effectively. They are patient as they communicate their message over and over until it is heard, understood, and acted upon; until the change is bought and owned. Communicating the change agenda, whether the change is an aspect of culture, developing a major new product line, or

learning to collaborate rather than compete, is a fundamental element of an executive's job.

Measures of great leadership are not always tangible and quantifiable, but also include intangibles that are difficult to measure, such as trust, team spirit, pride, and love. These are the factors that distinguish good from great leaders who lead by investing in their people and who understand their most important job: develop their people. These attributes play a catalytic role in innovation and solving the complex problems that are so key to competitiveness and effectiveness. You can judge a leader by the atmosphere she creates through communication. Yet this atmosphere is hard to measure. Perhaps because it is hard to measure, it doesn't get measured often. And because it doesn't get measured, people afford it lower importance. It is counterintuitive in that it doesn't seem important, but is of paramount importance.

4. Making Decisions of Consequence

Executives spend time about 5% of their time making decisions, but not just any decisions. They focus on those decisions that subordinates cannot make. Typically, the more complex and consequential decisions are reserved for the executive. Consequential means that a decision impacts the strategy and/or large numbers of people. Executives must relinquish control of decisions of lesser consequence. This is counterintuitive. At the executive level, loose is tight. What do I mean by that? I mean, you must give up control. You cannot possibly make all the decisions that you made previously plus the ones required of you at the executive level. You may be great at making decisions at the lower level, but many roads lead to the same results, and your decision, your road, is but one way to get there. Other people will take other roads. It is important to allow subordinates to travel the roads they choose and assess whether there is a shortcut, a better way, a faster route, a better decision. This is how they learn and develop. This is one very important way that you fulfill your most important role, developing your people. And, more importantly, relinquishing control gives you more power, because it builds trust. If you trust your subordinates, they will trust

you. They will follow you. So decision making is part of the executive's job, but only a select set of decisions should be yours to make.

Again, it is counterintuitive, but executives are not supposed to have all the answers. In fact, it turns out that it isn't advisable for them to have all the answers. If you have all the answers, you leave no space for the engagement of others in making a decision and you increase your liability. You run the risk of being wrong because you didn't understand a nuance or a detail. One of the first things executives have to understand is that not only are they not expected to have all the answers, it is disastrous for them to pretend to have all the answers. As soon as you realize this, your life will become much simpler. You may even feel as if a weight has been lifted off your shoulders.

Know Your Job!

An executive's time is a key investment for a company or organization. Every executive should ensure they he knows his job and uses his time wisely. If you find yourself doing any of the following, unless you are an extremely small business or organization, you are probably not investing your time as wisely as you could. An executive leader must avoid these kinds of tasks: editing documents or communications products; making decisions below the vision and strategy level (technical or tactical level); reviewing data below the system level (subsystem level) unless there is an issue. To the extent that you are spending time on these things, you are either not carrying out the responsibilities of your executive position or you are trying to do too many tasks at once. If you are trying to do both tactical or subsystem level tasks as well as strategic and system level tasks, I guarantee something will give. Either you will fail as a leader in the form of a serious professional crisis, or your health, family, or marriage will suffer. The solution to this problem is as simple as knowing what your job is and isn't.

5. Taking Care of Yourself

It is important to spend time every day taking care of yourself. To ensure your highest productivity, spend some time daily doing something that relaxes you like cooking, playing bridge, singing, acting, reading, or exercising. Research indicates that even with mild and acute stress there is a dramatic loss of cognitive abilities.¹ Outside hobbies and regular physical activity aids in stress management. As you are called on to make decisions that have serious consequences for your company or organization, stress management for an executive is exponentially important. Five percent of your time during the workday should be spent on activities to reduce stress and while you're not likely to spend work time on your hobbies, you can have a relaxing lunch, go for a walk, read, and schedule five minutes between meetings to gather your thoughts, for example, during the workday. Also, in developing staff, modeling stress management is especially valuable. If you take the time to take care of yourself, those whom you lead may feel justified in doing the same and this will positively impact the productivity and quality of work across the board.

Part of taking care of yourself is establishing behaviors and boundaries that ensure work-life balance. Reject the “do whatever it takes” attitude. Pay attention to the warning signs of working excessively. Know yourself and your values and align them with your career goals to heighten the possibility of success. Ensure that you are fully prepared to lead at the executive level and you can have work-life balance and so can those who work with you.

6. Reflecting, Analyzing, and Synthesizing Information

Executives should spend some time every day reflecting. Again, this may not look like work, but good executives spend about 30 minutes every day thinking—not multitasking—just thinking...about their decisions, their people and teams, and their communications.

Too many conversations in the workplace are ad hoc and hinge on moods, energy levels, relationships, and personalities.² You see it every day. In an hour-long meeting, even if there is an agenda, a facilitator, and an objective, the conversation is often unstructured and characterized by long arguments and personality clashes. Participants don't reveal their true feelings. Ideas are presented in a haphazard manner and lack clarity or detail. Assumptions are silently made without discussion. As an executive leader, you can manage this with prior reflection.

Reflect on the conversations you plan to have. Be deliberate in what you want to convey and the purpose for it. When you engage, demand that other people express themselves in a coherent and clear fashion. Sometimes that, in and of itself, is a mountain to climb. People haven't been taught how to express themselves or to put together an argument. It takes work, but over time, conversations will become more meaningful, relationships will become more solid, and trust will be built.

During your daily reflection period, you'll want to spend time thinking about trends and strategy. You should be thinking about today, tomorrow, and 20 to 30 years from now. Reflecting is when learning happens, insights occur, and growth flourishes.

7. Allowing Time for Contingencies and Unexpected Events

This is straightforward, although few executives actually carve out time every day for the unforeseen issues that inevitably arise. If you've accurately assessed and synthesized information from stakeholders and assessed internal systems; if you've got a vision, realistic strategy, and a change agenda that your team owns; and if you trust and empower your staff, then there should be few unexpected events. However, they do happen, and happen fairly regularly. Then there are major events that are unforeseen. It is difficult to plan for a natural disaster that disrupts your entire business model, ideological political fights that shut down government, or a large-scale security event or accident.

Most large companies and certainly the government have plans in place should these types of major events occur. However, when your day is consistently thrown off schedule because of unforeseen events or you are spending large percentages of your time dealing with the fallout of such events, this may be an indicator of a larger problem. Perhaps you didn't accurately assess the external environment to detect trends and patterns and account for them in your vision or strategy. Perhaps your assessment of internal systems indicated a greater degree of alignment than actually exists. The ideal is to spend less than 5% of your time on these kinds of issues, which means that you can spend more time on your number one priority, investing in staff development and growth; spending more than 5% calls for a reassessment.

Summary

Executive leadership isn't easy. One way to make it more manageable is to understand precisely what your job is and what it is not. This chapter has detailed the responsibilities of the executive, the time that should be spent on these responsibilities, and offered examples to help you gain a fuller understanding of the executive leader's job. In the following chapters, I will discuss each of these items in greater detail and depth.



Chapter One Secrets

1. Know your top goal: You are responsible for bringing value to improve the competitiveness of your company or the effectiveness of your organization.
2. Your job is not to have all the answers, to make all the decisions, or to control all the aspects of the enterprise.
3. The best leaders view their time as an asset and invest their time to yield the greatest value to the institution. They are disciplined in daily reflection.
4. Staff growth and development is job number one of an executive.
5. Great leaders relinquish control of decisions of lesser consequence.
6. Putting yourself above other priorities is key to ensuring your highest productivity.

Chapter One Exercise

Write down the precise parameters of your job. Review the components of time distribution in this chapter. Then, track your own time allocation to determine how close you are to the ideal distribution.

{ ABOUT THE AUTHOR }

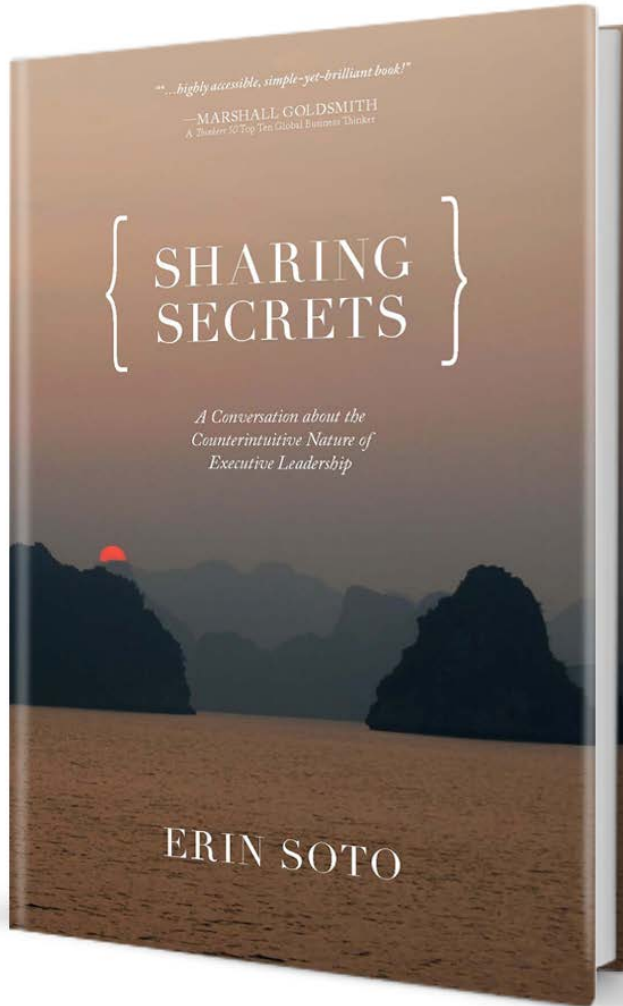


A proven leader in executive coaching and organizational development, Erin Soto is a seasoned executive with more than 30 years of experience leading around the globe. She has dedicated her life to public service including working for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Peace Corps.

She has lived and worked in Latin America, Africa, and Asia and has served as a member of the Senior Foreign Service Office and as an assistant professor at the prestigious National Defense University.

More recently through her business, TLC Solutions, Erin offers expert assistance in organizational development and executive coaching as an ICF-certified executive coach. She is married to Ben Soto and they have a daughter, Maggie and a son, Pedro.

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