

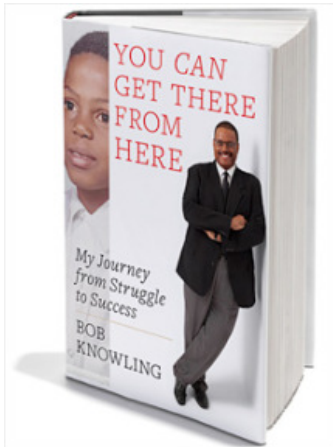
Bob Knowling's bridge to the top

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Our Weekly Read column features Fortune staffers' and contributors' takes on recently published books about the business world and beyond. We've invited the entire Fortune family -- from our writers and editors to our photo editors and designers -- to weigh in on books of their choosing based on their individual tastes or curiosities. Each Friday we feature a different review. This week, Fortune reporter Tara Moore reviews You Can Get There From Here, former Covad CEO Bob Knowling's memoir of his journey from childhood deprivation to the summit of the telecom industry.

FORTUNE -- Many business books claim to offer the keys to personal and professional success. All too often, these promises yield little but generic advice and platitudes. Then there's Bob Knowling, a veteran telecom CEO who ran Covad Communications, Simdesk Technologies, and other big industry players, both during the Internet bubble and after its collapse.

Knowling grew up in the Midwest, in a large African-American family that had little money and plenty of dysfunction. From this unpromising beginning, he climbed to the top of the global telecom industry during a period of wrenching change. His memoir, *You Can Get There From Here*, is an engrossing and often inspiring read.



Knowling isn't your typical corporate chieftain. He wasn't born on third base, and he doesn't appear to have been motivated by money. His career advice is very simple: "The will to win must be at the heart of your career." Overall, he comes across as a man of faith and morality with a knack for effective leadership. That's a rare combination in corporate America these days.

The journey was riddled with hardships, including racial injustice. Knowling recalls an elementary school principal paddling him across the back for 30 minutes because the child's behavior "reinforced his belief that it was wrong to have black children in school with white children." Yet Knowling seems impressively free of hatred or the desire for vengeance, merely noting that his difficult personal life made business challenges seem like "child's play."

In the end, Knowling's memoir is a meditation on morality, values and the many people who influenced his decisions along the way. He repeatedly uses the metaphor of bridge-building in talking about his personal and professional life. His goal, he writes, was to "spread the message of transformation around the world ... tell people who looked up to me that hard work, honesty, and treating people well was more than just a slogan. It was a way of life."