"Invaluable . . . a terrific book for leaders." —JONATHAN HAIDT, PROFESSOR OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP, NYU STERN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ANXIOUS GENERATION*

BUILD WISDOM | SPARK INSPIRATION | DEVELOP RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP INTELLIGENCE

Science-Backed Strategies for Mastering 21 Everyday Management Challenges

CAROLINE WEBB

FURTHER PRAISE FOR

Leadership Intelligence

"Caroline Webb's first book, *How to Have a Good Day,* is so wonderful that I assign it in every course I teach at NYU Stern. Now she's back with a terrific book for leaders. Every page of *Leadership Intelligence* offers invaluable advice drawn from her long experience as an executive coach, all grounded in current research on how the brain processes information, rewards, and threats —and I can personally vouch for the effectiveness of her advice. If you want to become a wiser, more inspiring, and more resilient leader, this is the best book you can read."

—Jonathan Haidt, Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at NYU Stern School of Business and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Anxious Generation* and *The Righteous Mind*

"Caroline Webb captures the texture of modern leadership—the overstuffed calendar, the stalled conversation, the chronic personnel headache—with the accuracy of someone who has lived it. Then she offers a suite of tools so well designed that using them feels less like following advice and more like seeing clearly. Her frameworks for dealing with conflict, overload, uncertainty, and team dynamics are simple enough to remember and powerful enough to reshape how you work."

—Daniel H. Pink, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Power of Regret* and *Drive*

"*Leadership Intelligence* provides a great system of principles and tools for leading your team well, and for converting tough challenges into genuine learning and progress. Backed by behavioral science and vivid real-world stories, Caroline Webb explains in twenty-one short, compelling chapters how to focus on what really matters and make better decisions in the rush of everyday work. The result is an essential guide for anyone who wants to lead with greater clarity, impact, and humanity."

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"Caroline Webb is one of the best leadership coaches in the world. I know this because I've worked alongside her and seen her help leaders tackle some of their hardest business and behavioral challenges. *Leadership Intelligence* captures what makes Webb so effective as a coach. It's smart, insightful, practical—and it will immediately improve the way you lead. Read it, use it, and give it to every leader you know!"

—Marshall Goldsmith, Thinkers50 Hall of Fame executive coach and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Triggers* and *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

"Caroline Webb's *Leadership Intelligence* is a masterful guide to creating the conditions for people to thrive and contribute their best. She shows us that the core leadership principles of building wisdom, inspiring others, and sustaining resilience can help any leader unlock the human magic that lives within their team. In a world that desperately needs purposeful, human-centered leadership, this book is an essential compass."

—Hubert Joly, former CEO of Best Buy, bestselling author of *The Heart of Business,* and co-lead of Chief Executive Leadership Programs at Harvard Business School

"Caroline Webb is candid about why leading can feel so exhausting and lonely; she's also inspirational about its joys. Packed with practical, tactical advice as well as relatable stories, this book will reassure you that you are not alone, because she is in your corner. *Leadership Intelligence* will help you understand your own brain—and more important, how to bring out the intelligence of those around you."

—Kim Scott, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Radical Candor* and *Radical Respect*

"In my career advising and leading in organizations and governments around the world, I have had the privilege of working with many extraordinary leaders. What the best have in common is a desire to keep learning and evolving as they face new challenges—and *Leadership Intelligence* is a gold mine for leaders who want to keep raising their game. This book is unusually comprehensive and full of the kind of frameworks and insights that I have seen make a difference in real-world settings. I recommend *Leadership Intelligence* to any forward-thinking leader who wants to take their team and organization to new heights."

—Dominic Barton, chairman of Rio Tinto, former global managing partner of McKinsey & Company, and former Canadian ambassador to the People's Republic of China

"*Leadership Intelligence* is an amazing book—a veritable trove of knowledge, insights, and practical advice. It answers real questions that managers struggle with, and does it in a systemic, science-based manner. The world needs more books of this kind. It deserves to become a classic, and I look forward to recommending it to every manager I meet for years to come."

—Olivier Sibony, professor of strategy at HEC Paris, *New York Times* bestselling co-author of *Noise,* and author of *You're About to Make a Terrible Mistake!*

ALSO BY CAROLINE WEBB

How to Have a Good Day

LEADERSHIP INTELLIGENCE

Science-Backed Strategies for Mastering 21 Everyday Management Challenges

CAROLINE WEBB

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is wonderful work. When you do it well, you multiply the human potential of the world. You make it possible for people to do more, build more, and become more than they ever could on their own.

But, as anyone who's ever led anything knows, leadership also asks a lot of you. You need to inspire your team to deliver great results today, but also build their capacity to keep delivering tomorrow. You need to have a high-altitude view of where you're headed, but also stay tuned in to the ground-level essentials that keep people moving forward. Meanwhile, technology is remaking the fabric of work. The division of labor between human and machine keeps shifting, with organizational structures and workflows in constant flux as a result. What does it take to lead intelligently through all of that?

A big part of the answer is understanding how intelligence (the human kind) really works, and how to make the most of it in a changing context. That includes knowing how to make the smartest possible decisions where there's no easy answer to be had. It means bringing out the best in the people who look up to you, even when you're all under pressure. It means knowing how to build a team, read a room, and mend a relationship. This is what *Leadership Intelligence* is for. It's a practical, science-based playbook to help you lead in the modern world, equipping you with the tools you need to steer yourself and your team through these interesting times.

Why I wrote this book

I've been coaching and advising leaders at all levels for nearly three decades, across dozens of countries and every major sector and function. Along the way, I've been a leader myself, both in a big global company and

in a small start-up. Every leader's life is different, but this broad experience has given me a view into what's universal about great leadership across contexts and cultures—and the work that it takes to keep growing as a leader, day after day. To help my clients reach those heights, over the years I've honed a coaching approach that gets its precision and power from being rooted in insights from cognitive and behavioral science. By working with what's fundamentally true about the human brain, I've found it's always possible to unlock more of a leader's ability to achieve impact with their team, wherever they're starting from.

I wrote this book because I wanted to make those insights available to everyone. As you get more senior, it can be hard to find support that tackles the sheer range of challenges you wrestle with daily—from solving complex strategic problems, to helping a struggling colleague get back on track, to managing your own time and energy. So whether you've only recently been thrust into leadership, are moving steadily up the ranks, or are stepping up to the peak of your career, the techniques in these pages are designed to help you be the leader you want to be in the moments that matter.

The book follows the approach that has worked well for my clients: It's grounded in proven science, offers practical advice, takes an integrated approach to a comprehensive set of topics, and—if I've done my job right—should feel personal and engaging along the way. Let me say a few more words about each of those qualities.

Science-based

All the advice in these pages is based on widely tested findings from neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral economics—research that explains why people think, feel, and behave the way they do. For years, I've seen executives sigh with relief when they realize that the challenging situations they face have biological or psychological explanations and are solvable (or at least improvable) once they understand what's really going on under the hood. I've distilled the latest science into a few clear principles that every leader should know about what it takes for humans to thrive.

Keeping those in mind can help everything in the workplace make more sense, making leadership feel less like guesswork and more like a craft.

Practical

Leadership Intelligence is built for real life, so you can reach for it in moments when you're short on time and need to know what to do next. You won't have to dig through a mountain of dense prose to try to extract the advice; it's spelled out, clearly and directly. Each chapter addresses a specific leadership challenge, and its advice is built around a memorable framework to help you recall and apply it in the heat of the moment. Many of us have had the experience of reading management books that leave you thinking, "Okay, now what do I actually do with this?" My hope is that this book will feel different. You'll know exactly what to do, and you'll know how to do it.

Comprehensive

This is designed to be a playbook that's broad enough to guide you through the challenges of everyday management, yet compact enough to be usable. It doesn't cover absolutely everything a leader might ever face—that would take an encyclopedia—but the chapters tackle the 21 issues that have come up most often with the people I've advised. They span both strategic and pragmatic topics, and they speak to both the best and the worst of times. They offer advice on working with individual colleagues, and on building effective group dynamics. The aim is to give you the essentials in one place, tied together by those core science principles, creating a coherent picture of what intelligent leadership looks like across the board.

Personal

Each chapter is brought to life by the real-life story of a leader who's especially good at handling the challenge of that chapter. These are people from different industries, countries, and walks of life who have become intentional experts in the skills I describe. I say "intentional" because they've worked at it, and you'll find out how and why they've become so

good at what they do. (I've changed the names of just a couple, where a little light anonymization allows them to share their stories in fuller detail.) They're all quite different people, but what unites them is their commitment to learning and developing as leaders, wherever they are in their careers.

How to use the book

Leadership Intelligence comes in three parts, covering in turn: How to make consistently wise choices, how to inspire great performance from your colleagues, and how to boost everyone's resilience to the inevitable ups and downs along the way. Building this **wisdom, inspiration, and resilience** in your team is the essential job of a leader. And what's interesting is that each of these three qualities is underpinned by fundamental science about how the human brain works: how it processes information, reward, and threat, respectively.

So in each part of the book, I describe what I call a "double unlock"—a pair of connected science-based principles that will give you the keys to being the most wise, inspiring, and resilient leader you can be. Those "double unlocks" flow through the advice in each part of the book, and taken together, they make up the **Leadership Intelligence System**: an integrated set of six principles that will help you overcome any challenge you come across as a leader. (Once you've become familiar with the system, you can apply it to situations that range far beyond the 21 scenarios covered in these pages.)

The book is set up as follows:

Part I—Deliberate Wisdom: How to make sense of what's going on and figure out the best way forward, by drawing on the science of the way the human brain processes **information**. The double unlock that emerges from the science on wisdom is this: We make the most of our brain's capacity for critical thinking when we adopt habits that systematically **widen** our perspective when needed and **lighten** the cognitive load where possible.

Part II—Intrinsic Inspiration: How to unleash deeper motivation and enable higher performance in your colleagues, by drawing on the science of how the brain processes **reward**. The double unlock for being an inspiring leader: The brain's reward system is the engine of motivation—and we fuel that engine every time we send signals that reinforce and develop people's sense of **competence** and **connection.**

Part III—Reasoned Resilience: How to guide your team (and yourself) through difficult situations, by drawing on the science of the way the brain processes potential **threat.** Your double unlock for building resilience: The more you can frame a challenge as **manageable** and **meaningful,** the less people's brains will mount a defensive stress response—and, as a result, the more they'll be able to adapt, solve, and learn along the way.

So that's the backbone of the book. There are a few **practical design features** that will help you as you read:

- Each part of the book begins with a summary of the core science behind the "double unlock" principles that link its chapters together.
- Then, each part has seven chapters that give practical advice on how to handle a specific challenge, by applying those principles. The last of those seven chapters is always team-focused, with tips on how to encourage a culture of collective wisdom, inspiration, or resilience in your colleagues.
- Every chapter follows the same structure, to make it easy to navigate: "The Challenge," "The Role Model," "The Advice." The description of the challenge gives you a science-based explanation of why this situation can be tricky—but also points toward what will help you reliably master it. At the end of some chapters, you'll also find "Spotlight" sections that dive into important applications or extensions of the chapter's ideas.
- The "Advice" section in every chapter is always built around a framework (an acronym, image, or short phrase) to make it more

memorable. I've also highlighted key guidance with bullet points, so it's easy to scan the pages and find what you need.

- Hundreds of academic journal articles and books underpin each part of *Leadership Intelligence,* but to keep the book easy to read I've kept the main text light on the detail of individual studies. They're all referenced at the back of the book, for those who'd like to know more. I'm beyond grateful to the researchers whose work has made this book possible.

Now, a few words about **AI.** The work at the heart of this book—encouraging wisdom, inspiration, and resilience in your colleagues—is deeply human, when done well. As a leader, you need to bring interpersonal as well as analytical judgment to how you frame, assign, and challenge your colleagues' work. You need to build relationships and sense the emotional subtleties of situations in real time, so you can adapt as necessary to get the best out of your team. And you need to lead with practical empathy and realistic optimism in times of upheaval, to lift people's sights and spirits when they might otherwise falter. All of that is pretty difficult to subcontract to technology. That said, AI can be a powerful thinking partner as you prepare for major leadership moments. You can use the book's questions and frameworks as prompts—to generate options, test your reasoning, or rehearse important conversations. For more guidance on how to use AI alongside the book, please visit carolinewebb.co/leadershipintelligence.

On the website you'll also find other materials to support your use of *Leadership Intelligence,* including guidance for book groups or teams reading the book together, and advice on how to apply the book's contents in specific contexts—for example, when you're developing a new strategy, redesigning your organizational structure, or are new in your role. You can read straight through, from start to finish, or you can dip in and out by using the table of contents to find the chapter that addresses whatever's most pressing for you today.

However you use it, it's a book I hope you'll return to whenever you need to steady your path or push your thinking. My hope is that by the end of it all, you'll feel lifted and refreshed in your ability to face the challenges that come your way. The work of leadership matters more than ever—and when you do it with wisdom, inspiration, and resilience, you unlock the very best intelligence in everyone.

With that, let's get into it.

THE

LEADERSHIP INTELLIGENCE

SYSTEM

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>><<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<

DELIBERATE WISDOM

WIDEN
your perspective
where it matters

and

LIGHTEN
cognitive load
where you can

INTRINSIC INSPIRATION

Expand their
sense of personal
COMPETENCE

and

Deepen their
sense of social
CONNECTION

REASONED RESILIENCE

Make the
situation feel
MANAGEABLE

and

Amplify
what's
MEANINGFUL

PART I

DELIBERATE WISDOM

Making Good Choices

"As soon as you present a problem to me, I have some ready-made answer. Those ready-made answers get in the way of clear thinking, and we can't help but have them."

–DANIEL KAHNEMAN

THE CORE SCIENCE OF DELIBERATE WISDOM

How the Brain Processes Information

Every day as a leader brings an endless flow of judgment calls, big and small. Even as you read this, you might be weighing where to focus your team's efforts this quarter, who to hire for a role, or how to handle a slightly cheeky budget request from a colleague. You might be trying to decide whether to skip a meeting this afternoon, or how to tamp down a weird little disagreement so that it doesn't turn into a bigger one. And these choices are rarely like math problems with clean answers; you have to figure out the right approach when there isn't really a single "right approach." So a distinctive strength of a good leader is the ability to make choices wisely, day after day, in ways that maximize your team's chances of success.

Where does that wisdom come from? Years of experience can certainly help guide you, if you're lucky enough to have it. But whenever you're faced with something new, familiarity may not be enough to make you wise. That's why—whatever stage you're at in your career—it's worth distinguishing between experiential wisdom and what I call *deliberate wisdom.* Experiential wisdom comes from having seen situations before. Deliberate wisdom is the set of intentional mental habits that help leaders think clearly in any situation—even when encountering it for the first time. And **the key to developing deliberate wisdom is to learn to work intelligently with the way your brain processes information.**

That's because our brains have tight constraints on how much they can handle at once. If we ignore these limits, our brain can underperform without us realizing: We miss important signals, think less clearly, and do

things that cause a facepalm the next day. But if we understand and work within those limits, we help our brain function at its best—and we make smarter, better judgments as a result. The way to unlock that capacity for wisdom is to learn to **widen** our perspective where it matters, and **lighten** the cognitive load everywhere else. Here's the core science behind that widen-and-lighten "double unlock."

WIDEN your perspective where it matters

To make good choices, you need a clear and accurate picture of whatever situation you're dealing with. And to bring that picture into focus, it helps to know three big things about how your brain makes sense of the world:

1. Believe it or not, you only ever notice part of what's going on. Your brain is constantly receiving billions of bits of data—but it only has the bandwidth to consciously process a fraction of them.[1] So it does the sensible thing: It filters incoming information and selects some of it for your awareness, while leaving the rest in the background. That means you're always missing part of the story—and on top of that, you're not even aware of what you're missing. Scientists call this *selective attention,* and it affects us all (even though we all like to believe we're immune to it).[2],[3]

2. What's on your mind right now shapes what you notice next. Since you can't notice everything, your brain guesses where to focus based largely on what you're already thinking. For example, if you have a distinct goal in mind, your brain makes sure you see and hear anything related to that goal.[4] When you have strong assumptions about something, your brain will zero in on information that supports your view, while missing much of what points the other way.[5] Even your mood matters: When you're in a bad mood, you see more negative things.[6],[7],[8] Your mental starting point always filters the reality you experience.

3. When it's time for you to take action, your brain automatically points you toward the easiest choice rather than the best one. Because your brain has limited processing power, it aims to be efficient by taking shortcuts that use less mental effort.[9] Without you realizing, it follows simple rules of thumb like "let's do what worked last time" or "let's do

what others are doing" to get to quick conclusions without having to think too hard. Scientists call these shortcuts *cognitive biases,* and using them can be fine if the stakes are low. But for things that matter—as they often do, when you're the one in charge—you want to take deliberate steps to bring all your intelligence to the table.

So: Wise leaders know how to **come off autopilot and deliberately widen their perspective** when doing something important. In Chapters 1 to 7, we'll look at ways to do that, including:

- Recognize that your first impression probably isn't the whole story. Develop the habit of asking: "What's another way of seeing this?" "What could I be missing?" and "How could I test that?"
- Be aware of what's top of mind for you, knowing that it will color what you notice next. When it counts, ask yourself: "What do I really need to look out for here?"
- With major decisions, take a structured approach that checks multiple angles, and guides you to the best option (rather than the easiest one).

This thoughtful approach might feel counterintuitive if you've absorbed the myth that great leaders always have immediate answers. But in a world full of unknowns, wise leaders know the best answers only come after you've taken the time to ask the right questions.

LIGHTEN the cognitive load where you can

You might be thinking "okay, but deliberately **widening** your perspective requires some effort—so where on earth do you find that extra mental bandwidth, when you're already working hard?" The answer: by **lightening** the cognitive load wherever it's unnecessary. Here's your primer:

1. The brain's *central executive network* (CEN) keeps you on track as a professional. Your CEN is like your brain's conductor, orchestrating the mental tasks that enable you to focus on what matters, evaluate possible responses, make a plan—and switch gears when that plan needs to change.[10],[11] Anytime you're trying to make an important choice, you can bet your central executive network is working hard.

2. Your CEN has limits on what it can do at any given moment, in part because its tasks rely a lot on the brain's limited *working memory*. [12] Working memory is the mental scratch pad you use to hold information in mind just long enough to think about it. Some researchers suggest it tends to max out when handling four chunks of information at a time; others say it can be closer to seven.[13] Either way, its capacity isn't huge, which is why it's harder to think clearly when you're juggling a lot of things. And once your working memory is overloaded, your brain is more likely to fall back on those simple mental shortcuts we just learned about, resulting in poorer choices all around.[14]

3. Certain things make it more likely that your working memory will get overloaded—including fatigue and multitasking. When you're tired or worn down, your working memory capacity declines—and your analytical skills decline with it.[15],[16] Then, if you ask your brain to divide its processing capacity across two activities that both require attention, you'll generally reduce your performance, accuracy, and speed on both tasks.[17] In other words: If you splinter your focus, nothing gets the full version of your intelligence.[18]

So: The good news is that a wise leader can **make the most of the brain's capacity by lightening unnecessary cognitive load wherever possible.** Tips we'll cover include:

- Notice when your mind feels full of too many things at once. Take a moment to pause, focus, and simplify where you can.
- For important work: Do one thing at a time ("singletask"), to ensure your brain is putting its attention and energy where it's most needed.
- Respect your brain's need for sleep and rest, to enable it to function at its best.

To recap: Even the best leaders perceive an incomplete version of reality, can only hold a certain amount in mind at once, and are likely to take automatic mental shortcuts when deciding what to do. But if you

acknowledge and work with these limitations, by **widening** your perspective when it matters most and **lightening** the mental load where you can, you'll make the best possible use of your brain's capacity for wisdom —and you'll be better equipped to handle the complexity and range of choices you make each day. I can't promise that you'll be right every time —but I can say that applying this pair of Deliberate Wisdom principles will help you be right more often. Better still, these principles don't just help you improve your own judgment; they're also the key to unlocking smarter critical thinking across your entire team. So let's see how they can be put to work in the real-life challenges you face.

CHAPTER 1

How to Better Understand a Complex Situation

THE CHALLENGE

As a leader, you often need to get to the bottom of complicated issues that don't have an obvious cause or conclusion. One week you're trying to figure out why customers seem to prefer a competitor's offering; the next, you need to root out the reason that your tech rollout has slowed to a crawl. And it's often difficult to uncover what's really going on, for a couple of reasons.

First, you can't personally be everywhere at once. So to piece together a complete picture, you need your colleagues to tell you what they're seeing and experiencing in their work—and, unfortunately, there's a kind of gravitational distortion that skews information as it makes its way to the leader's ears. In particular, research tells us that without direct encouragement, **people tend to be wary of sharing bad news or difficult messages with their boss.**[1],[2],[3]

Then, **even when important information does reach you, your brain subconsciously filters out some of it without you realizing.** As we just learned, that's because of the automatic prioritization process that your brain uses to manage cognitive load, and this *selective attention* mechanism is often helpful in filtering out irrelevant trivia. But it can also overzealously filter out useful information—so it really pays to understand

how those filters work when you're trying to get an accurate read on a situation. Here's what you should know:

- **Our brains tend to block out information that contradicts our existing point of view.** We all zero in on evidence that confirms what we already believe, thanks to *confirmation bias*.[4] When we're forced to confront evidence that says we're wrong, *motivated reasoning* can kick in, where our brain still finds ways to twist the information to fit with our existing beliefs ("Yeah, you see, that actually proves my point, because…I want it to").[5] And studies tell us that the more confident you are that you're right, the more your brain tends to filter out contrary evidence.[6]
- **If we don't have a strong initial view, we'll tend to form one based on whatever data is easiest to wrap our heads around.** We lean on information that happens to be close to hand—for example, because it's in a publication we subscribe to.[7] We give extra weight to something we heard recently, because it's already fresh in our minds.[8] And our brains are wired to find stories easy to remember, so a single anecdote can outweigh ten true-but-dull bits of data that point in the opposite direction.[9] (Scientists refer to these findings as *availability bias, recency bias,* and *narrative bias,* respectively.)
- **Then, however little information we have, we'll be tempted to declare that it's enough—rather than continuing to dig to understand deeper patterns.** This is known as the *illusion of information adequacy*.[10] One particular flavor of this is the way we often forget to set something we've just learned in a wider context—for example, by comparing it with averages or trends to see how unusual it is; this is known as *base rate neglect*.[11]

So, what can we do to overcome these filters when we need to understand an issue? The answer is to adopt some information-gathering habits that **deliberately widen our field of vision** as leaders, so we can see more of what matters. It takes effort, but it's worth it: Research shows these kinds of

techniques really do improve executives' chances of making sound judgments.[12],[13]

THE ROLE MODEL

Michael Roberts, the Chief Marketing Officer of a large financial services company, is one of the most cognitively self-aware leaders I've met. He has an unusually clear grasp of what he knows and doesn't know, and a knack for figuring out how to fill the information gaps he finds. He wasn't born with that instinct, though. He says it really took shape in his twenties, when he made an unexpected career switch from opera singing into business. (Yes, you read that right.) Shifting track so dramatically meant putting in long hours to teach himself the language of markets, metrics, and management. "I had a lot to learn," he says, "so I had to figure out how to process huge amounts of new knowledge in a way I could use right away."

It was a steep learning curve, but it came with an unexpected upside. As Michael settled into his new field, he noticed that on several occasions his outsider's eye allowed him to spot things his more seasoned colleagues missed. That was a surprise, and it made such an impression on him that he resolved to try to hold on to that rookie quality of open-mindedness and curiosity as much as possible—even as he grew into senior leadership.

And he's done just that. He says, "I've got a lot of experience at this point in my career, and that's helpful. But I've also developed a bunch of mental tricks that help me broaden and check my perspective whenever it matters, so I don't get stuck in a single view of what's going on. These tricks help me explore, sharpen, adjust—and let go when the evidence points in a different direction."

He shares an example from the early days of one of his Chief Marketing Officer roles, when he needed to work out what his top priority should be as CMO. For many newcomers to corporate marketing jobs, he jokes, "the standard move is to propose a global brand refresh, take it to the board, and declare victory. That's how CMOs often get applause." But Michael held off, because he first wanted to understand what the function most needed from him. After some structured detective work, he discovered the priority

was not at all what he expected. Rather than inventing a bold new vision, he urgently needed to fix the basics. "It turned out I needed to rebuild the marketing team's fundamental capacity to deliver," Michael says. "Figuring that out early on ended up being crucial to my success in the role." Let's understand what he did to uncover the real story.

THE ADVICE: 360-DEGREE VISION

When you're trying to get to the bottom of an important issue, the key thing to remember is that your brain usually won't give you the full picture unless you take deliberate steps to widen your perspective. The goal is to develop what I call "360-Degree Vision," where you look at the issue from all sides. A good first step is to acknowledge your initial view of the situation—and then, set it aside, by saying to yourself:

- *Here's what I think I understand. Now, assuming I'm at least partly wrong: How can I check all the angles and get a fuller picture?*

The four techniques that follow will help you do exactly that, pushing you beyond the data that's easiest to find and believe, and compensating for the natural blind spots we all have. Here's a snapshot of what we'll cover:

SEE DEEPER: Draw out what's under the surface
≫ Bonus Tip: Go and See for yourself what's really happening
SEE DIFFERENTLY: Seek out fresh perspectives from mentors and advisors
SEE ACROSS: Set your information in a wider context
SEE THE SYSTEM: Make a causal map to join the dots

In some situations, you might find one or two of these techniques are enough to help you see more of the real story. For example, if you're trying to understand whether a colleague should receive the pay raise they're asking you for, you might consult your "See Differently" advisors, and use the benchmarking guidance in the "See Across" section. If you want to kick

the tires on some work that your team is doing, the exploratory questions in the "See Deeper" section would be a natural place to start. But for broader issues, or when something is going wrong, or when you're new in your role, you'll likely benefit from using all four techniques. So let's get started.

SEE DEEPER: Draw out what's under the surface

There's a voice of truth inside each of our colleagues—one that says what they really think, worry about, or find confusing. When we're trying to get a true read on a situation, we really want to hear that voice. It often holds the key to understanding, say, why production is down, or attrition is up. But those viewpoints often don't get surfaced unless leaders make a special effort to invite people to share them.

That's partly because people instinctively run a quick cost-benefit calculation: They weigh the career downside of being seen as difficult if they speak up about problems, versus the uncertain personal upside of telling the boss what they think—especially if they're not sure of themselves. Research shows that staying silent generally feels safer, unless a leader changes that cost-benefit analysis by making it feel worthwhile for them to share their concerns (creating a state sometimes known as *psychological safety,* based on work by pioneering scholar Amy Edmondson).[14] As Michael puts it: "To find out what's going on, I know I need to make clear that I will be genuinely grateful if the team shares their thoughts. Unless you demonstrate that you truly value the chance to hear different points of view, and that you are going to really listen, you probably won't find out what people are really thinking."

Demonstrating your desire to hear what might otherwise go unsaid requires a different approach from the normal check-ins you might have with your colleagues. It takes a conversation that's less focused on immediate outcomes, and more focused on exploration and understanding. To achieve this, it helps to set up dedicated time with the people you want to learn from. They might be on your direct team, or they might be other colleagues involved in the issue you're trying to understand—maybe the owner of a process that seems broken or slow.

Then, use this approach as a guide for your discussion with them:

1. First, signal clear intentions that you want to learn, not evaluate. Your colleagues are more likely to share their thoughts when it's in aid of helping you, rather than being assessed by you. That's especially true when discussing high-stakes, ambiguous, or charged topics. That may feel obvious, but when we're racing to try to understand a tough situation, it's easy to forget to frame the conversation in the right way. Say something like:

- *"I'm trying to get a better understanding of this situation, and I'd really like to hear your perspective so I can learn from it."*

2. Ask truly open questions. Many things that leaders ask are really opinions masquerading as questions: "Don't we just need to do ABC?" or "What's really going on here is XYZ, isn't it?" If people can answer your questions with a yes or no, you're narrowing the field of what you can possibly learn. Instead, park your theories, and ask space-creating questions like these:

- *"What's your sense of the situation?"*
- *"What do you think is really going on?"*
- *"What's working well that others might not realize?"*
- *"What would we have to do to improve things?"*
- *"What else might I be missing?"*

3. Draw out reasons and patterns. Once your colleague says something interesting, don't slip back into broadcast mode ("Well, that's interesting, because what I think is…"). Pause, paraphrase, and probe for root causes. Ask:

- *"That's interesting—what makes you say that?"*
- *"What do you think might be driving that?"*
- *"And what in turn do you think is driving <u>that</u>?"*

In particular, if you're trying to find out why people are behaving a certain way, you might seek to understand whether it's being driven by a <u>process</u>

(e.g., a system that's broken) or a mindset (e.g., a fear or belief people have).

If you're surprised by something your colleague says, or inclined to disagree: investigate in a way that signals curiosity, rather than critique. For example:

- *"How often has that happened?"*
- *"Can you give me an example?"*
- *"What kind of evidence have you seen for that?"*
- *"Do you think there could be any other possible explanations?"*

4. Finally, reward their openness. Thank people warmly for sharing their view with you, especially if it's hard for you to hear. Never shoot the messenger, if you ever want to hear any more messages that matter.

Michael had these kinds of exploratory conversations with the people on his team when figuring out where to focus in his CMO role—but in my experience, he's rather rare in doing that. Many leaders hesitate to ask their team questions, fearing they'll seem uncertain or uninformed. But studies suggest the opposite is true: Even when you're the boss, asking for advice tends to make others see you as more intelligent and capable, not less.[15]

On top of that, research shows what common sense tells us: You make your colleagues feel great about themselves when you ask for their perspective and show that you're really listening to their answers.[16] Michael's refreshing level of curiosity and openness was certainly welcomed by his direct reports. Three months after he joined that team, one of them presented him with a plaque saying "Chief Question Officer"—which he still displays proudly on his desk.

Drawing out a group's views through BRAINWRITING

If you're trying to gather information from a group, rather than an individual, the questions above give you a great framework; step through them just as you would in a one-to-one conversation. But you'll tap even more insight from a group if you **ask people to jot down some notes**

before inviting them to share their thoughts. Some call this process "brainwriting"—to distinguish it from brainstorming, where people launch straight into free-for-all debate—and it's been found to improve the quality and openness of group discussion significantly.[17]

Michael has worked on teams with their own names for brainwriting—one calls it "perspective-seeking." This is how they do it: Everyone first takes 30 seconds to collect their thoughts. Then Michael goes around the table and asks for everyone's perspectives, allowing around 20 seconds each. He says, "It doesn't take long, and it's made a huge difference to how normal and safe it feels for people to speak up in a group. And it's a very helpful leveling mechanism between extroverts and introverts." Michael also uses several of the techniques we'll cover in Chapter 7 on leading frank group discussions, including inviting dissent by asking, *"Who can share a different view?"* and *"What would be another way of seeing this?"* He also deliberately draws out the quieter voices: *"I'd like to hear from those who haven't yet spoken."*

All told, Michael learned an enormous amount in the conversations he had with his team, both one-to-one and as a group. "Once I started asking these kinds of deeper questions, I heard a whole bunch of views that I think had never come up before," he says. For example, he learned that while his team knew the business extremely well, they were worried that they lacked some of the technical and analytical skills needed to have real impact—and knowing that they were falling short was denting their morale. Hearing that was a reality check, and it was the first key to Michael understanding what his focus needed to be.

≫ Bonus Tip: Go and See for yourself what's really happening

Sometimes, especially if you're in a large organization, there's no substitute for observing what's really happening on the ground—perhaps by listening in on a customer call, or watching someone use a process that's been causing problems.

The leaders you'll meet in this book do this kind of "Go and See" exercise in different ways. Gayle Tait, who we'll meet in Chapter 19, visits colleagues at their desks (via screenshare if needed) to see the work through their eyes when there's an issue to solve. Rob Allen, the healthcare CEO we'll meet in Chapter 10, schedules hospital visits that allow him to see frontline teams in action. For his part, Michael frequently creates calendar blocks for dropping in on different parts of the organization that he wants to understand better: "I always bring a specific issue I want to explore with them, and I ask lots of open questions. It's some of the most valuable time I spend."

Doing these deliberate deep dives into the business helped Michael understand the needs of the marketing function's internal customers across different departments. He remembers dropping in to meet one of the product teams: "I learned how they used marketing, but also what made them tick and the broader challenges they faced." He says it became clear that groups like theirs needed more responsiveness from his marketing team, and "it helped me see where improvements would make the biggest difference to them."

SEE DIFFERENTLY: Seek out fresh perspectives from mentors and advisors

The higher up you go in your career, the harder it can be to get good advice—and the easier it can be for you to think you don't need it. That's partly because we're all drawn to people we identify closely with (psychologists call this *homophily*).[18] When you're a leader and you choose who's on your team, that means you can end up surrounding yourself with people you

like—and people you are like. It can be a recipe for only hearing your own views reflected back at you without challenge.

That's why all the smartest leaders I know have a habit of seeking counsel from a range of sources, to deepen their understanding and compensate for their blind spots. In effect, they build a personal version of an advisory board, and they consult it freely.

For example, one CEO I worked with often called on two of his former bosses to be informal mentors. He also relied on an old friend who was always refreshingly blunt—especially after a high-spirited dinner together. Others find their "advisors" through professional networks of peers—Shellye Archambeau (the leader we'll meet in Chapter 13) started her own network that's still running fifteen years later. Where your bench of hand-picked experts comes from doesn't matter; what matters is that someone, somewhere, is willing to offer you a different angle on whatever you're wrestling with.

Michael describes himself as "pretty disciplined" about doing this. "I try to surround myself with people who will tell me the truth and give me feedback, whether or not it's comfortable. I get clear on where I need input, and then I talk to specific mentors or friends who I know will have an interesting view on that topic. I also talk to peers—some of the best advice I get is from other members of the executive leadership team. And I go outside the organization too." His personal advisory board isn't limited to people of his seniority: "It might include my Chief of Staff, for example, or an HR business partner."

If you're starting this from scratch, here's how to get going:

- **To prepare: Make a "long list" of people you respect who generally think differently than you.** They might have different experiences, different skills, or a different personality. Aim to come up with five to ten names you can draw on in the future.
- **Then, when you're trying to understand an issue, pick your advisory board for this specific topic.** From your longer list, choose

the three people who are most likely to stretch your thinking on this particular issue.

- **Get in touch, explain the situation, and ask their advice.** I suggest you ask:
    - *"What do you see that I might be missing?"*
    - *"What feedback would you give me, if you weren't trying to be polite?"*

  If you can't ask them directly, imagine a conversation with them. Research suggests that it's quite effective even just to imagine what a trusted advisor would say.[19] Picture their facial expression; imagine their voice querying your assumptions. (You can also ask an AI to role-play your advisors, if you give it the right context.)

Michael gathered lots of valuable information from conversations like this, particularly with peers. It included candid observations that he was inheriting a team that everyone liked, with real talent there—but the rest of the business didn't always see it. And, more concerningly, there was a sense that marketing wasn't always bringing practical value. Michael also learned that when business colleagues approached his marketing function with requests for promotional support, his team's typical first response would be to point to budget constraints rather than exploring possibilities—leading with "How much budget do you have for that?" or "We don't have the money to do that." As a result, Michael realized there was a mindset shift needed in his team, as well as a capability and resource gap to address.

SEE ACROSS: Set your information in a wider context

Your next trick is to overcome the *illusion of information adequacy:* the common assumption that the information you already have is representative of reality. Often, it's not. You spoke to one colleague—but do others feel differently? You've got a report in front of you—but is it based on a good-sized sample, with trustworthy sources? The narrower your view is, the less likely you're seeing an accurate picture, because a lot of data is what's known as "noisy"—meaning it's inconsistent from one case to another.[20]

So it's a wise move to cross-reference the information you have (or are given) by looking at broader averages and trends, to set it in context and check its reliability. Developing this compare-and-contrast habit also helps you guard against many of the brain's mental shortcuts (including *base rate neglect* and *narrative bias*), making your judgments more accurate overall.[21],[22]

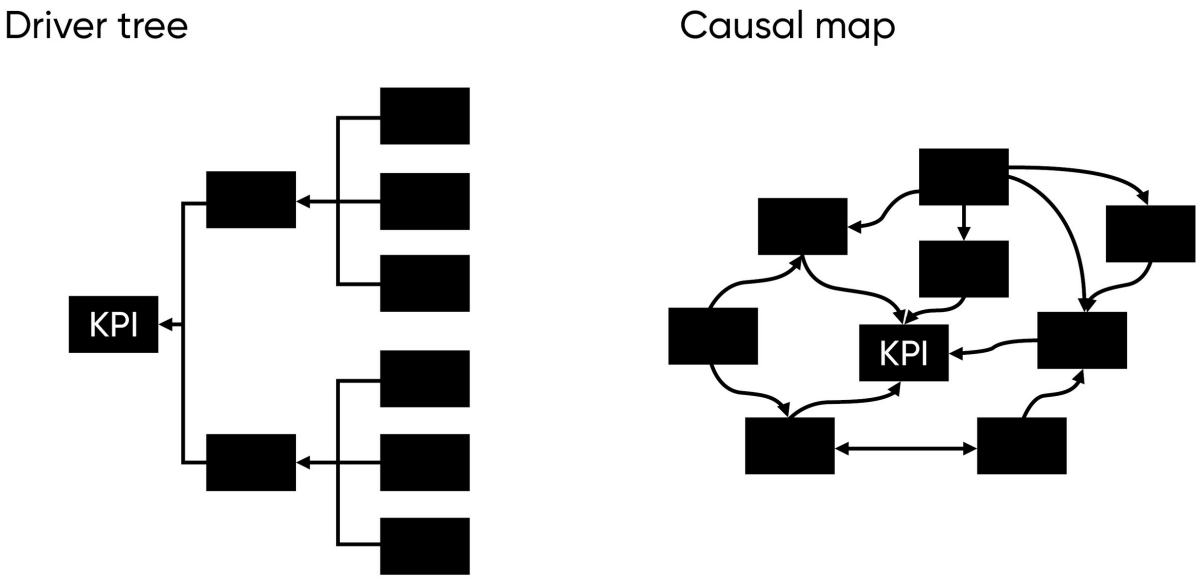
Here are the kinds of comparisons that can help you set your information in a wider context:

- **Compare over TIME:** Look for trends, not just snapshots. Ask: Is this getting better, worse, or just bouncing around? What has changed, and what has stayed steady over time? When Michael was new in his role, he started looking at his team's historical marketing spend and was surprised to find that it had dropped steadily over the previous five years. "It told me this wasn't just a one-off budget squeeze," he says. "It was a recurring pattern that the function wasn't getting what it needed."
- **Compare across GROUPS:** Does what you're hearing from junior people match what your senior colleagues are saying? Does what you're hearing internally match what external stakeholders are saying? We've already heard how committed Michael is to engaging people at different levels in his organization, so it won't surprise you to know he also has a process for checking external perspectives: "I make sure I'm regularly in front of customers, because it tells us how our marketing is really landing in the outside world."
- **Compare with COMPETITORS:** How does your information compare to averages that you'd see from industry peers, or key competitors? When Michael asked these questions, he found that marketing budgets had been declining elsewhere as well—but the drop was much greater for his team. That was sobering, but helpful to know.
- **Compare with SUCCESSES:** Sometimes the best way to understand what's going wrong is to look at other places where things are going

right, because it helps you tease apart whether a problem is a system issue or a local issue. When Michael needed to decide whether to replace the marketing head of a lower-performing unit, he wanted to get more context first. So he visited two higher-performing units for comparison. “I noticed both of those strong areas had some system-level conditions in place that were missing in the weaker area. So I thought: ‘Before we change anything about the team, let’s fix those issues in the system, and see what happens.’ ” Performance rebounded without any change to personnel. Comparing across units with different track records had enabled him to fix the right problem.

SEE THE SYSTEM: Make a causal map to connect the dots

Once you’ve gathered information—observations, numbers, examples—the next challenge is often to understand how it all fits together. One effective way of doing this is to create a map that captures potential causal links between your insights. Even if you don’t think of yourself as a visual person, I’ve seen how this exercise helps leaders both sharpen their understanding of a situation, and identify where the real issues lie. Creating a map also has a neat additional benefit: It can free up capacity for clear thinking by lightening the cognitive load. Looking at one coherent map puts less strain on your brain’s *working memory* than sifting through twenty unconnected insights—even if the map contains the same amount of data overall.[23]



You might already know a younger cousin of the causal map: the "driver tree," which lays out the main factors influencing a single business metric. For example, you can use a tree to break down a key performance indicator like "total revenue" into smaller components such as "number of customers," "purchases per customer," and "average price per purchase." It can be a good way of organizing straightforward numerical information.[24] But, as Michael says, "most issues that leaders deal with are not linear—they're best seen as a system, because there are a multitude of interconnections to understand." So that's where a map becomes more useful than a tree.

Michael sometimes uses software to build his causal maps, but you don't need fancy tools to do it—he most often scribbles them on a piece of paper. I'll describe the steps in a way that works for both high- and low-tech approaches.

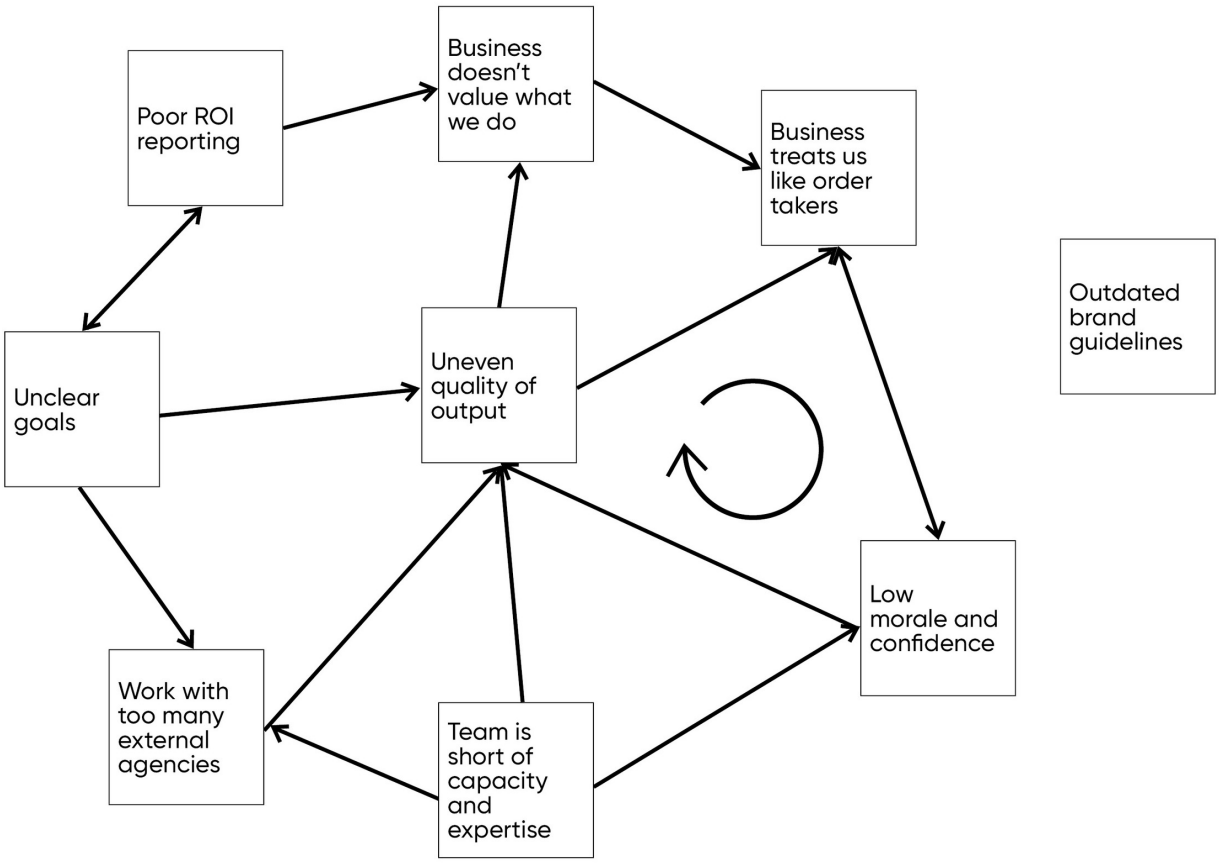
- **Step 1: Lay out what you know.** Jot down each major piece of information or insight on a separate Post-it note, or its digital equivalent (often called a "node" in mapping software). They're the

squares in Michael's example below. Be concrete—use short phrases that capture one clear idea per note.

- **Step 2: Draw causal arrows.** Ask: What causes what? Does X influence Y? If so, draw a one-way arrow from X to Y. Make it a two-way arrow if it feels as if two things are interconnected. If you're not sure there's a simple causal link, you could mark the arrow with a question mark. (As you add arrows, you may need to move some notes around.)
- **Step 3: Look for interesting patterns.** For example: Perhaps there's a behavioral issue that looks like it's being driven by certain incentives, systems, or beliefs. Perhaps there are longer chains of connections that tell a story—e.g., a vicious circle where A leads to B, which leads to C, which then feeds back into A.
- **Step 4: Identify gaps and queries.** Are there arrows that are fuzzy or unclear? Is there information that you're missing? This tells you where you might need to do more investigation.
- **Step 5: Look for points of highest leverage.** Which observations have the most arrows pointing out of them? Those are likely to be influential "kingpin" points in your system, where one small change might start a domino effect that makes a big difference.

Below is an illustrative, simplified version of what Michael's map looked like. After he began connecting the dots in this way, it became clearer that the solution wasn't either of the two actions he might have initially leaned toward. First, although there was mixed feedback about the brand, nobody suggested it was driving the immediate shortfall in the marketing function's impact. There are no arrows around that box on the right of the map, because it wasn't directly driving any immediate pressing problems. Second, it would have been easy for Michael to assume that he should go on a charm offensive with his business colleagues, to encourage them to draw on his team more. But the causal map laid bare that their lack of demand was merely an outcome of how marketing was operating; the box saying "Business doesn't value what we do" has mostly causal arrows

coming into it. Michael realized "this meant we couldn't just say, 'They don't understand the great things we're doing, so let's tell them again why they should use us.' "



Instead, the map highlighted two bigger sources of Michael's problem: unclear team goals for business impact, and lack of team capacity. Those are the boxes with the most causal arrows coming out of them—three arrows each, to be specific—reflecting their importance in driving the patterns Michael observed. Which meant that if he could tackle those, a lot would shift in the system.

(If you're eager for more detail: Unclear goals made it hard to drive consistent output and hard to track marketing's ROI. Blurry priorities also meant that external agencies were being hired without a clear brief, which made their work uneven. Meanwhile, the team's technical skill gap was

affecting quality, and this drove even more outsourcing to external agencies.)

So, it wasn't that Michael's marketing function needed a new brand or an internal PR campaign; instead, they needed to build the solid operational foundations that would allow them to deliver brilliant output more consistently. Michael and his team got to work. They created a financial model that determined what would boost their business impact the most; then, they set clear goals, and created an ambitious three-year plan to achieve them. Michael also made new hires to bolster the team's technical capability, which eventually allowed him to bring back in-house the work that had been going to external agencies. Thanks to Michael's careful effort to unearth the real issues, he was able to solve the right problem—and a much healthier causal map started to emerge.

After that, Michael's well-informed, well-targeted interventions paid off handsomely. Total sales attributed to his marketing team's work grew many times over. The new confidence that the business then had in his marketing team's contributions resulted in a substantial expansion of their budget, and he says, "Once we had those strong fundamentals in place, we earned the right to tackle the brand." He ended up delighted with where things landed. Today, he keeps hold of that spirit of inquiry. "It remains a constant process of figuring out the right sources of input, so I can adjust my approach as I go along. Every time we reach a new phase of growth, I know there will be even more to learn and understand."

CHAPTER 2

How to Make Time for Your Top Priorities

THE CHALLENGE

Just about every leader I meet wishes they had more time for their most important priorities. Urgent requests always seem to crowd the calendar, filling the gaps around standing commitments and leaving little breathing room for tackling bigger issues. That's a problem, because as you become more senior, your impact depends on your ability to widen your perspective and do the things that only you can do: Set direction, see patterns others can't, mobilize colleagues. You're the only person on your team with an integrated view of all the moving parts, so if you aren't spending time on work that requires this leadership perspective, it isn't getting done.

On some level, you already know this. So why is it hard to make time for those "only you can do" priorities? Partly, it's habit.[1] If you haven't stopped to rethink your approach to your calendar as you've become more senior, your time management patterns may still reflect the job you had a few promotions ago. It's also a consequence of being in demand: Without a deliberate approach to allocating your time, your days can end up fragmented across everyone else's priorities, rather than your own.

Even once you accept that, redirecting your attention toward knotty, complex priorities still takes effort—not just for you, but for everyone, because of a few ways the brain works:

- **We're wired to focus on here-and-now tasks that feel immediately useful.** Our brain's *present bias* means it feels more rewarding to complete a quick task that makes us feel productive right away, rather than grappling with a tough issue that takes time to solve.[2] On top of that, **our brain is drawn to things that are easy to understand**—a phenomenon known as *processing fluency.*[3]
- The combination of those two biases **systematically tilts our attention toward whatever is simple and immediate,** rather than things that are important but abstract. That's totally normal human behavior—but it means that, as leaders, we need to make a deliberate effort to **redirect our attention toward longer-term, more complicated work.**
- **Multitasking harms the quality of our thinking.** The evidence on *dual-task interference* shows that when we try to do more than one thing at a time, we perform less well on everything.[4] That means if we're juggling multiple tasks and messages, we're not doing our best analysis or having our best conversations. The urge to be constantly available to our teams can be hard to resist, not least because it plays into the desire for quick wins that we've just learned about. But **you need uninterrupted time to do your deepest work.**

It's normal to fill your time with tasks that feel satisfying in the moment—for example, knocking out three emails, rather than knuckling down to work on your three-year business outlook. But it is possible to overcome that natural tendency and make room for the more important leadership work that only you can do. Put differently: this is where you **lighten** your cognitive load in a way that makes your **wider** perspective possible. This chapter shows you how to make the shift.

THE ROLE MODEL

Lindsay Flannery is a senior HR leader with responsibility for a sizable chunk of a high-tech packaging and labeling business that operates across fifty countries. When I started working with her, she was steadily accruing

more responsibility and was in line for a promotion. With increasingly weighty issues on her plate, she knew she needed to change the way she was managing her time. She told me, "I'm back-to-back every minute of every day. I really want to carve out more strategic thinking time, so I have the space to connect the dots more." She could already name the kind of leader she wanted to be: someone who shapes the global vision, sees wider patterns, and asks insightful questions that unlock unexpected solutions. But as she put it, "To do that, I need to move from being reactive to proactive in how I manage my time." The CEO agreed. "You need to be thinking about the future of the business," he told her, "not getting caught up in minutiae."

The trouble was that Lindsay's calendar wasn't filled with minutiae by accident. It was a direct result of how she saw herself: "I'm a fixer," she says. If there was a messy situation that needed sorting out, she would parachute in and save the day. Others saw her that way, too. People throughout the organization knew her as a reliable source of ideas and support, even on issues well outside her current role. She enjoyed being that "fixer," because it gave her the buzz of feeling immediately useful—and that's what *present bias* looks like in the wild: a perfectly normal human preference for tangible wins now, rather than bigger but less-defined rewards later.

Lindsay could see the gap between the kind of leader she was working to become and the way she currently spent her time, so she knew something had to change. To step into the more senior leadership role she was being lined up for, she'd have to stop being everyone's go-to mechanic. I'm glad to say that she did find an approach that worked—one that allowed her to keep feeling a fix-it buzz while making room for more high-quality thinking. Here's how she did it.

THE ADVICE: THE YES-GROW-NO RULE

There's limited time in every day—so, each time you say yes to something, you're saying no to something else (whether consciously or not). The

question becomes: Are you saying yes to the right things? This **Yes-Grow-No** rule is designed to help you make those calls more deliberately. This is what it includes:

Positive YES: Make a daily plan to focus on work that only you can do
Let Go and GROW: Delegate tasks someone else could step up and do
Positive NO: Lead with what you're saying "yes" to when you decline
Yes-Grow-No calendar: Adjust your schedule to support your priorities

Positive YES: Make a daily plan to focus on work that only you can do

The first step is to get clear on your unique role as a leader: what you can do that others cannot.

Every leader is different, but I would guess your unique role includes an ability to lift yourself up and see the big picture, so that you can set overall direction for your team. It might include transforming the way your team works, or boosting your colleagues' capabilities and confidence. It could also mean asking the questions that nobody else is asking, or providing context that only you have.

Like Lindsay, you may still enjoy being a "fixer," and occasionally you may need to pitch in and help your colleagues with their day-to-day work. But if you want to lead them well, your main job isn't to be extra capacity for your team—it's to take them places that only you can take them. That's the kind of work to make sure you're saying a **Positive Yes** to when choosing how to spend your time, rather than simply reacting to what hits your inbox.

So first, reflect on your role as the leader of your team. Ask yourself:

- *What unique value can I bring to my team as a leader?*
- *What do I want to feel good about having achieved as a leader, when I look back on this role?*

Given that:

- *What's my Positive Yes—what should I be doing more of?*
- *And what should I be doing less of, to create space for that Positive Yes?*

Then, reinforce that intentional focus as you plan each day. Each morning, take a moment to remind yourself of what you're saying a Positive Yes to, in order to help set your priorities for the day. Remember from "The Core Science of Deliberate Wisdom" how your brain directs your limited stock of conscious attention: Whatever is top of mind for you right now will drive where your attention goes next. So you're more likely to actually focus on your real priorities if you start the day by articulating them clearly. Ask yourself this question to focus your mind in the right direction:

- *What really matters most today, given my unique role as a leader?*

Lindsay has built this intention-setting moment into her morning exercise routine. That's smart, because if you can connect a newly forming habit to one that's already well entrenched, your familiar routine will trigger a reminder to do the new thing.[5] That might mean you decide to do your daily **Positive Yes** planning while brushing your teeth, or at the same point in your commute. For Lindsay, "doing it in the same location and at the same time each day means I always remember."

Once this morning habit felt solid, Lindsay extended it to include not only the core "What matters most today?" question but also two other questions. She says: "I also ask, 'What's weighing on me?' and 'What can I ask others for help with?' Adding those has helped me focus and delegate more than I did before." Let's now double-click on that point and talk more about delegation.

Let Go and GROW: Delegate tasks someone else could step up and do

Every so often—say, each Friday—look at your to-do list and meeting schedule, and ask yourself:

- *Which of these things could someone else do—even if not as well as me—so that I have more time for the things that only I can do?*

This may feel hard if your inner voice protests, "They won't do it as well as me!" Here's the thing: It's true that they probably won't do it as well as you, if you have more experience—or at least, they won't do it in exactly the same way as you would. But if you don't delegate the things that others can do a "good-enough" job on, nobody at all will be doing the work only you can do. Think of it this way: You may be the team's fastest typist as well as their best strategist. Should you type out all the team's work, at the expense of making a strategic plan? The answer is no, even if you enjoy typing and even if it makes you feel immediately useful. You need to let go of the typing.

It can be easier to **"let go"** if you do the following:

- **Focus on the development opportunity you're creating for someone.** This is the **"grow"** part of the advice to **Let Go and Grow.** Ask yourself: *Who would find this a great chance to step up?* and *Whose strengths might this play to?* You're creating room for one of your junior colleagues to learn and shine. That makes you a good boss, because developing your team's confidence and capacity over time is one of those things that only you can do.
- **Recognize that you don't just have to hand over a task and hope for the best.** You can (and should) still give people guidance and instructions; refer to Chapter 11 on delegation, Chapter 12 on feedback, and Chapter 13 on coaching. "But wait," you might say. "If I spend time coaching them, how is that going to create more space for me to think?" I hear you, but it will still free up some of your brain's *working memory* if you coach someone intermittently, rather than having ongoing responsibility for doing the work. Also, crucially: Any time you spend coaching them now builds their capacity to do the work more independently in the future.
- **Think expansively about the kind of tasks you can let go.** For example, look for meetings where you could start to send someone

else in your place, with some handover from you. Or: Break your complex work into smaller pieces, and find a discrete chunk that someone else could take on—for example, researching a topic or analyzing options. If you're nervous, start with something simple.

- **Notice when your mind tries to slip away from broad, difficult topics toward more tangible short-term deliverables.** It's normal for your brain to gravitate toward work that feels easier to check off a list. Remind yourself: "I understand why my brain wants to do nicely defined tasks, but excelling as a leader depends on doing the bigger-picture stuff."

Lindsay's first major experiment with Let Go and Grow delegation came amid an urgent push to create a new people strategy for her company. She says: "Our organization was going through a restructuring because we were investing a lot in digital transformation. And we needed to drive that change with as clear a vision for our people as we had for our technology." Some of that work fell into the "only I can do" category for Lindsay—for example, ensuring that the people strategy dovetailed with the business strategy. But the work on some specific pieces (change management, workforce development, leadership training) was something that she could delegate.

It was a leap for her. Lindsay says that what made it easier was remembering that this letting go of tasks wouldn't just help her; it would do a lot to help her team develop. To get more comfortable with letting go, she also created some healthy guardrails—for example, she made sure each initiative had a clear owner, gave them a template for documenting progress, coached them on how to present a team discussion on their topic, and set clear deadlines. (You can read more about this kind of effective delegation in Chapter 11.)

Lindsay said the effect was surprisingly positive for everyone. Not only did she get the time she needed to focus on the big issues, but also the team was energized by being more fully engaged. She adds, "It really worked to get them to step up and own pieces of the project. I'm proud of what they

did, and the work we delivered together is now a foundational part of the overall business strategy."

Positive NO: Lead with what you're saying "yes" to when you decline

Even after some delegation of tasks your team can reasonably tackle, your calendar and inbox might still be full of things that aren't high-priority. It may be that you made commitments when you didn't realize how busy you were going to be right now. Well-meaning people might also be eager to involve you in a project, share an update, or ask your advice. We can all agree that having a vibrant network is a wonderful thing—and if you had unlimited time, you might say yes to all of it. But you don't have unlimited hours in the day. So the more you engage with those requests, the less time you'll have for the leadership work that requires your personal attention, and the less time you'll have after that to rest and recharge for the next push.

So, you probably need to decline some commitments. It can be tempting to procrastinate over this, hoping the appointment or ask might somehow disappear without you having to do anything. That's not a good solution (and not only because it's tough on the person who's requested your time). Continuing to think "I must deal with that" also takes up some of your brain's *working memory,* leaving you with less cognitive capacity for your most important work.

So why do we put off declining? Fundamentally, the issue is that most of us don't like saying no. We worry that it might damage relationships or close off opportunities. But that's a fixable skill gap, because there's a way you can learn to say no that preserves relationships and can even strengthen your future options.

Here's the trick: You don't lead with no. You lead with what you are saying yes to, in a warm and positive way, before getting to your apologetic-but-now-understandable response. This was William Ury's great insight in *The Power of a Positive No.*[6] My version of the Positive No process adds some topping and tailing to the original, and it has

successfully preserved relationships every time I've used it (and every time someone has used it on me).

Here's how to deliver a Positive No regarding a nonessential commitment, which we'll label as "X":

- **Warm appreciation:** Be positive about whatever the other person wants to get you involved in. Some version of *"Thank you, X sounds great and I appreciate you thinking of me."*
- **Your "yes":** Explain what you're needing to focus on right now, describing it in as warm and enthusiastic a way as you can. For example: *"Right now I'm deep in working on [interesting, important priority]. It's demanding but going well so far."*
- **Your apologetic but clear "no":** Explain that, as a result, you are having to prioritize. *"To create enough time to do a good job on that, I'm having to make some tough choices with commitments I'd otherwise be glad to say yes to. As a result, I'm very sorry that I need to say no to/withdraw from X."*
- **Warm support:** Thank the person for having been interested. If it's easy to do, consider making a suggestion for how else they might find what they're looking for. *"I wonder if you might consider Y as a way to get what you need. Either way, thank you for your understanding, and I hope it goes well—it sounds like an excellent [project/event/idea]."*

There are a few reasons the Positive No approach works so well. First of all, leading with your "yes" reminds you of what's important. Second, it helps the other person see that you're making deliberate, mindful choices. This comes off as more leader-like than ignoring a request, or doing a lackluster job because you're too stretched. Third, if you're positive enough about your "yes," your response might even leave them feeling enthused about what you're doing.

The last step of the process is offering warm support, but you don't want this to become its own big task. Light ways that you might offer support (but only if it's easy) include:

- **The name of another person who might be able to help.** However, don't copy that person on this message. Just suggest them as an alternative idea, and let your requester follow up.
- **A useful document relating to their ask.** If it's a topic you're asked about often, consider taking 15 to 20 minutes to create a new document summarizing your advice, and send it along. You can then use that for future requests.
- **An offer to connect in the future.** Be careful, though—don't offer this if you know it will never feel like a top priority for you. If you do want to make room for ad hoc requests, I suggest setting a time budget each week, preferably in the same recurring slot—in my calendar, I call them "clinic hours." (When you're doing someone a favor, they're usually fine to wait until that slot syncs up with their schedule.)

Lindsay has used the Positive No technique to redirect some significant requests—for example, when she was invited to run a transformation program unconnected to her full-time leadership role. Flattering, but not feasible. Her Positive No ran like this: "Thank you for thinking of me for this role—I'm grateful for the confidence you obviously have in me." (Warm appreciation.) "I'm very committed to giving the leadership team the strategic guidance they need in the coming year." She gave several specific examples of what was on her plate. (Her yes.) "As a result, realistically I think it's not going to be in the organization's interests for me to take on the dual role leading the transformation team as well—it would dilute what I'm able to do on both fronts." (Her no.) "But stepping up to run it would be a huge opportunity for a talented individual, and I have several ideas for people who would be a great fit." (Warm support.)

This Positive No allowed Lindsay to telegraph her strategic focus in a way that sounded statesman-like. She adds, "You do want to keep a humble and collaborative tone when you're responding to major requests like that, but the technique has really helped me be direct and transparent with people about my priorities. And that's created some of the space I was looking for."

Yes-Grow-No calendar: Adjust your schedule to support your priorities

Once you've made more space by saying yes and no to the right things, the final step is to build the sort of calendar that will help you stay focused on your leadership priorities.

Do a commitment audit

To get really systematic about personal prioritization, and support both your Positive No and your Let Go and Grow strategies, it helps to do a full audit of where your time is currently going. In my experience, this process always surfaces meetings or tasks that can be gracefully declined or delegated in the future. Start by making a list of your ongoing commitments:

- What repeating meetings do you usually attend?
- What external engagements do you usually attend?
- What else takes a lot of your time? (Are there documents or discussions you regularly contribute to? Recurring admin tasks?)

Aim to capture everything that draws significantly on your time in the average month. (Look at your past calendar and task lists to jog your memory.) Now, go back to the now-familiar Let Go and Grow question: *Which of these things could someone else do, even if not as well as me, so that I have more time to do the things that only I can do?* And where is it time for you to say a Positive No, full of warmth and clarity?

If you're in the splendid position of having an assistant who manages your schedule, do tell them what you're trying to do with your time. If you get their help in auditing your commitments and creating more room for your priorities, and defending the space that's created, you're far more likely to succeed.

Schedule a "Meeting With Myself"

To support your Positive Yes, plan at least one uninterrupted block of time to focus on your top priorities each week. I call this a Meeting With Myself, and it should be one of your most precious appointments. (If your calendar is visible to others, you can name it MWM, or something that signals its importance like "Strategic planning" or "Focus mode.") There are two ways of making time for it, and I suggest you try both.

First, the opportunistic approach: In any week where you need more breathing room, **the moment you see a solid block of space open up in your calendar, book it for yourself.** Then, protect the core of the block. If you let a short call land in the middle of your slot, your brain will be thrilled to switch over to an easier activity, and you might not get back into focus mode. If you have a truly unavoidable call to add to your calendar, at least try to push it to the start or end of the slot, to reduce the amount of task switching you're asking your brain's *central executive network* to do.

Second, the proactive approach: **Block a regular slot each week.** It's better to aim for a shorter slot and feel great about your ability to protect it, than it is to set an aspirational aim for a massive chunk of time that gets eroded, which you then feel bad about. Why? Your brain likes to repeat things that feel rewarding (as we'll learn in Part II of the book on "Intrinsic Inspiration"). Set an achievable goal—say, 30 minutes—then adjust if needed.

To make the most of this priceless meeting slot:

- Schedule it at a time of day when your mind tends to be at its sharpest. For early birds, that might mean blocking time to do your most complex work early in the day; for night owls like me, you'll probably want the block to fall in the afternoon or evening.[7] The idea is to "meet with yourself" in your prime time zones, not your calendar offcuts.
- Having protected the time, don't then let yourself be interrupted by incoming messages that scatter your attention and make it harder to think.[8] You can make a slim gap in your calendar really count if you turn off notifications. Lindsay calls this "technology mastery," and it

became a key part of her prioritization toolkit. Her phone used to vibrate almost constantly with every email she received, but she learned to reach for the **"do not disturb" setting** whenever she needed to get herself rapidly into focus mode. (You'll find more advice on how to prime your mind for fresh thinking in Chapter 3, including the power of planning deliberate breaks to refresh your perspective and mental energy.)

Finally: Apply the Yes-Grow-No rule to any new requests

When any new requests for time or focus come into your inbox, apply your Yes-Grow-No rule:

- If the ask is truly related to your top leadership priorities—the things that only you can do—say a Positive Yes.
- If it would be a useful opportunity for someone on your team to take on, with the right coaching from you, it's something to Let Go and Grow.
- If it's neither a Positive Yes or a Let Go and Grow, say a Positive No to the person asking. Don't sit on it—remember clarity is kindness. If you do it thoughtfully and promptly, you'll make it easier for them to make an alternate plan.

Through applying a combination of the practices above, Lindsay says, "I have way more thinking time to devote to my most challenging work. And taking a step back more often has helped me spot and solve problems earlier, before they can become big issues." That makes the "fixer" in Lindsay very happy. Overall, it's allowing her to play at a higher level: "I really am focusing on the most critical, strategic topics now, which is allowing me to have more impact. And because I'm prioritizing more, all of this is happening without me exhausting myself." Her boss soon noticed: After a few months of making more deliberate choices about her time,

Lindsay was promoted—proof that creating the space to think bigger can help you get even bigger things to think about.

CHAPTER 3

How to Come Up with Fresh Ideas and Solutions

THE CHALLENGE

Leaders are endlessly solving puzzles. Sometimes, they're elaborate puzzles, like figuring out a new strategy or restructuring a team. Sometimes, they're more modest, like thinking through how to improve team meetings or making sense of customer feedback. Work like this makes leadership interesting—but to do it well, you have to think clearly and creatively, often in the middle of a busy day. So it helps to have a reliable routine for mustering your most brilliant self when you need to come up with fresh ideas or solutions. What we're effectively talking about is developing the skill of *metacognition:* the ability to think about the way you think, and take deliberate steps to do it better. There are three foundational things it's helpful to know about this before we dive into the practicalities:

- **Your attention needs direction.** As we learned in the "Core Science of Deliberate Wisdom," your brain steers your limited conscious attention toward whatever seems to be top of mind for you—so, your mental starting point always matters. Specifically: If you articulate a clear intention to solve a problem, your brain will dutifully drive your attention toward that goal, but if you start with a scattered mind, your attention will also scatter.[1] That's how ten minutes can pass before you realize you haven't made any progress on your big topic. We'll

explore how to be more deliberate about where to direct your precious attention.

- **Your mental workspace is tiny, so you need to use it well.** Your brain's *working memory* can hold only a few pieces of information at a time, so it's important to make maximum use of that small capacity by lightening any unnecessary cognitive load. One way to do that is to avoid multitasking when you're trying to be smart; people perform better on most tasks if they concentrate.[2],[3] Another way is to get the brain to see multiple bits of information as a single chunk—we'll explore this in detail below.[4]
- **Coming up with fresh ideas often requires you to shift your perspective.** When we figure something out and have an *aha! moment* (yes, that's the term scientists use), it's because our brain has connected information in a novel way that suddenly makes a new solution visible.[5] It feels great when it happens. But it can take some effort to see an issue in a novel way, because *confirmation bias* means we often filter out any information that challenges our existing thinking. The good news is that there are plenty of techniques that can shift your perspective enough to unlock insight.

All told, we know a lot about what it takes for people to be at their best intellectually—and that's great news, because it means your cleverest thinking can be deliberately summoned, rather than you needing to hope it emerges by chance. That's what this chapter is about.

THE ROLE MODEL

Antony Mayfield might be the most intentional leader I know when it comes to metacognition. He's the founder and CEO of Brilliant Noise, a digital transformation agency that helps clients use new technologies to improve their competitive advantage. Antony was the first leader I met who understood that the way you treat your brain affects the quality of its output, and he's adjusted his working habits to reflect that. As he says: "Leaders are so often under pressure to solve complex issues faster than we would like.

I've learned that it really pays to take a moment to do all the things that set your brain up for success."

Antony has needed all his capacity for fresh thinking in recent times. His company downsized during the pandemic, but then went through a big growth phase thanks to the AI boom. Demand for the company's tech-savvy advice rose sharply, giving Antony a high-quality problem to solve: He needed to figure out how to equip Brilliant Noise for an exciting expansion. He says, "One of the more complex things I had to do was redesign our internal systems to match our new scale. It was a pain in the neck, but it was necessary, because our ways of working had to remain fit-for-purpose as we grew. We couldn't just keep relying on informal meetings to sync up on everything in person."

Antony had to rethink every business process and tool they used, from strategic planning to sales to project tracking. It felt like a dense thicket of problems to solve at once—and he had to find a logical path through it all. So let's see how he applied the advice I'm going to lay out in this chapter.

THE ADVICE: THE FUSE MODEL

I call this model FUSE, reflecting the acronym of its key steps—Focus, Unpack, Shift, and Energize—as well as the way it can ignite your creative thinking. Here's a snapshot of what we'll cover:

1. **FOCUS your mind:** Remove distractions and get clear on your question
2. **UNPACK your mind:** "Dump and Chunk" to organize your thoughts
3. **SHIFT your mind:** Use "Consider the Opposite," "Rubber Duck," and the "Two-Bite Rule"
4. **ENERGIZE your mind:** Plan microsteps to sustain momentum

Each of these steps helps you make the most of your mind's cognitive capacity—either by **lightening** the load, by **widening** your perspective, or

both. As a result, new ideas can spark at any point along the way—so I suggest you grab a notebook to capture thoughts right from the start.

1. FOCUS your mind: Remove distractions and get clear on your question

If you're sitting down to think about your big problem, but you're surrounded by noise and are also noodling on five other things in parallel, you're seriously diluting the brainpower you have available for that important work. You lighten cognitive load and maximize your available intelligence if you remove distractions, both outside and inside your head, so you can tackle the task with your whole mind.

OUTSIDE: Remove distractions in your environment

Perhaps you know the value of doing this—and yet, it's so often not done. I suggest you make these steps a quick, undramatic ritual whenever you're trying to think clearly:

- **Silence notifications.** Put your phone and computer on "do not disturb" mode. If needed, tell colleagues you'll be offline briefly but can respond later.
- **Remove visual clutter.** Close or minimize any documents or tabs you don't need. (There are tools that allow you to save your tabs if you're very attached to them.) If you tend to pick your phone up reflexively without being aware of it, put it out of reach.
- **Optional: Put on headphones.** They help block out noise, which reduces cognitive load, but they also signal to others (and perhaps to yourself) that you're trying to concentrate.

INSIDE: Remove distractions inside your head

Now you have a quiet environment—but sometimes it's your own competing thoughts that can cause the most distraction. So, take a moment to quiet that inner noise as well:

- **Take a deep belly breath.** Sit up straight, stick your belly out as far as it will go, and breathe from there. This type of *diaphragmatic breathing* has been found to dampen stress, which in turn frees up the brain's *working memory* capacity.[6],[7]
- **MOST IMPORTANT STEP: Set a clear aim for your thinking session.** Ask yourself:
  - *What's the real problem I'm trying to solve?* OR
  - *What's the real opportunity I'm trying to capture?*

Simply asking that last question can lead to some clarity that wasn't there a moment ago. When Antony sat down to work on his new processes, his mind was full of urgent concerns, with thoughts going in all directions. "So I knew I needed to frame up the problem before doing anything else," he says. Antony paused, took a breath, and decided his real aim was to answer this question: "How do we develop a scalable business system without pausing what we're already doing?" This was already a fresh insight—the challenge was not to design a perfect system, but to design a good system that built capacity for the future while not disrupting the company's current workflow.

When Antony needs to concentrate deeply, he likes moving to a different space where he's not surrounded by all his stuff. He explains: "Working somewhere other than my normal desk does a lot to remove distractions, and signals to my brain that a different way of thinking is required." He also swears by the longer-term benefits of permanently killing notifications on devices: "That's the single intervention that's most helped my problem-solving over the years." He also fights fire with fire, by using an app to block access to other apps and sites when he really needs to focus. (I do this too, and this book probably wouldn't exist without that habit.)

2. UNPACK your mind: "Dump and Chunk" to organize your thoughts

The next step of the FUSE model is to download and organize—or Dump and Chunk—your thoughts in a way that makes the most of your mental resources.

Dump your thoughts

First, write out all the thoughts you have on the issue you're trying to solve. Don't judge them just yet. The point is to stop them from swirling around in your mind, because that uses up some of your brain's limited processing capacity. Research has also found that writing down your thoughts on a topic tends to sharpen your understanding of it, even without you doing anything else (a process researchers call *writing to learn*).[8]

Your brain dump might look different each time you do it. It might include things you know about the problem, things you're worrying about, or half-formed ideas about the way forward. The format of what you write might range from bullet points to full sentences. Antony says that for him, "sometimes it's a mind map, or sometimes it's ideas for the outline of a document I need to write." It's all useful in reducing the load on your *working memory.*

Two additional tips to make the most of this step: First, to help you see the issue with fresh eyes, it can be helpful to use a medium that's different from your usual approach.[9] If you're constantly on your computer, consider switching to paper or anything else that requires you to **write by hand.** (Michael Roberts, the CMO we met in Chapter 1, always keeps a few sheets of blank paper in his bag for this purpose.)

Second, you may find yourself getting distracted by off-topic thoughts. Don't use up any scarce memory capacity trying to remember them—write them down on a separate **"parking lot" list** as soon as they come to mind, so you can handle them later. Antony keeps this log going throughout his working days, to help him stay focused on what matters at each moment.

Chunk 'em up

Next, try grouping your brain dump notes under a few big headings. Research on working memory has found it's easier for us to handle large

amounts of information if we arrange it into a smallish number of chunks. [10] That's because our brain treats each "chunk" as one item, even if it contains lots of smaller pieces of information. This is the mechanism that helps us remember long phone numbers: A string of eight or ten digits becomes more manageable when it's broken into a few blocks, like (123) 456-7890 or 12-34-56-78.

So you'll help your brain if you can nest your long list of thoughts under a few big questions you have to address, or potential paths forward, or a mix. Antony says, "I sometimes group my thoughts by type of work, or by timing, or by an objective." Aim for three or four chunks, ideally, but don't worry too much if you have more like five or six themes—it will still lighten the load on your brain, compared with trying to keep in mind a list of twenty or forty items.

Antony says that "once I've unpacked my stream of consciousness about the problem, and then organized it around themes, it's usually much easier to see patterns, spot connections and gaps, and identify next steps. It begins to make sense."

To see what he means, here's Antony's first attempt at a brain dump for his business process redesign challenge:

- Asynchronous team–how to set and track progress?
- Need proposal process
- Italian client proposal
- Social media strategy
- Next post about *Economist* news article?
- Need to choose CRM
- One focused product initially (or develop suite)?
- Next turn on strategic business plan–when?
- OKRs?
- Newsletter as outreach
- New General Manager
- Expenses–mine and others'
- New coffee machine
- Email system
- Shoot for perfection, or how good is good enough?
- Emails to prospects
- Onboarding for new hires
- Ownership of processes

- Marketing best practices review
- Weekly team meetings—what should they cover?
- My peer group—watch video
- Need to do more with past client stories
- Timing and sequencing—what comes first?

It's a long and messy list, mixing questions and ideas, plus a few off-topic items. But he soon realized he could group the majority of it into three themes: marketing and sales, business planning, and people. These were the big new core processes his business needed. He also realized that buried in his list were some emerging principles on how to approach the work—so he made that a fourth category. After grouping his list under those four headings, Antony took a step back. It was suddenly easier for him to see connections and draw conclusions.

His biggest "aha!" was to see that many immediate tasks could be used to test out new processes, particularly in marketing and sales. For example, rather than seeing the next social media post as an isolated item, they could tweak it to more formally test a new social media strategy. Similarly, an upcoming one-off proposal for a prospective client could be used to test a standard approach to designing proposals. Antony started to realize that his big process design challenge didn't have to be a formal exercise that was separated from the day job. He could use many everyday tasks as a chance to test and iterate his ideas for new company systems. He summarized this insight as "Designing is not separate from doing."

MARKETING and SALES	• Social media strategy—*could use our next major post (about* Economist *news article) to test our ideas on social media process and brand positioning* • Newsletter as outreach—*could use to share client stories* • Proposal process—*could use Italian client proposal to test out new approach* • Choose CRM that also has email system—*could test functionality through current planned emails to prospects* • Marketing best practices review
PLANNING	• Strategic business plan development—defer? • Define workable OKRs for now—refine later • *Weekly team meetings (new thought)—should be for things we can only do in live discussion*—e.g., discuss and align on working principles. Agree to separate process for sharing progress updates asynchronously.
PEOPLE	• Onboarding approach for new hires • New General Manager—need to write welcome email—*good way to test new onboarding approach*
WORKING PRINCIPLES	• Timing and sequencing—need to be pragmatic, do what's most needed now • Focus—start narrow in offerings? Discuss with team • Perfection—approach should be test and learn

His chunking exercise created mental space for other new thoughts, too. For example, he now saw that his team needed a proper discussion about their new working principles—and that this meaty topic was the sort of thing they should be using their face-to-face meeting time for, rather than for progress updates that could easily be shared before the meeting. (Meanwhile, Antony dumped into his "parking lot" list the off-topic thoughts on his peer group, expenses, and a much-wanted new office coffeemaker.)

Antony is a fan of using AI to help with the chunking process: "Enter everything you're thinking, even with no order whatsoever, and it will create categories that help you see patterns." But an analog approach is effective, too—you can write each thought on a Post-it note and group them

around themes. That can be an especially helpful approach if you're doing this with other people.

Chunking the other way around: From big to small

We've just seen that chunking can help us make a long list of small thoughts feel more cognitively manageable when grouped into a few big themes. Chunking can also help the other way around: When you have a huge, amorphous question that feels too unwieldy to wrap your head around, breaking it down into a manageable number of chunks can make it feel easier to think through.

A neat example of this is the Drake Equation, a famous attempt to help scientists estimate the number of intelligent civilizations in our galaxy.[11] It's a very tricky question to even begin to think about answering. But astronomer Frank Drake broke that big unknown into seven smaller questions (like how many stars have planets, and how many planets might support life). Each of the seven questions was still extremely hard to estimate, but breaking the impossible problem into seven merely difficult ones made the analysis more manageable.

I used this approach when a CEO I was coaching was approached by a competitor who asked if he would be interested in acquiring them. Instead of immediately trying to answer the big question, "Should I buy this company?," we took a step back and broke it down into the underlying questions that needed to be answered. First, should his business grow through acquisition at all? If so, what kind of company should he consider acquiring? And what would be the ideal timing? By breaking one large question into three more tractable ones, this leader was able to see more clearly how to work toward the right answer rather than the reactive one. (In case you're wondering, he did not pursue this particular acquisition—but having done this structured thinking, he was ready to act when a better opportunity arose several months later.)

So whether your starting point is one big tough question or a dozen half-thoughts, try to break down or roll up to a handful of chunks. Your brain will thank you.

3. SHIFT your mind: Use "Consider the Opposite," "Rubber Duck," and the "Two-Bite Rule"

The next step in the FUSE model is to brighten your thinking by shifting perspective. Sometimes, when you've reduced the cognitive load through your Dump and Chunk process, a good answer has already emerged from the resulting clarity. But if you're not yet sure what to do, it helps to look at the problem differently so that your brain can make the kind of fresh connections that spark ideas. And even if you do already have a solution in mind, research suggests that looking at it from different angles will improve its robustness.[12]

So here are three perspective-shifting techniques I've seen many leaders use to unearth or strengthen options. The first is focused on shifting your mental model of the situation; the second places you in conversation with another person (real or imagined); the third physically moves you away from the problem and back again. (If you're eager for more, in Chapter 7 we'll review other intelligence-boosting techniques that work especially well with teams.)

Consider the Opposite: Identify and flip your assumptions

Even when you're thinking hard about a problem, you're often unaware of the assumptions you're making—but they'll be narrowing your thinking nonetheless, because of the way that *confirmation bias* leads you to filter out anything that contradicts those assumptions. So: Drag your assumptions up from the depths of your unconscious and shine a light on them. Check your assumptions both about what the solution is, and about how you'll try to achieve it—and then, for a moment, **consider the opposite.** Ask:

- **What:** *What am I assuming about the problem/opportunity?*
- **How:** *What am I assuming about the right way to solve this?*
- **Then, for each assumption:** *What if that's not true—what could be a different way of seeing this?*

As Antony says, “When I find myself thinking ‘Why am I an idiot, why can’t I see a way forward?’ I find it really powerful to ask ‘What am I assuming?’ and then seriously attempt to challenge it.” In his process redesign work, Antony felt stuck when he saw how long the sales “chunk” list was. It was hard to know where to start. So he checked what he was assuming about the way forward, and two things became clear. First, he was assuming that the sales issues were so urgent that he had to solve them before finishing the new strategic business plan. But what if that wasn’t correct? Antony recalls: “It suddenly became obvious to me that we needed to sharpen our strategy first, so that we could be clear on our new priorities for sales and marketing.”

At the same time, the need to articulate a new strategy seemed daunting. Here, it was helpful for Antony to challenge a “how” assumption: “I realized I was assuming that I had to come up with a strategic plan on my own as the CEO. And yet, was that true? Not really. In fact, I wanted to trust my team more.” As a result, Antony had a conversation with his COO and shifted some of the work to her. “She took my thinking and turned it into a strategic plan, which made it clearer who needed to do what, when. It was a big win.”

Rubber Ducking: Imagine talking to another person

Another way to spark new insights is to try explaining the issue to another person. This has been found to improve our understanding even when the other person says nothing at all, and even if we’re just imagining telling someone else.[13] It works by triggering the *observer effect,* the widened perspective that comes from seeing the problem through the eyes of another person.

The process is sometimes called **rubber ducking**, because even explaining your problem to an inanimate object (like a rubber duck) seems to result in better thinking. The name comes from a classic book on software engineering, where the authors described a programmer who, whenever he needed a breakthrough, forced himself to explain his code line by line to a rubber duck.[14] Here are some phrases to use:

- If you're talking to someone else, ask: *"Can I talk through my thinking with you, just to get it straight in my head?"*
- Whether you're alone or with someone else, say: *"What I'm trying to work out is…and my current thoughts on how to tackle it are…"*

Antony said that the mere fact of knowing he was going to talk to me about his process redesign challenge helped to clarify his thinking a smidgen more, as he prepared to think about how to explain it to me. (I was very happy to be his rubber duck.)

The Two-Bite Rule: Step away and return with fresh eyes

You may have noticed that you're often more able to solve a tricky problem after taking a short break. That's exactly what the research shows, too, especially if you take a walk.[15],[16] There are a couple of reasons for the power of this **two-bite rule** (as I call it). A change of setting gives us a better chance of seeing the issue with fresh eyes—neuroscientists have even been able to track this, by seeing the reorganization of connections in the brain after a break.[17],[18] And even the smallest amount of physical activity can sharpen our cognition, giving us greater alertness and faster problem-solving.[19] So stand and stretch, and take a few steps—outdoors if you can, or at least to the nearest window. It works for Antony: "You can go from feeling despairing about your inability to solve a problem to feeling absolutely fine when you come back to it, even just two minutes later. So whenever I can't see a way forward, I remind myself that a quick walk around the block has sorted it out before."

For all these reasons, it can be smart to deliberately plan to tackle a challenging topic across two working sessions with a break in between, rather than powering through in one go. Several leaders in this book swear by this two-bite approach, because it so reliably creates space for new associations to form in their mind. It also stops your level of mental fatigue from building to the point that you want to throw your notes (and your rubber duck) out of the window.

Side note: It's even better if you can plan ahead enough to split your work across two or more days, so that you can sleep on it in between.[20] Good sleep not only helps your *working memory* operate at its fullest capacity the next day; it also allows your brain to do crucial processing and consolidation of your thinking overnight—which is why people so often wake up with new insight on a problem they were working on the day before.[21],[22]

4. ENERGIZE your mind: Plan microsteps to sustain momentum

Having focused, unpacked, and shifted your thinking, the final step of FUSE is to plan to do something with whatever insights have arisen. Often, the final action of a problem-solving session isn't a big decision; it's clarity on what you need to do next to keep moving forward. (If you are really on the cusp of making a big decision, turn to Chapter 4, on decision-making.)

What you do not want to do is wrap up your thinking session without deciding what your next concrete steps should be. We've all been in a position where we're sure we had some useful thoughts on a topic, but for the life of us we can't recall what our scribbled notes actually mean when we come back to them a week later. So spend the 30 seconds it takes to be kind to your future self. Ask yourself one of these questions to get to manageable next steps—what I call "microsteps":

- *What is an immediate next step I can take to make progress on this issue?*
- *What's the smallest next step I can take to move things forward?*

For Antony, along with that breakthrough conversation about strategy with his COO, the immediate microsteps included deciding how to use the next weekly team meeting, reviewing the notes on his potential new client, and capturing the rest of the insights from his thinking session in his running to-do list—with no half-thought left behind.

Antony's business has doubled its revenues in the past year, and now supports clients with technology transformation programs across the United States, Europe, and Asia. The business processes he designed during their rapid growth phase have scaled beautifully, and his early insight about integrating design and execution remained core to their approach: "It's a philosophy of 'not waiting, but doing,' figuring out solutions by moving through the problems and challenges, and it's paying off very well. The work we're doing with our clients has been groundbreaking for them, and personally this has been the most creative and entrepreneurial phase of my career." Through it all, Antony has remained a strong advocate for leaders taking time to "think about thinking." "For companies to make the best use of AI," he says, "I'm seeing how crucial it is to understand and improve the way we think as humans. It's clear that metacognition is only getting more important."

SPOTLIGHT ON: Planning for Uncertain Futures

When you're planning or budgeting without full visibility of what lies ahead, uncertainty adds to the complexity of the thinking challenge. The metacognition skills of the FUSE model will help you approach it in as clearheaded a way as possible—but dealing with uncertainty wisely requires a little extra care. That's because ambiguity often pushes our minds into one of two unhelpful patterns. It can make us feel stuck, reluctant to move forward because we aren't confident enough in our predictions. Or it can make us pretend the uncertainty isn't there at all—charging ahead full of confidence and placing all our bets on one possible outcome.

As leaders, of course we want to find a middle ground—and luckily, there is a way of thinking that helps you avoid both traps. It works by encouraging you to treat the future as a set of possibilities rather than a single, certain forecast. Instead of asking, *"What's going to happen?,"* you ask, *"What are the different ways this could play out—and how likely is each scenario?"* This approach is known as *probabilistic thinking*.[23] Even rough estimates have been found to improve the quality of your planning, because you're less likely to anchor on one uncertain outcome—and as a result, you're more likely to design plans that hold up across a range of futures.[24] Here's a five-step process to try:

1. Define what you're trying to predict. Frame it as a clear question. Example: Will this new product launch succeed?

2. List the most plausible outcomes. Imagine multiple future paths, including the unpleasant and less likely ones. Doing this is already a win, as many leaders only consider one scenario. For your product launch example, those might be:

- Outcome A: Strong uptake and growth
- Outcome B: Slow but steady adoption
- Outcome C: No traction, and we pull it

3. Estimate the probability of each outcome. A rough assessment is a good start, but then try to use some benchmarks to ground your estimates. For example, what happened when your company did something like this in the past? And what are the averages across your industry, or your country? That cross-referencing does a lot to improve your accuracy (as we saw in the "See Across" section of Chapter 1). Here are some illustrative probabilities for your three product launch scenarios, which you might estimate based on past product launches at your own company and your peers:

- Outcome A: 20 percent chance
- Outcome B: 60 percent chance
- Outcome C: 20 percent chance

A note of caution: most people skew toward *overconfidence* in their plans, which leads them to underestimate the probability of negative outcomes.[25] So give your downside scenario an especially stern and careful look before you move on.

4. Ask yourself: "What evidence would change my mind about those probabilities?" This step keeps you thinking flexibly, helping you avoid the *belief persistence* bias that comes from sticking with your first guess even when new information comes in.[26] It also helps you tune in to the leading indicators to watch for, to check if something needs to shift in your approach. For example: "If we find ourselves getting above-average retention in the first 100 users, I'd revise the odds of A upward. But if we get poor retention in those first users—say, below 20 percent—I'd revise the chances of C upward."

5. Make a plan that hedges you against alternative outcomes. Instead of only planning for the most likely scenario, use the probabilities for all scenarios to stress-test the quality and robustness of your planning. In the example: You think there's a 20 percent chance you'll end up with no-traction Scenario C for your product launch. What does this awareness of

the downside scenario mean you could do to plan and prepare well? For instance:

- Maybe you decide to defer an expensive hiring decision until you've seen what those retention numbers look like for your first 100 users.
- Maybe there's something you could do to hedge against downside Scenario C—say, by doing more advertising. How much would it be worth spending on that hedge? Suppose you think you'll lose up to $10,000 if Scenario C happens, and there's a 20 percent chance of this. Your expected weighted cost of that downside outcome would then be $10,000 × 20% = $2,000. So you might think it was sensible to pay up to $2,000 to protect against that outcome.

You can do all the above with more or less sophistication. A complex version of this approach underpins many frameworks for creating strategies under uncertainty. But the core concept can be worked through on the back of an envelope: Consider the likelihood of different scenarios, plan with that range of possibilities in mind, and update your thinking as new information comes in. That's a wise approach for any leader when navigating a changing world.

(For broader guidance on how to lead your team through uncertainty, turn to Chapter 16.)

CHAPTER 4

How to Make an Important Decision

THE CHALLENGE

Not all decisions need a lot of careful thought. Choosing a hot drink doesn't require in-depth analysis—you just go ahead and select what feels right in the moment. But when you're deciding something more consequential, you really don't want to be on autopilot. That's because, left to itself, your brain uses energy-saving shortcuts to simplify the decision. (See "Your Brain's Decision-Making Biases," below, for a summary of these shortcuts.) The result is that your brain automatically steers you toward the quickest and easiest choice—which is often not the optimal choice. Fine when it's just coffee; less fine when you're picking suppliers or strategies.

So, when it comes to a decision that counts, you want to come off autopilot and use a more trustworthy decision-making method. Happily, there's a structured approach that improves your odds of a successful outcome, and that's what this chapter will lay out for you.

Before we walk through it, I do want to acknowledge that some leaders like to take more of a "trust your gut" approach, and I understand the appeal. It can feel fast, efficient, and authentic. But the research is clear: **When relying only on gut instinct, we tend to overestimate how well our decisions are going to turn out.**[1],[2] There are several reasons for that.

One is the fallibility of memory. Our "gut instinct" emerges from our brain's memory bank of experiences, and if used wisely, it can help us see patterns based on our past. But it's not reliable enough to use on its own, because studies show that our memories tend to become less accurate as soon as they get stored—and then they change slightly every time we retrieve them.[3] And however strong our gut instinct, we're still being swayed by all those subconscious shortcuts that draw us away from the best decision, without us realizing it. For example, once your gut has an answer, your brain's *confirmation bias* will work to stop you from seeing any evidence that contradicts that answer—even when it's not actually the right solution to today's problem.

So: Wise leaders both tune in to what they know from their experience and also still think things through in a structured way, so that they can balance out their biases. Let's see how that works.

Your Brain's Decision-Making Biases

The human brain has evolved many shortcuts to save mental effort, and they can be useful in everyday decisions where speed matters more than precision. But as a leader, you need to know how to override them when you're trying to make a good choice—and to do that, it helps to have some awareness of the most common patterns. Here are some of the cognitive biases you'll see mentioned in this book, grouped by the way they make things easier on our brain: Ego, Social, Stability, and Familiarity. (A couple of them also affect our perception of the world, which is why we saw them back in Chapter 1.)

EGO BIASES ("I knew I was right")

It's easier to feel that our views are correct than to have to reevaluate them.

- *Overconfidence:* We generally overestimate how much we know, how good we are relative to others, and how well our choices will play out.[4]
- *Confirmation bias:* We notice information that supports our existing opinion, and tend to ignore evidence to the contrary.[5]
- *Motivated reasoning:* If we do encounter data that contradicts our view, we often unconsciously misinterpret it.[6]

STABILITY BIASES ("Don't rock the boat")

It's easier to go with whatever causes least fuss or disruption.

- *Sunk cost fallacy:* If we've already put a lot of time or resources into something that isn't working out, we resist changing course, even though it makes little sense to keep investing in it.[7]
- *Endowment effect:* People place higher value on what they already have even if there's a better option out there, which in turn drives *status quo bias*—a tendency to stick with what you know.[8]
- *Omission bias:* We tend to assess the pros and cons of taking action, but forget to look at what will happen if we do nothing.[9]

- *Default bias:* If we decide to make a change, we tend to choose whatever option is proposed to us rather than doing the harder work of comparing multiple options.[10]

SOCIAL BIASES ("Everyone's doing it")

It's easier to feel in harmony with those around us than to feel in conflict with them.

- *Homophily:* We tend to be drawn to people who seem similar to us, which can mean we end up with nobody around us who challenges our thinking with a different perspective.[11]
- *Groupthink:* People often go along with their peers without exercising independent judgment, taking apparent consensus as a proxy for correctness.[12]
- *Cascade effect:* The first people to comment in a debate generally shape its direction, and others then tend to follow suit without independently evaluating the evidence.[13]

FAMILIARITY BIASES ("Better the devil you know")

It's easier to go with something familiar than to do the hard work of getting to know something new.

- *Recency bias:* We tend to choose options that we've recently seen or learned about, since they're easy to bring to mind.[14]
- *Mere exposure effect:* Simply having been shown something multiple times makes us more likely to say we approve of it.[15] Simply having been shown something multiple…(see what I did there).
- *Anchoring:* Our numerical decisions (e.g., how much to pay or invest) are skewed by high or low numbers we've recently heard, even if they're irrelevant to the topic at hand.[16]

THE ROLE MODEL

One of the wisest decision-makers I've ever encountered is Angela Park. She's the head of a major practice at a top law firm, as well as the board

chair of a bank, so she frequently finds herself making choices that have huge financial and organizational implications.

Angela says she learned a long time ago that it was worth taking a structured approach when making important decisions: "It might add to the work you need to do initially—but I can tell you that overall, it minimizes work. It's so much better than things going off track later on because you failed to think them through. Early in my career I had a few bad experiences where I was trusting my gut, and it's those experiences that taught me the value of spending a little more time up front." She now actively enjoys the process of discovery that a good decision-making approach unlocks: "It's very satisfying when you ask the right questions, and you start to see all the angles as a result."

So what are those "right questions" to ask? There are many decision-making approaches out there, but there's a model I return to time and again, having seen it deliver successes for many of my clients. They've used it to make broad choices about strategy and organizational structure, as well as narrower (but still important) moves like choosing a new supplier or hiring a new employee. In this chapter, we'll see how Angela used it to help set a new strategic path for the bank she chairs.

THE ADVICE: THE ACORN APPROACH

Without further ado, here is the ACORN decision-making approach, named after the acronym of its five steps:

1. **AIM:** What is the objective of making this decision?
2. **CRITERIA:** What characteristics does the ideal solution have?
3. **OPTIONS:** What are the options (plural)?
4. **RATING:** How do those options score against your criteria?
5. **NEXT STEPS:** What do your ratings suggest you should do next?

≫ Bonus Tip: Stage, Track, and Pivot to stay nimble

This is one of those techniques where something is always better than nothing. If you only have time to do Steps 1 and 2, studies suggest you'll already have improved your odds of making a good decision; if you do the other steps as well, you'll find yourself even better off.[17],[18] And of course, it's even more effective when it follows smart information gathering (Chapter 1) and some clear thinking about possible solutions (Chapter 3).

By the way, if you're reading all this and thinking, "My problem isn't that I make decisions too quickly; it's that I overthink everything and move too slowly," you'll be glad to know that this can help you, too. While the model certainly helps to ground more instinct-driven decision-makers, it also unblocks leaders who are feeling bogged down in complexity, by giving them a way to organize and progress their thinking.

Here's how the ACORN approach works in practice.

1. AIM: What is the objective of making this decision?

First, ask yourself: What are you really trying to achieve by making this decision? Put another way: If you make the right decision, what good things will happen? It's easy to skip this step, but getting clear on your **Aim** at the start can speed the process later on.

This was critical in the case of Angela's work to get the board to a decision on her bank's strategy. She had recently been appointed chair of the board, and she knew there was a lot to do. The bank had been missing its business targets, and it also needed to raise capital—a hard combination to manage. "Things had come to a head, and we needed to find a viable way forward for the business," she says. The board needed to agree on a plan. But everyone around her was jumping ahead, coming up with options without getting aligned on what they were all trying to achieve. "The major shareholder came up with a proposal for effectively restructuring the business," she recalls. "So did the executives. Another potential investor was expressing views, too. Everybody had ideas, but I knew we weren't going to make the right decision unless we first got clear on the goal."

To articulate that big-picture aim, Angela looked to the statutory role of the board, as defined by banking regulations. "We have obligations as

directors to make sure there is a sustainable business model, with a clear strategy, properly assessed against key risks. That wording was actually quite helpful," she says. The clear aim of the decision was to find that sustainable business model—not a quick fix, but something that would stand the test of time.

2. CRITERIA: What characteristics does the ideal solution have?

The next step is to list the characteristics of the ideal solution. These will be your **Criteria** for choosing among options. For example, one of those criteria might be speed, if you want to see impact quickly. Another might be how much it benefits your customers. A third could be the extent to which it minimizes disruption to the business. There may not be an option that scores highly on every criterion, especially if your wish list is long. What matters is that your eventual choice performs well on the dimensions that matter most to you.

You may only need to come up with three or four criteria to evaluate your options effectively. Angela originally considered ten criteria for her situation, and then focused in on the following four:

- **Profitability: Will this plan generate enough profit over time?** Will there be enough market demand to generate **income,** and will it allow **costs** to be kept under control?
- **Capital: Can this plan be funded effectively?** Will it attract the new investment needed to fund the business, or will the plan be achievable without significant new investment?
- **Talent: Will this option retain key people?** Angela says that "in a time of stress, you often see staff attrition, so it was important that the plan resulted in a positive environment where people want to work."
- **Regulatory:** Would the **regulators** accept it?

For a more sophisticated decision process, you could assign different weights to different criteria. For example, if you know that one criterion is roughly twice as important as anything else, you could decide now that you will double the points on this dimension when you total up the scores in

Step 4. Even if you don't assign weightings, one important distinction to make at this point is whether any of the criteria you've noted feel like dealbreakers. For example, maybe you want a solution that moves quickly—but definitely not at the expense of leaving customers worse off. That might mean "benefit for customers" is a dealbreaker, and any option that fails to score positively on this criterion should be taken off the table. Be as clear as possible about which criteria must be met for an option to stay on the table, before you move on.

3. OPTIONS: What are the options (plural)?

Then: articulate the potential **Options** for addressing the issue or opportunity. Always bear in mind:

- **Don't just evaluate one default option.** Come up with at least two or three options, so that you don't fall victim to *default bias,* where your brain just goes with the easy answer that's in front of you. People make better decisions when they compare multiple options side by side, even if they start off with one preferred option.[19]
- **Don't forget to evaluate the option of doing nothing.** Especially if you know you're procrastinating about making a choice, it's important to examine the effects of leaving things unchanged just as carefully as you examine the effects of taking action—something that research on *omission bias* tells us we often forget to do.[20]

As board chair, Angela would have found it very easy to just focus on the first plan that landed on her desk from the main shareholder. But she told her board colleagues that it was important to look at all possible options—including another plan that the executive team was putting together, as well as the option of continuing on the existing path without major changes. So, the options were:

- Option A: Shareholder's plan involving cost reductions, new team, and new product focus

- Option B: Executive team's plan involving lighter cost cuts, same team, new business generation using existing product
- Option C: Take no action, carry on as things are

4. RATING: How do those options score against your criteria?

Next up: **Rate** your options. Collect as much relevant information as you can, and then score each option against your selection criteria.

You can do the ratings informally as a first pass—a "yes" or "no" is the most basic way of doing it. A slightly more detailed approach is to rate each option as high/medium/low on each criterion. However, there are real benefits to going a step further and rating each option on a scale from 1 to 10. It means you can add up the scores at the end, which gives you a more finely tuned sense of the right way forward. One leader I coach who uses this technique says: "It really does help to put numbers on it. You can say 'I don't know,' but when you force yourself to say 'This is an 8, and this is a 6,' you surface more of your rationale and sharpen your thinking."

Your ratings may only be guesses at this point, but aim to make a good first attempt. (Below, we'll look at ways to improve the rigor of your ratings.)

For Angela, the options when scored against the decision criteria looked something like this:

Options	**Criteria for a good solution**				
	Path to profit (increased revenue, less cost)	**Sufficient funding to meet needs**	**Retention of key talent**	**Regulatory acceptance**	**Total Score**
A: Shareholder plan: Focus on new products, big cost reduction	LIKELY–7 Ideas for new products, though lots of competition in those markets; deep cost cuts	YES–9 Existing shareholder says they'll put more money in if their plan is agreed on	POSSIBLY–6 Moving away from original strategy might mean some staff quit—could be mitigated with retention bonuses	YES–9 Likely to be acceptable to regulators	31
B: Executives' plan: Focus on growing existing product, modest cost reduction	POSSIBLY–5 Different ideas for new products, with perhaps better market potential; more modest cost cuts	UNCLEAR–2 New potential investor mentioned by CEO, but no formal commitment	YES–9 Retains existing leadership team and favored product focus	UNCLEAR–2 New investor would need to agree to buy existing shareholder's shares—more complex	18
C: No change to current strategy	NO–1 Current strategy is not working –unclear path to profitability	NO–0 No further investment without a change of plan, so business will be wound up	POSSIBLY–6 In principle, retains current team—but in a failing business, some will likely decide to leave in any case	NO–0 Regulators will not continue to support a failing business	7

5. NEXT STEPS: What do your ratings suggest you should do next?

Now, take a clear-eyed look at what's emerging from your ratings. What do you notice? Is there a clear "winner"? If so, do you feel comfortable or uncomfortable with the conclusion that's implied? Let's take each of those outcomes in turn.

Comfortable with a clear favorite?

If you <u>are</u> happy with the way the scores landed, I need to ask an annoying question: Might you have rated your initial favorite a bit more generously, to make the scores come out the way you wanted? It's a natural thing to do—it's *motivated reasoning* in action. If there's a chance you did this—or if you simply want to increase the robustness of your decision—it helps to **push your thinking into the future.** Here are two ways of doing that, to test your leading option.

Future Back (prospective hindsight): "What went wrong?"

- Imagine it's a year from now. You went ahead with the leading option and unfortunately, the decision turned out badly. Sorry about that. Ask yourself:
  - *What went wrong?*
  - *Why did it go wrong?*
  - *What did I miss when I was making the decision?*
- Now, bring yourself back to the present, and ask:
  - *What does that mean I should change about my decision now?*

The Future Back technique is also known as a "pre-mortem," as we'll see in Chapter 9.

Now Forward (consequence tree): "If this, then what?"

- For the option you like most, ask: *If I do this, then what happens next?*
- Maybe there will be two, three, or four possible outcomes—sketch out all the branching possibilities.

- Estimate rough probabilities for each branch, as described in the Spotlight on "Planning for Uncertain Futures" (just before this chapter).
- What does that mean you should factor into your decision now?

Angela pushes herself to do multiple layers of this kind of tree when making an important choice. "I ask myself again and again, 'If this is what we choose to do, then what consequences could flow from that? And then, what flows from each of those?' I find it helpful to do this kind of 'if-then' analysis, because in the heat of the moment you're just looking at the immediate situation. But as a leader, you actually have to be asking, 'What's the third, fourth, fifth consequence of my actions?' "

What if you're not comfortable with the winning option?

If you don't like the way the ratings stack up, don't fret—discomfort is often a signal that **you're successfully challenging your thinking,** and pushing yourself to think more objectively. It can feel hard because we're wired to stick with our first instinct, and it takes mental effort to override that. In my experience of using ACORN for significant decisions—including major career choices—it has often pointed to an answer that felt challenging at first, but which turned out to be an excellent option. If this is where you're at: Sit with the outcome for a day or two and see how it settles in your mind.

However, you might be feeling uncomfortable with your ratings because the process has made you realize that **you're missing important information** that is needed to properly assess some of your options. If some of your scores were too rough to be useful, it's helpful to recognize this now rather than later. Go and research what you need to know, referring to Chapter 1 on getting to the heart of an issue. Then have another go at the rating process.

You might also feel stuck if you have the following outcomes—but in both cases, there are clear actions you can take:

- **You have a dilemma because two of your options rate equally highly.** If this is the case, the good news is that you can't really lose. Consider whether one option feels more in line with your values. (For more on this, see the Spotlight section on "Being Guided by Your Leadership Principles," later in this chapter.) You could also explore whether it's possible to test both approaches on a small scale—we'll return to that under "Stage, Track, and Pivot," below.
- **Your winning option scores low on one criterion.** It's not a dealbreaker, just worrying. If it's clear that this option is otherwise the right decision, don't let it grind the decision process to a halt. Be proactive about planning to offset the risk on that particular criterion. Maybe one of your criteria is "retain talent" (like in Angela's example) and your winning option scores low on this dimension. In that case, you could take steps to show you really value key employees, perhaps through mentoring or retention packages. Once you're clear where a risk exists, you can often do something to mitigate it.

Finally, the process may have made you realize something new about your criteria or options:

- **There's an additional option—maybe a hybrid option—that wasn't on your original list.** This can be a very useful revelation. Hybrid options often emerge as a result of this process, allowing you to combine the advantages of more than one solution.
- **You're missing a success criterion** that actually matters to you. In that case, go back to Step 2, revisit your criteria, and restart your structured approach from that point onwards.
- **One or more of your factors should be weighted more heavily.** If one criterion is clearly the most important thing to achieve with your decision, but you didn't recognize that before, you may need to give its score extra weight. If you've realized it's actually a dealbreaker—meaning it's critical that you have a positive score in that column—take all options that fail that test off the table.

Just be careful with this kind of retooling of your ACORN criteria and ratings after you've run the process. It's a very human instinct to want to keep tweaking to get your conclusion to line up with your initial hunch. The best approach is to go back to Step 2, do one firm rethink about your criteria and their weightings, and then rerun the process with an open mind about the outcome.

The end of the story

So what happened with Angela's decision? While working through the process, she realized that regulatory approval was a dealbreaker—and that no option would succeed in getting regulatory approval without having a viable path to profitability. So sticking with the status quo (Option C) was off the table. The board had to do something to change the strategy and get the business solvent again.

She then took the other two options to the board, using ACORN as a guide. Before the key meeting, she sent everyone three documents. One laid out the aim of the decision and the criteria for a good outcome. The others described each of the two remaining options in detail. Once everyone had that shared fact base, Angela says, "we were able to go through each plan and look at them against the criteria and rate them, asking, 'Does it meet this criterion—yes, no, maybe?' "

The ACORN approach helped the directors feel that everyone in the room was being objective. "And it quickly became evident what the right decision was—the shareholder's plan was the stronger option," she says. "It was amazing how having a structured process allowed us to get to the decision reasonably promptly. Getting aligned on the aim and the criteria up front meant the discussion of options wasn't emotional. It felt logical and analytical."

Another benefit emerged from comparing the two options side by side: The board realized there was a hybrid solution that could retain some of the benefits of the executives' plan. "It became clear there was enough overlap between the two plans to find a middle ground in several places," Angela says. By incorporating some of what the executives had suggested, the

board could avoid cutting costs as deeply as the shareholder's plan originally proposed. Then, the board worked with the most important employees to help them feel supported and invested in the new path. And finally, the plan was accepted by the regulators—the crucial hurdle to overcome. As a result, the bank was able to launch the new strategy that would make it fit for the future.

≫ Bonus Tip: Stage, Track, and Pivot to stay nimble

The wise decision-maker can also do one final thing to improve the odds: Treat the decision as something to solve in stages. Relatively few decisions have to be a huge, all-or-nothing bet. In many cases, it's possible to break a big decision into a series of smaller commitments. And in most cases you can plan to review early data on whether things are going as hoped, and set an expectation that you'll adjust course as appropriate. I call this adaptable approach "Stage-Track-Pivot," and it helps you and your colleagues avoid the *sunk cost fallacy,* where people keep sinking time and money into something that isn't working simply because they've invested so much already.

For example, if it's a hiring decision, Stage-Track-Pivot might look like this: Consider whether you can test the candidate's fit in a role before you bring them onto permanent staff, perhaps by engaging them as a contractor on a project (Stage). Set up frequent check-ins to make sure they're performing well, and gather information on their progress sooner than you might otherwise be inclined to (Track). Don't wait for the normal performance review cycle to give them feedback—do it right away, and adjust the guidance they're being given if needed (Pivot).

If it's an investment decision: Make a smaller initial commitment, gather data, and release funds for the next phase only if certain milestones and progress have been reached. Suzanne Heywood, the COO and Chair we'll meet properly in Chapter 12, is a fan of this approach: "Maybe there's a $100 million investment proposal on the table, but the situation isn't clear enough to make a decision of that size. Instead of seeing it as a binary yes-no decision, I would ask: Can we make a sensible $10 million investment that will give us more data about the probability of succeeding? It reduces your risk to think in less absolute terms like this. It increases accountability, too, because it means you're checking progress along the way before committing the maximum amount." Your numbers might be smaller than Suzanne's, but

at any scale the Stage-Track-Pivot approach helps you keep your decision-making quality as high as your aspirations.

In the real world, you can't ever be sure that a decision you make will lead to exactly the outcome you hoped for, however carefully you evaluate your options. Luck and circumstance play a role. But what you can control is the way you make decisions, so that you can be proud of the process you followed—however things work out. Angela says of her experience with the bank decision: "I felt very good afterward about the approach we took." By running the ACORN model, she says, "you know you're not just being reactive to whatever option lands in front of you. It stops thoughts circling around in your head, and gives you a process to work them through properly. And it makes you feel more confident that you will not take the bait of a bad idea."

Angela doesn't just save the ACORN approach for dramatic issues like her bank's survival; she uses it for any significant decision, from how to handle a delicate conversation to how to approach a new hire. "Not every decision needs all the steps, but I find any one of them helps me think clearly," she says. "For example, it often reminds me to step back and think of my aim, or to get clearer on the criteria for what a good solution looks like. Or it pushes me to look for other options when there's only one on the table. I've found these concepts helpful for improving most leadership choices I make every day, not just bet-the-company choices. Which I am extremely relieved to say that I do not have to make every day."

SPOTLIGHT ON: Hiring Wisely

Hiring decisions are among the most important choices you'll make as a leader. It's a major investment to hire a new person, and it's a major pain if they don't work out. But most organizations still rely heavily on conversational interviews to assess candidates, and unfortunately studies show they're less reliable than we'd hope at predicting success. In fact, if all you know about two candidates is that one seemed better than the other in a job interview, the chance that the apparently better candidate then performs better on the job is around 56 to 61 percent—only a little better than flipping a coin.[21]

The issue is that many of the biases we've covered so far in this book affect the average interview process. If an interviewer is having a bad day, *mood-congruent perception* means they may end up rating that day's candidates less positively.[22] If a candidate reminds them of their best friend, *homophily* means they'll probably score them more highly.[23] It's normal human behavior, but it's not a great foundation for intelligent recruitment.

What's the wiser approach? Research suggests you'll make better hires if you use a structured decision process that requires you to define clear success criteria up front, rate each candidate against each separate criterion, and then hold off making a final decision until you've taken stock of all your ratings.[24] As you might guess, the ACORN approach can help. Here's how to apply it next time you're making a key hire:

1. AIM: Be clear about why you're hiring for this role. Is it to fill the shoes of a departing team member, or to add new skills that the team currently lacks? It may seem obvious, but asking the question often sharpens what you're really looking for and helps get colleagues aligned on the purpose of your recruitment effort.

2. CRITERIA: With that aim firmly in mind, list the must-have characteristics for success in the role. These might include things like technical skills, industry experience, and adaptability. Then, importantly, plan how you'll conduct interviews in a way that collects evidence on each of those criteria. Decide on a list of questions that will draw out this evidence, and structure the core of the interviews around that list.

3. OPTIONS: Make sure to find multiple candidates to assess, even if one feels like a clear front-runner. Rushing toward an "obvious" choice without considering others is a common blind spot in hiring (as in many other types of decision-making).

4. RATING: Score each candidate against your criteria, step by step, using evidence rather than impressions (however charming the impressions may be). In interviews, ask all candidates the same core set of questions, and take structured notes against the agreed criteria. Do your best to gather multiple sources of information to support your ratings—e.g., work samples, aptitude tests, and reference checks—not just interview notes.

5. NEXT STEPS: What do your ratings suggest you do next?

- Do you need more information to feel sure of your choice? If so, could you give the leading candidate(s) a more hands-on test, to find out more about their skills?
- Can you improve your accuracy by running a quick "Future Back" check? Imagine it's six months from now, and your hire of the leading candidate has unfortunately failed. What will have gone wrong? What could you have done in the hiring or onboarding process to prevent it? And back to today: What does that mean you could and should do differently right now?

SPOTLIGHT ON: Being Guided by Your Leadership Principles

In leadership, every day brings a huge number of micro-choices, many of which are matters of personal judgment. (Should we give a colleague feedback on their behavior, or stay quiet? When a peer talks us through a half-baked idea, what should our response be?)

You don't have time to run the full ACORN model for split-second decisions like this—but you can still take a wise approach if you're clear on your personal leadership principles. These are the things you value and are willing to prioritize, even when it takes effort, and those principles can become your standing criteria for quick decision-making. Being clear on those principles can make it easier to resolve dilemmas, and to feel grounded when there's a lot coming at you. It can also give your colleagues a helpful sense of consistency in how you handle yourself from day to day.

So what <u>are</u> your leadership principles? They might feel obvious: "Of course I care about excellence!" But "excellence" could mean efficiency, perfection, or client satisfaction—and when you're under pressure, those definitions could pull you in different directions. Principles that genuinely guide your choices often require getting more specific about what you care about most. To get clearer on that, try the following:

- **As a warm-up: Think about two or three tough calls** you've made in the past that you ended up feeling good about. What did you do? What did you choose <u>not</u> to do?
- **Then, try asking yourself:**
    - *What does it mean to me to "do the right thing" as a leader?*
    - *What am I willing to say, choose, or defend, even though it might take some courage or effort?*
    - *What will make me feel proud of how I handled my role as a leader, looking back in a few years' time?*
    - *What would I like people around me to feel I stand for as a leader?*
    - *What behavior do I respect in other leaders? And what makes me think, "That's not how a leader should do things"?*

- **Look for the themes in your answers**—these are your emerging principles.
- **Next, try writing each emerging principle as a full sentence,** starting with *"I always…"* Be as specific as you can. So, instead of just saying "integrity" is important to you, try spelling it out more precisely: "I always keep my promises, even the small ones." Instead of "innovation," a full sentence could be: "I'd always rather fail trying something new than succeed by doing something average." The principles should sound like something you're proud to sign up for.

Pick your top two or three to focus on, and then apply them to your next small but significant choice. Maybe your principle about keeping promises means you decide to take the time to give feedback to the junior colleague you previously offered to mentor, even though you're busy. Your principle about trying new things might mean you decide to listen more openly to your colleague's new idea, even though you're not convinced it's right. When you're stuck between options, your principles can be a useful tiebreaker. And over time, each principled choice helps you be more of the leader you want to be.

CHAPTER 5

How to Mentally Prepare for a Key Meeting

THE CHALLENGE

When there's an important meeting on your calendar, I'm sure you take steps to be ready for the content of the discussion. You'll read (or at least skim) any briefing documents sent in advance. If you're chairing, I imagine you also make sure there's a clear agenda. All very sensible. But my guess is that many leaders would be better off spending slightly less time preparing their materials before a key meeting and slightly more time preparing their minds. That's because the way we're thinking and feeling when we walk into a meeting shapes what we perceive—and, therefore, what we can achieve.

Here's how that works. **In any interaction, your brain will tend to make sure you notice anything relating to:**

- **Your AIM.** If you come in with a narrowly focused goal (e.g., "I must get my point across!"), *inattentional blindness* will tend to narrow your perceptions accordingly—and you may miss useful information simply because it isn't directly related to your aim.[1],[2] If instead you set a broader, more leader-like aim for the meeting (e.g., "I want to look for win-win opportunities"), you'd be more likely to notice a correspondingly broader set of possibilities in the discussion.

- **Your ASSUMPTIONS.** *Confirmation bias* means that if you expect someone in the meeting will be difficult, you're more likely to interpret their neutral comments or expressions as somehow nefarious.[3] Or the other way around: If you assume that a favored teammate will ace a big presentation, you may miss evidence that they need some developmental feedback. Your assumptions, negative or positive, reflect patterns you've observed in the past—but they don't always let you see the full truth of what's in front of you.
- **Your ATTITUDE.** Whatever you feel, read, hear, or experience before the meeting will subconsciously prime your brain to notice more of the same.[4],[5],[6] Of all those subconscious influences, it's especially important for leaders to pay attention to the way they feel. Walk in full of excitement after receiving good news, and your positive mood may cause you to miss an astute comment about a risk that needs attention. On the flip side, if you arrive in a bad mood, you're more likely to think that a colleague's perfectly reasonable idea is off base.[7]

This explains how two smart people can walk away from the same meeting with different impressions of what happened, if they had different aims, assumptions, and attitudes as a starting point. That said, if you're the boss and the meeting is with people on your team, their state of mind is likely to sync up with yours. That's because strong emotions are proven to radiate unconsciously between people, and this ***emotional contagion*** **effect happens even more powerfully around higher-status individuals.**[8] As a result, your mindset affects everyone else's cognitive and emotional experience of the interaction as well.

All of which to say: To make the most of any meeting, it matters to take a moment to prepare your state of mind. This chapter will show you how to do that well.

THE ROLE MODEL

When I think of leaders who take a wise approach to meetings, one person who comes immediately to mind is a treasured former boss of mine, Keith Leslie. Most recently, Keith has served as the chair of the Samaritans, a major mental health charity—the capstone of a varied career that's included a high-impact run in management consulting, as a senior partner at Deloitte and before that at McKinsey & Company. That's where our paths crossed, and where I learned about his mastery at managing meetings. I remember one particularly tricky meeting that showed how good he was at it—and it sticks in my mind, because the meeting was with me. I was the problem.

It happened early in my time at McKinsey, and the reason I was meeting Keith was that I'd landed myself in the awkward situation of being committed to managing two projects at once. One was in transportation, and Keith was one of several senior bosses leading that engagement. The other project was in healthcare. No big deal, you might think—except each assignment was supposed to be a full-time job. I didn't know how wires had gotten crossed in the staffing process. But I did know I was in trouble, because I was going to have to drop one of the projects and therefore annoy one team or the other. Keith was eager for me to join his transportation team —it was a big contract. I wanted to stick with the healthcare project, not least because I'd already been working on it for a month. I was enjoying the work and I didn't want to disappoint the client there.

It would have been easy for Keith to barrel into the meeting full of annoyance, demanding that I switch to his very important project. I was nervous about that, and fully expecting it. But the way Keith handled our meeting not only resolved the staffing debacle amicably; it also led me to trust him as a boss and mentor for decades afterward. Let's explore what he did.

THE ADVICE: THE TRIPLE-A CHECKLIST

Wise leaders develop the habit of tuning in to their state of mind before any conversation, so they can steer their attention more deliberately toward

what matters most in the interaction. You can use the Triple-A checklist to help you do this well. It reminds you to broaden your **Aim,** check your **Assumptions,** and reset your **Attitude** as needed. (If you like a metaphor, you can think of this AAA as a battery pack to power your meetings.) At the end of the chapter, I'll also include the When-Then technique that helps you prepare for moments where you may need a bit of extra charge to carry you through.

Elevate your AIM: What really matters most in this meeting?
Check your ASSUMPTIONS: Can you keep a more open mind?
Reset your ATTITUDE: What do you want to project into the meeting?
≫ Bonus Tip: Prep a When-Then plan for difficult moments

Elevate your AIM: What really matters most in this meeting?

Reflect first on the starting point—yours and theirs:

- **You:** *What are you really trying to achieve in this meeting, as a leader? Do you have any unspoken aims that you need to surface?*
- **Other person:** *What state of mind are they likely to be in, and what do they want or need from this meeting?*

And now, ask:

- ***What really matters most*** *as your leadership aim for this meeting?*

For example, imagine you're meeting with someone on your team who's dropped the ball. Without reflection, part of your unspoken aim might be to make them feel bad about their mistake, so that they don't repeat it. Your radar might therefore be focused on picking up signs of sufficient contrition on their face. With a moment's reflection, though, you realize they're probably already feeling guilty. A wiser leadership goal would be to find out what really happened here, so that you can work out if they can be coached on it. With that broader aim in mind, you go on to notice things in the meeting that you would otherwise have missed, including dark circles under your colleague's eyes. You see an opportunity to ask what's really

going on, and you learn that they recently received some bad news about a family member's health that's knocked them sideways. Equipped with this insight, you can be a better boss to them.

Keith remembers that before he met with me, he had a big realization that his real aim wasn't to drag me onto his project—that was a very narrow way of seeing the problem. He saw that the real prize for everyone involved was to find a staffing solution which kept the clients on both projects happy. That meant shifting his internal rhetoric from "make Caroline move" to "get a fuller picture of the options." If he'd stuck to a narrower aim in our conversation, he might not have properly heard me explain how deeply embedded I already was in the healthcare project and how problematic it would be to extract me. As Keith says today, "It's so important to take a moment to check that your aim is broad enough—especially if you're the most senior person in the meeting. Everyone follows your lead."

Check your ASSUMPTIONS: Can you keep a more open mind?

Next, ask yourself:

- *What are you assuming about the meeting: its outcome, the other people, yourself?*
- For your fiercest assumption: *Is that definitely right? What could be a different story?*

Then, ask:

- *What's the **most helpful assumption** you could make about this meeting?*

I'm not saying your fiercely held assumption is wrong. But it's worth noticing if you're using what I call "absolute language," whether in your head or out loud. Very little in life is completely good or bad, or 100 percent certain. If you're using words like "never," "always," or "definitely," it's a sign that you're making the kind of firm assumptions that will skew your observations, since your brain's *confirmation bias* will tend to filter out

evidence pointing the other way. And that makes it harder to have a balanced, productive meeting.

For example, maybe the person you're meeting is a peer who's been spiky with you in the past. You're assuming they've set up time with you to complain about something your team is doing wrong. Are you sure about that assumption? Maybe you're 80 percent likely to be right—I'm not here to tell you this person is suddenly your biggest fan. But if you go steaming into the meeting assuming they're about to be critical, there's a chance you'll read negativity into everything they say. You'll get piqued. Then, thanks to *emotional contagion,* you'll radiate that pique at them—and they'll radiate it right back.

If that isn't actually what you want, try this thought experiment: What could be a different story to entertain in your mind, at least just for today? Like: Maybe they've always been secretly envious of how well you run your team, and that's why they've always been a little uptight. Or: Maybe they have a brilliant idea about a project your respective teams might work on together.

And here's the funny thing: You don't even have to really believe your alternative stories for this technique to have the intended effect. Merely pushing yourself to think of different assumptions is enough to loosen the grip of *confirmation bias* and help you be less narrow-minded in the conversation you're about to have.

For Keith, his initial strong assumption had been that the right solution was to get me to quit the healthcare project. That was what his transportation colleagues wanted. But as he says now, "I thought about it before meeting with you, and I realized that it wasn't obvious that this was the single right answer. So I managed to go into the conversation without assuming, 'This is what must happen.' " Keith has seen over the years how checking his assumptions expands what he can achieve in meetings. "Early in my career, I would come into meetings very tunnel-visioned," he says. "But I gradually learned that when I paused and asked myself, 'What's a different way of seeing this?' it almost always led to more options being available in the discussion that followed."

Reset your ATTITUDE: What do you want to project into the meeting?

Check in with where you're at right now:

- *What's on your mind right now? How are you feeling?*
- *What will you therefore be radiating to others?*

Now, decide:

- ***What attitude** do you really want to project here?*

Let's say you notice that you're feeling irritable heading into a meeting. You know this means you'll be more likely to perceive all the little annoying things people do, and less likely to tune in to the positive things. What can you do? Most of us can't just snap our fingers and tell ourselves, "Be happy right now." But we can ask ourselves what would be a more useful attitude to carry into the meeting. In this case, maybe you decide you want to project curiosity, knowing that you'll be more likely to notice interesting comments or ideas as a result.

In the staffing situation that Keith was trying to sort through, it was especially important for him to manage his attitude, because he was absorbing a lot of frustration from his fellow leaders on the transportation project. He remembers: "I had them chasing me and saying, 'Sort this out!' " It would have been easy for him to bring that impatience into our conversation. Instead, he took a breath before we met. To reset his mood, he said a favorite phrase to himself that he knew would make him smile, while also reminding him to stay focused: "Shut up and listen, Keith!" And I can vouch that he did manage to avoid projecting the angst that he was navigating.

Also: Bring an attitude of full attention

As we saw in earlier chapters, the brain's central processing capacity is limited, and we make more mistakes and miss solutions when we multitask. [9] And yet, many of us have meetings with multiple windows open on our

screens and with our phones chiming away, not to mention background noise from open-plan offices or domestic life. Every one of these small distractions adds some cognitive load and makes us less able to bring our full intelligence to a conversation—to the point that even glancing at a phone has been found to undermine the quality of an interaction.[10] So, to make the most of an important meeting, plan to give it your undivided attention.

Keith went so far as to schedule our meeting away from his own office, where he was frequently interrupted. He says: "I remember I found a room on the opposite side of the building, where we could sit and chat without being disturbed by colleagues." And he wasn't on his phone or laptop—he was fully immersed in our conversation. The absence of distractions lightened the cognitive load and helped to create a good thinking environment for both of us, which helped us see a way forward. (We'll revisit the benefit of minimizing distractions in larger group meetings in Chapter 7.)

How the story ended

As I walked through my dilemma, Keith listened carefully to everything I said. He asked about the work I had already started with the healthcare client, and what I was enjoying about it. We talked about how the work on his transportation project would compare with what I was currently doing, and what would be involved with me switching over. The more questions he asked, the calmer I felt.

Once Keith felt he understood the full picture, he leaned back and said, "Well, Caroline, we can't change what's happened. But we can make a thoughtful choice about what to do next, and try to solve the right problem —which is how to get the right people happily working on both projects, so that we do good work for both clients. So: Tell me what you want, and then I can find a way to resolve this."

With this broader framing, it was as if more air had rushed into the room. Where there had seemed to be only one zero-sum solution—moving me from one project to the other—within a few minutes, we were able to

come up with several plausible options. Was there some way I could split my time across the projects, breaking the mold of how they were usually managed? Could I switch projects not now but in the future, at a natural break point? Or was there anyone suitable who could step in for me on the transportation project—perhaps another manager who had met the transportation clients in a previous meeting?

We considered the pros and cons of each path. Keith eventually settled on the last of those solutions. Our clients and colleagues felt good about the path forward and, as Keith says, "all the tension dissipated remarkably quickly." Both engagements ended up on track to success, staffed by dedicated teams who were excited about the work they were doing. Relationships, projects, and office politics were all saved—as was my job.

A final word on the story: You may be thinking it's pretty remarkable that both Keith and I remember that meeting so vividly, many years later. It's partly because people tend to remember emotionally striking experiences. [11] I was intensely worried about the situation I'd gotten myself into, and then both relieved and inspired by the way the conversation went. Keith also says it stuck in his mind because it cemented a habit he was cultivating at the time: "I'd been experimenting with being more open-minded in meetings, because I saw how it usually created more options. That meeting with you proved it yet again, and then I did it even more systematically in the years after that." The long-term payoff of his approach has been enormous because, he says, "I've almost always walked out of a meeting with a better answer than the idea I walked in with."

≫ Bonus Tip: Prep a When-Then plan for difficult moments

If you're assuming a meeting will be difficult, of course you want to check that negative assumption and see if you can imagine a more generous one. ("It's going to be interesting! It's going to be a unique chance to really understand where they're coming from!") But even after doing that, you might still anticipate there will be a difficult moment or two. If you get tense, it can be harder for you to think clearly—and easier to forget your wise intentions for the meeting.[12]

The good news, though, is that studies show we're far more likely to stick to an intention when we've thought ahead about why it might be difficult to act on, and made a plan for how we might rise to that challenge.[13] Scientists call this an *implementation intention;* I call it a When-Then plan, as in "**When** this challenge arises, **then** I will do XYZ." For example, if you're trying to stay curious about another person's perspective but you know there's a risk that you'll interrupt to tell them what you think, you might decide to make this kind of When-Then plan:

- "**When** I start to feel the urge to interrupt them, **then** I will take a breath and remind myself of my real aim here."
- "**When** I find myself actually interrupting them, **then** I will say: 'Sorry I'm interrupting. I'm eager to share my view, but I really do want to hear yours first.' "

If you rehearse your When-Then plan in your mind beforehand, you're much more likely to be able to reach for that behavior in the heat of the moment—and have the meeting you intended to have.

(In Chapter 15, we'll cover more guidance on how to manage yourself through a potentially stressful situation.)

CHAPTER 6

How to Handle a Disagreement Well

THE CHALLENGE

All of us need to navigate disagreements from time to time. We might find ourselves at odds with our colleagues on priorities, approaches, or timelines—or we might end up presiding over differences of opinion between our direct reports. The good news is that divergent views in the workplace can be a net positive if handled well. Evidence suggests **people can often get to a better answer if they pool their wisdom with others who see things differently.** That's because together they're less likely to miss something—one person's knowledge can compensate for another person's blind spots, and vice versa.[1]

The challenge is that to reap the benefits of complementary perspectives, each side has to listen to the other, and then be willing to adjust their position to get to a better joint answer. That's not always easy. But you can make that outcome much more likely by using the approach I describe in this chapter, because it tackles many of the reasons that good people have bad disagreements. Here's a summary of what it's helpful to know:

- **We tend to assume that others must be wrong if they disagree with us.** As you know by now, our brains are only able to process a limited amount of information.[2] *Selective attention* means that in any two-sided debate, we're often missing something—and so is the other

person. But we think we see the world objectively—a phenomenon known as *naïve realism*.[3] So when anyone disagrees with us, we tend to think they must be misinformed, irrational, or obstructive (and those are the polite words we might use).[4]

- **People often fail to fully hear what the other side says.** *Confirmation bias* applies to everyone in the conversation—so each side tends to notice information that reinforces their initial point of view, while filtering out anything that goes against it. The other side isn't being deliberately obtuse any more than we are; this filtering is mostly unconscious.[5]
- **Once people start disagreeing, they often stop noticing the places where they agree.** Attention gets pulled toward whatever resonates with their current mood (that's *mood-congruent perception* again)—and in a disagreement, the mood is often combative. So, even if people agree on 90 percent of an issue and differ on only 10 percent of it, that 10 percent typically grabs people's focus.[6]
- **When people feel they're not being listened to, it can trigger a defensive response that impairs their reasoning.** Everyone has a psychological need to feel competent and feel connected to others (as we'll see in Part II on "Intrinsic Inspiration")—and not feeling heard undermines both of those needs. That can be unpleasant enough to provoke an automatic stress response, which makes people even less flexible in their stance.[7] This is the brain's *defensive mode* (we'll revisit this in Part III on "Reasoned Resilience").

All of this is why arguments feel so wearing. In principle, every savvy professional says they love a challenging discussion; in practice, their brain doesn't always agree. However, if we flip the science around, it tells us what leaders need to do to manage disagreement productively. We need to set a tone of mutual respect, making sure everyone understands that others may see something that they've missed. We need to show that all the different points of view have been properly heard. And then we need to illuminate all areas of agreement, so that they don't get submerged under

the weight of disagreement. Doing all of this helps keep people's brains out of *defensive mode,* which makes it easier for everyone to think clearly about where there might be room to move forward.

THE ROLE MODEL

A leader who's especially skilled at managing disagreement is Elham Qasimi, the Chief Strategy and Technology Officer of a global conglomerate that spans retail and hospitality. She relishes complex challenges, and over the course of her career she has tackled everything from running the strategic planning of her country's economic development program to leading a technology company developing cutting-edge cybersecurity products. Along the way, she was also the first Arab woman to ski to the North Pole, doing it "unsupported and unassisted," no less. (This is explorer code for doing it on "hard mode.")

The way she works in real life, though, is distinctly the opposite of doing things "unsupported and unassisted." What's striking about her leadership style is the way she couples her drive for results with an understanding of the importance of bringing people along on the journey.

Elham worked hard to develop that collaborative skill early in her career. In fact, she says, "I was innately terrible at it at first." As a young manager, she received some useful feedback from a boss who helped her see that others might be starting in a different place than her—and that she should work to build a bridge between her perspective and others, rather than trying to "bulldoze" her way through (as she puts it). She adds: "I had to go through a conscious process to fully grasp that other people might have different needs and wants, different training and experience, or even different values. And that I might not be the one who has the perfect view."

Elham says her approach to managing differences of opinion became central to her success as an executive—and that the key was learning to start not from the point of conflict, but from shared understanding. Let's see what that wisdom looks like in practice.

THE ADVICE: THE COMMON GROUND TECHNIQUE

The core of the advice is to start with where people agree, rather than where they disagree. This is what I call the Common Ground technique—my extension of an idea from cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett, who in turn took inspiration from game theorist Anatol Rapoport.[8] You can use it to guide your own reaction to a person who disagrees with you, but you can also use it to facilitate a debate if your team is divided on a topic, by walking people on both sides of the argument through these steps. (You'll find an example of that at the end of the chapter.)

Step 1: Describe their point of view as **POSITIVELY** as possible
Step 2: List all the areas of **AGREEMENT**
Step 3: Isolate and understand the true **DISAGREEMENT**
Step 4: Explore how **BOTH** sides could be **CORRECT**
Step 5: Decide what you can **DO NOW,** based on your common ground
» Bonus Tip: The courage to intervene

If you do any one of these five things, it will increase your chances of finding a collaborative way forward, rather than getting stuck in a dispute that drags on. If you walk through all five steps, while setting expectations that people's views are to be expressed and listened to with respect, you'll maximize your chances of getting to the best answer—and you'll lay a foundation for a far better working relationship, too.

Step 1: Describe their point of view as POSITIVELY as possible

If you're having a disagreement with a colleague: Start by describing their side of the argument as generously as you can. Lay out what they want, and why it makes sense to them. The aim is to make them feel you truly understand their good intentions. It's the opposite of setting up a straw man, where you make their points seem weak so that you can easily knock

them down. Instead, you are "steel-manning"—making their argument as strong as it can be. Say:

- *"I understand that you think we should do [thing], because of [reasons]."*

If you're mediating a disagreement between two of your colleagues: You have a couple of ways to approach this.

- **Basic option:** You summarize each side's point of view, generously and evenly. Do your very best not to play favorites—the unfavored side will feel hurt rather than heard, which will make them less open to compromise and collaboration.
- **Pro option:** You ask each side to describe the other person's perspective in as positive and compelling a way as possible. This generates much more learning and collaboration for your colleagues, if they're ready for it.

Step Zero

By the way, if it's not possible to summarize each point of view because the perspectives haven't yet been laid out clearly, start with a **Step Zero,** where each side describes their own point of view (and you describe your own, if you're in the debate yourself). Then do Step 1 above. Don't worry about it feeling repetitive. The psychological payoff from hearing someone else articulate your point of view, even if you've just said it yourself, is enormous.

Step 2: List all the areas of AGREEMENT

Together, make a list of what everyone agrees on. Even if it seems obvious or minor, add it to the tally. The longer the list, the better—this is your common ground. There is often more that people agree on than they first realized.

- *"Where does everyone agree? I think everyone wants A. We all believe that B. We all care about C. We all know that D."*

Getting to the longest possible list of commonalities often requires taking a step back to review the broader discussion that has led to this point. This could include the overall **goal** of what you're doing, the **knowledge** you have gathered, and the **history** and **values** you share.

Step 3: Isolate and understand the true DISAGREEMENT

Only now do you aim everyone's attention at the source of the conflict. This should feel more bounded than it did before you laid out the areas of common ground. Home in on where the real disagreement is, then probe to understand what has shaped those differing points of view.

- *"The only place we/you seem to disagree is…"*
- *"Why do we/you each feel or think differently about this specific issue?"*

Often, people's views have been shaped by constraints that aren't visible to the other side. Perhaps someone is short-staffed; perhaps another is facing pressure from stakeholders. Equally, sometimes people's opinions reflect their background or experience. For example, if a colleague was once involved in a product launch that went badly, they're going to have a strong point of view on the right approach to future launches—and that might differ quite a bit from the view of a colleague who's only ever seen successes.

So, ask people to share those personal constraints and backstories. Understanding why a colleague seems so resistant to an idea does a lot to humanize the "opponent." It helps everyone see that they're not arguing to be a pain; they're arguing because they're worried or excited about a particular option—and that's in turn because they care about doing a good job. (If they didn't care, they wouldn't bother speaking up.)

It's important to reinforce that this step is about mutual exploration. This is not about winning the point; it's about understanding what has shaped the other side's perspective. It can help to spell that out again, if anyone starts arguing with what the other is saying. And if you hear yourself or anyone else getting into argument mode by saying *"Yes, but…,"*

pause and recommit to that spirit of exploration: *"Actually, can you say more about that?"*

Step 4: Explore how BOTH sides could be CORRECT

Now, ask:

- *"Is there a way that both perspectives could somehow be correct?"*

This question is less weird than it first sounds. It's often the case that people are each partially right, but perhaps in different situations or with different groups of people. For example, maybe something that works well in one region doesn't work in another area where people have different needs. Or maybe a process that makes sense when you're in crisis mode doesn't make as much sense in business-as-usual mode.

You'll find that the answers to this question often flow naturally from the last step, where you probed for the constraints or experiences that have shaped each different point of view. And when you reach this step in the conversation, there's often a sense of both people turning to face (more or less) in the same direction.

Step 5: Decide what you can DO NOW, based on your common ground

Once everyone feels heard and understood, people typically feel less defensive and therefore better able to think clearly about what to do next. So, now you ask:

- *"What can we do based on where we agree?"*

New ideas often start fizzing at this stage. For example, you might see that it's possible to get moving on a project's immediate next steps while one specific question is resolved; there's no need to hold everything up because of that sticking point. Or it might be possible to trial two different approaches, and use the resulting data to guide the final choice.

In most cases, you don't need 100 percent agreement to move forward. People often find it's possible to amicably "agree to disagree" on issues that

don't require total alignment, once they feel their views are understood. Research shows that people are more likely to be able to get behind something they don't initially agree with once they feel their perspective has been given a fair hearing—which the Common Ground technique helps you do very skillfully.[9]

Elham's example of using the Common Ground technique

Let's work through an example where Elham found herself at odds with a colleague. Besides leading the technology function for her conglomerate, she also has indirect responsibility for shaping the data strategy for the four business units it contains. The four unit CEOs don't report to her, so she needs to work in partnership with them on anything related to technology. One day, Elham was having a meeting about AI and data strategy with the CEO of one of the smaller businesses. She says that it quickly became clear that "he was unhappy that his business had not yet received any new investment, and he was worried that they were being deprioritized and sidelined."

Elham didn't feel his business had been sidelined, so it would have been easy for her to launch into arguing the point with him. But she knew enough about the phenomenon of *emotional contagion* to know that her reaction would set the tone of the whole discussion.[10] She needed to stay solution-focused rather than getting argumentative. "It doesn't matter how stressful the situation is," says Elham, "you've got to stay calm. So I tried to put myself in his shoes, and I thought, 'If something has aggravated him, rightly or wrongly, I should listen and help him get out of that corner.' "

Elham first used **Step Zero** of the Common Ground technique, to check that she understood his view: "I gave him the space to get to the bottom of everything he was thinking and feeling, so I could understand where he was coming from before I responded."

Then, Elham applied **Step 1: Describe their point of view as POSITIVELY as possible.** "I always start with that. It helps me check I've got their perspective right, and actually I think it helps the other person process as well. Sometimes, when people are upset, they're not actually

sure themselves what they're trying to say. It definitely helped here, to play back to him what I heard." She separates the facts from feelings, but makes sure to mention both. In this case: "We're not yet building a data strategy for your business" (fact), "and that makes you feel worried that you might be being left behind" (feeling).

Step 2: List all the areas of AGREEMENT. Elham says she makes sure to always say the actual words: "I agree…" In this case, she led with: "Look, I absolutely agree your business is valuable. I agree that you can create much more value through the way you use data. And I'm sure we're both going after the same thing, which is what would create the most value for your business." She added: "We are going to do what's right for each business—it's not a question of smaller businesses automatically getting less investment." That was a relief for him to hear.

Step 3: Isolate and understand the true DISAGREEMENT. It became clear they only had a different view on sequencing. Elham's colleague was eager to move fast, because he saw the possibility of value creation from improving the data platform in his business. Elham explained that she needed to stagger her work with the four businesses, because her team had capacity constraints. The colleague hadn't realized that her team's lack of capacity was the reason for the delay. "That was new information for him," Elham says.

Step 4: Explore how BOTH sides could be correct. Her colleague was of course right to advocate for his business, and Elham was also right to be realistic about how much capacity her team had. She walked him through the proposed timeline, and told him, "We're just getting started, and we are not going to ignore you—it's simply a matter of working with the resources we have."

Step 5: Decide what you can DO NOW, based on your common ground. Elham realized that they could start working together on planning the work in the colleague's business, even if the actual start date was further out, and that this would create a healthy sense of progress. She says, "It also gave him comfort on the fact that decisions would be made with his input."

This was a breakthrough in their work together. Further down the line, when the conglomerate board signed off on the data strategy for the business, Elham says it felt like a truly collaborative joint venture between her team and this CEO. And it all started with the common ground they built in this conversation.

Elham is delighted to report that the new data strategies for all four businesses are already bearing fruit, with a rise in revenues attributable to improved use of technology. In all the conversations she had along the way, she says, “it was so important that I was focused on the ‘how,’ not just the ‘what’ of getting things agreed. And the ‘how’ always needs to include showing that you’ve heard the other person, and that there’s a way to solve the puzzle even if you start in different places.”

Elham says she’s found that the Common Ground technique not only gets results, but also helps her be the leader she wants to be—even when discussions get heated. “Using this approach helps me avoid going into defensive mode, and stops me from saying ‘You’re wrong,’ which is guaranteed to shut things down. In my experience it’s always worth extending the olive branch by saying ‘I hear you, and let’s find out how to work through this together.’ ”

≫ Bonus Tip: The courage to intervene

The Common Ground technique gives you a roadmap for mediating both your own disagreements and those of others, and one leader who's a fan of using it in that broader way is Evan Auyang. He's the Group President of Animoca Brands, a Hong Kong–based multinational blockchain technology and investment company. Evan tells a story about using this method to resolve a disagreement between two people on his team. As he explains: "They were arguing because one had made a decision the other didn't like, and it was running the risk of tearing our team apart."

So, Evan launched in, telling the two of them: "Hey, I picked up some tension between you. Let's address it now." Then he walked them through the Common Ground technique, step by step. "I started by summarizing each side's argument. Then I asked the questions: where they agree, where they disagree, where they're both right, what they can do next." It achieved exactly what he'd hoped. Each of Evan's executives better understood the other's point of view, and that enabled them to find a way to keep working productively together.

Evan says any leader would have sensed there was a disagreement; as he puts it, "The question is whether you have the courage to intervene, and the skill to facilitate a positive conversation. But the thing is, you can learn that skill—and then that's what gives you the courage you need." If you use this approach to handling team disagreements, Evan adds, "you get to watch your team blossom. I find people end up feeling proud of themselves, because those brilliant questions helped them behave better than they would have otherwise. It's awesome."

SPOTLIGHT ON: Challenging Constructively

Sometimes you're not in an outright disagreement, but a colleague—a peer, a direct report, perhaps even someone senior to you—makes a suggestion or shares some work that doesn't seem well thought through. Your inner voice might be muttering, "How on earth could you think this is right?" But your outer voice can do better than that. There's a response you can adopt that usually yields a better outcome: the **Tell Me More** approach. This channels some of what we've just learned in the Common Ground technique—specifically, the value of making the other person feel heard, and of recognizing we might learn something we'd have otherwise missed. By guiding you toward a more thoughtful response, it also makes it less likely that you'll squash people's willingness to make other, better contributions in the future. So the next time someone says something that makes you want to groan, try this:

- **Thank them first for their contribution.** Apart from being polite, it gives you a moment to gather yourself.
- **Acknowledge what they're saying: *"I hear you," "I take your point,"* or *"I understand this is important."***
    - Bonus points: If you can, find something positive to call out about what they've said or the way they said it—even just *"I appreciate the spirit of your comment."*
- **Ask a Tell Me More question.** Why start with "Tell me more"? Because it slows you down, reminds you to be curious, and generally stops you from sounding dismissive. For example, ask:
    - *"Tell me more—what's behind your question/comment?"*
    - *"Tell me more—can you walk me through your thinking?"*
    - *"Tell me more—how would that work in practice?"*
    - *"Tell me more—what data would we need to test that?"*

Once you've done that, you have far more information to guide you in deciding how to respond to their comment—and, with any luck, you've

helped them think more deeply, too. (For more coaching questions that go further in improving people's thinking, see the "Deepen" section of Chapter 13.)

SPOTLIGHT ON: Negotiating Effectively

One subgenre of disagreement is when you're sitting across from someone who's asking for more than you want to give. Maybe you're negotiating a salary, hammering out a contract, or agreeing on a budget. The Common Ground technique can be useful here, because good negotiators seek to understand the other person's perspective and build on areas where their interests are aligned. But negotiations also benefit from a few additional tactics, which are summarized below.

Preparing to negotiate

First, set yourself up for the best possible outcome by doing some groundwork, so that you're focusing your brain's *selective attention* on the right things.

Get clear on what you want. Make some notes on the following:

- Top objectives: If you could only get one or two things, what would they be?
- Compromise territory: Where are you willing to give ground?
- Walk-away point: What's your minimum acceptable outcome?
- Your BATNA: This is your "Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement"—your fallback option, if this negotiation falls through. [11] The stronger it is, the more leverage you have.

Anticipate the other party's needs. Next, put yourself in their shoes and run through the same questions. What are their likely objectives, compromises, walk-away point, and BATNA? Even rough guesses will help you propose solutions that work for them, making a yes more likely.

Prepare your mind. Then, channel the meeting prep advice from Chapter 5. Ask yourself the Triple-A checklist questions:

- *What's my **aim**? What am I **assuming**? What **attitude** am I carrying in?*

As you think about your Triple-A, try to view the interaction as collaboration rather than combat. Research tells us that people who see negotiations as a chance for joint problem-solving, rather than as zero-sum battles, tend to find more creative solutions (and sustain better relationships).[12]

During the negotiation

Start by describing where you're aligned. As we saw earlier in this chapter, it helps to start by describing any common ground you have—including shared needs, goals, or values. For example: "We both want a deal that's sustainable in the long term" or "We're both trying to deliver excellent results for our teams."

Spend some time understanding their perspective. It's generally smart to make the first suggestion in a negotiation (see below). But if you're negotiating with someone you're likely to continue working with, studies suggest it's useful to start by asking open-ended questions to better understand their position before you make your suggestion.[13] Say:

- *"What would make this work well for you?"*
- *"Help me understand what your main concerns are."*

Asking questions like this often surfaces important constraints or opportunities that you hadn't anticipated, and it can generate goodwill that makes the whole negotiation smoother.

Make the first suggestion, but signal flexibility. Once you get to the meat of the negotiation, knowing about *anchoring bias* becomes useful. This tells us that when people are uncertain about a quantitative question, their brains tend to latch on to anything that might be a clue to the right answer.[14],[15] In practice, that means the first number mentioned acts like an anchor that drags the eventual agreement toward it. So if a seller opens negotiations by

suggesting a $200 price, the buyer's brain unconsciously uses that as a reference point; after haggling, they might land on a final price of $170. By contrast, if the buyer makes an initial offer of $100, anchoring the conversation on a lower number, the final price might land at $130.

Anchoring has its limits, though. If you go in too aggressively (say, asking $20,000 for something worth $200), you'll just annoy or baffle people. Research shows the sweet spot is to both **lead with a credible number and signal reasonable flexibility around it.** Studies have found two effective ways to do that:

- **Use flexible language** (*"I'm thinking $250, but I'm open to discussing options"*)[16]
- **State a target range** (*"I typically charge between $200 and $250"*) [17]

Either approach can anchor the conversation while telegraphing that you're a reasonable person who's open to finding a mutually workable solution.

Think broadly: Is there a way you can offer something that helps solve a problem for them? This is where having asked about their goals earlier can really pay off. Instead of just saying, "This project costs $80K," you might say something like: *"Since your budget is tight this year, I could invoice $40K now and $40K in January, if that would help."*

Finally, make sure to clarify commitments. Summarize the agreement and clarify next steps to ensure you're both picturing the same thing. People often remember conversations differently because everyone has their own *selective attention* filters. Be explicit: "Just to confirm, we've agreed that you'll deliver by March 15th and I'll provide feedback by March 20th. Sound right?"

It can be okay to walk away

If what you're being offered is genuinely a bad deal and the other party doesn't seem likely to budge, the *sunk cost fallacy* can creep in: a feeling that you've invested so much time that you should accept any deal (even a

bad one), just to have something to show for it. But remember: that time is already gone, whether you walk away or not. The only question is whether this deal serves your interests going forward. So remind yourself of your other alternatives. Walking away from a bad deal can be a strong move—and one that protects your interests for the future.

CHAPTER 7

How to Lead Intelligent Team Discussion

THE CHALLENGE

You can do a lot to help your colleagues be their wisest selves by teaching them the techniques in Chapters 1 through 6, showing each of them how to **widen** their perspective and **lighten** the load when they're trying to think something through. But when you're meeting with them as a group, there's a whole extra toolkit to make your colleagues collectively wiser.

This toolkit is worth knowing about, because social dynamics can make it either harder or easier to do good thinking when your team gets together. It can be harder because—paradoxically—sometimes you end up hearing fewer ideas in larger groups. *Cascade effects* often occur, where the first person to speak colors the tone of everything that follows.[1] And from there, teams can slip into *groupthink,* where people (often unconsciously) fall in line with the majority even if they started out with different views.[2]

But research shows that with the right setup, groups have the potential to do better thinking than individuals, demonstrating *collective intelligence* that exceeds the sum of the individuals' intelligence. That's because of something we saw in Chapter 6: If different people in the group have slightly different personal blind spots—which is almost always the case—the collective blind spot shrinks when they pool their perspectives.[3] So groups can be less likely to miss something important, and more likely to see a solution that would elude an individual working alone.

The leadership challenge is then to steer toward this "wisdom of the crowd" rather than falling prey to easy conformity in meetings. To capture that wisdom, studies suggest that team discussions need to have three conditions in place:

- **Clarity of focus:** A clear goal and structure for the conversation improve the odds of a good outcome, by sharpening people's motivation and focus.[4],[5],[6]
- **Frank sharing of views:** To benefit from all the intelligence in the group, you need people to be open about what they think—and that requires them to feel it's *psychologically safe* to do so. Safety in this context doesn't mean being soft; it means everyone knows they will be listened to with respect even if others disagree, with no fear of it resulting in ridicule or anger.[7]
- **Flexibility of perspective:** The final piece of the puzzle is *cognitive flexibility.* Team performance has been found to be higher when leaders encourage the group to keep testing, adapting, and improving its thinking as different views emerge.[8]

When you create a team environment that encourages this kind of focused, frank, flexible discussion, it pays off. The team performs better overall and is less likely to be derailed by issues they didn't see coming.[9] In this chapter, we'll look at some specific habits that set the stage for this kind of intelligent team thinking.

THE ROLE MODEL

If anyone knows how to help a group think more clearly and expansively, it's Ndidi Okezie. Over the course of a career spanning the public, social, and private sectors, she has guided dozens of boards and teams to higher-quality thinking. She's currently the CEO of Business in the Community, which convenes UK business leaders to tackle some of society's biggest challenges. Along the way, she's also been the CEO of UK Youth, a senior executive at Pearson, and a board trustee or advisor to organizations including Teach for All, Sky, and the Southbank Centre. Reflecting on her

work in all these settings, Ndidi says, “If you can help a team see that they all get smarter by asking the right questions of each other, they will achieve far more together—and that’s a very powerful thing to experience.”

She began in education, spending ten years as a teacher and school leader—experience that taught her how people learn and how to read the subtle rhythms of a group. She carries these skills into every boardroom, which has given her a gift for turning a collection of individuals into a genuinely wiser team. She says: “I think I was always curious about group dynamics and how to create the conditions for a good discussion, even before I went into education. But there’s no doubt that being a teacher brought it out in me even more.”

Ndidi has used these skills to boost collective performance even in challenging circumstances. For example, she took on a new CEO role at a mission-driven social sector organization just before the ups and downs of the pandemic. So, the timing was tough—and on top of that, her new team initially lacked focus and discipline. She remembers: “Our meetings were supposed to start at 9:30, but people just strolled in, on their phones, at different times before 10:00. So casual, no comment. I was floored by that at first.” But she wasn’t daunted. With steady application of the kind of techniques laid out in this chapter, the quality of the team’s interactions rose steadily, as did their impact. Let’s learn more about what she did to achieve that.

THE ADVICE: THE 3 FS OF TEAM WISDOM

There are hundreds of tools for improving group discussion, but in my experience the ones below are enough to make a big difference in your team’s ability to sharpen each other’s thinking. If you put any of them in your leadership toolkit, they’ll help you create exactly the kind of environment that’s been shown to raise the collective intelligence of your team: clear, **focused** attention and process; **frank,** open discussion; and the ability to be **flexible** and adaptable in the way you think and work together.

I can vouch that they're all easy for leaders to use in regular meetings without a specialist facilitator, and they're robust enough to make a positive difference even if you don't do them absolutely perfectly. If these are new to you, I suggest you pick one technique to experiment with—try it, then notice what seemed to work well, notice what didn't work as well, then try it again. Finally, don't feel you have to be stealthy about using these techniques—it's fine to name what you're trying to do, as in: "I'm going to ask a check-in question to focus our attention" or "I'm going to suggest how we can challenge each other in a healthy way." Here's the list:

FOCUSED:

- Ask **check-in questions** to gather and align attention
- Sustain everyone's focus with **digital discipline**
- Use the Wisdom frameworks to **structure discussion**

FRANK:

- Encourage **Turn-Taking** to maximize contributions
- Ask **Hypothetical Questions** to surface new thoughts
- Adopt a **What I Like** norm to enable healthy challenge

FLEXIBLE:

- Look at the topic from **different perspectives**
- Learn and adapt through **team reflection**

FOCUSED: Ask check-in questions to gather and align attention

To maximize your team's collective intelligence, you want to encourage everyone to fully focus their attention on the discussion at hand. If you're only getting a fraction of their focus, you're only getting a fraction of their intellect.

But this alignment of attention doesn't happen automatically. As we know, *selective attention* means that people's brains can only process some of what's going on around them, and they automatically prioritize information relating to whatever concern is top of mind for them. That concern will almost certainly differ from person to person. If your head of

product just discovered a delay in the schedule, that's what they'll be thinking about. If your communications manager just saw a worrying news story, they'll be wondering when to bring that up. Both of them might then miss what people are saying about other topics as a result.

So, as the leader, you'll get a better conversation if you gather people's attention and firmly point it toward what matters most right now. It doesn't have to be a complex exercise. You can simply ask:

- *"What's the most important thing for us to achieve in this meeting?"*

You might feel this is unnecessary if you already have a meeting agenda. But it's the act of engaging with the question live, even briefly, that gathers people's focus. As Ndidi says, "People come in so scattered. Most of us aren't that intentional at work—we're just 'go go go' all the time. So you're helping everyone get their heads into the room by asking that question. The moment you have clarity about what you're going after, the rest of the discussion becomes easier." She finds it not only boosts the team's focus, but also her own ability to lead the room. "There are always twenty other things pulling at my attention, and asking the question makes me pause and remind myself, 'This team discussion is the priority right now.' "

By the way, the answer to the "what's most important" question should never be to walk everyone through a detailed document that could have been sent as pre-reading. The purpose of a good meeting is to do things together that can't be done apart. So use your team meeting time for real conversation, not basic information transfer. (End of sermon.)

A check-in question for longer meetings and even clearer minds

If you have a few extra minutes at the start of a longer group session, you can focus people's attention even further by asking a broader check-in question about everyone's mental starting point. One that I often use is:

- *"What's on everybody's mind as we begin?"*

Asking this does a few useful things for you as a leader. First, it helps your colleagues concentrate. When people have a persistent thought turning over in their mind, saying it out loud at the start makes it less likely to distract them in the discussion that follows. It also gives you a useful snapshot of where everyone's mind is at. Ndidi swears by this: "You will think you don't have time to do it, but I will bet money that your meeting is better when you ask that kind of question than when you don't." She adds that it also helps everyone tune in to each other's needs, "which can really help later in the meeting, when everyone is wrestling with a complex problem."

If you're worried about time (and even if you're not), ask for one-sentence answers, and call first on someone you can rely on to be brief. If it's not realistic to have everyone answer in the time you have, try asking people to share what's on their minds with the person next to them. Even without a debrief, it typically improves the quality of people's attention in the discussion ahead.

FOCUSED: Sustain everyone's focus with digital discipline

Of course, you don't just want to gather people's attention at the start of a meeting. You also want to hold that focus over time—and research suggests you'll find this easier if you **reduce digital distractions.** As we've learned, people are sharper when they're not multitasking.[10],[11] Even if people aren't actively typing, every lit screen calls on a sliver of their brain's processing capacity, making it a little harder for them to see solutions and tune in to subtle cues. So unless someone's dealing with an emergency, it's smart to set an expectation that team meetings get undivided attention.

Two things can help you achieve that. First, consider creating shared ownership of the "no multitasking" norm. As Ndidi says, "It's clear that to do your best thinking as a team, you've got to stay off your phones and laptops. But I don't like having to nag people about it." With her new executive team, she invited them to **set their own rules.** "I asked them, 'What do you need to be your best self in our meetings?' and many of their answers were a version of 'I need people to listen to what I'm saying.' I asked 'What's going to help with that?' and they quickly decided on a

shared rule about distractions. We put it at the top of every meeting agenda. After that, anyone was able to refer to that rule to call the room back to focus." (Of course, if your team doesn't reach that conclusion themselves, you can still set the rule yourself.)

Second, finish on time—and if you have a longer meeting scheduled, **build in short breaks.** If your colleagues know when they'll get a chance to pause and check messages, it's easier for them to give themselves fully to the discussion in the meantime. Breaks can also help because cognitive fatigue builds over time; even a brief pause lightens cognitive load, making it more likely that people will return to the table with smarter ideas.[12]

FOCUSED: Use the Wisdom frameworks to structure discussion

Researchers have found that for groups to make the most of their collective intelligence in a discussion, they usually need some kind of organizing process.[13]

Happily, from the "Deliberate Wisdom" chapters earlier in this book, you have a fine collection of frameworks that can provide a clear roadmap for group discussion. In the box below, you'll see suggestions on how to use Brainwriting, Causal Mapping, Dump and Chunk, Consider the Opposite, and ACORN with your team. Being clear with your team about the framework you're using can help reduce the mental chatter of people wondering what the plan is ("Are we just going in circles?"). And they often make tackling complex issues feel more manageable, by breaking the process down into clear steps. As Ndidi says, "That can help a lot when people are wondering, 'Where do we even start with this issue?' "

Another important benefit of using these clearly defined discussion processes is that it helps you get colleagues aligned around the conclusions that eventually emerge. When one person has a strong point of view but the team opts to do something different, the strong-minded person can sometimes struggle to get on board with the group decision (as I'm sure you know). Leaders often wish their colleagues were open-minded enough to "disagree and commit"—a phrase first popularized at Sun Microsystems in the 1980s—but they wonder how to achieve it in their own teams. A

transparent and balanced discussion process is the answer. Studies show that people are more likely to accept a decision they don't love if they feel sure their viewpoint was properly evaluated, because it gives them a sense of *procedural justice*.[14]

Ndidi shares a "disagree and commit" example from a talent planning meeting she led. One of her colleagues was pushing to re-fill a particular role, despite the fact that two people in a row had quit the job. Her team took a structured approach to the discussion about whether to hire yet another person for the role, and an insight came when they clarified the aim of the decision, ACORN-style: It should not be to simply fill a slot on an organization chart, but instead to make sure the role was set up for success. They decided to examine and rescope the job description before doing anything else. Ndidi says that although the "hire a replacement ASAP" colleague was outvoted, "he felt the conversation had been well managed and fair. As a result, when we reported out to the organization, he was willing to say, 'We've made a decision not to fill the role right now.' And no one outside the team would have known that wasn't his preference."

Work the Wisdom frameworks

To surface views with less groupthink: Brainwriting (Chapter 1)

- Frame a specific question you'd like your colleagues to comment on—e.g., "What are three ways to solve this problem?" Or, "What is the main challenge we need to address?"
- Ask them to take 30 to 60 seconds to **jot down their thoughts about the topic before anyone answers.**
- Then, ask people to share what they wrote. Ndidi finds the extra seconds of reflection "always encourage more honesty and invite bolder contributions."

To understand an issue more deeply: Causal Map (Chapter 1)

- Ask your teammates to download what they collectively know about the issue at hand, with each observation or data point on a separate sticky note (physical notes at an in-person meeting, or virtual notes if you're meeting remotely).
- Put the notes on the wall (or on a virtual whiteboard).
- **Map the causal connections between each piece of information,** by writing arrows on more sticky notes to show what causes what. Then, use the guidance in Chapter 1 to draw out patterns.

To make sense of a long list of ideas: Dump and Chunk (Chapter 3)

- Get your teammates to write up each of their ideas clearly on sticky notes. Ask each person to explain their idea before putting it up on the wall or whiteboard.
- Then **group the thoughts and ideas under a number of big themes.** This kind of "chunking" makes it easier for people to process and assess a large number of contributions.

To make the team's thinking more robust: Consider the Opposite (Chapter 3)

- Identify all the main assumptions you're making about the topic you're discussing. Get everyone in the group to contribute to the list—via a flip chart, whiteboard, or shared online note.

- For each assumption, consider the opposite:
  - Explain your reason for thinking this assumption is correct.
  - Now: **What would be the opposite assumption? And what evidence do you have that this opposite might actually be correct?**
- After considering the opposite, how would you change your view of the situation? What might you then do differently?

To make big collective decisions: ACORN approach (Chapter 4)

- **Aim:** Clarify the objective of the decision you're making.
- **Criteria:** Define the characteristics of the ideal solution.
- **Options:** Lay out multiple possibilities (make sure to consider more than one idea—it improves everyone's thinking).
- **Ratings:** Score those options against your criteria. **Bonus tip:** In a group, it helps to **do this rating visually.** Create a grid listing your options along the top and the criteria down the side. Then ask your colleagues to add a visible dot for each point they want to allocate (red marker pens work best).
- **Next Steps:** Step back and decide what the scores tell you (using the guidance in Chapter 4). Decide what information the team now needs to collect, and who will do what by when.

FRANK: Encourage Turn-Taking to maximize contributions

Research has found that teams with high collective intelligence excel at something called Turn-Taking—that is, nobody hogs the airtime and everyone gets to say something.[15] But without a norm around Turn-Taking, group discussion can easily end up being dominated by the most extroverted, making it hard to reap the full benefits of the wisdom of the crowd.[16] So it pays to be systematic about getting everyone's ideas and views on the table. The Wisdom discussion frameworks listed above give you a structure that naturally encourages balanced contributions. But there are additional techniques that Ndidi and other leaders in this book use to encourage a healthy distribution of airtime in the regular flow of discussion.

From light touch to the most structured approach:

- **Ask for a range of views:** Instead of asking a general question like "Who else wants to comment?" (which can result in silence), say, *"I'd like to hear a range of views. Who could share a different perspective on this?"*
- **Call on the quieter people:** Say, *"I'd like to hear from people who haven't spoken."* Ask individuals directly—e.g., *"Jan, you're looking thoughtful—what are you thinking?"*
- **"Round robin" technique:** Say, *"I'd like to hear from everyone,"* then go around the room and ask each person to share a comment. Use this for consequential topics where you want to hear from everyone, or where you want everybody to feel present and accountable (as with the check-in questions earlier). In chatty groups, you might consider setting a time limit that you enforce with humor—and perhaps a gentle bell when the timer runs out.
- **Debrief pairs:** For discussions in larger groups, you can still generate a sense of Turn-Taking by getting people into pairs or trios to discuss a specific question, then inviting each pair/trio to share one reflection in plenary. Pair discussions raise the energy level in quiet groups, and you're more likely to keep on hearing from shyer people in open forum after they've broken the seal in a more private conversation.

FRANK: Ask Hypothetical Questions to surface new thoughts

It's often hard for people to speak up with a comment or concern if they're not 100 percent sure they're right. And yet, there's often something useful in the thoughts bubbling at the back of people's minds, and it's good to have a way to draw them out if you're trying to make use of all the intelligence in the team. A smart way to surface those half-thoughts is to ask what I call Hypothetical Questions, designed to invite exploratory rather than polished comments. The conditional language ("if" and "would") creates enough safe distance that people feel more comfortable about opening up and

saying what they're half thinking. Here are some of my favorite hypothetical questions.

- **To draw out ideas:** *"If you had one idea about how to tackle this, what would it be?"*
- **To surface concerns, especially when the debate hasn't yet gone very deep:** *"If you had one concern about this at the back of your mind, what would it be?"*
- **To balance a discussion that's in a negative spiral:** *"If there were one thing we liked about this idea, what would it be?"*

Ndidi is a strong proponent of using what she calls these "if-style questions" to get her teams sharing what's going unsaid. A couple of her favorites include:

- *"If you were looking at this from the outside, what would you question?"*
- *"If there were a voice or perspective missing here, whose would it be?"*

Ndidi recalls a leadership meeting where she used the last of those questions to improve the team's thinking about a new youth development program they were working on. She asked her "if" question, gave people a few minutes to think, then went around the table and asked everyone to share their answer (a nice example of Turn-Taking). She says: "As a result of asking that question, it quickly became clear that many on the team were worried we were missing the perspective of the young people we were trying to help." Surfacing this made a real difference to their success, she says: "We then invited several young people directly into the design process, and it transformed the impact of the program because they helped us tailor the language and positioning to appeal more to the kids we wanted to reach."

FRANK: Adopt a What I Like norm to enable healthy challenge

Maximizing your team's collective intelligence depends not only on people speaking up with their ideas, but also on being able to challenge each other in a way that makes those ideas stronger. As Ndidi puts it, "I tell people that it's not only okay to disagree—it's our job to disagree, so that we can get to a better answer. It's what helps us compensate for each other's blind spots, so we get smarter as a whole."

But it often takes work for a team to learn to disagree well. While we all know someone who seems to love an argument, many professionals hesitate to challenge each other directly for fear of offending or creating conflict. Ndidi has worked with several teams who started out with a total lack of ability to raise concerns effectively with each other. She says: "I would leave a meeting thinking everyone was aligned on a course of action, but afterwards I'd get a flurry of emails from individuals saying, 'I'm really concerned, can I speak to you?' "

To encourage openness in that team, Ndidi did exactly what I recommend: She suggested a shared language for expressing disagreement, with phrases that convey respect as part of the challenge. This helped her remind her team that "disagreeing well is never about tearing somebody down. You're trying to strengthen and sharpen the work, not destroy it. So we take care to use language reflecting that."

My favorite wording for respectful challenge is this pair of statements:

- *"What I like about what you're saying is…What would make me like it even more is…"*

It often gets a laugh, which is part of its power—it can soften tension when needed. It also forces the speaker to start with Common Ground, which (as we saw in Chapter 6) lowers defensiveness and makes it easier to keep the conversation moving forward. Other phrases that have that same two-part build include:

- *"Where I agree is…Where I differ is…"*
- *"What works well for me is…What works less well for me is…"* (this is Ndidi's go-to)

Whatever language you choose to adopt on your team, you want that two-part structure. Ndidi emphasizes that the positive part has to carry real weight: "Otherwise, people just sit there waiting for the criticism that they know is coming. And you have to make it clear that both parts matter if you want to improve the work." It's not just about making people feel better; it's a way of making sure that you don't throw out what's useful by mistake.

When you introduce this language to your team, it helps to also discuss how to receive feedback in a group discussion. Ndidi says, "I ask people to properly listen to the positive comments, and respond to them before moving on—otherwise they so easily brush them off." Then, on the negatives, she says, "A classic response from someone on the defensive is 'We've already thought about that.' If I hear that, I ask people to take a beat, and then clarify what they've heard." She's found that coaching the group on the right way to respond means "everyone feels safe to raise both ideas and concerns, knowing they won't be knocked back either way."

By the way, people will sometimes want to push back on something that you have said as the leader—and you need to not only be okay with that, but to visibly welcome it. I once worked with a leader who did this perfectly. When a colleague used their shared What I Like language to challenge a point he'd made, he would often respond—deadpan but with a twinkle: "Thank you—and what I like in turn about your excellent comment is…" The room would laugh, relax, then return to the serious work of sharpening their thinking together.

FLEXIBLE: Look at the topic from different perspectives

So far, we've talked about drawing out all the viewpoints inside the team—but the wisest teams go one step further, and look beyond themselves to adopt an outsider's perspective.[17] Here are a few lenses you could ask your team to use:

- **Customers:** What would a customer appreciate about the discussion we're having, and what concerns would it raise for them?

- **Competitors:** How are other companies likely to respond to what we're discussing?
- **Regulators:** What are the authorities trying to maximize or minimize through their decisions, and how does that affect us?
- **Frontline staff:** How do employees across the organization view what we're doing?

This doesn't require a huge effort. I've certainly seen teams invite customers to offsites to share their perspective, and it's always a hit. But putting yourself in others' shoes can also be a 10-minute exercise using short discussion prompts like those above. You can also assign a role in a meeting:

- *"Can someone play devil's advocate from the perspective of…?"*

You might even rotate the lens you use in your team meetings each month. For example: customer view in June, competitor view in July, frontline view in August, and so on.

Ndidi loves this kind of perspective-shifting exercise. She told me about a time that her team was putting together a funding bid for a new program. As she recalls: "We were really proud of what we had. But then we stopped and said, 'Okay—what would the people reading this bid say about us behind closed doors?' " That shift—looking at the proposal through the eyes of the funder—revealed a major risk. Their proposal hinged heavily on one key individual, and this was obvious in the document. As Ndidi says, "We suddenly realized we were making a big assumption that this person would still be with us when we got to the delivery phase, if we won. And actually, there was a real possibility they might leave." The team revised their approach to address that vulnerability. They rewrote the bid, and it got funded.

Since then, Ndidi has taken this one step further: She now brings in real live outside experts to thoroughly kick the tires on her teams' work on big projects—a process sometimes known as Red-Teaming. "It's very valuable to have this outside perspective on what you've missed and what could go

wrong. You do have to keep reminding everyone that this level of challenge is a gift; that it's going to help us succeed. But every team massively appreciates it by the end, and says, 'We must do that again.' "

FLEXIBLE: Learn and adapt through team reflection

Studies suggest that when teams periodically step back to reflect on the way they're working and how they might improve, they significantly boost subsequent performance—with some research suggesting a whopping 20–25 percent bump in effectiveness from a single debrief, compared with teams that don't do it.[18]

So, after any major team effort, make time for a round of reflective questions with your colleagues. Something like this:

- *What did we do well?*
- *What didn't we do as well, that we could improve?*
- *So: What should we now do more, less, or differently?*

This kind of retrospective, or "retro," is now standard in many project management methodologies. But it's worth weaving into your team's routine whether you're running formal projects or not. As Ndidi puts it: "It's really powerful, yet still mostly not done. Teams often feel they don't have time to stop and reflect, but you can build it seamlessly into your routine. Just make a habit of asking those three questions in your team meetings—it only takes a few minutes."

Many leaders in this book have done exactly that, creating an end-of-meeting reflective habit. Rob Allen, CEO of Intermountain Health (who we'll meet in Chapter 10), wraps up his team meetings with a quick reflection on what was good about the discussion, and what they might improve. Likewise, Blanca Juti of L'Oréal (who we'll meet in Chapter 14), ends her "cabinet" meetings with five standing reflective questions, including "Did we solve the problem we needed to solve?"

One last point: When you're reflecting on something bigger than a meeting—a project, say—it's important to separate the quality of the process from the quality of the results. You can have a flawed process but

splendid luck, which might make you wrongly assume you should carry on with no changes. You can also do everything right and have rotten luck—and in that case, you don't want to dismantle an otherwise strong approach. The real question is always, win or lose: Did your team handle the work in the best way possible? Ndidi feels strongly about this distinction, saying, "It's never just about the outcome, because you can 'win' in a really awful way. If my team has fallen out with each other as a result, that's hard to really call a success. The quality of your process is always what you want to examine."

The techniques in this chapter can help any leader draw shared brilliance out of their colleagues. After Ndidi used these approaches with the senior team she took on during the pandemic, she says they blossomed: "I've honestly never been happier with a team. They were absolutely cooking." Full of fresh drive and determination, they made a series of smart choices to focus their efforts and their budgets more strategically. They developed a more compelling story on the value of their work, and got better traction with it by using more modern marketing channels. And the result of all that wasn't just better morale; they nearly tripled the organization's annual income, securing several multiyear partnerships with new sources of funding that transformed the level of impact they could aim for. That's collective intelligence at work: a team that's become far more than the sum of its parts.

PART II

INTRINSIC INSPIRATION

Motivating Your People

"Successful people become great leaders when they learn to shift the focus from themselves to others."

–MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

THE CORE SCIENCE OF INTRINSIC INSPIRATION

How the Brain Processes Rewards

If you took ten people and asked them to describe the managers or mentors who'd most inspired them, you'd probably end up with a highly varied list of personality traits and styles. Some people might be the sort that radiate energy, while others would be soft-spoken. Some might be impressive in front of groups, while others shine in one-to-ones. But what all inspirational leaders have in common is this: They understand how to unlock motivation and engagement in their colleagues, so that everyone wants to do the best job they can.

It matters to lead in a way that makes people want to excel—and not only because we might like to be on the list when they're asked to name leaders they find inspiring. The business case is clear: People try harder and perform better when they feel engaged by their work, and teams with high levels of engagement generate 20 percent more productivity and profitability than those with low engagement.[1],[2]

So, how do you inspire that kind of commitment in your colleagues? At a basic neurological level, **motivating people to do their best is about engaging what's known as the *reward system* in their brains.** And lucky us: Science is very helpful in showing us why and how to do that well as leaders. As we'll see, the key is to amplify people's sense of personal **competence** and their sense of social **connection**. Here's a summary of the core science that flows through all the chapters in this part of the book.

The importance of intrinsic rewards

The first thing to know is that **the brain's *reward system* is the engine of human motivation.** Harnessing many neurochemicals and brain areas, it constantly analyzes the appeal of what's around us and then steers us toward whatever seems "rewarding"—which could mean satisfying, replenishing, pleasurable, or any other flavor of "feels good to me."[3] The prospect of discovering and experiencing things that feel good is the mechanism that drives all of us forward in the world. When the likely rewards for an activity look worthwhile, the brain's *reward system* sends signals that drive us to pay more attention, exert more effort, and feel less tired as we do it—all of which translates into higher performance.[4],[5],[6],[7] So as leaders, we definitely want work to feel rewarding for our colleagues. But what kind of "reward" are we talking about?

It turns out that **psychological rewards are highly effective and affordable sources of motivation.** The word "reward" makes most of us think first of money, and you should absolutely make sure your people are paid fairly.[8] But financial rewards are finite. To inspire extra motivation for important tasks, you can't afford to give every single person a bonus or raise every single day. By contrast, psychological rewards are in practically unlimited supply—and in fact, they have a longer-lasting impact on the quality of people's work.[9] Psychologists often call them *intrinsic rewards,* as opposed to *extrinsic rewards* like money, because they deliver their benefits directly inside our minds rather than through things we acquire in the external world.[10] That's why this part of the book is called "Intrinsic Inspiration"—it will show you how to unleash that inner sense of drive in your colleagues.

The main sources of intrinsic reward in the workplace can be grouped under two big themes: <u>competence</u> and <u>connection</u>. Those rewards typically flow from people feeling capable and in control (competence), and feeling valued and useful to others—whether in big or small ways (connection). Let's take a quick look at how we'll apply this competence-and-connection "double unlock" to create a working environment rich in each of those two categories of intrinsic inspiration.

COMPETENCE: Feeling capable and in control

Human beings are wired to feel good when they're doing something well.[11] You'll know this if you think of the burst of satisfaction you get when you solve a puzzle or nail a presentation. And it's not just a feeling—you can see it on a brain scan. Neuroscientists have found that when people answer a question correctly, the brain's reward system is engaged[12]—and this also happens when the feeling of competence comes from being praised by others.[13],[14] So, when you lead in a way that helps people feel competent, it creates a flywheel of motivation where people want to keep going and keep doing well.

As a leader, this means that you'll inspire the best in people if you:

- **Show authentic appreciation.** When a colleague does something well, call it out. What gets recognized gets repeated: You're telling their brain it's worth continuing to deliver great work. (If you're not giving much praise, you're leaving a lot of motivational energy on the table.)
- **Encourage people to learn.** Learning adds to people's stock of competence, and something as simple as receiving a useful piece of information can engage the reward system.[15] So if you help a colleague improve by giving them developmental feedback and coaching, you're building up both their personal commitment and your team's capacity.
- **Give people autonomy where you can.** Feeling competent isn't just about achievement; it's also about having the space to choose how you get things done. People's reward systems are more engaged when they feel in control of at least some aspects of their work,[16] which is why giving people a little breathing room tends to result in better performance.[17],[18]
- **Make goals feel achievable.** If people feel there's truly no way to reach their goals, they can tune out rather than fire up.[19],[20] You can be bold in your aspirations, but you need to help people see a

plausible pathway to success to keep the competence engine humming.

CONNECTION: Feeling valued and useful to others

The human brain is deeply wired for social connection: Signals of belonging, respect, and approval reliably delight the reward system.[21] (Introverts and extroverts have different preferences about the types of connection they most enjoy, but we all get a solid boost from social interactions.)[22] Given that, it's no surprise that the quality of people's working relationships has a powerful effect on their motivation on the job.[23],[24]

For your colleagues, the importance of social connection operates on multiple levels. The first basic layer is feeling valued and feeling supported—by you in particular, plus anyone else who matters.[25],[26] Another layer comes from feeling included and involved in whatever is going on, which activates the reward system to a degree that might seem surprising until you think about the opposite: how unpleasant it feels to be excluded from something.[27] There's also the wider sense of human connection that comes from having a sense that your work makes a meaningful difference to other people, no matter how distant or abstract those people are.[28]

As a leader, that gives you plenty to work with. For example, you'll do a lot to inspire your colleagues if you:

- **Show real interest.** Being listened to engages people's sense of social reward.[29] So don't underestimate the power of simply asking your colleagues, "How are you doing?"—and paying real attention to the answer.
- **Create a sense of shared identity.** It lifts people's motivation when they feel that they're part of a team with shared values or priorities.[30] So look for ways to create a feeling that you're all "in it together." Even a small joint task has been found to be enough to knit a group together psychologically.[31]

- **Demonstrate fairness.** Fairness is treated as a reward by the brain—but the flipside is that perceptions of unfairness can quickly erode feelings of connection and motivation.[32] So, take care to show that you're treating people as even-handedly as you can.[33]
- **Connect their work to a broader purpose.** People feel more motivated when they're reminded that their work is useful to others.[34] Do what you can to help people see the positive impact of their contributions, whether inside or outside your organization.

To unleash your colleagues' greatest energy and commitment, your job is to create a working environment that's full of these kinds of psychological rewards. The payoff is not only short-term, but long-term as well: Employees who feel good about themselves and their work not only perform better, but are also less likely to leave.[35],[36] With all of that in mind, let's see how to build **competence** and **connection** into everything you do as a leader.[37]

CHAPTER 8

How to Get People Aligned on a Goal

THE CHALLENGE

We all cover more ground when racing toward a finish line than when we're running in circles, and research confirms this is more than a poetic observation: People perform better when they have a clear goal. That's because a goal helps the brain direct and organize its easily scattered attention—and as a result, people find it easier to focus, they persist for longer, and overall they achieve more than if they're just given general encouragement to try their best.[1]

That said, **not all goals are equally good at motivating people**—as you'll know if you've ever been handed objectives that felt impossible, muddled, or pointless. So, how do you set direction in a way that leaves your colleagues feeling engaged and excited about the road ahead? The answer lies in applying what we've learned about the motivational power of competence and connection in the brain's *reward system.* Here's how that shows up in goal-setting:

- **Competence: It's highly motivating for people to feel they're doing well.**[2] **But if it starts to look like there's no way of achieving a goal, people lose steam.**[3] Their brain runs a cost-benefit analysis on whether it's worth continuing to exert effort, and studies suggest the average brain decides there's no point trying as hard if there's no chance of success.[4],[5] That doesn't mean you

should only give people easy things to do; you just need to take care to sustain people's sense of possibility as they work toward a stretching goal. You can do that, for example, by helping them see a path to achieving the goal, and by tracking and celebrating wins, even —or especially—when the going is tough.

- **Connection: People feel good when they're working toward a shared goal that makes a positive difference.**[6] When reminded how their work helps others (giving them something known as *task significance*), they try harder and perform better.[7] The purpose doesn't have to be grand world-changing impact—it can be what I call **"little-p" purpose,** like delighting a single customer or colleague. Across all sorts of workplaces, just reminding people of the practical reason they're doing a task—the fact that someone somewhere will benefit—has been found to improve the quality of their work.[8]
- **Competence and connection: Involving colleagues in setting goals makes people feel more motivated to pursue them.** Being given a chance to shape the direction of travel (rather than just being told what to do) makes people feel respected and included—which tends to drive higher engagement and performance.[9],[10],[11],[12]

In summary: You can (and should) set goals that are ambitious—as long as you're also smart about giving people a sense that it will feel worthwhile and satisfying to work toward them. And although responsibility for setting direction sits with you, it's worth making it a joint effort wherever you can. Let's see what that looks like in practice.

THE ROLE MODEL

Darcy Verhun is CEO of Canada Diagnostic Centres (known as "CDC"), that nation's largest privately owned diagnostic imaging company. In his previous role, he led a company through an astonishing tenfold increase in its market capitalization—and at CDC his aspirations are just as high. Alongside that, he has been at the forefront of the fight against

homelessness in his home city. He's a founding Director of the Calgary Homelessness Foundation, and he helped shape Calgary's "Plan to End Homelessness"—they're not at that finish line yet, but they have successfully stabilized a housing situation that was going in the wrong direction. All in all, he's not shy about pursuing bold goals.

Darcy doesn't simply announce bold targets and then hope that big numbers will inspire action. He thinks hard about how to frame a vision and goals so that they speak to people's inner sources of motivation. He says he didn't start off with that instinct: "In my first career, I was an accountant—if you want to talk numbers, I'm your guy," he jokes. He was a Managing Partner at EY, to be specific, and he advised companies on how to set up and use balanced scorecards to drive business outcomes. "But over time, I came to appreciate that numbers alone aren't motivating. Although I really care about them as a CEO, most people don't get excited by measures like EBITDA and same-store sales growth. They don't capture people's imagination, and as a result they don't capture people's best work. So, as a leader, I learned to do it differently."

Darcy found he needed to bring all that insight to bear in how he set direction for CDC after he took over as its CEO. The company's situation was more challenging than he had expected—in fact, he says, "we had significantly missed board expectations, our employee engagement scores were as low as I had ever seen anywhere, and there was no clear plan." It was a bracing start. Darcy knew that to get the business rebooted, he would need to establish a positive vision that pointed everyone in the right direction.

To understand what was driving the poor performance, Darcy used the kind of 360-Degree Vision process I described in Chapter 1. He dug into the numbers, looking at patterns and benchmarks, and spoke to his mentors. He visited every single site in the company to understand from employees what was going on at ground level—no small feat in the dead of winter in Canada. Once he understood what was most broken, he realized that the heart of any new plan had to be to create more high-quality imaging capacity, to serve more customers. He established a bold ten-year goal of

providing diagnostic services to 10 percent of Canada's population—which meant reaching 3.5 million people, up from a starting point of 600,000. The first year's goal was to raise volume by 20 percent.

But then, the next challenge: How to get his colleagues as committed as he was to the direction of travel? That's where his leadership skills came into play, and that's the topic of this chapter. I'll use his reflections to illustrate some best practices for getting any group of people working successfully toward a goal. They'll serve you well whether you're a CEO driving a hefty turnaround, like Darcy, or a team leader running a neatly defined project.

THE ADVICE: THE PILLARS OF POSSIBILITY

The more you engage the brain's *reward system* in the way you set, track, and talk about your goals, the more enthusiastic people will be about pursuing those goals and giving their best effort along the way. I call this model the Pillars of Possibility because the stronger you make these four pillars, the higher you can build—whether you're setting direction for an individual, a team, or a whole organization. Here's a preview of what we'll cover:

PURPOSE: A vision of what the team can achieve, and why it matters
PATH: A plan that links top to bottom, and long-term to short-term
PEOPLE: A sense of shared ownership and involvement
PROGRESS: Ways to review and celebrate progress as you go

PURPOSE: A vision of what the team can achieve, and why it matters

The first of the four pillars is making sure that people really know what they're going after, and why it matters. It's easy for people to lose sight of the bigger point of their work when they're heads down on daily deliverables—and yet, as we've learned, lifting people's gaze and

reminding them of their work's impact is a proven way of boosting the quality of what everyone does. When Darcy took over at Canada Diagnostic Centres, more purposeful direction was urgently needed. He says: "There was zero clarity on what mattered most, or the 'why' behind our work. To get people engaged, I knew we needed to have a vision of the point of it all."

Whatever kind of target you're about to pursue with your team, here are three ways of expressing it that will help you to help your colleagues keep that bigger picture in mind. Any one of them will help; it's even more powerful if you combine all three in how you talk about your goal.

a. An "imagine" statement

Make the purpose of your team's work feel more real and relatable by calling to mind the ultimate beneficiaries of that work, and how it will help them.

Start by getting the picture clear in your own mind:

- **Imagine it's a year from now.** Your team has achieved its goals, and excelled at everything on their plate.
- **Who has benefited from your team's success?** This might include customers, colleagues who use your services, or other communities that matter.
- **What has improved for those people?** What's better or easier for them as a result of your team's work? What will they now be able to do that they couldn't do before?

Then, turn that into an "imagine…" statement for your team, like:

- *"Imagine our [customers/users/colleagues] finding it so much more [satisfying/manageable/efficient] to do [XYZ] as a result of all the work we've done. That's why we're doing this."*

In Darcy's situation, he wanted everyone to rally around an aspiration to create more high-quality imaging capacity, so they could do more scans for

more people every day. One way this would benefit customers was obvious: Additional capacity would reduce their wait times to get a scan. But the "high-quality" aspect of Darcy's aspiration was also important. He wanted to be able to give more people clarity on their health with both speed and compassion. So Darcy's "imagine" statement was: "Imagine patients not having to wait and worry for weeks before getting clarity on their health, and feeling supported and cared for by us in a remarkable way through the whole process. That's the purpose of what we're doing here."

b. A short and sticky tagline

Thanks to the brain's limited processing capacity, people tend to remember and support statements that are easy to understand—a phenomenon called *processing fluency.*[13] It matters a lot to keep this in mind as a leader. If you can create a brief, memorable phrase that reminds you and others of what you're trying to do, it will help to keep your goal front and center in people's minds. It doesn't need to be as slick as an advertising slogan, but it does need to be something you can all remember when you're busy.

Darcy's was this: "Clarity Through Caring." Just three words reflected both what they wanted to deliver (clarity) and how they wanted to do it (in a caring way).

c. A few supporting themes

Next, it helps to underpin that simple tagline with a small number of themes that describe the kinds of work needed to achieve the goal. By "small number," I mean ideally a maximum of four themes, because the brain's *working memory* often struggles to recall a list longer than that.[14] You want people to be able to keep the themes in mind without having to refer to a slide deck or memo. So ask:

- *What are three or four big themes of work that will help us achieve the big goal?*

Aim to give each theme a simple name—for example, leaders I've worked with have picked themes like "Collaboration, Productivity, Urgency" or

“Culture, Analytics, Talent.” You might notice that those trios of themes also form acronyms—CPU (like a computer) and CAT (like the animal)—which helped the respective leaders remember their themes when speaking to staff. You can’t always land a neat acronym—it’s more important that the themes are the right ones—but it’s nice when it works. These themes act as a practical bridge between your high-level vision and what it’s going to take to deliver it, so you don’t leap straight from “We’re going to change the world” to “Here are your KPIs.”

After consulting with colleagues, Darcy decided on three themes to sit underneath his “Clarity Through Caring” tagline. “Maybe it’s a bit corny, but I used the company’s CDC initials as inspiration,” he says. “The first C is Culture, because we need a highly engaged team; D is Deliver Care, the nuts and bolts of expanding capacity; the last C is Cost Excellence, because we need to do it with operational efficiency.” Far from being corny, using the company’s initials was a smart move to make the themes feel more memorable.

Darcy then threaded those three themes through every part of the direction-setting process and echoed them in all his communications, until they became a shared language for the company’s goals. Before long, he says, people were quoting the tagline and themes back to him—a good sign that the purpose had clicked into place in their minds. The clear articulation of purpose also helped to unite his colleagues. He says: “When I arrived, people didn’t really trust each other to deliver, but the shared CDC themes did a lot to help everyone start to feel like they were on the same team.”

PATH: A plan that links top to bottom, and long-term to short-term

The second pillar of motivational direction-setting is giving people a sense that everything is joined up and coherent. You want a clear link between your big overarching themes and the more specific goals you set as a team. You also want your team- and individual-level goals to fit together, and your long-term aspirations to connect cleanly to short-term steps. People perform better when it’s clear how all these goals fit together.[15],[16] That’s

because coherence builds confidence that there's a path to success: If each person consistently achieves their near-term goals, the whole team should eventually achieve its collective long-term goals, and vice versa.

Maybe that sounds obvious, but many leaders skip at least one step in fully integrating vision and execution in all directions. Sometimes staff set their own KPIs and deadlines without anyone checking they add up to the overall vision, or the other way around: with leaders setting new team goals without considering what's already on people's plates. And sometimes there's an audacious long-term goal but no clear sense of how this quarter's plan builds toward it.

That was the starting point at CDC when Darcy arrived. There was an aspirational capacity number in the budget he inherited, but no timeline of deliverables laying out a path from here to there, and no integration of goals up and down the organization. He says, "I started asking, 'How is that going to work?' And there were no answers."

So Darcy tackled this head-on, using the three CDC themes as a unifying framework to map the route from the current level of performance to the company's big long-term goals. He explains: "We have something we call the KPI Ladder Up. At every level of our organization, each leader has their goals stacked under three columns—Culture, Deliver Care, Cost Excellence—and it all ladders up to the overall enterprise goals." Specifically, he asks each executive to lay out their goals on a one-page Personal Roadmap that includes:

- **Key actions:** "Tasks, initiatives, projects…I don't mind what they call them. This is what they'll actually do against each of the three CDC themes."
- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** "This is how they'll know they've succeeded on those key actions." Darcy looks for a mix of process metrics (e.g., utilization rate) and outcome metrics (e.g., number of patients served).
- **Leadership focus:** "This is their behavioral aspiration as leaders. I want them thinking about how they're going to inspire and connect

with the people who report to them."

Once he sees what his colleagues are proposing on their roadmaps, he compares notes across the team to spot gaps or overlaps that need addressing. He also looks for timing interdependencies. For example, if one person on Darcy's team plans to buy a lot of new imaging equipment, would another colleague need to hire a lot of new technologists, or run new trainings, before that equipment could be put into service? The point is to check that different colleagues are aligned not just on what the targets are, but also on when and how those targets will be delivered. Darcy then lays out the team's goals on a visual timeline "so we can stand back and see it all on one big page. It shows us if there's a crunch anywhere, and helps us make trade-offs to resolve it."

From there, the KPI ladders continue down through the organization. "Once I've made sure that everyone's goals add up across my team, my direct reports cascade their Personal Roadmaps with their own teams, using the same approach," he says. "Then their teams do the same with their direct reports. At every level, it should be clear that we're on a path to the impact we want to see."

A note on prioritization: Less is more (and more motivating)

A big part of intelligent goal-setting is helping people prioritize. No matter how inspiring your vision, if people's brains get overloaded you risk them doing nothing well. To keep your team motivated and effective, you have to help them focus their attention. That often means encouraging them to defer or delegate some work that matters less, to make space for what matters most.

Darcy says prioritization was a real issue at the company when he joined. "Everything seemed important, all the time. We had a lot of data, but people had no real sense of where to focus." Darcy says the three CDC themes have made a real difference on this front. "It's allowed us to simplify a whole bunch of stuff," he says. "There used to be eighty new to-dos after every team meeting. Now, everyone knows that if it doesn't

improve our culture, delivery of care, or cost excellence, it's a lower priority." They paused several pieces of work as a result.

That's at the team level. It's also important to make sure individuals on your team have set reasonable goals for themselves. Darcy encourages each of his executive team members to filter their personal priorities with two questions:

- *"Does it support one of our big goals?"*
- *"Is it something only you can do?"*

Some enthusiastic colleagues have listed as many as forty KPIs. Darcy lets them track as many as they want, but asks them to circle the three to five that really matter. "I tell them that's what I'll hold them accountable for—and really, I prefer three, because I can actually remember three."

PEOPLE: A sense of shared ownership and involvement

The third pillar of effective goal-setting is involving colleagues in shaping the direction of travel wherever you can. As we've seen, because autonomy engages the brain's reward system, people generally feel more motivated when they have some say in what they're doing. Goals that people set for themselves even show up differently in the brain—they're processed more like pleasures than obligations, and overall people tend to perform better on them compared with goals assigned to them by others.[17],[18] People also place more value on things they had a hand in shaping—a finding known as the *IKEA effect,* which you'll recognize if you've ever found yourself reluctant to part with a crooked bookcase just because you built it yourself. [19]

So wherever you can involve your colleagues in shaping your goals, you'll see more drive to get things done and more "proud owner" energy about the outcome. Here are a few ways to encourage that shared sense of ownership.

a. Engage people in setting their personal goals

It's a good start to have people do the first draft of their own KPIs, both on the numbers and the timing they're shooting for. Giving them space to do this still allows you to check and refine those goals together, and you can give them a framework to work within—as Darcy did when asking each member of his team to put together their Personal Roadmap using his suggested themes. There's plenty of challenge and query in his conversations with them about their goals, but he starts from an assumption that his colleagues have responsibility for setting their own course.

Then, outside the regular goal-setting round, keep looking for any way to give people room to decide what they aim for. Rather than always asserting what you think the goal should be, cultivate the habit of first asking:

- *"What do you think is possible, if we really try?"*

Darcy took this approach when he wanted to raise the utilization rates of CDC's ultrasound rooms. "Up to 15 percent of the rooms used to be empty at any time. That was 150 patients we could have cared for each day, but didn't," he says. Instead of handing down a target, he asked the ultrasound, bookings, and front desk teams what they thought was achievable. Darcy explains: "They said, 'If we got to 3 percent, that would be spectacular.' I said, 'Okay, 3 percent is our goal.' I didn't tell them how to do it—they're the experts. And they figured it out." And now, he says, "they're talking about aiming for a 1 percent unfilled rate, or even zero—which is probably not possible, but the enthusiasm is real, and it's far greater than if I had just told them to make it 1 percent."

If they're not ambitious enough: Check and Stretch

Sometimes you'll experience that happy circumstance where your colleagues are more ambitious than you'd expected, and your job is to make sure they really understand what they're taking on. But sometimes you have the opposite situation, where you feel they're undershooting what's possible. In this case, resist the temptation to simply say a flat "You can do

better." You'll do more to inspire great performance if you instead **Check and Stretch** their thinking, like this:

- **Check:** First, explore and understand: *"I notice you're targeting X. Tell me more about why you're aiming for that."*
- **Stretch:** If you think there might be room for more, ask questions that expand their thinking while remaining grounded in feasibility:
  - *"What do you think would have to be true for you to get to X + 10 percent?"*
  - *"What could you do to make that more likely?"*
  - *"So what's the minimum you'd like to achieve, and what's the ideal?"*

Remember: the path does need to feel viable, even if it's steep. Pushing people to chase an unachievable goal is a bad recipe for sustained motivation. So listen carefully to what they might say about potential blockages. You might learn about something you weren't aware of—in which case the next step may be one or all of the following: adjust your expectations, intervene to help clear the way, or coach them on the way forward (Chapter 13 offers guidance on this).

If you think they're deliberately "sandbagging" (underpromising so that they feel less pressure), it may be because they've been beaten up for missing their numbers in the past. A good Check and Stretch discussion helps, by signaling your openness to honest debate about the right goal. But if you want to see bolder aspiration across the board, you'll need to make it clear that people can have a grown-up conversation with you about any unexpected shortfalls—one that's focused on solutions, rather than blame.

One CEO I worked with struggled with his colleagues not setting bold enough goals. He managed to break through after saying clearly to them: "If you do everything possible and you hit 90 percent of our target, we are still going to celebrate that 90 percent—and then we'll explore what else we need to do together to get it over the line." After that reassurance, the goals people dared to set became braver and loftier—and their performance followed.

b. Seek ongoing input on your plans

You'll build an even broader base of committed engagement around your goals if you reach beyond your team to ask for input from others with a stake in the vision.

Darcy, for instance, shared his initial ideas about the vision for CDC with colleagues at a town hall. His team then sat with staff over dinner, asking for their feedback and taking notes. He says, "There's no question that their input improved the way we articulated our goals." For example, he's quick to give credit to the regional manager of the X-ray team who came up with "Deliver Care" as the middle theme of his triad. But, just as important, this kind of consultation resulted in staff across CDC feeling that they co-owned the direction of travel. As Darcy says, "If I just dream up stuff and push it on people, they'll roll their eyes. But if we put it out there and ask for feedback, more energy builds around it. And the ideas get better, too."

So, ask yourself:

- *Who are you relying on to get your goals met, whether on your team or across the wider organization?*
- *Where could you allow room for those colleagues to shape the plan in some way?*

For example, you could ask for input on the framing of goals, as Darcy did. And you can almost always ask people how they think the big-picture goals could apply in their local domain. Anywhere you allow this kind of co-creation, you'll increase your colleagues' sense of pride in the endeavor.

c. Collect and share real examples

Another way to help colleagues feel connected to your shared goals is to put a familiar face on them, by sharing examples of their peers supporting the goals in their everyday work.

Darcy's regular all-staff emails always reference the "Clarity Through Caring" tagline, and then include at least one example of employees

bringing the goals to life—often illustrated by informal photos snapped on his phone as he visits sites. One email told the story of a location leader who noticed patients tracking slush and ice into the lobby on a snowy morning. Without being asked (and without realizing Darcy was in the building), she grabbed a mop and started cleaning the floor. Darcy later told her he'd seen her doing this, and said he was impressed since it obviously wasn't her job—to which she simply replied: "Well, I didn't want anybody to slip and fall. They already have enough to worry about." It was a neat illustration of the company's Culture goal in action.

So, whenever you see the goals coming to life at a personal level, make a note of it, so that you can replay the example to illustrate the vision. Darcy calls it "catching people doing things well," and it's an uplifting leadership habit that pays off handsomely over time. (We'll revisit the broader power of using stories in your communication in Chapter 10.)

PROGRESS: Ways to review and celebrate progress as you go

The fourth pillar is about keeping progress visible for everyone. If you've ever played any kind of game, you might have noticed how you get more excited when you're about to advance to the next level. Or if you've ever organized a fundraiser, you might remember that the nearer you got to the target amount, the more it encouraged people to give a little more to get the total over the line. That's because the brain's reward system not only thrives on progress, but also makes us more and more focused as we get closer to achieving a goal.[20] So it's smart to have a way of tracking and demonstrating your collective performance over time—not just for accountability, but also to keep everyone engaged in the journey.

You probably already have a progress-tracking system in place—but with that science in mind, you can make it work harder for you if you ensure that it checks the following boxes:

- **Clarity:** Is it easy for people to see how the organization is performing against key metrics and deadlines? Are you erring on the

side of transparency, where possible, knowing that visible progress gives people more energy?

- **Conversations:** Do you have a regular rhythm of check-ins, to enable solution-focused problem-solving if anything's off track—with a tone that's less "You really screwed up" and more "What would it take to fix things and get moving again?"
- **Celebration:** Are you using the process to "catch people doing things well," not just catch them doing things wrong?

Darcy uses a range of approaches for tracking and talking about progress. For example, his leadership team has a shared visual tracking tool that maps to each of their KPIs, which they review in depth every month. He says, "The tracker makes it easy to see where we're doing well, and where we need to problem-solve together." He also has frequent one-to-ones with each direct report to discuss progress on their Personal Roadmap—their three priority KPIs, plus their behavioral leadership aspiration—and he expects his executives to do the same with their teams.

Obviously, things don't always go smoothly. "I expect a lot, but sometimes I need to be patient," he says. Things get marked in red on the tracker if they're behind schedule. That triggers a coaching conversation with Darcy: "In areas that are off track, I try to get to root causes by asking, 'What's really causing that to occur?' For example, one place this kept happening was finance automation. In that case, we discovered the CFO genuinely had four other more urgent things on her plate. In the end, we agreed that automation should be on a slower schedule for now." That was an intelligent, flexible decision based on good data and open communication.

The company also has a scorecard called the Clinic Excellence Index, which Darcy made sure was designed with input from staff, and which allows frontline teams to track how they're doing. The scorecard metrics are indexed against an all-clinic average, so each group can see how they compare with others across the network. The scorecard also tells Darcy where units are doing a good job. When a team scores especially well, he

makes a point of recognizing it. “I’ll send a note to the group saying, ‘Way to go!’ ” He adds: “Even if your business overall is struggling, there will always be pockets of excellence—and you want to make sure those people know they’re doing great work, and it’s appreciated.”

All these efforts have paid off. Darcy says that “thanks to everyone getting clarity on what matters, we’ve seen patient numbers increase by over 25 percent in each of the last two years, and I’m thrilled to say we’re at around a million now. We’re on track to the long-term goal.” Darcy’s engaging approach to setting direction has brought everyone along on the journey, too. From a rock-bottom low, Darcy says, “employee engagement has risen steadily and is now above average for our sector. And we’re consistently exceeding the board’s expectations.” He concludes, “We’re never done with goal-setting and managing progress—it’s an ongoing conversation. What I do know is that by involving people in setting goals, putting them on a page for us all to see, and talking about them constantly, it’s helping us get better all the time.”

CHAPTER 9

How to Change the Way People Work

THE CHALLENGE

There comes a point in every leader's career when it becomes clear that your colleagues could achieve more if they changed the way they worked. Perhaps you find yourself hoping for more curiosity, initiative, rigor—or some other quality that would help you deliver greatness together. Maybe you need them to embrace new technology or new workflows with more openness, adaptability, and enthusiasm. Or maybe you've just joined from another organization and you're eager to import something you liked about the culture in your old place.

The challenge is that you can't just announce that from Monday onward everyone should "be more curious" or "use AI like a pro," and expect them to pivot like a skilled improv comedian. Even if people agree with you, and even if they report to you, it doesn't mean they'll immediately change how they behave. Think about how hard it is for you to change one of your own habits, even when you want to. People generally have *status quo bias:* They lean toward doing things the way they have been done in the past.[1] That's for several reasons.

- **Brains run on habit.** Most of what people do each day happens on autopilot, because our brains rely on stored habits to save the effort of figuring out what to do next.[2] Think of a time you had to walk up a broken escalator: Your brain probably predicted the stairs would be

moving, so it took a moment to suppress the old routine and get your legs going. Likewise, when you ask people to behave differently, you're asking their brains to suppress familiar neural patterns and build new ones. That doesn't mean they can't adjust, but it's more natural for them to stick with what's familiar.

- **Early attempts to do something new often feel unrewarding.** As we've seen, the brain's *reward system* is highly sensitive to how competent we feel. New ways of working often feel clumsy, and that sense of incompetence can sap motivation. If you've ever given up after failing to make yourself understood in a foreign language, that's the feeling.
- **Behavior is strongly shaped by environment.** Everything that people encounter in the workplace nudges their choices one way or another—and if nobody and nothing around them has changed, it's much harder to change the way people behave.[3],[4] (For example, maybe you want cross-functional collaboration—but managers still talk about "crushing" other teams. Maybe you've asked people to do deeper thinking—but the office still lacks quiet places to sit and work.) It helps to think broadly if you want change to stick.

All of this is surmountable, though. You just need to recognize that to drive change—as with setting goals—it helps to engage the brain's *reward system*. If you can keep people feeling **competent** and **connected,** even as you get them to try new ways of working, you can make your desired behavior feel worth the effort at a deep neurological level. And these principles apply whether you're trying to drive change in one person, across a team, or at scale across a system.

THE ROLE MODEL

Astro Teller is the head of X, The Moonshot Factory, a subsidiary of Alphabet which has a mission to develop radical new technologies that solve major world problems. He's widely known as one of the world's most influential experts in innovation, tech, and entrepreneurship. But if you ask

Astro what his job is, he often uses a different label: He says he's a "culture engineer." That's because, at X, he has worked steadily to build an unusual culture—one where wildly creative experimentation is matched by the disciplined courage to shut down projects if they can't scale. Astro says: "We call it 'dream like a child, test like an adult.' "

Building this culture has required his colleagues to unlearn a lot of ingrained habits. "People learned a certain definition of success when they were five years old, and it centers on trying to be right. Everything they've experienced in their career tells them they'll only be rewarded for things that work," Astro says. "So, they hate to say anything that's probably wrong—even though the most brilliant, innovative ideas usually come from things that seem wrong at first. We've had to redefine what success looks like in their minds. We need people to feel good about putting a huge number of ideas on the table, whether they're right or wrong, and then feel good about saying, 'That didn't work.' "

Making that shift happen has taken thoughtful, systemic effort. "For people to change their behavior, they have to believe—consciously and unconsciously—that it's not stupid for them to do what we're asking them to do. And to achieve that, we have to wire it into how people are compensated and promoted, how teams are organized, et cetera. Everything you do as a leader has a ripple effect. Everything has to send the right signals."

This understanding didn't come naturally to Astro. He learned it in his first CEO role—where, he says, "I had a horrible attitude. I assumed the way you managed and led people was by being smarter than them. Obviously, that not only annoys everybody, but it quickly becomes impossible to lead that way because you can't physically do everyone's job for them. I had a crisis moment when I decided my approach wasn't working. I was pretty kerfuffled for about a month." But he didn't give up. "I got interested in what really motivates people. I started asking each person how they felt about their work, and what drove them. I'd say, 'I asked you to go that way. You're going this other way. I'm not annoyed, but I'm really curious: Why are you going this way when I asked us all to go

that way?' And I learned a lot from directly asking people what their motivations were."

The result was a shift in how he thought about influence. Encouraging someone to do something, he realized, means tapping into what he calls "a mix of intellectual, emotional, visceral, and even moral aspects of what underpins human behavior." So much of it, he says, comes down to "How do I feel about myself? How do I think my peers feel about me? What habits and behaviors make me feel good, if I do them while working here?" And that's exactly what the science says. So let's unpick all of that, to highlight the levers you can pull as a leader to shape your own colleagues' desire to change.

THE ADVICE: THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Your aim should be to build an environment that makes people want to do what you need them to do. You can't prevent people from feeling wary when asked to work differently, but you can do a lot to make the experience feel good enough that they want to try it again, and again, until it sticks. That means **engaging the brain's reward system,** by reinforcing people's sense of **competence** and **connection** around the new behavior. I call this approach CASE, which stands for making it Clear, Appealing, Social, and Easy—you can think of it as your "CASE for change."[5] It will help you whether you're trying to shift the behavior of one person or a whole company. Here's a summary of what we'll cover:

Make it CLEAR: Articulate the From-To shift you want to see
Make it APPEALING: Offer positive recognition for the new behavior
Make it SOCIAL: Create shared rituals and engage key influencers
Make it EASY: Remove roadblocks and provide support
≫ Bonus Tip: The art of stopping things (Chesterton's Fence)

As many of you will know, a powerful way to hit all four corners of CASE is to be a visible role model for the change you want to see. There's a Spotlight section at the end of the chapter with some tips on doing this well.

Make it CLEAR: Articulate the From-To shift you want to see

In the workplace, people generally like to feel they're doing the right thing—it's a crucial part of feeling competent and connected. But sometimes you need to update their definition of what "the right thing" is. And that's the first hurdle, because leaders often think they've been clear about a shift in behavior that they want to see, only to find that they somehow haven't been understood in the way they hoped.

This often happens because leaders forget that their colleagues can't see inside their head. Imagine saying something like "I want people to be more customer-focused." It sounds reasonable—but what does it actually mean? Without you being clearer about the specific behavior you're hoping to see, each of your colleagues will make their own best guess—and those guesses may differ wildly. One person might think you want them to reach out to more prospective customers; another person might assume you want them to build stronger relationships with the customers they already have.

The challenge is that we all fall prey to the *curse of knowledge:* the mistaken belief that because something is clear to us, it must be clear to everyone else.[6] Add to that the fact that each person filters the world through their own lens of *selective attention,* and it's easy to see how misunderstandings arise.

So, your task is to paint a clear picture of the behavior you want to see, so that people will understand exactly what you're asking them to do differently.

Defining your From-To

One good way to be clear about the issue you're trying to address is to lay out a "From-To" statement describing the behavior shift you have in mind. The "from" is what your colleagues do today, and the "to" is what you'd like to see them doing instead, or in addition. Like this:

- **From:** *"The way things have been done in the past is…"*
- **To:** *"The way I'd like us to do them in the future is…"*

In the earlier example of being customer-focused, a brief version of your From-To might be "From individual response to team effort." Spelling that out more fully, you might say: "Right now, when a customer calls us, we try to get them the fastest answer possible, and that means not pulling in anyone else from across the company. In the future, I'd like you to think about who else in our company could help provide an even better response to the customer's need, because we've found time and again that we deliver best for customers when we draw on everybody's talent." The contrast between the "from" and the "to" makes it much clearer than a "to" statement on its own.

Back at X, Astro wants everyone to embrace the fact that the organization celebrates exploration, iteration, and learning—not flawless results. So a key From-To that he talks about is:

- **From:** "Success elsewhere means making the most visible progress you can."
- **To:** "Success here at X means generating the richest learning as efficiently as possible."

In my experience, leaders often find this exercise sharpens their own clarity of thinking about what they really want from their colleagues. Sometimes either the "from" or the "to" is clear in your mind, but the shift you want remains murky until you push yourself to articulate it—with the result that you can end up leaping into action without really defining the problem you're trying to solve. Whether you're urging one person to work differently, or encouraging change across a team, sharpening the From-To is almost always a breakthrough in understanding the opportunity you're really going after.

Illustrating your From-To

Once your From-To shift is clear in your mind, start talking about it in a way that brings the idea to life for your colleagues. Aim to illustrate the shift with examples where you can, to help people understand what you mean. For instance, Astro often talks about how his From-To shows up in performance reviews: "I tell people, 'I'm not going to ask you how successful you were, or how much code you wrote. Instead, I'm going to focus on your growth mindset—which means I'm going to ask what you've learned, and what you'll do next to reflect that.' " Especially when you're trying to drive a complex change, this kind of concrete example makes your ideas much clearer to colleagues.

At the beginning of a change effort, you may not yet have many real examples of your "to" (the desired end-state), but illustrative ones can still be effective. Astro sometimes reinforces the From-To about the importance of courageous learning by saying: "If you were working on a teleporter, I wouldn't mind if it took a decade to get it working. What I would mind is waiting a decade to find out anything about whether it's likely to work. So I'm going to ask you every three months to show us what you've learned, and what that teaches us."

Side note: It's often smart to pilot a big change idea in one small area or with one group, before rolling it out more widely. If it works, you generate heaps of compelling examples to illustrate your From-To. (If it doesn't work as planned, it's far better to learn that early so you can adjust.) Think about:

- *What would be a tangible way to show that this change works?*
- *Who would be the right people to try this out with?*

Involving others

Continuing that thought: It's even better if you can discuss these From-To questions with your colleagues, rather than trying to decide all of this on your own. As we learned in the last chapter, the more that you encourage two-way dialogue about any goal, the more likely people are to feel

enthusiastic about pursuing it. So look for places to ask for your team's input:

- *"I have an idea about how we could work differently—how would you refine it?"*
- *"Is there anywhere you've seen this happening already?"*
- *"How do you think we could try this out?"*

Make it APPEALING: Offer positive recognition for the new behavior

It's hard for people to embrace a new behavior if they don't feel good about doing it, because the brain likes to repeat what feels rewarding. So, if you want a new way of working to stick, you need to make sure it's appreciated and recognized—both informally and formally.

Put like that, it seems obvious. But leaders often move too slowly to align incentives with the new behavior they say they want. They might announce that they want more experimentation, but then grumble if people fail. Or they might ask for more teamwork, but have bonuses still paid out to stars based on individual KPIs. This results in the kind of mixed messages psychologists call a *double bind*.[7] That's a situation where people can't win, and their brains are too confused to get motivated. A classic article captured this phenomenon perfectly in its title: "On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B."[8]

So, think about the incentives currently baked into your systems—and consider more broadly what people really care about. Ask yourself:

- **Informal recognition:** *Are you praising, celebrating, or otherwise drawing positive attention to the behavior you want to see?*
- **Formal systems:** *Is the desired new behavior being recognized and valued as a good thing in people's performance reviews?*

X faced a misalignment on this in its early days. When X was founded it was part of Google, and they used the same performance review system as the rest of Google. The Google system rewarded successful outcomes, as

most organizations do. Astro assumed his people would ignore this and focus on what he said was unique about X: the importance of learning (whether or not you fail or succeed). But they didn't. "Bad culture engineering on my part!" he says now. Astro realized he needed to work with his colleagues to design a new performance management system specific to X—one that explicitly rewarded the process of innovation rather than just the outcome. "In other words, we made sure it lined up with what we were actually asking our people to do."

Informal recognition is also crucial. "If people don't think they're going to get a thank-you from their manager for behaving a certain way, they're not going to do it," Astro says. "Money only motivates for about a week. People get much more motivated by a 'Hey, I really appreciated that.' "

X sometimes does this in bold ways. One of their most unusual practices is the public celebration of teams that decide to shut down their own projects. If a project leader concludes—honestly and courageously—that their team's idea won't deliver sufficient value, and that X's resources would be better used elsewhere, they are cheered rather than sidelined. "They get celebrated onstage and applauded by everyone. We give the team a bonus, and a vacation, and then a chance to find another X project where they might be a great fit."

In short, if you want to inspire people to behave differently, make sure they feel seen, appreciated, and celebrated when they do. That's how you build a reward loop the brain wants to repeat.

Make it SOCIAL: Create shared rituals and engage key influencers

Once people understand what's expected (because it's Clear) and feel good about doing it (because it's Appealing), you want to keep sending signals that nudge them toward the right behavior. This is where it helps to remember that our brains are highly responsive to signals with a social element, reflecting the importance of connection as a source of motivation. Even just noticing what others seem to care about can engage reward pathways in the brain, and knowing that others share the same goal makes

people feel more motivated to succeed.[9],[10] Research on *social proof* also tells us that people often unconsciously copy the behavior of others around them—so the more that some of your people start to behave in the way you're hoping, the more that others around them are likely to follow.[11] And given all of that, real-world studies confirm what you'd expect: A change is more likely to stick when leaders succeed in building a sense of shared endeavor around the effort.[12] Pulling together works far better than pushing alone.

I've already suggested you should have a bias toward **involving others in deciding how and what to change;** that's your starting point for making change a team sport rather than an individual one. Then, there are two ways to accelerate that social momentum: rituals and influencers.

Rituals

Aim to create some shared practices or processes that not only reinforce the behavior you want to see, but also make it a social experience. They don't have to be complicated. Even simple coordinated actions (walking in step, clapping in sync) have been found to increase feelings of connection and cooperation, even among strangers.[13] Don't worry—I'm not going to suggest that your team does a synchronized dance. But if you can create even one shared routine that has your desired behavior at the heart of it, you'll benefit from some of the in-built social power of shared habits.

Astro and his team at X have developed plenty of social rituals to encourage a culture of courageous learning, including:

- **Bad Idea Brainstorm.** Instead of being asked to share only great ideas, this is a session where people are deliberately asked to share "bad" ideas. It loosens people's attachment to being right, and spurs creativity. "A terrible idea is often the cousin of a good idea," Astro likes to say, "and a great one is the neighbor of that."
- **Pre-mortems.** Here, groups get together to imagine that one of their projects has failed at some point in the future, and then they work backward to imagine the most likely reasons why it went wrong.

(This is similar to the "Future Back" approach we saw in Chapter 4 on decision-making.) The process helps to normalize failure. And their norm of saying "Thank you for raising that"—even if it follows a sharp intake of breath—keeps it feeling like a mutually supportive shared effort.

- **Tales from the Crypt.** Every time a project is shut down, the team writes up what they tried, what they learned, and where the insights might be reused. Then, every year around Halloween, X hosts an event where people dig out these "tales" of past projects and read them out loud. There are costumes and laughter, so it's fun—but it also reminds people that failures can be useful, and helps them build on past efforts.

So consider:

- *What kind of social event or process would reinforce the change you want to make?*

Perhaps you could establish a regular slot in your weekly team meeting, or at a monthly gathering, that shines a light on a way of working that you want to encourage. Or, set up a standalone event or new meeting format, like Astro's examples above.

Influencers

Another way to harness the power of social connection is to work with the grain of your colleagues' existing relationships. That means thinking about the people whose behavior you'd like to change, and then considering how you might reach the individuals they most listen to and rely on. Those individuals—let's go ahead and call them "influencers," leaving aside the social media connotations—are often useful leverage points for the change you want. If you can spend time making your Clear-and-Appealing change pitch to them, research suggests you're more likely to achieve the change you want.[14] Ask yourself:

- *Who are some **popular or respected people** whose enthusiasm might be contagious?*
- *Who **controls resources, decisions, or processes** that relate to the change you're hoping for?*
- And for each: *How can you lean in and **make the case for change** to these people?*

They might not have formal authority or exalted status, but if you can get these socially important people to change the way they work, you're more likely to create a positive domino effect where others follow suit. You're borrowing insights here from research on *network dynamics,* showing what it takes to tip a whole system.[15] But these insights are useful even if you're only trying to change one or two people's behavior. If you can win over someone they trust, like, or need to work with, you're halfway there.

One of the biggest changes I led when I worked at McKinsey was the creation of a new kind of leadership training product. Instead of the typical setup, where a course was designed for executives from just one company, execs from a dozen different companies would attend. It was a significant change, because all internal McKinsey norms and systems were built around projects billed to one company rather than a dozen at once. Many of my colleagues were skeptical, and it was hard to get off the ground. My breakthrough came when I managed to get two particular people on board: one, a much-loved and highly respected partner who sang the praises of the idea; two, a brass-tacks person in the accounting department who was willing to help me puzzle out a new billing system for this multi-client work. Convincing these two people unlocked the whole endeavor.

At X, a crucial point of influence in the system is the project leader. They're not the most senior people in the organization, but they're central to the behavior that Astro is trying to encourage because they're the ones who need the courage to say "My project isn't working." So there are a lot of cultural interventions focused on these folks. For example, every new project leader receives a document called "The Deal" that clearly lays out the From-To shifts expected at X, with a lot of emphasis on the importance

of being willing to pull the plug on their own projects. And then, when they're brave enough to do it, they become the focus of everyone's celebration and encouragement.

Make it EASY: Remove roadblocks and provide support

As you know from Part I of the book, on "Deliberate Wisdom," the human brain is efficient to a fault: It tends to minimize effort by choosing whichever course of action feels easiest. The upshot is that if it's even slightly difficult to do the new thing you've asked, people will unconsciously avoid it. Mild frustration (e.g., from a clunky interface or incomplete instructions) can be enough to slow the adoption of an obviously useful new idea. But once you identify where the friction points are and get systematic about removing them, change is likely to speed up. Astro describes this as "getting the paths of least resistance to line up with what you want people to do."

To start your own work on this, it helps to channel the example Astro shared from his first CEO role, where he politely asked people why they were "going this way when I asked us all to go that way." Channel your inner Astro, and talk to some of your colleagues to uncover why things are getting stuck. Ask them:

- "*I've been talking about changing [XYZ]. How does that apply in the way you work?"*
- *"What would make it harder or easier to do what I'm suggesting?"*

(Those questions are often enough to surface what's going on, but Chapter 1 has more advice on how to draw people out when you're trying to get an honest take.)

Here are some particularly common sources of friction to check for, and create more Ease around:

- **SKILLS. Do people actually have the capability to do what you're asking of them?** Would a demo or training give them more ability (and confidence) to do it? One leader I coached was baffled by his

team's inability to communicate clearly in their slide decks. He had a natural talent for structuring logical stories around data, but it hadn't occurred to him that others might not. So he used a slot in a team meeting to walk his colleagues through what a great presentation looked like, and why. Months of frustration disappeared almost overnight.

- **INFORMATION. Do people have the information they need to behave the way you want?** Let's go back to an example I mentioned earlier, where a leader wanted to improve customer service by getting colleagues to bring in others with relevant expertise. In a real-life version of that situation, the next snag turned out to be that nobody knew who had which type of expertise. There was no internal directory. Once that was fixed, collaboration improved dramatically.
- **PROCESSES. Do your systems support the behavior you want?** I once worked with a CEO who was frustrated that his executive team wasn't moving more quickly. One barrier he discovered was that many of the team's deliverables were cross-functional projects, and there wasn't a smooth process for handling shared accountability. Work kept falling between the cracks as a result. Eventually, the team had a dedicated session to agree on norms for dealing with joint responsibilities. That reduced confusion about who was on the hook for what, and who could chase whom on deadlines, and progress accelerated.
- **WORKLOAD. Do you need to stop something to make it easier to start something new?** Sometimes, adoption of a new way of working stalls simply because people don't have the headspace for it. At X, they've built a whole culture around encouraging teams to stop some projects in order to create room for others. But in any organization, resources and brainpower are finite. So when you're making a significant new ask of your team, consider whether there's anything you could take off their plate for a while. Ask yourself—and, ideally, ask them:

- *"What could we stop doing (at least for now) so we can prioritize this new initiative?"*

  I've seen teams do this reprioritization in a few ways: temporary pauses on certain pieces of work, extending the timeline on others, or subcontracting work to external suppliers. (And of course, you can also decide to cut something for good—though see the Bonus Tip below on Chesterton's Fence before you do.)

At X, Astro is always looking for ways to make the right behavior feel easier. At the time of writing, he says one issue they're trying to address is a shortage of informal, ongoing feedback. They're good at formal progress reviews, but less strong on the kind of day-to-day coaching that would be ideal in a culture where you're encouraging people to learn and pivot fast. Astro explains, "We've tried various approaches over the years, but it hasn't yet created the kind of rich, regular conversations we want. So now we're working on new ways to make feedback happen more often, not just between managers and teams, but between peers as well."

Astro says that refining X's approach to feedback is "just one example of the things we're actively working on improving. Our culture is always a work in progress. We're always trying to find ways to optimize and fine-tune." And he continues to inspire each change by making it as clear, appealing, social, and easy as possible—an approach to improvement that has helped his team deliver extraordinary results. Over the past decade and a half, X has been the birthplace of innovations ranging from self-driving cars, to wearable robotics that help people regain mobility, to laser-based internet that connects remote areas. Your own change ambitions may be more earthbound than Astro's moonshots—perhaps you're just trying to get one person to work differently, not a whole company—but big or small, the CASE model can help you turn those improvement ideas into reality.

≫ Bonus Tip: The art of stopping things (Chesterton's Fence)

However much zeal you feel about changing the way your colleagues operate, be careful about rushing to bulldoze an existing way of working—especially if you're new in your role. There might be a reason the current approach exists, and you want to make sure you understand that logic before you break it apart.

This is what the **Chesterton's Fence** rule is about. It's named after philosopher G. K. Chesterton's argument that if we come across a fence that's blocking our way, we should understand why it's there before we remove it. As he said: "Some person had some reason for thinking it would be a good thing for somebody. And until we know what the reason was, we really cannot judge whether the reason was reasonable…. When you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it."[16]

The modern science behind this old advice is that once you're full of conviction about imposing a new way of working, *confirmation bias* can stop you from taking on board any evidence suggesting that you'd be smart to retain any of the existing approach. So, when you're itching to blow up a process or norm, first ask:

- *"What's the history of why we do it this way? What problem was this approach trying to solve?"*

Sometimes, there really is no substitute for a fresh start—you may be right to want to rip things up and start again. But asking those questions reduces the risk of unintended consequences; it also shows you're honoring the past and building on what went before. And that's worthwhile in its own right, because studies show that establishing a sense of continuity will make people more likely to accept whatever exciting new approach you're proposing.[17]

SPOTLIGHT ON: Being a Role Model for the Change

Whatever change you're trying to encourage in your colleagues, you have a powerful extra lever available to you: your own behavior. A leader's actions and attitudes strongly influence their team.[18] And if you make sure you're personally doing what you want everyone else to do, you hit every corner of the CASE model for driving change: It helps you demonstrate more **clearly** what you want; you make it more **appealing** and you add some **social** dynamics to the mix, because people often want to be like the boss; and you show people that it's doable, which is a step on the way to **easy.**

Of course, the power of the leader's example cuts both ways. People quickly get demotivated if they see their bosses not living up to the standards they set for others.[19] For example, it undermines commitment if a leader asks people to be collaborative—yet fails to give credit to others where it's due. Or if they say they want people to move fast—yet sit on urgent requests.

So to be an inspiring leader it's vital to walk your own talk, visibly and frequently. Astro puts it like this: "We take it for granted that kids pay an incredible amount of attention to what their parents do. It's a little bizarre that we somehow think that adults don't tune in to cues in the same way. Employees pay a ton of attention to what you do as a leader—they watch your every move."

Here are a couple of ways to strengthen your role modeling of the change you want.

Reboot your habits

Look at how you already demonstrate—or might be undercutting—the behavior you want to see in others:

- **Today:** In the way you currently work, how do you show you're on the "to" side of your From-To? Is there anything you might be doing

that sends the opposite signal?
- **Looking ahead:** What visible habits could you adopt (or amplify) to be a better role model of your From-To? How could you make these habits so obvious that nobody misses them?

If you're aiming for a collaborative mindset, for example, could you role-model that by routinely asking for input and ideas from your team? Or could you be vocal about a new habit of asking a peer for feedback on any major piece of work you produce?

State your intentions

Being clear about what you're trying to achieve gives your actions much more power. People will pay more attention to what you're doing if they realize it's intentional, and it saves your colleagues from wasting mental energy trying to guess what you're up to. ("He's asking for my input—he's never done that before! What does that mean? Is it a test?") For example, you might say:

- "**The reason** I'm looking for your input **is because** I really do believe we will do better work if we collaborate more fully" (rather than just "I am looking for your input").
- "**The reason** I'm ending this meeting five minutes early **is because** I want to make sure we can all clear our heads before the next meeting —I know that's how we'll show up best" (rather than just "I'd like to stop five minutes early").
- "**The reason** I'd like us to step back and discuss our overall aim **is because** I care about us getting to a decision everyone can stand by, and it will help us make sure we're all on the same page" (rather than just "Remind me what our aim is").

CHAPTER 10

How to Communicate and Be Heard

THE CHALLENGE

So you've done the inspiring work of setting direction and building momentum for change—that's been the focus of the last two chapters. Now, you want to keep those ideas front and center in people's minds, to help everyone stay on track from day to day. That's where your communication skills come into play. Every single thing you say and write offers a chance to keep people moving in the right direction, whether you're drafting a routine update or preparing for a town hall.

But it's not always easy to get your message across as you intend. Most leaders I've coached have struggled with this at some point, saying something like "I don't know why they're not getting it" while metaphorically banging their head against a wall. And they aren't the only ones who are frustrated: On the listeners' side, survey data suggests that only 45 percent of employees agree with the statement "I know what is expected of me."[1] How does such a communication gap open up between leaders and followers?

Science offers some good reasons, some of it echoing what we learned in Part I on "Deliberate Wisdom":

- **We often assume that what we know is equally well known to others.** That's the *curse of knowledge,* which we've touched on before.[2] What's clear in our own minds often isn't as clear to other

people. And this asymmetry doesn't just apply to facts: We also overestimate how clearly our hopes, feelings, and intentions come across, a phenomenon called the *illusion of transparency.*[3]

- **People rarely take in everything you say the first time they hear it, and that's normal.** It's not only your brain that's subject to *selective attention*—everyone else's is, too. So when someone is listening to you, they're almost certainly missing some of what you're saying without realizing it.[4] And even if they do take it in, *working memory* constraints can mean it's hard for them to process a lot of new information in one gulp.[5]
- **People are more likely to grasp and retain information that feels psychologically rewarding and relevant.** That's because those qualities tell their brain it's worth putting in the cognitive effort needed to hold on to the information.[6] In other words: If people can't see how what you're saying matters to them, it's less likely to stick.

The good news is that each of these insights points to what it takes to be properly understood as a leader. We need to spell things out more clearly and fully than we might imagine. We need to keep spelling things out, time and again. And the more we put ourselves in the shoes (and heads, and hearts) of our audience, speaking to what they will find motivating—with competence and connection at the heart of it—the more their brains will naturally tune in to what we're saying. Let's see what that looks like in practice.

THE ROLE MODEL

Rob Allen is a compelling communicator—which is lucky, because he stands on a big stage. He's the CEO of Intermountain Health, a complex organization spanning large hospitals and small clinics, with sixty thousand employees. And his platform goes beyond his organization, because Intermountain is known for its innovation and regarded as a model for healthcare systems around the world. Whether Rob is speaking to his board,

a conference audience, his team, or his wider organization, he has a way of holding people's attention.

Some of that presence comes naturally to him, but much of it comes from hard work over the years. At the beginning of his leadership career, Rob had just been hired to run a care facility when he was invited to say a few words to his new staff. The way he tells it, "a few words" was all he managed to squeeze out: " 'Hello, I'm happy to be here' was about the sum of it." He could sense some surprise that, as the new boss, he didn't have more to say—and he knew he could do better. So, after a weekend of thinking and preparation, he stood up again in front of his new colleagues on Monday sounding more like the inspirational leader he wanted to be.

That's been typical of Rob's communication approach in the years since then—he notices what's working and not working, and adjusts his style in response. It's the kind of adaptability that has served him well across many leadership roles and in front of his many audiences.

These days, a big part of Rob's leadership agenda is a push for simplification across Intermountain's operations. As he says, "A massive challenge in healthcare today is that it's too complex, both for the caregiver and for the patient. For example, we ask patients the same questions three or four times when they register. It's frustrating for them, and a waste of time and effort. That's the sort of thing we're working to fix."

They're making good progress now—but early in the journey, there was a time he was worried that he wasn't getting his point across. "I felt like my words were going out into the organization and people would say, 'Yes, okay'—but then carry on as they always had." He knew he needed to tweak his approach. This chapter lays out the interventions that successfully gave Rob's communication a little extra oomph, and a lot of extra impact.

THE ADVICE: THE FOUR FREQUENCIES

If you want to reach people, your words and ideas need to make it through their natural neural filters. Luckily, we know four kinds of information that

the brain is always eager to take in: signals that speak to their **personal** sense of self-worth, that reflect their desire to have impact as a **team,** that make them feel their **leader** is on their wavelength, and that give them confidence they've understood the **message** and what to do with it. If your comms include those signals, they'll reinforce people's sense of competence and connection from multiple angles, and your messages are more likely to get traction. Here are the four frequencies to broadcast on, as much as possible—plus some useful preparatory work, and a bonus tip for your big onstage moments:

» Pre-work: What effect do you want to have on your audience?
PERSONAL: "This tells me I'm respected and appreciated"
TEAM: "This reminds me we're doing something useful together"
LEADER: "This shows me my boss is a fellow human being"
MESSAGE: "This makes me feel I've understood the point"
» Bonus Tip: Manage your nerves with the Readiness Reframe

» Pre-work: What effect do you want to have on your audience?

Before we step through the Four Frequencies model, take a moment to think about what you're trying to achieve with your communication. You've no doubt already thought hard about the information and ideas you want to convey, but you also need to think about the listener's side of the conversation. After all, the real goal of communicating isn't to speak—it's to be heard. So, think about your audience's current state of mind and where you want to leave them after your message.

To frame this, let's borrow a concept we used in the last chapter: the From-To, to describe a change you're hoping for. Ask yourself:

- **From:** *What's their starting point, mentally and emotionally?*
- **To:** *What would you like them to think, feel, or do as a result of your communication?*

In Rob's case, he wanted to tell his employees about the aims and the progress of the simplification drive. But he also wanted to leave them with a sense of excitement and action orientation. He says, "I wanted them to be thinking about how they could personally do something differently, as a result of what they heard." Being clearer about that aspiration was the first step toward increasing the impact of his communication.

PERSONAL: "This tells me I'm respected and appreciated"

Now, for the first of the Four Frequencies. Think about how your words speak to your colleagues' sense of competence as individuals. Their brain's *reward system* will be listening out for any clues about:

- **Self-worth:** Is this showing respect and appreciation for what I do?
- **Capability:** Is this going to help me do a better job, or make my work easier?
- **Growth:** Is this going to allow me to learn or experience something interesting?
- **Autonomy:** Is this something I get to choose or shape?

Whatever you can say that gives a positive answer to any of these unspoken questions will direct people's brains to pay more attention to what you're saying.

Part of Rob's simplification push at Intermountain involved using technology to speed up the task of capturing information from patients and transcribing it into records. He was asking staff to make a big leap, changing long-established ways of working. But Rob knew it would ultimately make life more satisfying for both nurses and doctors. "So I talked about getting joy back into the workplace, by making their job more doable and reconnecting them with the reason they got into healthcare."

For example, with nurses, Rob talked about how the new technology would increase the number of minutes they could spend with each patient each day. "I said to them: 'The national average is for nurses to only spend 30 percent of their time with patients, and I don't know anyone who trained as a nurse so they could spend that little time with patients. This change is

how we increase that.' " As the simplification initiative started to have impact, Rob shared stories and data demonstrating progress, including surveys reporting that nurses felt they knew their patients better and had higher job satisfaction as a result.

Rob also tailored a version of the message for doctors. He says: "We found that doctors who'd adopted the new tools were saving up to two hours a day because of the reduced paperwork burden. So I shared personal stories of individual doctors—including one who had always dreamed of being a doctor but was so burned out that he was about to quit medicine, who said, 'I feel like I got my life back.' "

So, as you're thinking about what you want to say:

- **Highlight anything you can about how it will benefit your audience.** Tailor your message to the concerns of the people you're talking or writing to.
- Even with the driest of messages, you can usually **say something that shows your appreciation of people's efforts.**

Adding just a couple of sentences that make people feel good about themselves means they're more likely to take in what you say. Even if your next communication challenge involves delivering bad news, you can still keep in mind the principle of making people feel as good about themselves as possible—perhaps by praising the effort they've put in, even if things haven't turned out as everyone hoped. (For more guidance on this, see the Spotlight on "Talking About Crisis and Bad News" at the end of Chapter 16.) It may not make them love every word you say—but they'll be more open to hearing it.

TEAM: "This reminds me we're doing something useful together"

For the next Frequency, let's shift from individual competence to collective impact. We know that a sense of connection sparks the brain's *reward system,* and that people are more engaged when they feel they belong to a team which is doing work that matters (as we saw in Chapter 8).[7] So

anything you can say about a shared sense of purpose will help your words stick. Ask yourself:

- *What can you say about the **positive effect of their work**—within the company, for customers, or for the community?*

In Rob's case, he talked about how the push to simplify information processes would benefit patients. By allowing nurses more face-to-face time and making doctors feel less overburdened, it would mean "our patients will have a better relationship with their caregivers, and that will give them more confidence in their care—and we know this in turn helps their healing." Even early on, he was able to cite some data to back this up, because patient satisfaction had risen in areas where the simplification tools had been adopted. He adds: "I always look for ways to talk about what we're doing together, rather than what you should do, so it feels like we're locking arms to go forward."

LEADER: "This shows me my boss is a fellow human being"

The next way to strengthen your message is to create a different kind of connection—not only to the work or to each other, but to you as the leader. People are more likely to follow you if they feel they're in it with you, not just working for you, and you'll do a lot to create that sense of fellowship if you show why you personally care about what you're saying. On top of all that, putting more of yourself into the message is likely to make it more memorable, because research on *emotional memory encoding* suggests people are more likely to remember messages that are delivered with some feeling.[8]

Rob started making his communications more personal after receiving some 360-degree feedback suggesting that although he was a highly polished speaker, he might be even more compelling if he opened up more about himself. One board member was rather specific: "Maybe a few more stories from the farm?" That was a reference to Rob growing up on a Wyoming farm. His modest roots had always shaped his leadership style—he just hadn't been in the habit of talking about it. "For a lot of my career I

was quite guarded," he says. "But when I got that feedback, I thought back to leaders I'd known who had opened up to me, and I remembered that I was totally drawn in by it."

So he began experimenting with weaving more of his personal history into his remarks—and it worked. He talked about his mother being a nurse. He talked about situations he'd faced in the past. He talked about how honored he felt to be leading the organization. All in all, he let people see a little more of the person behind the role. "Shifting my style felt a bit challenging at first," he admits, "but the reward was greater than I ever anticipated. I've been able to connect with the team in a much deeper way, and we're getting better results together because of it."

If you weren't lucky enough to grow up on a farm, fear not: There are other ways to make your communication more personal. Just think about what you can share that could help others feel connected to you as a fellow human being—not just as the big boss. That might mean:

- **Acknowledging what something means to you personally:** *"This makes me feel proud because…"*
- **Sharing an anecdote about an experience that molded how you think about this topic:** *"My view on this was shaped by what happened when…"*
- **Allowing a bit more of your natural warmth or humor to come through.**

As Rob says, "Don't worry, you can still use your slides! Just think about how you could reinforce your point with a personal story, or give your own take on something. I found that over time it became easier and easier to add a personal touch to what I wanted to say."

MESSAGE: "This makes me feel I've understood the point"

Okay, you've crafted a communication that speaks to people's **sense of self,** evokes **shared purpose,** and shows **you care personally** about the topic. Now comes the fourth Frequency, focused on the actual words you use. The key question: Is it straightforward for people to process what you're saying

—not just in the moment, but afterward, when they're thinking back, telling others, or deciding what to do?

If your message is complex or unclear, it's less likely to get traction in a busy brain, and it misses the chance to leave people feeling good about having understood your point. To put it more positively: Studies on *processing fluency* have found that people are more likely to remember and believe information that's easy to understand.[9] So it really pays to make your message feel easy to follow and easy to recall. To do that, three strategies help: clarity, stickiness, and repetition. Here's how to put that into practice:

1. Clear and simple

The more streamlined your message, the more likely it is to land. That means it's generally best to make no more than **three or four big points** when you're speaking, because that's within the bounds of what people can keep in their *working memory.* If you need to cover a longer list of points in writing, use **clear formatting** to make it easy to scan. Even a hard-to-read font can impair recall, so don't shrink your text to squeeze in every word—use fewer words.[10]

Here are three additional tips to help you make your communication clear and simple.

a. Don't reinvent the wheel–reinforce your existing themes

If you've already established a few big themes of work for your team to tackle (perhaps after reading Chapter 8, on goal-setting), it's smart to use those themes as the top-level structure for your communication whenever you can. You might recall that Darcy Verhun, the CEO we met in that chapter, organized his company's goals under the themes of Culture, Deliver Care, and Cost Excellence—and all his emails to staff reinforced those themes. Blanca Juti, the L'Oréal C-suite executive we'll meet in Chapter 14, has four big "priority topics," and she uses them to structure her monthly updates. Rob has two big themes: the "simplification" one you're

now familiar with, and "proactive care." They're often the backbone of his remarks.

b. Use signposts that make it easier to follow

Whether in writing or in speech, use clear signposts that keep your audience oriented as you walk them through your points. As the old adage goes: "Tell them what you're going to tell 'em; then tell 'em; then tell them what you told 'em." For example:

- As you start, say: *"There are three things I want to talk to you about. Number one…"*
- At transitions, say: *"Let me pause there and shift to the next idea. Number two…"*
- At the end, say: *"Before I close, here's what I want you to remember. One…two…three…"*

These cues help your audience track where they are and what's coming next, reducing the cognitive load that comes from wondering "Wait, where are we now?" and "When is he going to finish?" Rob adds, "When I'm clear up front about what I'm going to say, and I close by hitting those points again in a succinct summary, I can tell in the weeks afterward that it was easier for people to understand and remember the messages."

This approach can also help you remember what you're going to say. As Rob notes, "When I'm presenting, I find it so much easier if I have the signposts clear in my mind." When he's preparing for a high-stakes meeting or speech, he adds, "I take a piece of paper, fold it into thirds so it fits in my pocket, then write myself the outline of those key points. It's very helpful for my own mental flow."

c. Watch out for pet phrases

Snappy phrases can help people remember what you say, so they can be helpful tools for making a message stick. But problems can arise when leaders use shorthand language that their colleagues may not all understand in the same way. Here are some of my clients' favorite phrases that turned out not to be fully clear to their teams:

- "We need to understand the physics of…"
- "We need proof points for…"
- "We need to close the loop on…"

You probably have your own reasonable guesses about what each of those phrases meant to the leader who kept saying them (and yes, one was Rob). But they might not be the same guesses as I would make, or as their colleagues were making. As Rob says, "In my mind there's a whole description of what my go-to phrases mean. But I've realized that I need to be very clear on what they mean to me, so people know what I'm talking about." So try asking your colleagues:

- *"Which phrases do you hear me say a lot? And what does each of them mean to you?"* (As always, the question needs to feel like you're honestly curious—not like it's a pop quiz they might fail.)

If you do decide to adopt some touchstone phrases, research suggests that using concrete rather than abstract language will help make them stick.[11] So in Rob's case, for example, he talked about "more minutes by the patient's bedside" rather than "time optimization."

Gayle Tait, the leader we'll meet in Chapter 19, has one other general piece of advice on making messages clear and simple: "I learned that it always helps to ask *'What could I have explained more clearly?'* after I've said something important. It's better than 'Any questions?' at encouraging people to speak up if they haven't totally understood what you've said."

2. Sticky stories and sticky data

I've mentioned in earlier chapters how helpful it is to use examples to bring your goals and change aspirations to life. I want to go further here and suggest that wherever you can, you should share stories and anecdotes (with real people in them) to illustrate what you're saying. There are a few reasons human stories are so powerful in leadership communications.

First: Social connection matters so much to the brain that human-focused examples activate extra mental processing power, making your

message easier to understand. One study found people were three times more likely to give the correct response to a tricky logic puzzle when the task was framed as a social situation (trying to figure out if someone was cheating on a rule) rather than just drily expressed as numbers and letters.[12] Second, given the profound way that stories engage the brain, it's no surprise that studies show people remember and are persuaded by stories more readily than they are by hard data alone—that's *narrative bias*.[13]

I mentioned narrative bias in Chapter 1 in the context of something to watch out for. As a leader, you need to be sure that your judgment of a complex situation isn't being swayed by one unrepresentative anecdote. But here you get to harness narrative bias for good, by using stories to add power to your communication. Rob says it's very clear to him how effective it is: "I can tell from what gets played back to me that people remember the stories, so I always make sure to have one to illustrate each of my signposted points."

Here are three more tips to help you use stories well:

- **When you're sharing an anecdote, vivid and emotional details can help the story stick.** For example, one of Rob's stories about a burned-out doctor had at its heart the following: "He was only four years out of medical school, and he already felt exhausted and disheartened—not from the effort of taking care of patients, but because of the three hours of paperwork he had to do every night before he could go home to his family."
- **To make your point easier to grasp, skip details that aren't necessary to support your main message.** For example, the audience doesn't need to know which medical school the doctor attended. Use people's *working memory* judiciously: Fill it only with what's needed to make the story memorable and clear.
- **Keep a running list of good examples as you encounter them.** Echoing Chapter 8, whenever you see something interesting happening in your team or organization, make a note of it so that you can use it to bring your future communications to life.

The best of both worlds

Rob knows the power of stories, but he also uses data to strengthen his message. He says, "When handled right, numbers can add credibility to an argument, and I've found that people can remember a few data points if they line up with the stories." He's right on that—the combination of stories and data has been found to be especially powerful when you're trying to motivate action.[14] They work in tandem: Stories can make facts more relatable and memorable, while facts can lend precision and authority to stories.

When Rob mentions numbers in staff communications, he avoids dense tables and charts. He looks for one surprising data point that will grab attention and demonstrate the importance of the topic, without adding too much cognitive load. Some of his examples include:

- "We have to redesign the way we work in order to prevent burnout, because otherwise we're going to be 10 percent short of the nurses we need to take care of patients."
- "Doctors were spending hours a day on email, but the new patient information management tool cut that time by 47 percent."
- "Nobody could get in for an appointment, but by improving how we allocate doctors' appointments and shifts, we opened up 15,000 more slots."

So, the next time you want to get a key point across, ask yourself:

- *What's a **real example** that illustrates this?* Ideally, it's something already happening in your organization, but it could come from outside if needed.
- *How can you tell that story in a **focused** way, emphasizing any **vivid or emotional** details?*
- *Is there an **interesting fact** or **number** that would help you land the point of that story?*

3. Repetition, repetition, repetition (repetition)

Repeating your message might feel tedious, but it's essential for your audience. People are far more likely to recall and approve of something they've heard multiple times, something researchers call the *mere exposure effect.*[15] Of course, there are limits—we've all been annoyed by overexposure to an ad or tune. But as a leader, you'll probably only hit resonance on your key themes at the point when you feel like a broken record. Many CEOs say that it's only when they're "absolutely sick and tired of saying the same thing" that they know the message has landed.

Rob talked about simplification at every town hall, every management gathering, and every frontline visit—and after a year, it stuck. One of his close colleagues told me: "Rob has had a really consistent elevator speech, and it's now getting quoted more and more throughout the organization." That's the mark of a successful leadership communication.

Rob says, "It still amazes me how much repetition is needed. Telling the same stories, citing the same statistics, making the same case. But you've got to give people time to process, and if you keep going, you'll get there." And there's another way to think about repetition: You're creating consistency. As Rob says, "I've come to appreciate that a consistent message helps people feel like they have a sure footing. It creates a feeling of stability—that this is definitely what we're doing, and it's not changing anytime soon. And that enables them to engage more deeply in the work."

As a leader, the point of communicating with your colleagues isn't just to convey information—it's to motivate and guide people over time, to help them get the right things done in the right way. And when your communications hit all Four Frequencies—when they resonate with people's personal concerns, evoke shared endeavor, show you care, and are easy to follow—they are far more likely to move people in the way you hope. Rob says, "I've learned I always need to ask myself, 'How do I get out of my own head and see things from the audience's perspective?' And this checklist helps me remember to do that." He's pleased with the results

from this approach: “I’ve seen a real shift in the way people work—they’re more focused on tangible outcomes and are taking more ownership of the program.” It’s also driving real results: The simplification initiative is now freeing up far more time for high-quality patient care. “Patients are saying they feel more cared for as a result. We’re all thrilled,” he says. “And this is just the beginning.”

≫ Bonus Tip: Manage your nerves with the Readiness Reframe

Before important presentations, it’s normal to feel a flutter in your stomach or an increase in your breathing rate. It’s easy to interpret those sensations as a sign that you’re nervous. But there’s a more precise interpretation that can serve you better at times of high pressure: You’re getting ready.

Those jittery sensations are triggered by increasing levels of adrenaline and noradrenaline. At moderate levels, that’s good news. Those neurochemicals help us perform at our best by sharpening our focus and boosting alertness, enabling us to rise to the challenge in front of us. It’s only when those neurochemicals keep increasing that they tend to impair our ability to think and perform. And that unhelpful increase generally only happens when we feel a situation is unpleasantly outside our control.[16]

The great thing is that we can recapture a positive sense of being in control by labeling our jittery feelings as “helpful signs of readiness,” as soon as we notice them. (*“Oh, good, that’s my brain and body getting me ready to be focused and alert!”*) And research has found that doing this helps us stay in high-performance zone, rather than the panic zone.[17] So next time you notice your heart racing, take a deep breath, try the reframe of “Excellent—I’m getting ready,” and take the stage with confidence.

CHAPTER 11

How to Delegate for High Performance

THE CHALLENGE

At its heart, leadership is about delivering more through others than we can achieve on our own—which means our effectiveness as leaders depends on how well we oversee and support other people's work. This is such an everyday part of leadership that we often don't stop to think about how we're doing it. But it's worth examining, because for our approach to delegation to make the most of our team's talents, we need to strike a thoughtful balance between two extremes.

At one extreme is the leader who leans in too hard, constantly checking whether their colleagues are doing things right. This can be an especially tempting approach when the leader is very skilled at the work they're asking their team to do. But two problems flow from repeatedly looking over people's shoulders:

- First, it **pulls the leader's time away from the things only they can do.** The math is straightforward: If leaders are busy correcting people's typos, they have less time to think about strategy. (In the language of Chapter 2, they're reducing their impact by not focusing on their Positive Yes—the work they are uniquely positioned to do as leaders.)
- Second, **micromanagement tends to demotivate people and hurt performance,** because of the importance of autonomy to the brain's

reward system.[1] Colleagues generally do better when they're given at least some breathing room to decide how to get their work done, whether in terms of the output, the timing, or the process.[2],[3]

So, micromanagement is counterproductive. But **at the other extreme, the leader steps too far back,** giving their colleagues no guidance. This can feel like the most trusting approach, and with an experienced teammate and a routine deliverable you can get lucky with it. But totally hands-off delegation can also lead to disappointment, when leaders discover a colleague missed something that seemed obvious. That's the *curse of knowledge* again: We tend to assume that what's clear to us is equally clear to others, when it isn't.[4]

Research is clear that the winning approach is in the middle ground: **Give people autonomy where possible, and supportive guidance where needed.**[5] As well as maximizing your colleagues' motivation and performance, this combination has been found to help them learn more over time.[6],[7] So it's worth honing your approach on this—and consciously adjusting it as needed, because the right balance differs depending on each colleague's capabilities and the complexity of the work. This chapter gives you guidance on how to strike that balance well each time.

By the way: In this chapter, I'm defining "delegation" to include any situation where you're supervising a colleague's efforts. So it might involve work you're handing off to them (perhaps after reading Chapter 2, on the Yes-Grow-No rule), something that's already on their plate, or a new idea you've come up with together. In all cases, it's work you don't need to do yourself, because they're doing it—which is one of the practical joys of leadership.

THE ROLE MODEL

Elena Sukacheva has a remarkable breadth of commercial experience, spanning industries from fitness to media to confectionery. Her journey has included C-suite roles at major companies like The Economist Group and Ferrara, but she's also led several smaller, scrappier enterprises. These days

she's the CEO of a functional food company called UCAN, which creates products that help endurance athletes boost and sustain their energy.

Across all the organizations she's led, her knack for finding ways to supercharge growth is clear. What's less obvious is that she sees her approach to delegation as having been key to a big part of that success. She says, "One of the things I care most about as a leader is rallying and engaging my teams. And central to the way I do that is how I frame and delegate tasks. I always try to create a balance between giving people independence and giving them guidance when needed." She adds that when you're overseeing a colleague's work, "It's easy to think, 'They get the general idea, so now they'll just go and execute perfectly without me doing anything else.' I've learned it's rarely that simple, and it takes some care to figure out how to give them the right kind of support. But when you do manage to strike a good balance, you see the best of what people can do."

Elena says that the delegation principles we'll cover in this chapter have worked for her "whether I have a staff of two thousand people or fifteen, and whether I've been in the role for years or I'm new to the company." It's enabled her not just to create the powerful growth engines she's known for, but also to develop her teams' capabilities and confidence in an enduring way.

THE ADVICE: THE FIX-FLEX APPROACH

Delegating for high performance means giving your colleagues the freedom to think and learn within a clear framework of expectations and support. Before any discussion of a major new assignment, first ask yourself where your own views on it are **fixed** and where they're **flexible**—making sure that there's enough that's flexible to sustain your colleagues' motivation and performance. Then, when you delegate the work, be transparent with your colleague about all of those Fix-Flex boundaries. Finally, make a clear plan that will help them stay on track without squashing their sense of autonomy.

Here's what we'll cover, with the **Fix-Flex approach** running through all of it:

1. **THE WHAT:** Define the deliverable (output and timing)
2. **THE HOW:** Pregame the approach to getting it done
3. **THE WHEN:** Agree on a cadence for review and support

With an experienced colleague or a well-defined piece of work, you may find you can spin through these three What-How-When steps in just a few minutes. If that's the case, the checklist in this chapter can help you move through that discussion with greater ease and precision, leaving you both feeling confident that you're on the same page. But don't rush it if the work isn't straightforward. You'll see that for big projects, Elena sometimes splits the discussion across multiple conversations—knowing that the time she invests up front will pay off in her colleagues' performance down the road.

1. THE WHAT: Define the deliverable (output and timing)

In your first meeting with a colleague about a major new piece of work, aim to build a shared understanding of what success looks like. With someone experienced, this can be quick—but even when the territory is familiar, it's worth clarifying the following things about the output and timing:

OUTPUT: What needs to be done?

Discuss the **format, content,** and **quality** of the deliverable. For example, suppose you'd like your colleague to create a report on customer trends. Check you're aligned on:

- **Format:** It might be clear to you that a "report" always means a three-page memo, or a twenty-page deck of slides. Whatever the answer is, make sure your colleague knows what you have in mind.
- **Content:** For this "customer trends" example, your colleague might guess you mean trends over recent years, while you might have

intended something more forward-looking. Now is the easiest time to head off this kind of disconnect, before it results in wasted effort.

- **Quality:** Clarify the level of polish and depth you're aiming for. To calibrate, think about what this work is for. For example, are you hoping it will enable you to make a particular decision? How much detail is really required for that? Help your colleague avoid going too deep at the expense of other work that needs doing.

Encourage your colleague to ask questions about anything they're unsure of, and be appreciative when they do—it shows they're trying to get it right.

TIMING: When should it be finished?

Realism is key here. The higher your aspirations for the format, content, and quality of the deliverable, the longer the work will take. This might also be a good time for me to mention that our brains often underestimate the time that a piece of work is going to take—this is known as the *planning fallacy.*[8] However, studies suggest that our timing estimates get more accurate when we consider how long it's taken to complete similar work in the past, as long as we consider the less efficient examples and not just the shining moment of glory when we once knocked out a report in half the expected time.[9] Also remember that people usually take longer with a task if they're less experienced. With all that in mind, discuss the following with your colleague:

- *"Based on experience, how long will this take?"*
- *"What might slow the work down, and how could we protect against that?"*
- *"And what could speed things up?"*

If you'd like them to deliver something sooner than they're suggesting, consider whether you can:

- Give them more resources or support to overcome obstacles.
- Coach them on using technology tools more effectively.

- Stage the work, so they deliver something smaller or less polished first.

And, crucially: Know your FIX-FLEX

On each of the questions above, ask yourself: Where do you have truly **fixed** views, and where could you be **flexible**? Your aim should be to give your colleague as much room as possible to shape the deliverable, since even a little autonomy is more motivating than none. So wherever there's room, **ask them to suggest their own ideas on format, content, quality, and timing;** you can polish their suggestions if needed.

That said, where you do have a strong and unshakeable preference, it's best to say so. If you ask for your colleague's views when in fact you already know the answer you want—and you're just hoping your colleague will come to the same conclusion—the conversation can get awkward. You invite their thoughts; they respond; you frown and signal that it isn't the answer you wanted; then they wonder why they bothered saying anything. It's frustrating for both of you. That's why the Fix-Flex approach has two sides to it. Look for all the Flex you can, but be honest about what's already Fixed in your mind.

Two good phrases for striking this balance:

- If you're **sure** where you're fixed and flexible: *"This is where I have a clear view…and here's where I'm open to any suggestions you have…"*
- If you're **not sure** where you're fixed and flexible: *"I have some thoughts, but tell me first how you'd think about this, and then we'll discuss options."*

Elena says, "Whenever we set up a new piece of work, I spend time with my team agreeing what we're doing—sometimes in quite a lot of detail." She's quick to say that she keeps a lot of Flex in the mix. So what she means by "a lot" of detail is generally "not about me dictating to them. It would be very presumptuous of me to assume that I have all the answers—the team is always much closer to the issues than I am. So usually, it's more

about me asking them a lot of questions, to help them think through in their own minds what we're really trying to do, and what a good solution will look like."

She gives an example of a situation where someone on her UCAN team —we'll call him Stan—suggested the company could launch a sample-size package, to allow customers to trial the product for free. It would be a big innovation for their small company, and in some previous roles Elena might have led the project herself. But in this case, she saw a chance for Stan to step up in a new way, and she put the ball back in his court: "I told him, 'Great idea. Let's meet in three days to discuss it—could you bring me some thoughts on how it could work?' " That was already a healthy amount of Flex to start with.

Elena knew she had some firm ideas about certain aspects of a well-scoped sample product plan, because she'd done this kind of launch dozens of times before. So, when they met, she explained to Stan that he'd need to determine things like "which products we'd offer samples for, who the audience would be, and how we would distribute the samples." The need for his plan to include clear answers to these scoping questions was where she had a Fixed point of view. But she gave him complete Flex to decide the actual answers to those questions, so he could define the shape of the sample program himself. As a result of that Fix-Flex approach, he had plenty of autonomy but also a much clearer sense of the work that he needed to do to create a fully fleshed-out plan.

2. THE HOW: Pregame the approach to getting it done

Once you've agreed on <u>what</u> they're doing, discuss with your colleague any details of <u>how</u> they intend to get the work done. (That might happen in the same meeting, or it might be in a second conversation once they've had time to put together a plan.) Again, you might fly through this in just a couple of minutes with an experienced colleague—but if it's a new type of deliverable for them, it's still helpful to slow down and be clear about your Fix-Flex expectations.

So: Tilt toward asking them to articulate their thinking first. Then, express any advice you'd like them to take on board—and be equally clear about areas where you don't have a fixed preference. Like this:

- **FLEX: Ask them, *"How are you going to tackle the work?"*** If their thinking doesn't yet seem solid on dimensions that matter to you, ask them to explain more. If they're still unclear, that tells you it's worth giving more direction. Good to know.
- **FIX: Set any guardrails you have in mind for how to get the work done.** For example, maybe their proposed workplan mentions the idea of involving other people on the team. Great—and, if you have views on who in particular you'd like them to involve, tell them.
- **FLEX: Be explicit about where you're flexible on the approach so they can see where they have room to make their own choices.** For example, maybe you don't actually have strong views on who they should involve from the rest of the team, and you're happy for them to decide; if so, tell them this.

That last step is more powerful than you might think. As leaders, we often forget to be clear where the wiggle room is for our colleagues. But the more vocal we are in naming the areas where we truly don't mind what they do, the more room we earn ourselves to be clear about the things we do care about, without eroding people's all-important autonomy.

In helping her colleagues figure out the details of how they'll approach their work, Elena pays particular attention to setting financial guardrails. Specifically, she wants her colleagues to check that the numbers add up along the way, rather than getting to the end of a design phase before doing any costings.

With the work Stan was doing on the sample program, for example, Elena asked him to consider four financial angles: "What we're assuming demand will be, what we're assuming about likely conversion to sales of the full-sized product, your best estimate of the cost per sample, and what's the maximum the samples can cost us for it to make financial sense." That was her Fixed list. Her Flex list included just about everything else: She

made clear to him that she had no preconceived ideas about the right financial parameters, and that he was free to play around with those assumptions and try out whatever scenarios he thought made sense.

3. THE WHEN: Agree on a cadence for review and support

Decide together when you'll next meet to review progress, and put it on the calendar. Make sure it's soon enough that you have time to help them course-correct before the final deadline if they're off track. Check you're on the same page about what they'll plan to bring to that progress review meeting. (If there's an aspect of the work you expect to be a particular challenge for them, it can be smart to plan to check in and touch on that.)

Then, step back until you meet again. Make clear that they can reach out to you for help. But don't bombard them with messages before your check-in, unless you have important new context you need to share. Once you Fix a schedule for check-ins, give them Flex in between.

If it doesn't yet feel natural to give them this space, and you find yourself itching to see how they're doing, remember what we learned in Chapter 9 about why change is hard. In letting go of being as close to the work as you've been in the past, you're rewiring your brain's habits—and that does take some time. What I can tell you is that it typically feels easier to give your colleagues real space between meetings if you're very clear when you'll next have a proper progress review with them. Knowing exactly when you'll get something is a pretty good substitute for getting it right away, because our brain loves certainty—simply knowing what's coming lightens the cognitive load.[10]

Adjust as you go

After that first check-in, you'll have a sense of how well they're doing with the work, and how frequently you'll need to meet with them from then on. Many leaders start with a standard approach—say, giving people a week to make progress before checking in—and then adjust from there depending on what they discover about their colleague's ability to handle the work.

You'll probably find that the sweet spot for balancing stretch and support differs across your direct reports. In most teams, some colleagues are more fully proven and developed in their role, while others aren't yet as reliable or capable as you'd like. It's fine to reflect those differences in how often and how hard you lean in with each person. Just make sure your high performers know you're checking their progress less often because you're confident in their ability, not because you don't care how they're doing.

Elena says that in the intense early stages of a crucial project, her check-ins might be as often as daily. But once it's up and running successfully, "I go back to a 30,000-foot view of how it's going, checking in once a week or less." Then, as progress rolls along, "if I feel something isn't going well, I can drop down to the five-foot view to problem-solve with them if needed—but once that issue is resolved, I pull myself back up to the big-picture level. My goal is always to avoid suffocating the team with my presence, while being able to offer help when they need it."

(For more guidance on what to cover in your follow-ups, see the Spotlight on "Making the Most of Your One-to-One Meetings" at the end of this chapter. And for help on giving feedback and coaching, read the next two chapters after that.)

What if they screw up?

Yes, they might screw up. They almost certainly won't do everything perfectly, unless they're long overdue for a promotion. That's not all bad (hear me out on this). Studies suggest the missteps that occur when people are puzzling things out for themselves can lead to a lot of learning, because the brain tends to remember things it gets surprised by.[11] But your support is key to whether that learning happens. If people feel like they're simply being left on their own to fail, research suggests they often get demotivated (this is called the *tune-out effect*).[12] On the other hand, if you help your colleague reflect on what went wrong and what they'll do differently as a result, you help reframe this as a useful experience that builds their competence—which keeps them feeling it's worth pushing onward and upward.[13]

So, the next time someone doesn't nail an assignment, say:

- *"Tell me about the choices you made."* (They might have made perfectly sensible choices, and just been unlucky.)
- *"What do you think caused this to fall short of what we'd hoped?"*
- "*So, what should be done differently going forward?"*

Elena needed to do plenty of this. Some of what Stan brought her on the sample program, she says, "just didn't work, or wasn't going to work." For example, the program was initially aimed at too many products. Later, there were issues with some of the product samples, and certain marketing channels didn't work as well as hoped—some podcast ads had very little effect. Her response to these problems was to stay solution-focused: "I never start from a place of blame—I say, 'Okay, let's take a look at what didn't work, and let's figure out how we can make it better.' And I say 'we' rather than 'you' because I want to signal that I see it as a shared responsibility to get us back on track. That helps to stop people from feeling defensive, and keep them feeling good about carrying on." Each time something went wrong on the sample program, she says, "we managed to make it feel like a productive course correction that ultimately put us in a better position."

(Hopefully you don't—but if you need it, you'll find advice on how to handle more significant failures in Chapter 19.)

In the end, the sample program ended up being a tremendous success. In fact, Elena says, "it's become the main way that we acquire all our customers—everything else we do in our marketing is now layered on top of it." She says the quality of those up-front delegation conversations with Stan made a big difference to the program's chances of success. The experience also made a lasting impact on Stan: "He's taken on broader responsibility, and the sample program is now a collective effort with multiple people involved." It's had a positive knock-on effect on the rest of

her staff, too. “Seeing the program take shape gave everyone else more courage to take on bigger things. They learned what it takes to scale up from small to medium to large, constantly refining along the way.”

Overall, Elena’s steady application of the Fix-Flex delegation approach —guiding where needed, allowing ownership wherever possible—has built her team’s skills and confidence significantly over time. She says: “You can teach people a lot through the questions you ask them. And sometimes, now, I even feel like they’re leading me—which is a great feeling.”

SPOTLIGHT ON: Making the Most of Your One-to-One Meetings

Meetings with your direct reports are precious, because they're your chance to personally guide, redirect, and encourage your colleagues. Yes, they take some time—but they make everything else in this book easier to achieve, if you use that time to do these four things:

1. Review both the ups and downs of progress against their goals

- Ask them to share both their successes and their challenges: *"What's gone well?"* and *"What hasn't turned out as expected?"*
- When something hasn't worked out, ask for their analysis of the reason. Then ask: *"What have you learned from this?"*
- Make sure to connect the discussion of specific pieces of work back to their broader KPIs and development needs, so their day-to-day work and big-picture goals stay aligned.

2. Give them positive feedback on anything you see them doing well

- Be as specific as you can in what you highlight, so they know what's working and what to do more of. Don't just say, "Good job"; say, *"It's great that you did X because…so keep doing it."*
- Even if they're doing badly and you're frustrated, you're more likely to motivate improvement if you can find something to honestly appreciate—for example, *"I can tell you've worked hard on this."* (You'll find more on the rationale behind this in Chapter 12.)

3. Discuss what's going less well, and give them developmental feedback as needed

- To help them understand what needs improvement, make specific, factual observations about what's off track—avoid generalizing. So,

you'd say: "We agreed you'd speak to five customers, but I only see information about one" rather than just "You've fallen short in gathering customer feedback." (Again, Chapter 12 will cover why this factual approach to developmental feedback works so well.)

4. Coach and guide them on next steps

- In general: Ask them to outline what they think they should do next before you direct them. You can refine or redirect the plan, but you'll develop their skills more by asking first. (In Chapter 13, you'll find more tips on how to effectively coach your colleague on next steps.)
- Always end by asking them what they need from you to help progress the work.

Other tips to help you make the most of your one-to-one time:

- **Capture feedback and questions between meetings.** Set up a running note for each person on your team, and add to it whenever you notice or think of something you want to raise in your next one-to-one. It saves you from having to rely on your memory when you meet with them.
- **Ask them to send updates before the meeting.** If they can send material ahead of time, in a format that's easy for you to scan, it creates more room to use your meeting time for real discussion and problem-solving. (And if you can find 10 seconds to reply with "Got it; I look forward to reviewing," you'll stop them from worrying about your radio silence.)
- **Don't be afraid to occasionally ask a broader question about how they're doing.** When people feel their manager cares about them, it boosts their level of engagement and performance.[14] So every now and then, lift yourself out of the detailed deliverables and ask a question like:
    - *"How are you feeling about work, more broadly?"*

Brief, sincere questions like this can do a lot to help you see how to help them thrive and excel.

CHAPTER 12

How to Give Feedback That Drives Action

THE CHALLENGE

Feedback is one of the most powerful tools we have for encouraging and guiding our colleagues, yet most of us don't give it as often or as well as we could. Research shows that **employees want more feedback, both positive and negative.** On the positive side, three-quarters of employees feel they aren't getting enough recognition for their work.[1] On the developmental side, the picture is even starker: Almost all employees say they'd welcome additional corrective feedback if it's delivered in a constructive and respectful way.[2] (If that surprises you, remember that feeling competent—and growing in competence—is fundamentally rewarding for the brain.)

What's interesting, though, is that studies also show that **managers think they're giving far more feedback than employees believe they're receiving.**[3] That gap in perception tells us that when leaders do give feedback, it often misses the mark. There are a few possible reasons for that:

- **Leaders often give general feedback, but specific feedback sticks better.** People's brains process and remember concrete information more easily than abstract information (the *concreteness effect*).[4] So if leaders give someone broad feedback like "Great job" or "Be more strategic," it doesn't grab and hold as much attention as a precise

observation like "You did X last Tuesday and it had Y effect." It also doesn't give the recipient much guidance on what they should do more of, or do differently.

- **Some leaders give very little positive feedback, despite it being a major source of motivation.** The brain's *reward system* generates people's sense of drive, and one way this system is activated is by being made to feel competent by other people—that is, by receiving praise and recognition. That's why people work harder when their efforts are appreciated.[5],[6] However, some leaders give little to no positive feedback—perhaps because they didn't receive it from their own bosses, or because they feel it doesn't fit with their personal style.[7] Either way, it's a big missed opportunity if your goal is to get the best out of people.
- **Modest praise can get drowned out, because people naturally pay more attention to negative information than positive information.** That's *negativity bias,*[8] and you'll know the truth of it if you've ever received a 360-degree feedback report and turned almost immediately to "Suggestions for Development," all but ignoring the "Strengths" section. A positive comment, especially if it's vague ("Well done"), can end up being missed if it's accompanied by any critique.

So that's where wires may be getting crossed—but it's perfectly possible to uncross them. It's not hard to give the kind of feedback that's been found to inspire stronger performance, learning, and motivation. And whether you're giving positive or negative feedback, the heart of the best approach is actually the same—which makes it easier to remember.[9] Any effort you make to develop good feedback habits has a big ROI: Employees who say they get all the feedback they need are fully five times more likely to say they feel engaged by their work.[10] This chapter will help you earn that return.

THE ROLE MODEL

Suzanne Heywood is a woman of many talents. She's the COO of the Exor Group, a company that holds substantive investments in well-known companies like Stellantis, Ferrari, and Louboutin—and she chairs two of their public companies, CNH and Iveco Group. On top of that she's a bestselling multi-genre author, and—crucially for our purposes—she's a former boss of mine. That's how I know for sure that she's good at giving feedback.

I remember the day she gave me feedback for the first time. We had been working together on a leadership development program for high-potential managers across multiple government departments in the United Kingdom. It was interesting, satisfying work, and Suzanne was my manager on the project. One day, as we were walking back from a meeting at the Cabinet Office, Suzanne asked if she could give me some feedback. She told me first that she was impressed by my ability to make the client feel truly heard, and by my ability to design an ambitious and innovative course for them.

Suzanne then shared an observation that was squarely in my blind spot: I was powering ahead on the design of the program without asking anyone on our team for input or ideas. It's true that I knew a lot about leadership development—but she and another senior colleague on the project had a lot of relevant expertise in how government worked. I realized I'd been blithely assuming that the best way to delight and impress Suzanne was to present her with my work as a brilliant fait accompli (ta-da!), like a good student. Her comments helped me understand that I could, and should, ask for more help—both on this project and quite possibly in life more broadly—and that I would not be thought less competent as a result. In fact (ta-duh?), it would increase my chances of success. It was a big learning moment for me, and I was grateful for it.

Not only was Suzanne's feedback useful at the time, but—as you can tell—it really stuck. Twenty-five years later, I still remember what she said. And that lasting impact is because she used a version of the model in this chapter, which is my twist on a classic. Let's dig into the approach that worked so well.

THE ADVICE: THE FACTUAL FEEDBACK MODEL

To maximize the motivation and learning that your feedback inspires in your colleagues, the best approach is to be highly factual in your observations, and to explain why what you're saying matters. That's true for both positive and negative feedback, so the core of the Factual Feedback model below is the same whether you're praising someone or giving them developmental pointers. Here's how we'll walk through it:

Factual Feedback, the **PRAISE** version: Observation, Implication
Factual Feedback, the **DEVELOPMENT** version: Intention, Observation, Implication, Invitation, Collaboration
» Bonus Tip: The power of asking for their feedback in return

Factual Feedback: The PRAISE version

As we know by now, how well you inspire your colleagues to deliver excellence depends a lot on how well you engage the brain's *reward system,* by boosting their sense of competence and connection. Appreciation is especially powerful fuel for the brain, because it speaks to both of those psychological needs. It's obvious that praise makes people feel better about their level of competence, but it also boosts connection by making people feel respected by the person who matters most in the workplace—their boss—and by making them feel that what they're doing is useful to others.

Praise also helps direct and inform people's professional improvement. When you tell someone about something they've done well, it helps them understand what they should keep doing. Remember the *curse of knowledge*—we can think it's obvious they did a good job, and assume there's no need to spell it out. And yet, it might not be obvious to them. They might have been trying something new by accident, and unless you make clear you liked the results, the happy accident might never get repeated. As I like to say: Recognition drives repetition.

Suzanne goes further, saying: "I think it's actually quite dangerous if you don't give any positive feedback, and only give negative feedback,

because what you're doing is you're creating attention around only the moments where things go wrong. And you're implying, without meaning to, that you don't care about the things that go right. That's the last thing you want to suggest."

So praise is central to both motivation and learning, if done well. Now, let's see how to do it well.

The Factual Feedback formula for effective appreciation

Because of the *concreteness effect,* specificity is the key to giving praise that really lands and galvanizes people. What does that look like in practice? Suzanne describes it like this: "Instead of just saying 'You're doing great,' the style should basically be 'I saw you doing a good thing, and I thought that was good because of these reasons.' " Like this:

1. **OBSERVATION:** Tell them something specific you noticed they did that was positive.
    - *"I noticed that you did X."*
2. **IMPLICATION:** Then give more detail on why you liked it. Say what became possible as a result of what they did well.
    - *"I thought it was great because Y."*
    - *"And as a result, Z was possible."*

To underline why this specificity works, notice how it might feel to be told "You did great, well done!" compared with this: "I noticed that your preparation for the meeting really paid off, because you handled the most difficult question very well—and that made it clear you were okay with being challenged. And as a result, we got into the really important stuff we needed to discuss. Well done!" Both are nice to hear. But the chances are that the more specific positive feedback will stick in your mind and make you feel more valued—not to mention more aware of the things you should keep on doing. It might seem odd that the narrower feedback is what's more powerful, but that's how people's brains work.

Being specific (*"You did X; it was good because Y"*) also helps if you're one of those skeptical people who worries that praising your team

seems indulgent. The more factual the praise, the more authentic it will feel to both you and your colleague. As Suzanne puts it, "No ribbons and bows are needed if you follow the basic principle that feedback should always be specific."

And if you up your game on positive feedback early in a working relationship, research tells us, people will be more responsive and less defensive about any negative feedback you need to give them further down the line, because they've seen that you're able to respect what they do well.[11] So don't keep waiting for the perfect moment to say something appreciative—the sooner you do it, the sooner you both reap the benefits.

What if you don't have a lot of good things to say?

What if a colleague isn't performing as well as you'd hope—should you still praise them? Yes and no. You shouldn't invent something completely false, and you clearly need to give them developmental feedback to help them improve (more on that below). But if you need them to step up their game, you do need them to be motivated—and that means it is worth highlighting anything you respect about the way they're working, even if it's small. You could recognize the effort someone has put in, even if you're not yet happy with the output: "I can tell you've done a lot of research, which is great because it gives us a broad base to work from." Or perhaps you could say something positive about the format: "I like the way you've laid this out, because it will be easy for people to understand."

By pausing to look for what a colleague has done well—and perhaps editing a message to them so that it starts with the positives—we sometimes notice praiseworthy things that we might otherwise have missed. That's because once we've decided in our mind that someone is falling short, *confirmation bias* can blind us to seeing anything good in their work.[12] Searching for something to like helps you respond to them more objectively; it may even put you in a 2 percent better mood.

FACTUAL FEEDBACK: The DEVELOPMENT version

Now, let's turn to the areas where your colleague has fallen short. How do you talk to them about it in a way that sets them back on the right track, and keeps them feeling determined to do well? There are a couple of guiding principles: **specificity** and **improvement.**

You need to be as specific and factual for negative feedback as we have just learned to be for positive feedback. That's not only because it's easier for people's brains to process. It's also because being specific ensures that you focus on criticizing people's actions, rather than the person more broadly. You're saying "You did this thing badly" without any hint of "You are a bad person," and studies show that feedback is more likely to spark improvement if you take this approach.[13] Think of it this way: It's easier for people to see how to respond to feedback about specific behavior; it's harder if you're judging their character.

You also need to be in the mindset of **giving feedback because you believe your colleague can improve,** not as a sign of irritation or disapproval. The more you signal your desire to support their development, the more likely it is that the feedback will be received and absorbed well.[14] Suzanne puts it like this: "There are times when so-called feedback is used as a label for lashing out in frustration at a colleague. That's not real feedback—that's just complaint. Real feedback focuses on an opportunity for them to improve the way they work."

Both principles help you keep competence and fairness at the heart of the feedback exchange, making it more likely that your colleague will stay motivated as they try to fix whatever needs fixing. Here are the steps the conversation should follow:

1. **INTENTION:** Your development-focused goal in giving them feedback
2. **OBSERVATION:** The facts of what you noticed them doing
3. **IMPLICATION:** The facts of how that has affected you, and why it matters
4. **INVITATION:** Space for them to share what was behind their actions
5. **COLLABORATION:** What you will jointly do to help them improve

You'll notice that the five-step flow is built around the same two steps we use for positive feedback: **Observation** and **Implication.** But for negative feedback, the full five-step sequence matters, because each step improves the outcome you're likely to achieve. I've never seen a leader fail to have a productive conversation when using all five steps, whether with their team or their own boss. (Some have even reported success in using it with family members, too.) So let's walk through those steps.

1. INTENTION: Your development-focused goal in giving them feedback

Start by setting a positive aim for the conversation. This channels what we learned in Chapter 5, on preparing for important meetings: Your initial state of mind will drive your perception of the conversation. If you jump in while feeling irritated with your colleague, you'll tend to focus on whatever confirms that you were right to be irritated—which might come at the cost of you finding out what's really going on. So remind yourself that this is about developing your colleague's skills and building strength in your team. You're effectively saying, "I believe you're capable of more, and I care enough to help you get there."

Get clear on this in your mind first, then say it out loud at the start of the exchange with your colleague. Something like:

- *"I care about your development, so I want to share something with you."*

Or, if you're talking to a peer or someone senior to you (because I can vouch that this model works with everyone—up, down, and sideways):

- *"I care about our working relationship, so I'd like to talk about something with you."*

Saying this one sentence up front makes it more likely that the next four steps will have the desired effect. So, don't skip it—even if it feels a little awkward the first time you do it.

2. OBSERVATION: The facts of what you noticed them doing

Now, describe a factual observation that's very specific. Avoid any generalization, interpretation, or extrapolation. The aim is to state something that can't be argued with, because it's a plain fact that it happened. Like this:

- *"I noticed you did/said X."*

It helps to do some preparation on this step of the model, so that you're clear exactly which Observation you want to share (since you may have many to choose from) and how you'll strip it of generalization, interpretation, or extrapolation. Take a few minutes to think and jot down some notes ahead of the conversation. A few additional tips to bear in mind:

Stick to the facts

I know, I know. I've said this already. But it bears repeating. If you're starting with "You are…" rather than "I noticed…," you're almost certainly heading in the wrong direction, by making a generalization about the person. So, for example, instead of telling a colleague who has missed a deadline "You are bad at meeting deadlines," say something like "I noticed that although we agreed Wednesday was the deadline for your report, you didn't send it to me until Thursday."

Also, it can be tempting to follow a generalization ("You're bad at meeting deadlines") with an interpretation of the reason behind it—something like "Because you don't plan properly" or "Because you're too self-focused." You may be right—but you may be wrong. And if you make that kind of interpretive leap, your colleague can argue, "That's not right"—ignoring the point you're really trying to make.

What if they've done this more than once?

If it's not the first time you've seen them do something like this, don't extrapolate and say "You always do this." Words like "always" and "never" are red flags, because they're rarely 100 percent correct—so you're likely to end up being at least a little inaccurate, and therefore unfair. So try to be

precise about the pattern that you've observed, and don't overplay it. Say, for example, "I noticed something similar happened last week with the analysis that was due Monday, which I got from you on Tuesday." Or, "I noticed this lateness happened two of the three times you sent me work over the last two weeks."

What if it's something you learned from another source?

It's ideal if you can share a direct observation—something you personally saw, heard, or experienced—because that's the most factually grounded point you can make. However, sometimes you've only heard secondhand about someone on your team falling short. For example, maybe a customer or another team member has complained to you about them. If it's the first time you're hearing about this issue, your best first step is to gather more information—perhaps ask the customer to share more detail, or check with the team member about whether it's happened before.

If it seems serious enough that you need to say something, you can still take ownership of the point in a way that's less vague than saying "I heard that…" The idea is to stick to the standard of being very specific in your Observation. Here are some examples of that:

- *"Last Tuesday I got an email from a customer describing what you said to them about X…."*
- *"In the free-text section of our team pulse survey, someone wrote that you did Y… ."*
- *"A person on the team has raised a concern with me about the way you approached Z…."*

And then, crucially, end with:

- *"…and I'd like to find out more about what is behind that."*

3. IMPLICATION: The facts of how that has affected you, and why it matters

Next, describe the effect of their action, so they understand why it's important. Make sure to say how it made you feel, and why that matters in

the context of what you're trying to do as a leader of the team.

- *"It made me feel concerned because…"*

In the example of the deadline-missing colleague, you'd say something like: "It made me feel concerned because I plan my own work based on when I'm expecting to receive input from you. And in turn, I am on the hook to deliver our collective team report to the board."

You might be surprised that I'm suggesting you should talk about the impact on you personally. The reason is that making the Implication personal turns it into a type of fact, just like the Observation step. Saying to your colleague that you're concerned is not something that they can debate. Suzanne describes it like this: "It's hard for anyone else to argue that I am not feeling the way I'm feeling."

That said, there's an art to naming the way they made you feel. You're not looking for vivid or inflammatory language that puts you at the center of the situation; your goal is just to remind them that their choices have an impact on others. So you might choose to say something like "That made me feel concerned/worried/disappointed because…" You probably do not want to say something like "That made me angry/irate/utterly apoplectic with rage because…"

Suzanne is a pretty grounded type of person, and she confirms that "when you're sharing your personal perspective, you can keep it non-emotional, saying, 'This is what I saw, and this is how I felt.' " I still remember that when Suzanne gave me feedback all those years ago on not being collaborative enough, she said: "It makes me feel a bit frustrated that you're not involving me more in the design process, because I have lots of government experience to share that I think can be useful in developing a great course for our clients."

4. INVITATION: Space for them to share what was behind their actions

Now, invite them to share what they were thinking when they did the thing you're discussing. Don't be tempted to skip this; you're far more likely to

help a colleague improve if you get them to reflect on what drove their choices. And as noted earlier, it's easy for leaders to jump to the wrong conclusions about what was really going on. So, always remember to say, with genuine curiosity:

- *"Tell me more about what was going on for you, when you did that."*

In the example of the colleague who missed the deadline, you might have guessed their lateness was a time-management issue—but when you ask them to share what was going on for them, you might learn they were struggling with some new chart-making software and were too embarrassed to admit it. So there's a technical issue to address—they need to learn the software—but there's also a behavioral issue, which is that you need them to be more confident in speaking up when they're stuck. That's an important fact to know, as it tells you the real problem that needs solving.

Suzanne says, "I no longer try to guess why someone has done what they've done, because it's happened several times that my initial assumption turned out to be incorrect." In the case of the project we worked on together where I was failing to get her input, Suzanne made no guesses, for example about whether I had excluded her deliberately. She just asked me to share what was going on in my mind. And what I was thinking was that my working independently would impress her; it had nothing at all to do with my view of Suzanne's expertise, and everything to do with my skewed assumption about what a high-performing consultant should be doing. And that was something she could help me reset.

5. COLLABORATION: What you will jointly do to help them improve

The final step is to do some joint problem-solving on what they should do differently. First, ask for their own thoughts on how to address this. Then, build on what they say.

- *"Okay, how do we make sure you approach it differently in the future? What are your thoughts?"*

It's natural to think you should go ahead and simply tell them what to do next. But if you make them do some of the thinking for themselves, they're more likely to feel motivated to improve and personally accountable for doing so (we'll revisit this theme in the next chapter).[15] And you never know—they might come up with ideas you wouldn't have thought of.

In our case of the colleague who's been delivering late because of a capability gap, perhaps they might ask to do some training on how to use the new software—which you're happy to authorize. And then, you might suggest to them that they flag any future issues as soon as they arise, so that you can help them solve the problems before they get worse. In the case of my real-life story with Suzanne, the collaborative conclusion was clear: I would ask for her input more often, thanks to my fresh understanding that doing this would be a source of strength, not a sign of weakness.

When and where to give feedback

Factual Feedback conversations don't need to be tied to a formal evaluation schedule. It's most useful to share both positive and negative feedback when it still feels fresh to both of you.

Suzanne says: "I try to do it as close to in-the-moment as possible, because I think you can create an odd dynamic if you give somebody feedback but your example dates back a way. The other person is thinking, 'Well, you've been sitting on this for a while. Why didn't you just tell me?' If you give it to them soon after you observe something, it feels more authentic and natural as part of a human relationship."

In most cases, I recommend making appreciative and developmental feedback a standard part of your regular one-to-ones with your colleagues, so that it becomes a natural part of the ongoing conversation you're having with your direct reports (as you'll have just seen in the Spotlight on "Making the Most of Your One-to-One Meetings"). Suzanne points out, though, that "feedback doesn't have to be done at a sit-down meeting." It can take just a few minutes while you're having lunch—or walking along with someone, as Suzanne was with me all those years ago. The key is just to make sure that if you're discussing developmental feedback, the

conversation is only between the two of you. You can give praise in public, but always give pointers in private.

≫ Bonus Tip: The power of asking for their feedback in return

In many cases, it can be a motivating move to flip things around and ask for feedback from your colleague, because it engages their brain's *reward system* in a couple of ways. First, you're signaling that you respect them enough to ask their view, and that speaks to their sense of competence. Second, building reciprocity into a conversation generally deepens trust and connection.[16] (Of course, it's even more inspiring if you then visibly act on their feedback in some way.)[17]

So here's the extra powerful step from that conversation I had with Suzanne over two decades ago. Once we had discussed her feedback to me, she then asked:

- *"Do you have any feedback for me?"*

As it happened, I did have some tentative thoughts for Suzanne on stress management, because she was at a point in her career where she was facing very high expectations and was stretched across multiple projects.

I took a deep breath, and—using the feedback structure outlined in this chapter—I described the factual observations that made me feel concerned about the pressure she was under (Observation and Implication). When I then invited her to share what was going on (Invitation), what unfolded was a conversation that took our working relationship to a whole different level. It was on that day she first told me about the wild and difficult childhood she'd had—a story she has now written about eloquently in her book *Wavewalker*—and we discussed how that early life experience had given her a pool of inner resilience that she could tap into more fully as a professional. It was a great conversation. And it was Suzanne's boldness in making it a two-way conversation that made it especially great.

By developing the habit of sharing positive observations and raising tricky issues as soon as they arise, you're boosting your colleagues' ability to improve and learn—both from the times they outperform and from the times when things don't quite go to plan.

Suzanne points out one final angle on the benefits of giving more feedback: "I always remind myself that when I take the time to give feedback to my team on how to do their work better, their improvement will directly benefit me as a leader. But I think giving feedback also makes you a better human being, because you're helping the other person grow. And most of us leaders have got to where we are because at some point, a manager gave us feedback to help us get better. So now, we're paying it on to the next generation."

CHAPTER 13

How to Develop a Colleague's Capabilities

THE CHALLENGE

Imagine you have a colleague who needs to get better and bolder at doing something. Maybe you gave them developmental feedback they now need to work on. Perhaps you delegated a piece of work you know they're capable of delivering, but they seem to be getting bogged down. Or they're bringing you a problem—maybe for the second or third time—that you're pretty sure they could learn to solve themselves. You believe they're talented enough to step up. So what can you do to help them cultivate the capability or confidence they seem to be missing?

Let's review what science (and common sense) tells us about this:

- **Conversations with you are key to your team's professional growth.** Studies suggest most professional learning happens on the job, from day to day.[1] So while it can sometimes be helpful to send people on training courses, regular interactions with you will always be central to their development as professionals.
- It's natural for leaders to go into "instructor mode" when colleagues need help, giving guidance that's based on their own experience—and that's often a quick way to get people moving forward. But **giving tactical advice doesn't strengthen your team's sense of personal accountability and proactivity.**[2] It risks getting them used to

coming to you for solutions when they get stuck, rather than taking ownership for figuring it out for themselves.

- **"Learning by doing" is usually a better recipe for long-term skill building.** That's because it engages the brain in more ways (including sensory processing, cognitive control, *working memory,* and the *reward system*) and creates more of the new neural pathways that are characteristic of learning a new skill.[3],[4] In effect, their brain gets a bigger workout when it's figuring things out for itself versus being told what to do—and as we know, workouts build strength, fitness, and flexibility for future challenges.

With all that in mind, the best leaders I know hold back some of their instinct to instruct when a colleague needs help. Wherever possible, instead of telling them what to do ("Here's what your next step should be"), they push their colleague to think for themselves as much as possible ("What do you think you should do next?"). This question-oriented management approach is widely known as "coaching."

When you hear that word, you might naturally think of sports coaching. Workplace coaching involves less shouting (ideally), but it shares something with the sports version: It helps "players" improve while the coach supports from the sidelines, without grabbing the ball themselves. "Coaching" might also call to mind executive coaches who can be hired to support and develop people on your team—in which case, you might be thinking "that's their job, not mine." But the core skill of coaching is something every leader can and should learn for themselves, because research shows that the returns are clear: **When leaders adopt more of a coaching style, their teams become more self-sufficient, proactive, accountable, and committed.**[5],[6] So let's look at how you can be more of a coach in just about any conversation you have with colleagues.

THE ROLE MODEL

Shellye Archambeau has spent three decades leading technology companies—from her early years as an executive at IBM, to her time as CEO of risk

software firm MetricStream, to her current role on two Fortune 500 boards. Throughout, she's been a vocal advocate for the importance of capability-building—not just on her own teams, but more broadly through her nonprofit Ignite Ambition, which helps young professionals develop the mindset and tools to succeed in their careers. In short: She thinks deeply about what it takes to help people grow.

She says two pivotal conversations helped her grasp the full importance of coaching her colleagues. The first came while she was at IBM. "I was working hard, striving to do a good job so I'd get the next opportunity," she says. "But a mentor said to me: 'Shellye, you realize they're not going to promote you if they don't think they can replace you. You've got to make your people good enough that they can succeed without you.' " The other conversation was with Bill Campbell, the legendary Silicon Valley leader and coach. Shellye recalls: "He said a leader's number one job is to develop more leaders. His point was that you can grow your customer base, you can grow your business—but if you don't also grow your people to manage that business, it's going to fail."

Together, she says, those two conversations made both the personal and business case for coaching "crystal clear." Shellye decided to borrow Campbell's phrase and make it her own: "It became my mantra that my top priority was to 'build more leaders.' " And she soon discovered it was both effective and satisfying: "It is just so fun to see your people achieve more over time."

In this chapter, we'll explore the big shift that Shellye made to become a great coach to her teams, which was to stop giving them so much advice. "Unless it's an emergency, once you've acknowledged whatever problem they have—'You're right, that sounds like a challenge'—I learned your next step must be to ask questions rather than automatically solve problems for them," she says. "It might seem faster to tell them what to do, but they won't learn much that way. And if people get used to waiting for you to solve things, you become a bottleneck."

Dialing back on the advice-giving can be a challenge. For many leaders, it requires a shift of identity, from seeing yourself as the smartest person in

the room to being the person who makes the whole room smarter. You can still be a great problem-solver, but the problem you're solving now isn't the work itself—it's how to help your people become ever more capable of doing the work. Shellye admits, "At the beginning, it felt scary as hell to let go. But you have to take a breath and remind yourself: This is how they'll get better."

THE ADVICE: THE GUIDE MODEL OF COACHING

When someone needs your guidance, aim to replace the **instinct to instruct** with the **instinct to inquire.** Asking a good question will make them think—it's as though you're running a command in their brain that triggers a search for insight and builds new mental connections. The kind of question you're aiming for is one that invites your colleague to explore their thinking out loud. Not a disguised suggestion ("Have you thought about doing X or Y?") and not a yes/no prompt ("Did you try asking them?"), but a question like:

- *"So tell me, how are you thinking about this?"*

If you remember no other coaching tip beyond that question, you'll already be making your colleague's brain lift more weight than if you lead with "You know, what I think you should do is…"

Once you've built the habit of opening with a question instead of a suggestion, there are other coaching questions you can have in your back pocket to help you push your colleague's thinking further. For that, I offer the **GUIDE** model, named for the acronym of its five steps. In the rest of this chapter, we'll walk through those steps, and then I'll share a sample GUIDE coaching conversation based on an example from Shellye. Here's the summary:

1. Ask them to get clear on their **GOAL**
2. Explore their **UNDERSTANDING** of the issue
3. Surface their **IDEAS** (before adding yours)
4. **DEEPEN** their thinking through constructive challenge
5. **ENABLE** them to take action

» Sample coaching exchange using the **GUIDE** model

» Bonus Tip: Help colleagues develop new skills by drawing on their existing strengths

At the end of the chapter, you'll see a bonus tip on helping colleagues learn new skills by harnessing their existing strengths. And in the Spotlight section that follows, I'll add some advice on creating developmental experiences to help your colleagues grow. First, let's get started with the GUIDE model.

1. Ask them to get clear on their GOAL

When you realize that there's a possible coaching moment happening—perhaps you find yourself about to dispense some general advice, or tell a colleague specifically what they should do next—your first step is to catch yourself before wading in with a suggestion. Take a beat, and send the ball back to your colleague by asking them to articulate what they are trying to achieve. As Shellye puts it: "Get them to define what they really want to do, fix, or impact." Why start here? As we saw in Chapter 8, getting your colleagues to be clear on a **Goal** focuses their attention, which typically raises their performance as a result.[7] So, say:

- *"Let's take a step back for a moment—what's your real goal here?"*

This question works whether they originated the conversation or you did. For example, they might have brought you a stakeholder issue that you think they could solve for themselves. In which case, your question to them might get a response like, "Well, my real goal is to figure out how to get all of our stakeholders on board with our rollout plan." Or, maybe you're discussing some feedback that your colleague hasn't yet managed to take on

board—in which case their answer to your question might be, "Well, I hear you on the need to get better at competitive analysis. So my real goal is to figure out how to do that in practice, because I'm not actually sure where to start." You can also ask this goal-setting question in the middle of any one-to-one, whenever it sounds like your colleague is stuck.

If they still sound fuzzy or overwhelmed, try lightening the cognitive load by asking them a narrower question focused on the immediate conversation:

- *"What aspect of this issue would be most helpful for us to talk through right now?"*

2. Explore their UNDERSTANDING of the issue

Next up in GUIDE: Even if you think you know what they should do, asking your colleague to share their **Understanding** of the situation is an essential coaching move. It does three things at once. First, simply explaining something out loud has been found to improve people's understanding of a topic.[8] Second, it gives you insight into how clearly they're seeing things, and where you might need to help them clarify their thinking. Third, when people feel they're being listened to, studies suggest the quality of the conversation goes up.[9]

Shellye often starts this part of the conversation with a simple, open prompt:

- *"What do you understand about the situation?"*

If time allows, here are some good follow-ups to encourage deeper reflection:

- *"What are the biggest challenges in tackling this?"*
- *"What have you tried so far, and what did you learn from that?"*
- *"Where is this going well—and where is it not?"*

As they talk, you can also help them structure their thoughts by **summarizing what they say.** That has a few benefits. It organizes and

sharpens their thinking—as Shellye says, "I find that if I play back specific things I've heard them say, using their language, it helps them work it through in their minds." It also shows you're paying close attention, and makes sure you haven't missed anything they were trying to say. (This isn't the place to start adding in your own ideas—we'll get to that.) For example, say:

- *"Okay, I'm hearing you say there are three big things going on."*
- *"So you said you've tried A, B, and C—and none of them have worked."*
- *"It sounds like you're saying there are two criteria for a good solution."*

3. Surface their IDEAS (before adding yours)

Once your colleague has laid out their understanding of the situation, the next step of GUIDE is to shift the conversation toward solutions, and get them to share their **Ideas** on what to do next. Your aim here is to get them thinking for themselves—so again, bite your tongue if you're ready with a suggestion. Ask:

- *"What ideas do you have about the way forward?"*

When I help leaders start to experiment with coaching, they often say to me, "Look, I already know what they should do. Am I just supposed to pretend I don't?" I would argue that no pretending is required—just sequencing. You likely do have useful advice to give, and you'll have a chance to offer it soon. But as a leader, if you jump in with your own ideas first, you rob your colleague of the chance to think for themselves. Always go second.

Moreover, your idea may not in fact be the best or only answer. Remember Elena Sukacheva's take on this in Chapter 11: "My team is much closer to the issues than I am." Your colleague may have information you don't—the view from the front line, the customer, or some other relevant perspective.

If you still find yourself wriggling with excitement because you think you know exactly what they should do, quiet your mind by acknowledging your mental chatter out loud. Say this:

- *"I have some thoughts, but I'd like to hear how you're thinking about it first."*

Keep in mind that the reason a coaching approach works so well is that you're giving your colleague's brain a workout. So if you want them to get stronger, you don't want to lift the weight for them. If you're worried that you'll forget your idea while they talk, jot down a word or two to remember it. You might find that by the time they've finished, your colleague has come up with what you had in mind, or landed on something at least as good as what you would have offered.

If you still have something to contribute, this is finally the time to add it—but in a way that sits alongside their ideas rather than squashes them. Like this:

- *"You mentioned X and Y as options. Another possibility could be Z. How does that compare?"*

You're still offering guidance, but you're doing it in a way that preserves their ownership of the issue—which increases the odds they'll leave the conversation with energy and enthusiasm. That's because of the *IKEA effect* we learned about in Chapter 8: People are more committed to ideas they've helped shape.[10]

4. DEEPEN their thinking through constructive challenge

Sometimes, your colleague comes up with a solution, and—as Shellye puts it—"I want to love it, but it's not clear they've thought it through." Or maybe they've come up with ten ideas, and need help narrowing them down. Or, they've leapt to a conclusion without testing their assumptions. So the important next step of the GUIDE model is to help them **Deepen** and sharpen their thinking, while still leaving them in the driver's seat. Here are

four coaching strategies that will help you do that, drawing on some techniques we've seen in other chapters.

a. Kick the tires on a single idea

When someone's already landed on a favored solution, help them pressure-test it by asking:

- *"What would have to be true for that to work? What else would need to be in place?"*

Shellye uses this one a lot. "Sometimes answering it properly requires them to do some research," she says. "So I get people to go away and do that homework, gather the evidence, then come back and tell me what they've learned—and what that means for the plan they should now map out."

b. Help them choose between options

If your colleague has a laundry list of options, you can help them refine their thinking by asking:

- *"What's your real aim, here?"*
- *"So, what are the criteria for an ideal solution?"* (e.g., simplicity, speed, stakeholder support)
- Then: *"How would you rate your options against those criteria?"*
- Then: *"Which option looks most promising?"*

This is a miniature version of the ACORN model we covered in Chapter 4, and it's a great way to improve their decision-making without you doing the deciding for them.

c. Build on their thinking

Let's recap a routine we encountered in Chapter 7, on how to debate someone's point of view without deflating them. Say:

- *"Here's what I like about your idea…"* Be as specific as possible. Even if you don't love the conclusion they reached, you can often

recognize an element of the thinking behind it ("I like that you pulled in data from the front line to model this.")
- *"Here's what would make me like that idea even more…"* Maybe you'd want them to gather stronger evidence or set a more realistic timeline. You can be blunt here, as long as you took care to start with what you appreciate.

This also channels what we learned in Chapter 12, about the power of sharing appreciative as well as developmental feedback, when you want to keep someone motivated.

d. Reduce their blind spots

Everyone is affected by the cognitive shortcuts we covered in Chapters 1 through 7, and can be helped by the perspective-widening tips I described there. For example, you'll help your colleague sharpen their thinking if you ask them a version of the Consider the Opposite questions from Chapter 3, to surface and examine their assumptions:

- Get them to identify their main assumptions: *"What are you assuming about the situation or the solution?"*
- For each of the biggest assumptions: *"Let's test that assumption for a moment. What would be the opposite?"* (So, for example, the opposite of "We have to find a solution within the next week" would be "We don't have to find a solution within the next week.")
- Then ask: *"What evidence do you have that the opposite might be true?"* There may not be much they can come up with, but the point is to loosen their grip on the idea that there is only one way to see the situation. (In the case above, perhaps it becomes clear that there could be more flexibility in the schedule than they had first realized.)
- Finally, ask: *"Does that change what you think the right way forward could be?"*

Any of these four approaches will do more to build their critical thinking skills than simply telling them, "I think you're wrong" or "I just don't see it

working." Their logic might well turn out to be rock solid. But if your colleague uncovers a flaw in their own analysis thanks to your questions, the insight is more likely to stick in their mind and make their thinking stronger for the next time.

5. ENABLE them to take action

After helping your colleague refine their thinking, the last step of GUIDE is to make sure they're ready to take action. That means checking they're clear on what needs to happen next, and that they have the resources to get it done. As Shellye says: "You create momentum at this point by asking them very practical questions focused on the details of what they need to do right away." Ask:

- *"What are your specific next steps?"*
- *"What support or input do you need, from me or others?"*

The more precise you can get them to be, the better. If they say, "I guess I'll reach out to the Customer Experience team to get data," sharpen their commitment by saying, "Great—who exactly will you contact? What will you ask them for? And when will you do that?" If they say, "I'll try to be more on top of what our competitors are doing," get them to something more specific, like "I'll block out two hours every Thursday morning to do more horizon-scanning."

Finally, one pro-level question to ask:

- *"What's likely to be the hardest part, and what will help you find a way through that?"*

Here, you're walking them through what psychologists call *implementation intentions:* not only making a plan, but also anticipating potential obstacles and deciding ahead of time how to respond. Studies suggest this can triple the likelihood of success, which is a very appealing payoff for a few minutes' investment—so it's a powerful last coaching question to add whenever you can.[11]

≫ Sample coaching conversation using the GUIDE model

Here's an example of how the GUIDE model can play out, based on a story Shellye told me about a supply chain challenge at one of her companies. Let's say a colleague comes to you with a concern about an external supplier, and you decide to take a coaching approach to that conversation. Here's how that might go (useful phrases for you are in bold):

G: Goal

You: "So tell me, what's the real goal here?"
Them: "To make sure our new product launch isn't derailed by the supplier situation."
You: "And what would a good outcome look like?"
Them: "What we really need is to find an alternative supplier with quality we can trust. Ideally without blowing the budget or delaying the timeline too much."
You: "Okay—so it sounds like reliability is key for this. Cost and speed are also important."
[Playing back what you heard them say.]

U: Understanding

You: "What's your understanding of the situation right now?"
Them: "Eighty percent of our supply comes from a partner that's recently had some financing issues. We've had two late shipments from them already."
You: "And what have you already tried?"
Them: "I reached out to one of the solid backup suppliers we identified a while back, and they still seem good and interested, but they haven't worked with our specs before."

I: Ideas

You: "So what are you thinking about possible ways forward?"
Them: "We could double down with our current supplier and stay more on top of them to manage the risk more tightly. Or we could call it, and onboard the second supplier even though they're less experienced."
You: "Sure. Any other ideas? I have one, but let me let you finish your thought first."
Them: "Hmm. [They pause to think. **You wait.**] Maybe we could defer part of the launch—fewer units, or countries—so we're less exposed in the early phase?"
You: "I was thinking the same thing. It might give a less experienced supplier some time to get up the learning curve. I think it's possible the Sales team would be willing to dial things back slightly if they understood that it would pay off in terms of reliability."
[Sharing your thought second, after they go first.]

D: Deepen

You: "Okay, we have a few options. What would have to be true for each one to work?"

Them: "Sticking with our existing supplier, you'd have to assume that a serious conversation would be enough to get them delivering on time again. That's probably unrealistic. To get a new supplier onboarded, we'd need to believe that we could do an accelerated ramp-up without any teething problems—that's also unlikely. I'm not sure which choice is worse."
You: "Hmm, you say 'choice'—can I ask, what are you assuming here?"
Them: [Pause.] "That's interesting—I was assuming this had to be either-or. But we could go for a hybrid solution. There's probably nothing to be lost from one more push to see if we can get our current supplier to commit to reliability, even if it means they reduce volume. Then, we bring on the second supplier in parallel—and also try to soften the timeline on the launch."

E: Enable

You: "Great. So what do you need to do next?"
Them: "I'll get rough quotes from the second supplier, and map how the launch schedule could be tweaked."
You: "What's going to be the hardest part?"
Them: "Getting colleagues to agree to some of the launch being deferred."
You: "And what could help with that?"
Them: "If I can show the risk of not being able to fulfill orders is worse than the cost of a slower rollout."
You: "What support do you need?"
Them: "I'd love a quick check from you on the financial assumptions before I pitch this to Sales."
You: "I'm happy to help with that. What's your timeline?"
Them: "I'll send you something by end of day tomorrow."

Being coached in this way isn't easy. You're asking your colleague to think deeply, come up with new ideas, and commit to taking action. But you're also equipping them to learn and grow in a way that will last long beyond the current challenge.

Shellye has a **particular way of ending the conversation** that highlights this growth in capability. "When they reach a solution," she says, "I always try to finish the conversation by saying, 'Listen, I knew you could figure this out.' It builds up their confidence that they can handle it themselves next time."

A final piece of advice on using the GUIDE model: If this feels like a big change in how you operate, consider telling your team that you're trying to adopt more of a coaching style in your conversations with them. You'll

get more impact from the changes you're making if they understand why you're giving them more space to think and learn.

≫ Bonus Tip: Help colleagues learn new skills by drawing on their existing strengths

Encouraging a colleague to try new things and work out solutions for themselves often helps them learn a lot. But it's not always comfortable or pleasant, because most new learning involves a period of feeling less competent before a new skill feels solid. That means your colleague's motivation can flag, if their brain's *reward system* isn't getting the signals of competence that it craves. So it's a smart move to also encourage them to **draw on their strengths** when they're facing something that's a fresh challenge.

Say, for example, that someone on your team is preparing to make their first board presentation, and they're nervous. There's a risk they'll freeze and fail to shine under pressure. But you happen to know they're great at anticipating others' needs and concerns—so you highlight that strength and suggest they draw on it. "What might each board member be most worried or curious about?" you ask them. Your colleague comes to life as they think this through, and it quickly becomes clearer to them which questions their slides should address. By suggesting that your colleague plays to their capacity for interpersonal insight, you help them feel more competent, the task feels more manageable, and the resulting confidence boost helps them deliver a strong presentation.

There's plenty of evidence to support this strategy. When you encourage people to play to their strengths, it's been shown to boost their productivity and job satisfaction, improve your overall leadership effectiveness, and—you'll be glad to hear—deliver bottom-line results as well.[12],[13],[14] Of course this doesn't mean that people should only do what they're already good at. But it does mean you can suggest they draw on their talents and experience as stabilizing anchors when they're out of their comfort zone.

So, when a colleague is tackling something tough:

- **Highlight their talents:** Tell them what you've noticed they're especially good at. (Or ask: *"What have you been told by others*

that you're good at?")

- **Tap into their experience:** Ask *"Can you think of a time you've succeeded at something like this before?"*
- **Then translate that to the current task:** Ask *"How might that talent and experience help you here?"*

Shellye recommends starting that discussion well before a dip in confidence starts to bite. She says, "In your regular one-to-ones, you can help people learn what their strengths are, just by giving them positive feedback about what you see them doing well." If there's a weakness holding them back, Shellye says, "sure, you've got to give them feedback on that. But in general, I believe we should do more to encourage our people to lean into their strengths, because that's how they'll outperform and differentiate themselves over time."

(In Chapter 14, we'll also look at the power of doing a collective strengths assessment with your whole team.)

As a result of coaching and developing her colleagues so deliberately over the years, Shellye not only drew the best out of them while they worked for her, she also left them stronger—to the point that dozens of her past direct reports have now gone on to become C-suite executives in major companies (five of them CEOs). She also taught them all to make it a priority to coach their own teams as they advanced. She adds: "It holds people back as leaders if they like to be perceived as the smartest person in the room, because that means nobody on their team gets to step up, learn, or contribute all that they could. But if you make space for your people to think for themselves, that's when things change—and that's when you become a true engine of talent."

SPOTLIGHT ON: Creating Developmental Experiences

Once you've mastered everyday coaching, you might want to try other ways to accelerate the learning trajectory of your people. You can do a lot to help high-potential employees grow into the next version of themselves by exposing them to some richly developmental situations: **stretch assignments, front-of-room moments,** and what Shellye Archambeau calls **"show and explain."**

Special projects: A well-judged stretch

When someone's not quite ready for a promotion but you think they're close, a tailored stretch assignment can be a perfect next step. Maybe there's a piece of work you've been meaning to tackle, or a task that needs doing but doesn't sit cleanly in anyone's job description—like researching a new market or preparing a high-stakes meeting. As Shellye says: "There are always initiatives that need managing and thinking through—and the people you most want to develop are the ones to put forward for those leadership opportunities."

Tips for identifying a special development project:

- Keep it **well defined and time-limited,** with clear expectations for success.
- Don't mix this up with **"office housework."** Low-status tasks like taking notes or fetching coffee won't get anyone promoted, and should be spread fairly across the team. This is about real work that allows people to show off valuable skills.
- **Be careful about workload.** Check whether anything needs to come off their plate, so they have time to do this project justice. The last thing you want is for this to end up as a setback for them because they underdeliver on something else.

- **Make your intent explicit.** Shellye points out: "People don't always realize you've given them extra things to do because you're investing in them. It seems like it should be obvious, but it's actually important to let them know."

Front-of-room exposure: Let them lead

Handing someone the mic, literally or figuratively, can be a high-impact developmental move. I was prepping a client pitch many years ago when my boss (Keith, from Chapter 5) said, "Caroline, I think you should lead the section about developing the executive team." It would have been natural for him to take that piece himself, since he was one of the top experts in our firm on this. But he stepped back and let me step forward. It was my big chance to start showing up as an expert myself, rather than just a sidekick, and it amplified my confidence tremendously.

It takes alertness and generosity to put other people forward when you would normally take the reins, but these opportunities abound once you look for them. For example, Shellye says, "If one of my direct reports has been working on a topic that I'm asked to speak about, I might tell the meeting organizer: 'I'll be there, but I'd love for my colleague to take the lead.' Or maybe I suggest they present one part and I fill in the rest. The key is putting them in front, whenever and however you can."

Show and explain: Debrief the tricky stuff

Even when your colleague isn't the one in front, you can invite them into higher-stakes situations they wouldn't usually see—and then talk through what they observed. Shellye calls this "show and explain."

She remembers using this approach with her head of services when her company was falling behind on some customer promises. She brought him into a tense client meeting, which she kicked off in an unexpectedly direct way. She told the client: "Listen, I'm really upset that we've let you down. You put your confidence in us; you put your reputation on the line. And I'm sorry.' " She didn't try to make excuses for the situation, instead leading with that heartfelt apology. The customer, a little taken aback, said, "You're

right—and, ah, thank you." From there, Shellye promised: "We'll not only fix the issue, but we'll also work to repair your reputation. I want you to be able to count on us." The conversation was a successful turning point in her company's relationship with that client.

Afterward, she debriefed the meeting with her colleague, discussing the way she had taken full responsibility for the impact their delay was having on their client. "I wanted him to notice what I did, and why, because it wasn't exactly the standard approach," she says. That debrief turned into a playbook for him. Years later, when he became a CEO himself, he told Shellye, "I learned so much from watching you in that one meeting." That lasting magic comes, she says, "from taking the time to say: 'Notice what I did. Now let's talk about those choices, so you have more in your toolkit when you become the leader I know you're going to become.' "

CHAPTER 14

How to Strengthen Team Collaboration

THE CHALLENGE

If you have more than one direct report, the way they relate to each other is a huge driver of their motivation to do good work. Research tells us that people are more productive and less likely to quit when they feel positive about their closest working relationships, even after controlling for factors like role, tenure, and pay.[1],[2] It's not surprising, given how wired for social connection we are: You can see on a brain scan how collaborating with others lights up the brain's *reward system*.[3]

It's not just one-to-one relationships that matter, either—group dynamics are key. If people believe their team is made up of competent, decent, and reliable colleagues, research shows the group performs better as a whole.[4] That's because they waste less time second-guessing and checking on each other, which speeds up delivery and decision-making; they also help each other out and share information more readily, which boosts the team's ability to innovate and solve problems. In other words, mutual trust makes it easier for groups to achieve the kind of *collective intelligence* we saw in Chapter 7. So how do you build more of that collaborative spirit in your own team?

Each relationship between your colleagues has its own patterns and swirls, and you can't control it all. But there's plenty you can do to create a high-performance group dynamic, and that's what this chapter is about. Here's some of the evidence behind the advice I'll offer:

- **Shared identity.** When a group of people feel part of a common "us"—what psychologists call a sense of *in-group*—they're more likely to collaborate with and support one another, and more likely to feel motivated by each other's successes (not just their own).[5],[6]
- **Shared work.** A reliable way to create that *in-group* effect is to do some real work together.[7] There's a performance benefit to that, as well as trust: As we saw in Chapter 7, teams can get to better answers than individuals when they pool their perspectives. Multiple pairs of eyes on a complex topic usually means fewer blind spots.
- **Shared appreciation and understanding.** When teammates learn to recognize one another's strengths and understand one another's quirks, it boosts morale, makes people more forgiving of small frustrations, and raises overall team performance.[8]
- **Shared rituals.** Regular routines reinforce the team's sense of identity, and create some of the reliability and steadiness that's an important part of trust.[9] Agreeing on a few norms for how you treat one another also encourages more open dialogue and less defensive behavior, making it easier for each person to perform at their best.[10]

Once you start building this fellow feeling, you can eventually reach a tipping point, because emotions are contagious. When people feel good about working together, others will typically sense it and mirror it back.[11], [12] So let's look at how you can get to that happy tipping point.

THE ROLE MODEL

Blanca Juti has built successful teams in just about every corner of the world. She started her career at the Mexican embassy in Finland, before rising to the top ranks of global companies such as Nokia, Rovio, and Heineken. In addition to Helsinki, she's lived and worked in Mexico City, Amsterdam, Dallas, Cambridge, and Paris—and she speaks more languages than it's polite to count. Today, she serves as Chief Corporate Affairs and Engagement Officer at L'Oréal, one of the world's largest consumer goods companies, overseeing a global team of hundreds of professionals.

It sounds like a dream role—but when Blanca first took it on, it was far from easy. “At the time,” she recalls, “our group was not very well respected in the company, and we were fragmented across silos.” It became clear that she needed to knit together a team that didn’t feel like they were a team, and systematically reenergize people who felt undervalued. She says, “I had to help them see that they could become much more than they thought, if they worked together.”

What helped was that Blanca isn’t just a seasoned executive—she’s also an anthropologist by training. She brought to the task a deep sense of how people behave in groups, and how shared experiences shape collective identity. “I understand the value of group identity and all the rituals that support it,” she says. “And as a result of us building those things, we now have a strong community. I sometimes say it’s like we’re a big-band orchestra, playing beautifully together.”

So how did she create that sense of harmonious excellence? The rest of this chapter explores the principles and practices she used to transform a disparate group of individuals into a cohesive, energized team—and how you can apply those same ideas in your own workplace.

THE ADVICE: THE 4 HS OF TEAM INSPIRATION

To strengthen trust and collaboration within your team, research suggests you invest in building four things: a sense of shared endeavor, mutual appreciation of each other’s professional talents, a shared understanding of each other as people, and team routines and commitments to underpin it all. I call these four factors **Handshakes, Heroes, Humans,** and **Habits:** the 4 Hs of Team Inspiration.

To build that in your team, you can of course make big strides with in-depth sessions in “step back and reflect” settings like quarterly meetings or annual offsites. But there’s also a lot you can do within your team’s ongoing weekly and monthly interactions. So under each heading, I’ve included one

in-depth session and one ongoing process that you can use. Here's a snapshot of what we'll cover:

HANDSHAKES: Shared endeavor

- Common Goal: Step back and agree on **joint ownership** of at least one goal
- Brag and Borrow: Encourage **ongoing mutual support** with a powerful question

HEROES: Shared appreciation

- Strengths Assessment: Take the time to run an exercise that **surfaces everyone's strengths**
- Mingle and Master: Create an ongoing process for colleagues to **teach things they know**

HUMANS: Shared understanding

- Past-Present-Future: Pause to share **structured stories** to deepen mutual understanding
- Open Space: Make ongoing room for unstructured **casual conversation**

HABITS: Shared routines

- Pressure Pact: Agree on the **supportive behaviors** you want to see from one another at tricky moments
- Meeting Rhythm: Establish an **ongoing cadence** of interactions that support team cohesion

HANDSHAKES: Shared endeavor

The surest way to bond a team, and create a feeling of shared identity, is to do some real work together. There are a couple of ways for you to think about this.

Common Goal: Step back and agree on joint ownership of at least one goal

The first approach is to find at least one big goal that your team can own jointly over the coming year (or quarter), where everyone contributes in some way. Ask yourself, if you haven't already:

- *What am I trying to achieve as a leader that would be easier if the team worked on it jointly?*
- *What new thing could be possible if we worked together to achieve it?*

Sharing real work was the first big turning point in Blanca's efforts to transform her team. "Initially, every communications professional across the organization was doing whatever they wanted," she told me. "We didn't coordinate anything centrally. Silos are not always bad, but for my function, they're super bad. If the media is receiving different messages from various parts of the business, they don't know what we're trying to say." That business need for greater coherence gave Blanca a clear rationale for aligning her communications team more intentionally around a shared goal: to become more like what she calls "an editorial house." She explains: "It meant a coordinated set of messages, a shared editorial calendar, and a common way of working. It took some work, but it has turned out very well." For the first time, the team felt "in it" together.

For some of you, the importance of having a shared team goal is obvious, and you'll be scratching your head about why this is tip #1. But it's not always that obvious. I've seen several leaders who run a team along "hub-and-spoke" lines, where multiple colleagues report in to the boss while doing no real work together. If that sounds familiar, and even if your direct reports have highly individualized responsibilities, there's still usually one kind of work that they can all collaborate on: creating and sustaining the operating culture you want to see in your part of the organization.

I saw this with one CFO I coached. His most senior direct reports had no real team interaction beyond occasional update meetings—and yet, the CFO felt the broader finance function could be working together more effectively, for instance in how they shared data with each other. It turned out that his direct reports agreed with his ideas, and championing these changes gave them the common cause that had been previously missing.

Brag and Borrow: Encourage ongoing mutual support with a powerful question

Another way to build a feeling of "doing real work together" is to ask everyone the following two-part question in your regular meetings:

- *"What's one thing that's gone well since we last met…*
- *…and what's one thing where you could use some help or encouragement?"*

It gives people a snapshot of what everyone else is working on, as well as highlighting where they can assist one another. Over time, it normalizes the idea that your team exists not just to execute each person's own work, but to support each other along the way. I've heard a few names for this—one I like is "Brag and Borrow," because it makes clear that it's okay to feel proud when something goes well, and also that the team is there to lend a hand when you need it. The key is to be consistent in your language, so people are ready for the question.

It's a good idea to set the tone by going first—for example, to model candor and brevity. You can choose to split the question and do the positive part as a check-in at the start, and the support part as a wrap-up at the end. You can also set a norm that there's no need to discuss everybody's upcoming challenge in detail there and then, unless it lends itself to a group conversation. You can simply encourage people to make an offer to help, then follow up separately (*"I have an idea for you; let's chat afterward"*).

HEROES: Shared appreciation

To reiterate the main theme of this "Intrinsic Inspiration" part of the book, motivation at work comes down to two core things: feeling competent in what you're doing, and feeling happily connected to others. Recognition from co-workers is one of the surest ways to deliver both of those psychological rewards, so you want plenty of it in a well-functioning team. Here are a couple of tried-and-tested ways I've seen leaders encourage it.

Strengths Assessment: Take the time to run an exercise that surfaces everyone's strengths

In Chapter 13, we looked at the performance boost you get by encouraging an individual colleague to tap into their strengths, especially when you're coaching them on something they're finding difficult. Here, I want to highlight the benefits of doing a structured strengths assessment as a team, because it builds a lot of mutual respect when everyone understands the strengths each person brings to the table. Some strengths are obvious from the work people do—your finance person is hopefully a whiz at finance—but less technical skills are often less obvious. They might be strengths related to personality traits that haven't had a chance to shine, or related to experience that hasn't yet been called on.

So it's a smart (and enjoyable) idea to use a strengths assessment tool with your team, if you haven't already. If you all use the same tool, the results will give your colleagues a shared vocabulary for calling on one another's talents. One CEO told me that after taking a strengths assessment test with her direct reports, "we discovered that one person on the team had a particular ability to 'see the glass half full' when the rest of us could not. So when the team got into a spiral of doom about having to cut the budget, we remembered she was the 'glass half full' person, and we all turned to her to help us stay positive and keep pushing along the path. It was very useful for everyone."

Blanca confirms that learning each other's strengths has been central to creating strong bonds on her team. "In my first years in the role, we had an offsite every six months, and we all did an assessment at the first one to learn our strengths and our weaknesses. Then, we had a very honest conversation about the results. It increased everyone's confidence in each other's capabilities, and helped everyone get to know and trust each other more deeply." Now, every time someone new joins the team, they take the opportunity to review the group's strengths as a whole. She adds that doing a team strengths analysis also helps you see where your team's overall gaps are, and therefore how to compensate for them more proactively: "On the

personality traits we have very little of in the team, we take extra care to seek out other people who have a different view."

If you've already done one of these with your team, that's terrific. Don't hesitate to do it again every year or two, because adults' personalities continue to evolve more than we once thought.[13],[14] There are several strengths assessment tools based on this science-supported view of personality—if you're wondering which to use, visit carolinewebb.co/leadershipintelligence for ideas.

Mingle and Master: Create an ongoing process for colleagues to teach things they know

When one of your colleagues teaches the team something they know, it raises everyone's respect for them, lifts their confidence, and adds to the collective stock of team knowledge. That's why some teams create rituals where members teach each other bite-sized skills that can be conveyed in a short space of time. Sometimes it's a work-related tip (a tool, a workflow, a body of knowledge); I've seen other teams open up the process to include skills from outside the workplace. Find a rhythm that works for your team, and give it a name. "Lunch and Learn" is the classic, but "Mingle and Master" works even better across time zones.

A few tips to make it stick:

- Keep the session short-ish so that it's easy for people to fit into their calendar.
- Give whoever is the "teacher" a simple structure to guide them, for example:
  - What I'm sharing
  - Why it matters
  - How I learned it
  - How you can do it
  - A standard close, such as each person sharing one takeaway
- Set up a shared document to track the topics people cover, so it becomes a directory of team expertise.

Some leaders weave these slots into regular meetings as a recurring feature; Blanca has standalone team learning events at least a couple of times a month. She says: “It’s fun, and it’s been a good way to emphasize that everyone’s talents make up a piece of the puzzle in the success of the team.”

HUMANS: Shared understanding

Next, it’s worth helping people on your team get to know one another more broadly. When your colleagues see their teammates as fellow human beings, it’s easier for them to assume that others are acting with good intent —even if they disappoint or irritate each other in some way. For example, perhaps your team will understand why someone always seems low-energy once they realize this person is currently getting up very early to care for a sick parent before work. Or perhaps they’ll have more tolerance for a colleague’s apparently nitpicking queries after they discover he once spotted an error in a spreadsheet that saved his previous company from going bust. Here are two ways to encourage that shared understanding.

Past-Present-Future: Pause to share structured stories to deepen mutual understanding

Some people feel unsure about sharing anything personal unless there’s a clear brief and obvious symmetry in what’s being asked of everyone. This exercise provides that structure. At your next longer meeting, or over a team dinner, ask each person on your team to share:

- One **peak moment** from their **past,** one from their **present,** and one from their hoped-for **future**

People can choose how much or how little to share, and you can go first to set the tone. Asking just that “peak moment” question is powerful enough. But depending on the time you have available, you can also follow up with a matching question that draws out the bumpier side of life in the same structured, safe way. Ask them:

- One **challenge** they've overcome in the **past,** one they're dealing with at **present,** and one they anticipate in the **future**

If you're meeting in person (or are adept with virtual whiteboards), it can help to add some visual scaffolding, like this: Label three different areas with the headings **PAST, PRESENT,** and **FUTURE.** Ask each person to write one or two words on a sticky note for each of their answers—just enough to help the group keep track—and then stick their note in the relevant area when they share.

In my experience, this exercise has both short-term and long-term value, because teams tend to refer back to it again and again. (When one skeptical CEO I coached finally led a Past-Present-Future discussion with his team, he said it was the single best thing he'd ever done to boost mutual trust.)

Open Space: Make ongoing room for unstructured casual conversation

If you think about the strongest relationships you've enjoyed with colleagues over the years, you'll know that the best moments of connection sometimes happen when you're not hard at work. That's why it's a good idea to create opportunities for informal conversations on your team.

It doesn't have to be over drinks; it's not always easy for people to hang out after hours when they have a family. Blanca keeps it simple: **"**Every other Wednesday I have lunch with my team. It's not business. We just eat and have a great time together." She adds: "I've generally found that people are eager to come together and chat. They just sometimes need a framework that gives them permission."

In remote work, there's less opportunity for relaxed conversation to happen organically, but it's still possible to encourage it. Gayle Tait (who we'll hear more from in Chapter 19) was once the CEO of a company with a fully remote workforce. She set up "no-agenda" drop-in video calls that allowed her team to spend unstructured time together. "I would tell them, 'I'm hanging out online for this time slot, come and join me,' " she says,

“and it was great at replacing some of the water cooler serendipity you get from working in person.”

HABITS: Shared routines

Finally, you want to make sure you have reliable routines that hold the team together. That means getting clear on how you want to behave with each other, and how you will interact on an ongoing basis. Let’s tackle each of those in turn.

Pressure Pact: Agree on the positive behaviors you want to see from one another at tricky moments

To underpin a high-performance team environment, it helps to agree on a few behavioral norms for situations where trust tends to come under pressure—and then, for you as the leader to actually make use of these agreements to shape your team’s interactions when times get tough.

(Why this focus on tricky situations? Because many teams spend a perfectly pleasant session at a relaxed offsite talking about how they want to behave with each other—only to have those good intentions fall away on a less-than-perfect day, when tensions arise.)

So, to create an agreement that you’re all more likely to use in a crunch, try the following:

- **Make time to talk with your team about what it looks and feels like to collaborate well in tough situations.** Ask them to share examples of what they’ve seen make a difference in sustaining collaboration under pressure, whether on this team or a past one. (If you already have a team behavioral charter, use that to prompt discussion.) This helps you tap into what the team already knows about the right way to handle tensions well.
- **Get them to suggest two or three very specific behaviors they’d like to sign up for (or prioritize from an existing charter).** This is your “Pressure Pact.” To make it easy to remember, keep the list short and focused on specific tricky situations. Consider giving each

behavior a simple name, to make it easier to refer to in a meeting. The following often cover what matters most:

  - **When someone does something you don't like:** "Assume good intent." When a teammate does something that seems abrupt or contrary, don't assume they're deliberately trying to be a pain. Get curious and ask what's behind their behavior.
  - **When you don't agree with what's being said:** "Disagree well." That includes arguing the point, not the person, and starting from where people agree (as in the Common Ground technique in Chapter 6, and the What I Like technique in Chapter 7).
  - **When there's tension between individual efficiency and team integration:** "Take the team view." That means erring on the side of including others and sharing information freely across the team, rather than keeping things to yourself.

- **Discuss what this will look like in real-life situations.** Talk about some upcoming or hypothetical situations where these norms will be useful, like the next budget round or talent review. The more you talk about practical application—"So, if we disagree about the right cost allocation, what we'll do is…"—the more likely it is that these habits will stick. (You can also talk about recent situations where this pact might have helped. If you do this, make sure to focus the discussion on learnings for the future, not blame for the past.)

Once the team has signed up to their Pressure Pact, the leader plays a crucial role in keeping the agreement alive. For example, when tension rises in the room, you might say, "Hey, this is one of those moments we need to assume good intent. Let's try that, please." You should also appreciate moments when people do the right thing: "Thanks for taking the team view and making sure the team knows about this problem—as a result, we can all pitch in to help fix this."

You also need to take action if someone repeatedly undermines the behavior you've agreed on as a team. Most of the leaders in this book have

had someone on their team who repeatedly interrupts others, withholds useful information, goes behind people's backs, or generally behaves like they're not acting in the team's interests. If this happens more than once, you need to move quickly to have a feedback conversation with the person who's not behaving like a team player, before it impacts your team's ability to get things done. Blanca is clear on the importance of acting swiftly on this: "One thing I absolutely will not tolerate is if people are disrespectful of others in the team."

Meeting Rhythm: Establish an ongoing cadence of interactions that support team cohesion

Skip this if you do it already, but I've worked with a few leaders who had no standing meetings set up with their team. There can definitely be too many things in the calendar—but if you have too few touchpoints with your team, you lose the glue that binds people together.

There's no single right answer on how often or how long your team meetings should be. Some swear by daily stand-ups; some love meeting weekly or biweekly. As a leader, your goal is to find a meeting rhythm that doesn't feel onerous, and to use that time for real discussion and problem-solving (rather than just to broadcast updates that could be shared via other channels).

Blanca has two meetings each week with her team. One is her Operative Meeting: "This is a very practical review and planning meeting. We go through what happened last week, then we think about what will be the big stories of the coming week. It helps us prevent issues by looking ahead at the editorial calendar together." The other is her Cabinet Meeting, which is focused on making progress on top-priority issues. "People submit topics they want to look at with me—it could be HR, brand, or media. We make sure we're clear on how long each agenda item will take, and clear on the purpose of the slot: Is it to make a decision? For information? And I tell you, it works like magic."

She also has a monthly cadence with her wider extended team: "We actually have a tree in the middle of the office, so I always go and sit under

the tree to talk everyone through the priorities of our whole group." That's the anthropologist in her, tying a repeating ritual to a physical or audiovisual cue that makes it feel unique to the team. (I've seen another leader do something similar in a remote setting by always playing the same background music—chosen by the team—while people are joining the meeting.)

Blanca's meeting rhythm might not be quite right for your team—you may lack an indoor tree, for a start. But the point is to be intentional about the kind of focused, habitual gatherings that will help to knit your team together, making their joint work easier, more enjoyable, and more successful.

For Blanca, the effort she put into building true teamwork had an unexpected benefit. A couple of years into the job, she was diagnosed with a serious health issue—luckily, it was caught early and she's now fine—but she needed to take time off for treatment during a busy time of year. She considered trying to work part-time throughout, but, she says, "I wanted to show that health matters, and also to send the team a message that they were strong enough not to need me all the time." So, she told them she wouldn't be coming in for five weeks, and she would delegate all her work to them. When her colleagues asked what they should do with her senior meetings while she was on leave, she said: "You will handle them for me." When she returned to work, Blanca was so impressed by their performance in her absence that she kept much of the team's expanded role in place. "Of course, I'm going to my own meetings again. But I said to them, 'You've shown that you were completely on top of things.' They trusted and supported each other, and it has made us an even stronger team."

PART III

REASONED RESILIENCE

Rising to the Challenge

"While we cannot change everything about the environment we are in, we can change ourselves—to build greater strength and resilience, in spite of the headwinds around us."

—JACINDA ARDERN

THE CORE SCIENCE OF REASONED RESILIENCE

How the Brain Processes Threats

Good leadership isn't just about the good times. If all we had to do as leaders was decide on a destination and sail smoothly toward it with a happy crew, the job would be almost easy. In reality, choppy waters are the norm. Technology lurches forward in unexpected ways. The economy suddenly weakens, or a competitor suddenly strengthens. A key member of your team loses their mojo; perhaps your own energy begins to ebb. Whatever the source of difficulty, the best leaders know how to handle ups and downs in a way that helps their colleagues rise to the challenge. They lead in a way that builds resilience in everyone—including themselves.

By "resilience," I don't mean "grit your teeth and power through," nor do I mean "keep your head down and suffer quietly." I mean the ability to notice what's going on, think creatively about solutions, and adapt intelligently in the middle of a tricky situation, so you and your team can move forward with intent. This is what I call *reasoned resilience*—and you might guess what I'm going to say next: It's a lot easier to lead in a way that encourages this kind of resilience if you have some understanding of what's going on inside the brain when it's under stress.

In particular, it helps to know why the brain's defensive response to potential threats makes it hard for people to be at their best, and what tends to trigger that *defensive mode*. Then, crucially, it helps to know how to reduce that sense of threat, to get everyone's brains off the defensive and back on their game. As we'll see, the headline of the advice is this: **To maximize the chances that people will be able to rise to a challenge,**

leaders should aim to make the situation feel **manageable,** and help people find something **meaningful** in the experience if possible. Here's a summary of the core science behind that manageable-and-meaningful "double unlock," the pair of principles that will underpin the advice of the next seven chapters.

The brain in defensive mode

The first thing to know is that the brain is **constantly trying to predict what's about to happen,** so it can adjust the activity of our mind and body to help us to survive and thrive from moment to moment.[1],[2] For example, by tweaking the levels of neurochemicals in our system, it might gear up our alertness if it predicts that there's an opportunity to seize. Or it might make us feel sleepy (so we're forced to recharge our batteries) if we're not getting enough rest.[3]

We learned in Part II on "Intrinsic Inspiration" that the brain is always looking for rewards. It's also always scanning for potential threats to your well-being, whether physical or psychological. And **when the brain predicts that you're facing a potential threat, it tends to tip into *defensive mode.*** That means it boosts activity in its *salience network,* which raises its levels of vigilance and urgency, while reducing activity in the *central executive network,* which is key to deeper thinking and self-control.[4],[5] In other words, it makes us more amped up and less reflective. That might make sense in a life-or-death emergency where fast action is crucial (fire! run!). But in everyday working life, defensive mode isn't exactly ideal: it typically causes people to think less clearly, make poorer choices, and behave less collaboratively.[6],[7] So **you really want your teams to stay out of defensive mode as much as possible**—and you want that for yourself, too.

The subjectivity of stress

How can you help your team stay out of defensive mode? The answer is to send signals that keep their brain from perceiving every difficult situation as an out-and-out threat. Two insights help you do that.

The first one is that it's perfectly possible for a situation to be demanding without being perceived as stressful by the brain. It's only when something looks like it's going to be not just **demanding,** but also **unpleasant** and **uncontrollable,** that the brain registers it as a source of negative stress.[8] Looking at each of those three components:

- **"Demanding"** means it looks like our body or mind (or both) will need more physical or mental resources to rise to a challenge. That might be running to catch a bus, or working on a business proposal. On its own, this is emotionally neutral.
- **"Unpleasant"** means it looks like it's going to undermine something important to us, for example the psychological rewards of competence and connection—perhaps by making us feel out of our depth, or unfairly treated.
- **"Uncontrollable"** means it looks like it's going to be unpredictable, uncertain, or inescapable. This is often the kicker. After all, if something we're facing is demanding and unpleasant, but we can stop it whenever we want, it isn't all that stressful.

The second thing to know: To predict whether a demanding situation is going to be unpleasant and uncontrollable enough to be really stressful, the brain interprets three imperfect sources of information. The first is direct **observation:** What the brain notices in the environment right now, which is always incomplete because of *selective attention* (as we learned in Part I on "Deliberate Wisdom"). Second, it draws on **memory:** What it remembers from when something like this happened in the past, which can be unreliable.[9] Third, the brain uses **physical signals** about the way the body feels right now (this is known as *interoception*). Those physical signals give the brain broad clues on how to read what's going on—essentially, if the body feels bad, the brain is more likely to read a situation as bad.[10],[11]

So our brain can flag a situation as stressful just because we missed what someone said; we misremembered something; or we're tired, and that's making our brain's interpretation of everything more negative. In other words, stress comes from the brain's best guess—but it often isn't the

only way to interpret what's going on. And that's where there's room for us as leaders.

The leadership opportunity

If you can help your colleagues interpret a tough situation in a balanced way, you'll do a lot to keep their brains out of defensive mode. This is not about pretending things are amazing when they aren't. It's about finding ways to give people a greater sense of agency and possibility in the middle of a demanding situation.[12] Specifically: You can reduce potential stress by helping your teams feel that the challenge is somewhat **manageable** (rather than wholly uncontrollable), and perhaps even somewhat **meaningful** (rather than wholly unpleasant).

- Make things feel **more manageable:** In a situation that feels uncontrollable, try to help people feel that there is a way forward. That includes showing them that there are things they can control and choose, identifying practical steps they can take, and highlighting what's known—even if much seems uncertain.
- Make things feel **more meaningful:** In a situation that feels unpleasant, you can help people uncover what's potentially purposeful or satisfying in it. There isn't always anything straightforwardly positive to be found—but there may be something to be learned, or something to feel proud of in how you all handle the issue, or a feeling of pulling together in the face of adversity.

And, because people's brains are constantly blending information from three sources—current observations, past memories, and physical state—leaders have several channels to work with.

- As noted above, we should obviously **amplify anything in the current situation that's manageable and meaningful.**
- We can also **highlight relevant, positive experiences from the past.** Negative memories tend to be vivid, but leaders can make sure that

their colleagues also remember and draw strength from their past successes.[13]

- And we can **encourage people to invest in their physical well-being.** Helping them stay healthy, strong, and rested makes their bodies less likely to send interoceptive distress signals to their brain—making it more likely they'll feel able to rise to whatever challenge they're facing.[14],[15]

Let me say again: Our role as leaders is not to pretend that a difficult situation isn't hard. That risks making people feel misunderstood, which can make a stressful situation feel even more unpleasant and even more uncontrollable. Sometimes things are tough—a business might have to close down or cut jobs, or there might be a significant failure that harms customers or colleagues. **What leaders can do is give people good reasons to feel they can find a way through,** which helps everyone stay out of defensive mode and remain closer to their best selves as they push forward. Let's look now at how to do this in some common scenarios, to help you and your team rise to those challenges with resilience and emerge stronger on the other side.

CHAPTER 15

How to Stay Steady and Energized Under Pressure

THE CHALLENGE

It's normal for leaders to experience some stress at work. Handling high-stakes issues goes with the territory, and pursuing big goals usually requires some stretch from everyone—including you. The question is how you handle yourself under pressure. When things get rough, can you stay calm and focused on what matters? When your battery is low, are you able to reenergize yourself? And crucially: When the work feels hard, can you be a force for good in your team? You don't have to pretend everything is fine when it's not; nobody wants to be led by a robot. But you'll help everyone rise to the challenge if you can stay steady when it counts.

Here's why this is an ability you really want to cultivate as a leader:

- **Your state of mind sets the tone for your team.** When one person feels stressed, it tends to rub off on the people around them (this is *emotional contagion* again)—and that's especially true when the stressed person is the boss.[1],[2],[3] So if your team is rolling along happily but you walk in bristling with tension, they'll unconsciously start to mirror your mood. Importantly, though, the reverse is also true—if you can keep your wits about you when things get tough, your team will take a cue from your steadiness.

- **Everyone is smarter and sharper when they're not stressed—yourself included.** As we just saw in "The Core Science of Reasoned Resilience," when your brain anticipates that you're about to encounter a stressful situation—meaning one that's demanding, unpleasant, and uncontrollable—it flips into *defensive mode,* where it rebalances neural activity to prioritize rapid response over considered thought.[4] When this happens, it makes you more prone to knee-jerk reactions and less likely to see smart solutions.

The good news is that there are proven ways to get yourself out of defensive mode, so you can stay sharp under strain; we'll cover several in this chapter. And some encouragement before we dive in: **The ability to manage your mental state can be learned,** even by executives with long-established habits—and, as with any skill, you get better at it the more you practice.[5],[6] That perseverance is worth it. When leaders develop this capacity for *self-regulation* (as it's known), the results are tangible: Studies show they're rated as **more effective** by their teams, and that clearer thinking under pressure translates into **bottom-line impact.**[7]

THE ROLE MODEL

Feyzi Fatehi is Chairman and CEO of Corent Technology, and he's such an innovator in the software industry that he won the same lifetime achievement award previously given to Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, and Bill Gates. So he has a formidable analytical mind, without doubt—but what stands out even more when you talk to Feyzi is how much he works to sustain a steady level of energy and calm for his people. "I see it as my number one task as a leader, to be aware of my inner state—where my mind, my mood, and my mojo are at—and to shape it, so that I can stay grounded. This is the part of my job nobody sees, but it's the most important."

Developing your stress management skills isn't about staying calm for calm's sake—when you're a leader, it's about staying calm for everyone's sake. As Feyzi says, "As executives, we affect other people's energy just by

the words we say, the way we treat them, the way we show up at a meeting, what's in our heads. It radiates to others, and starts a chain reaction without us even realizing it. If I raise my voice or say something spiky, I can quickly trigger totally unnecessary bad vibes across the company. And that has a real impact on people's ability to do their best work."

He sometimes puts it more bluntly: "Look, if you let yourself be a jerk at work, you simply won't achieve as much. That's because eventually good people will leave you, and the rest won't perform as well as they could if you were a better leader. So even without any philosophical angle, there's a practical reason that you have to learn to manage yourself under pressure." A reminder of the science behind Feyzi's comment: behavior that's unpleasant and unpredictable tends to put your colleagues' brains in *defensive mode,* making it harder for them to think clearly and creatively. So their output might be adequate, but it simply won't be as good as if you'd kept your cool.[8]

To achieve that, Feyzi uses exactly the kinds of practices I'll describe in this chapter—an approach he refers to as "leading from the inside out," because it involves managing your inner state. He's been doing this ever since he attended a workshop on personal resilience and energy management twenty years ago, and he credits what he learned there with helping him deliver consistently excellent results in an industry that is in constant flux.

He draws on these techniques just about every day in some way, but he used them especially intensively during a tough period a few years ago—what he calls "an almost existential situation"—when his company's biggest source of financing suddenly fell through. Feyzi found out the bad news two days before payroll was due, and he says at first he couldn't see how the company was going to survive: "When I got the call, it felt like the room started spinning. I was thinking, 'What am I going to do?' It was a moment of desperation, for sure. But I knew if I lost my balance, that would be the end. So I had to muster my courage."

It took months of high-stakes work to get the company back onto stable ground, and I'll tell you now that it worked out in the end—the business is

more than thriving. And the techniques in this chapter are what Feyzi credits for getting him through that period, so let's hear more of his story.

THE ADVICE: THE FIVE RESETS

Great leaders take active steps to reset their mental state when they're worn down. They know that rough water comes with the job, but that it can be made more navigable with the right self-management strategies. The tips in this chapter—on how to Recenter, Reframe, Reward, Recharge, and Reflect—will help you stay upright as a situation is unfolding, and they'll also help you keep your mental and emotional energy topped up over time. And at the end, you'll find some additional advice on how to talk to your team about any personal stress that might be affecting your work. Here's the plan:

RECENTER: Run the ABC routine, to steady and redirect your attention
≫ Bonus Tip: Recognize your Cues and Tells, to recenter more quickly
REFRAME: Consider a different perspective, to see more possibilities
REWARD: Reconnect to what energizes you, to give yourself a boost
RECHARGE: Invest in physical activity and sleep, to build resilience
REFLECT: Do a quick daily reflection, to restore balance
≫ Bonus Tip: What to share of your stress, with Measured Authenticity

RECENTER: Run the ABC routine, to steady and redirect your attention

Researchers studying contexts as varied as sports, education, and the military have identified multiple techniques that can have a quick steadying effect and are easy to adapt to real life at work. Each helps you dampen your brain's defensive response, making it easier to reset and think clearly again.

One proven technique is *affect labeling:* naming your emotion as precisely as you can.[9] Another is *linguistic distancing:* calming your response by describing yourself or the situation from a detached

perspective, as if you were an observer or looking back from the future.[10] Third, many studies show that *diaphragmatic (deep) breathing* can calm your nervous system, sending a signal to your brain that draws you out of defensive mode.[11] And if you have a *mindfulness* practice, you'll already know that bringing your attention to a single point of focus helps steady your mood (among many other cognitive benefits).[12]

I've blended these findings into a simple routine you can use anytime—even mid-meeting—to restore your equilibrium and shift your focus to what matters. It takes just a few seconds, and it's as easy as **ABC: A**wareness, **B**reathing, **C**entering. So, as soon as you notice yourself getting off balance:

- **AWARENESS: Mentally label your state of mind.** Talk to yourself as a friend would, starting with *"You are feeling…"* and then finishing the sentence. For example: "You are feeling ticked off about the next meeting." "You are feeling a little disheartened." Extra tip: It helps to be as specific as possible about what you're feeling, and why you're feeling it—psychologists call this *emotional granularity*. For example: "You're feeling mild dread about meeting this person, because you think they're going to talk incessantly, and you know this always makes you feel like storming off." Most of us aren't used to that level of detail. Feyzi puts it plainly: "If you ask people to list the top ten emotions they have, they generally can't even come up with three at first." But the more that you practice labeling your emotions precisely, the easier and more effective it gets.[13]
- **BREATHING: Sit up straight, then take two deep breaths, pushing your belly out as far as you can as you inhale.** Notice how it feels. You should sense a shift, because a deep breath sends an *interoceptive* signal to your brain that you seem to be relaxed, which can then nudge your brain out of defensive mode. (Sitting up straight creates space for more air, and it also makes it hard for anyone to see that you're breathing deeply—handy in a tense moment.) If you can, take another few breaths the same way.

- **CENTERING: Ask yourself a question that refocuses your attention on the most central issue.** Simply asking *"What matters most right now?"* works perfectly well. Other good ones I've heard from clients:
    - *"How do I really want to feel right now?"*
    - *"What kind of leader do I want to be in this moment?"*

  The Centering question does more than anchor your focus—it helps restore a sense of control, by reconnecting you with what's useful and actionable. Choose a question that resonates with you and is easy for you to recall. Try writing it on a Post-it note or scribbling it in your notebook. It can be helpful to remind yourself of the question before going into interactions that you know may spark irritation or disappointment.

During his company's financing crisis, Feyzi had to call dozens of other funders to renegotiate terms, one after the other, to see if he could bridge the gap. He needed to center and recenter himself constantly throughout that process. He says, "I always try to catch myself as soon as I feel off balance. If I can, I take ten unhurried deep breaths. I completely focus on the breathing, and it clears my mind by bringing me back to the present." Then, his go-to centering question is: "What are we really trying to get done here?" This quick reset, he says, helps him show up as the leader he wants to be. And if others see him doing it? Even better: "You're then role-modeling to others how to pause and take ownership of your mind."

Of course, during this tough time, Feyzi also had to keep running the day-to-day business. "Whatever was going on inside me, I knew that the way I showed up would directly impact everyone. I thought, 'They don't need to be dragged into the drama.' It's like when you're sick; you don't want to make everybody around you sick. So I needed to be as grounded as possible, and as positive as possible without being artificial. That meant being very mindful in my conversations with colleagues."

One day, he was about to steam into a conversation with someone he felt had mishandled an important sales call. "I felt it should have been

shorter than it was. With longer calls, people can get lost in details that kill the deal if discussed too early. So I was a bit annoyed, and I wanted to speak to him." The thought ran through Feyzi's mind: "How many times do I have to tell you? Keep it short!" This is where his ABC routine kicked in. He became **Aware** of his frustration—so he paused and took a **Breath** before talking to the colleague. He asked himself his **Centering** question ("What are we really trying to get done here?"). He decided the priority was to understand what had actually happened on the sales call—he could then give feedback if needed.

Following that mental reset, Feyzi started the conversation with his colleague with an open question about how the call went—and learned that this particular sales prospect had in fact been an outlier, someone who really needed that extended conversation. As Feyzi says, "I'd have really regretted it if I'd ruined this guy's day by snapping at him. But I didn't, and it saved everyone a lot of unnecessary stress."

≫ Bonus Tip: Recognize your Cues and Tells, to recenter more quickly

If you want to get really skilled at resetting your energy and mood, it helps to understand your personal stress response patterns. That means recognizing two things: the particular situations most likely to trigger a stress response (your *cues*), and the physical and mental signs that tell you one is already under way (your *tells*). The earlier you notice one of your cues or tells in a potentially stressful situation, the quicker you can launch your recentering ABC routine.

Cues: Know what sets you off

As we've learned, your brain draws on your past experience to decide whether a situation is challenging enough to justify a stress response. This pattern matching can sometimes lead you to overreact to a perfectly manageable situation if it reminds you of a past experience. A little reflection on your patterns can give you useful clues about situations that might knock you off track. Try this:

- Think of three past work situations that felt especially stressful.
- What made each of them feel **demanding, unpleasant,** and **uncontrollable?** (Was your sense of competence or connection being undermined—for example by feeling out of your depth, overstretched, trapped, criticized, excluded, or disrespected in some way?)
- So, given that: What kind of situations might you now be especially primed to react to?

Feyzi, for instance, knows that one of his cues is a feeling of being ignored. "When people don't respond to what I've said—whether in conversation or by email—it feels like disrespect. To me, it's breaking a basic conversational covenant." He's got bad memories of this happening to him earlier in his career, and he's learned to tune in to any hints that this old feeling is being stirred. "I know that's the moment for

me to do a mental check: Where's my mind? How's my breathing? What matters most right now?" Knowledge of this pattern helps him quickly recognize when he needs to take control of his state of mind.

Tells: Know how stress shows up in your mind and body

Much of what happens during a stress response sits below the level of consciousness. But not all of it does, and many leaders I work with have managed to pinpoint some mental or physical signs that act as useful early warning signals that they're on the cusp of defensive mode. If you can spot your own "tells," you'll gain yourself a few valuable extra seconds to recenter yourself. Here are some things to look out for:

- **Mental tells:** These are the **thoughts** or **phrases** that loop in your mind when you're riled or worried. Examples that my clients have recognized in themselves include "I shouldn't have to tell them!" and "We aren't moving fast enough!" For Feyzi, it's "Why, why, why?" He's learned to take a few deep breaths when that repetitive inner monologue kicks off.
- **Physical tells:** These are the bodily signs that stress is ramping up. This can include a **faster heartbeat,** with breathing and vocal changes in tandem. Some people feel **muscles tightening** in their hands, chest, or throat—that's Feyzi's tell. One leader I worked with can literally taste it—he gets a metallic flavor in his mouth about a minute after a defensive response begins, a phenomenon called dysgeusia.

Everyone's pattern is different. The win is learning your own tells, so you can catch stress early—and then return to steadier ground with your ABC routine.

REFRAME: Consider a different perspective, to see more possibilities

Unfortunately, negative signals tend to grab and hold more of our attention than positive signals do. This *negativity bias* of our brain helped protect the human race for millennia, by keeping us alert to threats on the savannah.[14] But in the modern workplace, it means we can end up with an overly dark view of ambiguous situations, as our brain zeroes in on any potential sources of negativity without leaving space for a more positive interpretation. This imbalance gets even more pronounced when we're in a bad mood or feeling tired.[15]

Imagine this example: After you've had a poor night's sleep, you run into an important peer of yours in the hallway. After a brief greeting, he tells you he thinks a big new idea of yours won't work. You're taken aback by his bluntness, and you wonder if he's deliberately trying to make you feel bad. As your brain fires up its automatic defenses in response to that thought, you start missing important clues—like the fact that he ended his thought with "unless…" You end the conversation as quickly as you can, with a curt "Okay, thanks, bye." Now, your peer was definitely clumsy—but the truth is that he wasn't trying to be hostile. He was caught off guard by bumping into you unexpectedly, and ended up blurting out a thought he'd intended to share with you in a more considered way. If you'd realized that, you might not have ended up feeling as annoyed.

That sort of misreading happens all the time, to everyone. The trouble is that as a leader, your inaccurate interpretation is more likely to lead to consequential choices. Not only might you waste time stewing over the exchange with your colleague; you might also commit to investing even more in your big idea, just to prove you're right. So it's smart to get in the habit of double-checking and reframing your take on unpleasant situations, especially when you're tired or wound up. The way to do this is a version of what you've seen elsewhere in the book: examining your assumptions.

To do that, ask yourself these questions:

- *What am I assuming happened here?*
- *What could be a different way of seeing it? (What might a wise mentor or friend suggest as a possible different storyline?)*

- *Is there any evidence for that alternative interpretation?*
- *If that alternative interpretation were true, what would I do differently now?*

Here's how that might look with the colleague who commented on your idea:

- **I'm assuming that:** "He hates my idea, and thinks I'm not very smart for proposing it."
- **A different way of seeing it could be:** "I guess he's at least taken the time to read my proposal and develop a point of view. Maybe this is the first conversation, not the last."
- **Evidence to support that alternative interpretation:** "The culture here is for people to be pretty direct with each other. My ideas often end up getting supported, even if they get criticized initially. This colleague has been supportive of a couple of things I've done in the past."
- **What I would do now if the alternative were true:** "Instead of fuming about his lack of understanding of my vision, I would send a note thanking him for his thoughts and ask if there's room for a follow-up. Even if there isn't, I've stayed calm and behaved like the kind of leader I want to be."

Notice that I'm not saying you have to believe all is rosy. Done well, a good **Reframe** is simply about loosening your grip on a single intense story that might be narrowing your vision. Even if you end up feeling your original interpretation was right, evidence suggests you'll have a clearer head about how to respond, having considered the possibility of other explanations.[16]

Feyzi says that during his company's financing crisis, the most important reframe he did was to challenge his instinctive assumption that the situation was impossible to solve. He knew his mentor, Marshall Goldsmith, would have a different view: "I knew Marshall would say: 'It's not a disaster, it's showtime!' " And as evidence, he says, Marshall would add: "Feyzi, you have all the training you need to rise to this challenge. All

your life, you've been developing your leadership, communication, and negotiation skills, as well as your internal centering skills. This is the time you get to apply it all, for everyone's sake." Feyzi says that by just thinking about this alternative possible view, he could feel his despair start to turn into something more like determination.

Reframing has its limits. It's less effective when you're facing something that's such awful news that reinterpreting it feels disingenuous.[17] But it certainly works for the smaller daily annoyances that leadership sometimes involves, and even in Feyzi's challenging situation, it helped. His take is this: "Just pretending everything's good is ridiculous. That's not what you're doing here. The way I think about reframing is that by considering a different story, you're creating more room for opportunity to emerge in your mind."

REWARD: Reconnect to what energizes you, to give yourself a boost

Another way to feel more grounded and energized is to deliberately redirect some of your attention away from whatever is causing you concern, and toward something you find rewarding. As we've seen, situations tend to feel stressful when they're demanding, uncontrollable, and unpleasant.[18] If you can dial down the unpleasantness, even temporarily, your stress levels will generally drop. That's not to say you can completely walk away from whatever it is that's worrying you. But by consciously shifting your brain's focus from threat to reward, you can draw yourself out of defensive mode—which can help you think more clearly about the tricky situation when you return to it.

The kind of **Reward** that works best for you might be different from what works for me, or for Feyzi. The trick is to know yourself, and know what will reliably give you a boost when you need it most. I'll talk here about two categories of reward that you can shift your attention toward: **psychological** rewards, and **associative** rewards.

Psychological rewards

We learned in Part II of the book, on "Intrinsic Inspiration," that certain psychological rewards reliably engage the brain's *reward system:* a sense of personal competence, and a sense of connection with others. That gives us two useful clues about where we can put our attention when we're feeling worn down. Anything we can do to give ourselves a boost in self-worth or social integration—whether or not it's related to the challenging situation we're dealing with—will make it easier for us to reset our frame of mind and stay out of defensive mode. For example:

Competence:

- Do something, however small, that you know you're good at.
- Take one concrete step forward on something that feels useful.
- Identify something you're learning—whether from this stressful situation or anything else.

Connection:

- Chat with someone who brings you warmth or respect, whether at work or beyond.
- Acknowledge or appreciate someone else—even briefly.
- Remind yourself of the bigger purpose of what you're doing.[19]

One of Feyzi's go-to psychological boosts is something that sits across the competence and connection headings: He sends a quick note of appreciation to someone, which makes him feel he's doing something concretely useful and also socially worthwhile. He says, "It takes me two minutes, and it reconnects me with humanity. For example, I just said a quick, sincere 'thank you' to a new colleague in Austin who'd recently done excellent work. It made their day, and it made me feel great, too." During his financing crisis, he did a lot of reminding himself of the purpose behind his work. "I kept on thinking about the vision. In fact, I visualized achieving our goals, so vividly that it almost created the feeling of having achieved them. It really energized me when I needed it."

Associative rewards

Another source of reward we can harness comes from our past: things we associate with previous times we felt great. Recalling vivid memories has been found to reactivate many of the same brain patterns as the original experience, and when we encounter something that reminds us of a happy moment from the past, it often makes us feel good right now.[20] You only have to think about how you feel when you put on a suit that reminds you of feeling confident, or listen to a song that reminds you of feeling energized, to know the power of this effect. So a real stress-busting ninja knows exactly what they associate with feeling at their best, and knows how to quickly tap into those positive memories when they're having a tougher day.

For most people, music is an especially rich source of those stored mental associations.[21] Feyzi says, "I'm big on using music to change my state of mind. I like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—sometimes that just changes the entire day if I listen to it. Or Willie Nelson's 'On the Road Again'—if I play that three times, boom, I'm fixed. I am literally on the road again." During his financing crisis, Feyzi put together a particular playlist he listened to on repeat. "It was a hodgepodge, but it was a collection of songs that were meaningful to me, and it was a refuge. It helped bring me back to who I wanted to be, many times."

Of course, music isn't the only thing that can prompt an associative reward—you might equally reach for a photo, a quote, or a souvenir that reminds you of a time when you felt the way you want to feel now. Feyzi says, "The thing is to know what works for you, and be ready to reach for it when you need it."

To make that easier, do some preparation now. Ask yourself:

- *What sensory cues (music, images, objects, texts) remind you of a state of contentment or confidence?*
- *How could you keep one or two of those reminders close by, for the next time stress starts to tip you off balance?*

RECHARGE: Invest in physical activity and sleep, to build resilience

As we've seen, your brain uses *interoception* to interpret signals from your body to help it decide whether to launch into defensive mode. That means that if your body is showing any physical strain—if you're tired or run-down—your brain is more likely to perceive an ambiguous situation as a threat. But if your body is recharged, rested, and nourished, your brain is more likely to conclude that the situation is manageable (even if it's still a pain to manage).[22] In short: If you look after your body, you're also looking after your mind. Investing in physical activity and sleep quality isn't a luxury—it should be part of any smart, resilient leader's arsenal.

Physical activity

Decades of research have shown that when we exercise, we lift our energy, stabilize our mood, and navigate stress more effectively—and that's on top of the cognitive benefits of being active, which I mentioned in Chapter 3.[23],[24],[25] Even small amounts of exercise have been found to boost the neurochemicals associated with alertness and mood. So even if you can't step out to the gym mid-crisis, remember that something is always better than nothing when it comes to physical activity.

When you next feel depleted, try the following:

- **Move and stretch** as much as the context allows. Stand up, swing your arms, roll your shoulders.
- Even better: **Go for a quick walk.** Green spaces are ideal, but even a short urban walk can give you a mental and emotional boost.[26],[27]
- Bonus: **Drink a glass of water.** Staying hydrated can make a positive difference to your mood and mental clarity.[28]

Feyzi says he knows that for him, "even just stretching and walking gets more oxygen to my head. And it also creates a useful moment of mental separation from the constant flow of decisions you have to make as a leader." He says he took a lot of evening walks during his financing crisis.

To make the most of the mental rest that exercise offers, he also aims to bring his full attention to whatever he's doing, as an active form of mindfulness: "On a walk, I'll pick a goal of counting something that makes me pay attention to my environment—for example, the number of birds I see. In my office, I'll do exercises that need my full attention: push-ups, dumbbell lifts."

Overall, Feyzi says, "I've learned that physical activity is one of the most effective ways for me to manage my mental state. After some exercise, I feel like I can solve anything." He also likes hiking and yoga, which need more planning than a quick walk. But, he says, "it's always worth it. Yes, I have to protect the time in the calendar—it doesn't happen by accident. But whenever I do it, I end up feeling more balanced and optimistic."

Sleep

Prioritizing sleep is an equally important part of a leader's toolkit. I mentioned in Chapter 3 that a good night's sleep helps us be sharper and better able to see solutions that elude us when we're exhausted.[29] Getting decent sleep has also been found to be crucial to effective stress management. It makes us less likely to overreact and get irritable, and more likely to be inspiring to our teams.[30],[31],[32],[33] Being better rested also makes us more effective at using the resilience-boosting techniques in this chapter.[34] In other words, when you get enough sleep, it's easier to be the steady, smart leader your team needs.

That's not to say you can't survive on less than a full night's sleep. And in the middle of a crisis, sometimes you have to make do with less. (Feyzi remembers one sleepless night when a new investor texted him at 3:48 A.M.) But in the long run, mere survival isn't enough. While you sleep, your brain encodes and consolidates everything you've encountered and learned during the day—and when you're underslept, you lose some of the intellectual and emotional upside that comes from this deep processing.[35] That's why one executive I know reminds himself that not getting enough sleep is like "working on a file all day, then forgetting to save it."

Feyzi has been working on improving his sleep over the past year. He's based on the West Coast of the United States but has business activity around the world—and he had a well-worn habit of checking on operations in Asia as he was going to bed. As you probably know, late-night screen use makes it harder to fall asleep, by exposing you to engaging content and bright light—both of which delay feelings of sleepiness.[36],[37],[38] That's exactly what was happening to Feyzi. He's now clear that the extra minutes on his phone aren't worth it: "I have drawn a line. No phone for at least 30 minutes before bed. I know I need the sleep more than I need to read any new messages I receive at that hour."

There are many lists of evidence-based advice about ways to get better sleep—including keeping your bedroom as dark and cool as possible—and it's all worth taking seriously. For leaders in particular, this is the extra advice I'd give:

- **Set yourself a rule for the time you'll stop looking at your devices,** to let your brain wind down. If you wait until there are no more messages coming in, you can be waiting a long time. Use "do not disturb" settings overnight. If needed, agree on a custom channel for receiving alerts on anything truly urgent—e.g., allow texts from a specific unsilenced number.
- **For ideas that come to you overnight, keep a notepad handy.** Don't use your phone to take notes—you'll be exposed to bright light again, and you risk getting sucked back in.
- If you travel a lot, carry a good **eye mask and earplugs** with you. They'll help you grab short naps—which can lift mood and alertness[39],[40],[41]—and make it easier to sleep in suboptimal hotel rooms. (Consider bringing some large bulldog clips to close the curtains properly.)
- If the timing allows, try to **"sleep on it"** before reacting to something challenging—there's a good chance you'll have fresh insight about the problem the next morning.

REFLECT: Do a quick daily reflection, to restore balance

When leaders want to become more resilient to the ups and downs of their work, I often suggest adding one simple habit: a quick end-of-day reflection. It's just two questions, and it takes only a couple of minutes:

- *What went well?*
- *What did I learn?*

These short questions do a lot of work for you. The first helps you stay balanced in the way you think back on the day. Negative experiences tend to stick especially vividly in our memory—so even if your day was mostly fine, your brain will tend to zero in on the disappointments that happened along the way.[42] Reviewing successes, big or small, helps to counter that *negativity bias,* and remind you of what you managed to achieve. Then, the second question allows you to acknowledge the more difficult parts of the day while extracting something meaningful from them.

This kind of reflective practice brightens and enriches the story we tell ourselves about our work from day to day—and it's also been found to improve the quality of our leadership over time.[43] Feyzi combines his end-of-day reflection with a quick look at tomorrow's schedule, so he's clear on both the tone and the priorities he wants to take into the next day. It's a good recipe for a quieter mind and better sleep—which, after a demanding day, he finds very welcome indeed.

When you get skilled at this kind of deliberate self-management, the positive impact doesn't stop with you. You become a force for good on your team, by adding stability to the mix. Feyzi says that's what happened with his colleagues during the crisis—though he's quick to argue that he took his cues from his team as much as the other way around. "It was all hands on deck, and everyone on the team was grounded, genuine, and sincere throughout even the toughest of conversations. It felt like a kind of miracle, and it really created a strong bond between us all." On balance, he says,

“we turned that period of adversity into an advantage, because it made us better and sharper—especially operationally.”

Feyzi and his company weathered the storm, thanks to his steady hand. He secured a new source of funding and agreed on new terms with his existing investors, giving the business the runway it needed to keep building momentum. His company, Corent, then went on to win the prestigious CODiE Software Platform of the Year award, and they’re now in partnership with Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, Google, Intel, and NVIDIA (among others).

Feyzi says the principles in this chapter “have been a lifesaver” for him—not just during the crisis period, but also in the upswing that followed. “It was one of those situations that pushed me to my limits, and I do attribute my ability to get through it to what I’ve learned about managing my mind, mood, and mojo. And now, the work continues to be intense in a different way. We’ve got to be ‘game on’ and alert about strategy, people, customers, all the time. I’ve found that tuning in to these subtle inner signals always helps me bring my best self to every moment, whatever is happening.”

≫ Bonus Tip: What to share of your stress, with Measured Authenticity

Even with the best self-management skills, you'll occasionally experience an unpleasantly stressful situation that knocks you sideways for a while. When it happens, should you talk about it with your colleagues? The answer is maybe—if you can do it in a way that reduces the team's uncertainty, rather than increasing it.

If you decide to say something, but you give the impression that you don't really have things under control, it can add stress to the team. But it's tricky: if you're visibly out of sorts and you don't explain yourself, your colleagues can worry that they're the source of your angst—with the same result.

So, if something in your life is currently causing you stress, and you think it's showing—perhaps you snapped at someone or were unusually inflexible in a meeting—consider explaining a little of what's going on, while signaling that it's **manageable** and under control. Here's what I suggest you say:

- ***"I'm sorry I may look/sound*** *...distracted/frustrated/irritable"*
- ***"I have something going on with*** *...a supplier/my family/my health"*
- ***"And I know this is affecting my*** *...mood/focus/energy"*
- ***"I have a plan to improve the situation."*** (This reassures people that it's manageable)
- ***"I appreciate your understanding,*** *and* ***sorry again for not being at my best."***

The point about sharing that you have a plan is key. Talk to them once you can say you have a way to manage the issue (even if you don't share details), so that your team feels the situation is at least somewhat under control. Overall, I call this approach **Measured Authenticity.** If you open up in this way, you strike a skilled balance: reducing ambiguity about your demeanor, without adding unnecessarily to the

team’s concerns—making it a little easier for you to lead with grace and composure through whatever you’re dealing with.

CHAPTER 16

How to Lead Through Uncertainty and Upheaval

THE CHALLENGE

Uncertainty isn't always bad. Many people like a bit of spontaneous variety from day to day—they enjoy having a range of tasks, interactions, and issues to tackle. In our personal lives, we often relish the suspense of not yet knowing the twist in a movie or what's inside a wrapped gift. Personalities differ, of course, but many people find this kind of uncertainty fun, because the stakes are low and mostly about potential upside.[1]

But a lot of the uncertainty that occurs in the workplace is less fun, even for those who like surprises, because it shows up in situations that are either consequential or negative—or both. And that's a challenge for most people to handle, for a few reasons:

- **Dealing with uncertainty about important things is mentally taxing, even when the stakes are neutral.** When you're puzzling out what to do in an uncertain environment (say, "How will this reorganization affect my budget?"), your brain typically has to evaluate several variables across multiple future scenarios, which draws heavily on its limited processing capacity.[2],[3]
- **When things <u>are</u> bad, uncertainty makes everything feel more intense.** Not knowing what's about to happen amplifies the brain's

reaction to anything that causes sadness, anger, or pain.[4],[5] A minor workplace example: If a colleague is late to a meeting, that's annoying; if you have no idea when they'll arrive, that's doubly annoying.

- **Uncertainty makes situations feel uncontrollable, making a stress response more likely.** When the future feels unknowable (e.g., "I have no idea if I'm going to lose my job in the reorganization, or even when I'll find out"), it's hard for people to feel in control, so they're more likely to tip into *defensive mode.*[6]
- **So it's no surprise that on average, people prefer certainty—even when it means a less good outcome.** In a classic experiment, when people were asked how much they'd pay for a guaranteed $50 gift card (a sure thing) compared with a 50/50 chance of winning either a $50 gift card or a $100 gift card, they offered $38 for the sure thing and only $28 for the objectively better lottery option.[7] This aversion to uncertainty has many names, including *certainty bias;* I sometimes think of it as "Better to know than to worry."

This gives us lots of clues about how to help our colleagues (and ourselves) navigate ambiguous situations intelligently. Uncertainty makes hard things even harder to deal with. But if we turn that around: adding a sense of certainty reduces people's stress, which in turn makes it easier for them to think clearly about what's going on. Think of it like this: Most of us get less wound up by a travel delay if we receive at least some guidance on just how long we're going to have to wait for our train, plane, or automobile. A little information makes the situation easier for us to handle than if we had no sense of what to expect. That's the concept to channel here. Whatever we can do as leaders to amplify people's certainties will leave them better able to cope with whatever true uncertainty remains.

THE ROLE MODEL

Vivek Bapat is the kind of farsighted, adaptable leader you want by your side when you navigate uncertain waters. Over three decades at a senior

level in major organizations, including J.P. Morgan, SAP, and ServiceNow, he's led teams in an unusually wide range of contexts, spanning corporate functions, sales, marketing, and communications. He's traveled a long road from his childhood in a small village in India, on to the bustling city of Pune, and eventually to his current home in Texas. Along the journey he's written a book, registered thirteen technology patents, and founded the Institute for Purpose-Driven Leadership.

During the course of his career, he's often helped colleagues find a sense of direction when much around them feels uncertain—a leadership skill that's only getting more important. As Vivek says, "The pace and magnitude of change have never been higher. And when an organization makes a sharp pivot to keep up, you can end up with headcount reductions, structural changes, leadership rotations—it's very hard on people, because we're all wired for certainty. So how do you get your team to work toward a vision in the middle of all of that? This is the modern leadership challenge."

As Vivek points out, leaders are often tackling this challenge while managing their own uncertainty. "There are often only a few people who are in the loop on the biggest organizational changes before they happen, and leaders below that level lack full visibility of what lies ahead," he says. "But even when you personally don't have all the answers, you need to find a way to keep people moving forward." The good news is that it is possible. Vivek shares an example of this from a time he took over a team that was going through a big upheaval.

It was a sales support group that had been uprooted from one part of a large organization and dropped into another area, with little explanation for the move and without much oversight from senior leadership. Vivek says the team was "disillusioned and rudderless, because nobody had paid much attention to them for a while. They didn't know whether they'd continue to exist in their current form, or whether they would be disbanded. And on top of that deep uncertainty, they felt powerless to do anything about it."

Vivek saw they were struggling, and made a special request to have the team report in to him. This chapter describes how he helped them to steady —and ultimately raise—their game.

THE ADVICE: THE KNOW-BE-DO FRAMEWORK

If you can draw people's attention to anything that feels certain in the middle of upheaval, the things that are uncertain will loom less large in their minds—making it easier for them to calmly evaluate what to do next. There are three types of certainty you can usually amplify for your team: all the things you collectively **know for sure,** even while much remains unknown; the essential truths about **who you are** and what you stand for as a team; and anything you can **do** that allows you to exercise some choice and control. That gives you what I call the **Know-Be-Do** framework of certainties:

> The things we **KNOW**: Facts, timings, priorities, feelings
> The things we continue to **BE**: Our strengths, values, experience, rituals
> The things we choose to **DO**: Attitude to adopt, scenario planning, no-regrets moves, next steps

The things we KNOW: Facts, timings, priorities, feelings

In the middle of an unstable situation, the things that people know can get buried under the weight of all the things they don't know. That's partly because the work of processing uncertainty uses so much cognitive energy that people's brains struggle to notice or think about anything else. If you ask a question that reconnects everyone with the things they do know, it can ease the cognitive load enough to make people feel calmer and clearer-headed.

So, when you're dealing with an uncertain situation, the first question to ask yourself and your colleagues is:

- *"Setting aside the unknowns, what do we **know** for sure?"*

What people "know for sure" is usually a longer list than it first appears. It can include:

- **Facts:** What you know about the current situation, and anything you know about the future. This could include things that have already been decided, by you or by others.
- **Timings:** Any key dates that are known—for example, when you can expect that more information will be forthcoming, or when you expect that a process will play out.
- **Priorities:** The most important things to solve or deliver, even in the middle of all that's going on.
- **Feelings:** How it feels right now. This is a different type of knowledge, but it's worth calling out, because naming negative emotions has been shown to reduce the level of alert in people's brains. (This is called *affect labeling,* as we saw in Chapter 15.[8]) If you're not sure where to start with this, it can be as simple as saying, "I know this feels difficult."

Vivek's opening conversation with the uprooted team hit all of those points. He says, "I started by being super up-front with them, acknowledging the fact that it felt hard for everyone to be so unsure about the future of the team. I was honest with them that we had a challenge ahead to figure that out together." Then, Vivek asked the team to tell him everything they knew and felt about the situation. He listened carefully.

Next, he gently shared one important additional thing he knew, thanks to his outside perspective: The team was seen by the rest of the organization as being rather stuck in the past, geared toward supporting in-person traveling sales reps rather than virtual sales. That was hard to hear, but important to know. After some discussion, the team agreed their main priority for the coming months would be to look for ways to reverse that perception, to show that they could embrace the shift from in-person to virtual sales. That brought a degree of clarity that had been missing for some time.

The value of careful transparency

In amplifying what's known, Vivek adds, "it was important to me to be transparent with them. Previously, they'd been joining calls with senior leadership where they struggled to find out what was happening. They'd heard a bunch of jargon and vague generalities." Though well-intentioned, those calls had added to the team's uncertainty. "Especially at difficult moments, the language you use has got to be clear, and it's got to be human," he says. "I learned how important it was to say things in a simple, direct way from Bill McDermott, who is one of the most human leaders out there." (Many readers may know McDermott as the longtime CEO of SAP; he's now the CEO of ServiceNow.)

Your desire to provide clarity doesn't mean you should pretend to know things that you don't. Vivek was open about the fact that he himself wasn't sure where things were going to land. It's important to avoid riffing or speculating unproductively on things that haven't yet been decided. If you're asked a question you can't answer, it's okay to say, "I don't know yet"—but then move to amplify the certainties that do exist: "But I do know for sure that…"

Vivek adds, "You need to avoid conveying a false sense of optimism—you can't say 'everything will be amazing' when that's probably not true. But you can say: 'I'm going to invest in finding a way forward with you.' And you can say: 'I believe in you'—which are probably the four most important words a leader can say."

(You can find more guidance on communicating during challenging times in the Spotlight on "Talking About Crisis and Bad News," at the end of this chapter.)

The things we continue to BE: Our strengths, values, experience, rituals

Next, you can ask:

- *"Who **are** we as a team, and who do we continue to **be**?"*

This is a different type of certainty—less about the here and now, and more about reconnecting people to the enduring culture and talents of the group.

What is true about the team that gives you some solidity and some resources to draw on in this time of flux? Here's a list to talk through with your colleagues:

- **Strengths:** Your collective technical or behavioral talents.
- **Values:** What you stand for as a team, in how you work and treat one other.
- **Experience:** Useful knowledge and past experiences to draw on.
- **Rituals:** Shared team routines, habits, and processes.

Reminding your team of these certainties can give people a much-needed boost. But it can also guide your actions by revealing what you can build on as you figure out how to chart a course.

For example, on his team, Vivek says, there was a lot of technical talent. "People on the team were incredibly smart and experienced, and they were experts in creating resources to enable our sales leaders: value propositions, demos, enablement. And those resources actually included several digital tools and assets." That last point was important. It turned out they had already done a lot of work to move to a more digital model, but few of their internal customers were aware.

The team also had a very positive behavioral culture to draw on, which was still intact despite the organizational headwinds they'd experienced. Vivek says, "It was a very collaborative team, and they had a deep service orientation—priding themselves on who they helped, what deal and account they helped land, which customer ended up benefiting, and then what was the value back to the firm. They weren't just counting the number of sales tools they created."

Vivek says articulating all of this helped a lot: "I told them, 'I see your expertise, and I believe that we can do something much bigger with it.' I saw a light bulb go on in their minds. They hadn't had anyone say that they had the skills and the talent to actually achieve something more."

The things we choose to DO: Attitude to adopt, scenario planning, no-regrets moves, next steps

Even in situations where people feel they lack any control, there's usually room to help them take ownership of a few concrete actions and choices. Ask:

- *"What can we choose to **do**—what can we decide, plan, or shape for ourselves?"*

Think about the following:

- **Attitude to adopt:** Decide how you all want to think and behave as you navigate this challenge. For example, Vivek's team chose to tune out the noise about their uncertain future and stay focused on delivering great service.
- **Scenario planning:** Lay out a few possible hypotheses about what's going to happen, and discuss what the team would need to do in each case. (You can turn back to the Spotlight on "Planning for Uncertain Futures," at the end of Chapter 3, for more guidance on this.)
- **No-regrets moves:** Identify some things you can do that will be useful across all possible scenarios, no matter what happens—perhaps gathering more information, or communicating with stakeholders.
- **Practical next steps:** What you'll do next, to plan your way through this situation. That might include the logistics of when you will next meet, and what you'll do between now and then.

As Vivek says, "Doing this encourages people not to feel like victims, by saying to themselves, 'I do have some control.' " In this case, he says, it particularly helped to do some scenario planning. He worked closely with the team's manager and a few other colleagues to lay out three possible paths forward:

> **Scenario 1: We remain an intact team.** We continue to build on our work so far, staying where we are in this part of the organization.
> **Scenario 2: We become part of a different team.** This entire team gets absorbed by the newer, bigger, digital team that is being

created.

Scenario 3: The team is disbanded. Then there are two sub-options: People get absorbed across the company in different roles, or failing that, they are let go.

They then discussed how best to prepare for each. “This helped people feel like they were moving toward something,” Vivek says, “as opposed to just waiting for something to happen to them.” The team then came up with three no-regrets moves that would make sense whether they stayed independent, merged, or were disbanded.

First off, to give the team the best possible future across all scenarios, they needed to market themselves properly to their internal customers. Vivek says: “We had to show people the vision and the value of our work. We explained, ‘You know us as one thing, but here’s what we can do for you in this new digital selling environment.’ ” Second, Vivek became a spokesperson for the team. “In very large companies, teams like this can get lost if they don’t have an effective champion. I told them, ‘I’ll do everything in my power to make sure people know what you’re doing, and can see what’s possible if they work with you.’ ” He was true to his word. “I evangelized everywhere, making sure the team’s work was visible and was getting recognition. That recognition was good for the team’s reputation, and I could also see that it made them feel proud.”

There was also a third, more strategic no-regrets move for the team. Previously, the company had only used digital selling tools for its smallest customers. “But we argued that digital selling approaches could also be used with the highest tier of the market. We created a new style of digital experience for top customers, building in all the knowledge and assets the team had already developed. It was a fresh approach, and they were excited to get to work on something new.”

Bottoming out the worst-case scenario

It can be powerful to talk through the worst-case scenario and make a plan for it, to take the sting out of the scariest possible outcome for your team.

So Vivek made sure they tackled the scenario where the team not only was disbanded, but also lost their jobs. “I was very realistic. I said, ‘Look, you know, it could happen that you have to leave.’ ” He reflected on his own past brushes with adversity in his career, and shared his advice: “ ‘If it does happen, understand that it’s a temporary phase in your career, and it’s not the end of the world. You’ll come out the other side. And if you do get let go, don’t sit waiting for the phone to ring. Invest in yourself, make yourself better, go get new skills, start a new business, whatever it might be. The biggest investment you can make is in yourself.’ ” Talking about this out loud gave the team some sense that even the worst outcome could be made manageable. And after they’d had the conversation, Vivek says, they found it easier to throw themselves into their work with more energy.

The end of Vivek’s story is that the stronger strategic proposition did successfully boost demand and recognition for the team’s work. The team was, in fact, eventually disbanded—but because their strategic vision was so enthusiastically embraced, most of the people stayed on with the company. Vivek says, “They are now in roles where they are better off than they were. If we hadn’t done the planning and positioning we did, the entire team might well have ended up leaving.” The most senior person on the team retired, saying he felt happy that those remaining had “landed on good hands.” He went so far as to say that Vivek’s work to bring his teammates some certainty during that time of change had been “an inspiration.”

Not all stories of turbulence can land as well as this one. But helping your people perform at their best through uncertain times—by amplifying their certainties around what they can know, be, and do—makes a good outcome far more likely.

SPOTLIGHT ON: Talking About Crisis and Bad News

Sometimes the uncertainty your team is dealing with sits within a broader context of upheaval—a downturn, a pandemic, or some other blow to your organization. The way you speak to your colleagues matters at times like this, because well-chosen words can do a lot to reduce stress and leave them feeling better equipped to deal with what's happening. Overall, your goal is to strike a tone that is both honest and hopeful, and that makes the situation feel **manageable.** Here's some guidance on what to say:

First up, say something: "I want to talk about what's going on"

When bad news hits, there's one thing that almost always makes it worse: silence. Our brains are wired to find negative uncertainty stressful. If you say nothing, people will start wondering what you're thinking—adding another layer of uncertainty to all their worries about why this happened and what the organization will do next. Maybe you're not sure what to say, so you're hanging back. But even in unsettled times, you can say the things below and make a positive difference. You can even name your own discomfort as a starting point: *"It can feel hard to find the right words at a time like this."*

Share the facts, as far as possible: "What we know…Where we are at is…"

Briefly describe the facts of the situation, as far as you know and can share. Maybe you don't know how something is going to play out. For example, at the start of a recession, you don't know how long it's going to last. But you know what your numbers are saying right now, and that's what you have to work with. If you're relaying a difficult decision, include not only the decision itself but also some of your reasoning, so that people can see the fairness behind the choice—even if it's not what they wanted.[9]

Acknowledge how it feels: "I know this is difficult"

Then, acknowledge the emotional toll. As we've seen previously, *affect labeling*—naming the emotion—has been shown to reduce people's stress response to challenging situations. And it gives people a crucial sense of connection if you convey that "you're not alone in feeling this" and "we're in this together."

Reconnect people to a sense of purpose: "The most important thing to keep in mind is that..."

Remind people of what matters most. What are you here to do, together? The more you can reconnect your colleagues to the feeling that they're doing something meaningful and useful, the better.

Add realistic hope: "We have a lot we can draw on..."

Talk about the resources—practical and psychological—that you can collectively draw on as a team or organization. This could include things like good preparation, shared strengths, or previous instances of resilience where you all came back stronger. Don't overdo it—it can be jarring if a leader is too upbeat when it's obvious that there are really tough times ahead. But look for anything you can say to provide a realistic sense that the situation is at least somewhat manageable.

Suggest practical actions: "Here's what we're going to do..."

What are the concrete next steps? What can you do to show that you have people's backs? And what is it that your audience can do, practically speaking? Whether you ask everyone to call one customer this afternoon, or each come up with one idea to save money, the aim is to give people a sense of agency. In tough times, it can help to feel that there's something practical that can be done.

And if you owe people an apology, do it properly

If you've done something wrong related to the situation that's unfolding, your colleagues will find it hard to move on until you apologize. A part of their scarce cognitive capacity will be constantly distracted by the thought "I can't believe they haven't apologized." Do it right, though. A real apology isn't weak or waffly; it sounds like taking accountability. It doesn't shift blame or make excuses, so there are no "ifs" or "buts" in the kind of apology that actually makes a difference.[10],[11] No "I'm sorry if you were upset by what I did" or "I know I did a bad thing but I'm under a lot of pressure." Just "I'm sorry, I did a bad thing. I will learn from it and make it right."

CHAPTER 17

How to Improve a Difficult Stakeholder Relationship

THE CHALLENGE

Great leaders obviously know how to manage their own teams well—but they also know how to manage above and around their team, keeping important stakeholders engaged in the right way. When all goes well, these efforts make it possible to draw on support and guidance from influential people. But I don't know a leader who hasn't occasionally worried about their relationship with a boss, investor, founder, chair, or other pivotal person. You might experience this as concerns about misaligned expectations, micromanagement, or crossed wires. Or there can be a style mismatch—maybe their manner grates on you, or (dare I say it) maybe yours grates on them.

Of course, anyone at any level can end up with a tricky relationship at work. The particular challenge of handling it as a leader is that you often need to act as a buffer between your stakeholder and your team, absorbing the strain and translating it into something manageable for your colleagues. That can feel lonely, because you can't vent to your team about it. (To repeat: Do not vent. They look to you for steadiness—you're the grown-up in the room.) The good news is that there are proactive steps you can take to improve even the most complex of working relationships.

It starts with understanding the following:

- **Everyone perceives situations differently, without realizing it.** As we know from Part I on "Deliberate Wisdom," we all tend to notice things that confirm what we already believe or expect, while filtering out the rest.[1] That's how we can sit in the same meeting as our stakeholder, look at the same information, and draw different conclusions. On top of that: **People with power tend to find it <u>especially</u> hard to imagine that anyone else sees things differently.** [2] So it often requires a concerted effort to bridge gaps in perspective between senior people.
- **Relationships can get stuck in a pattern.** Once a relationship has become tense, people tend to dwell on negative incidents and discount positive gestures—making it hard to move forward without a clear intentional shift in the dynamic.[3]
- **You're part of the solution.** Whatever you're feeling, *emotional contagion* means the other person is likely to sense it at a subconscious level. If you're irritated, their brain will pick that up, and may react to it as a subconscious threat. But the reverse is also true: You can be a force for good in the relationship, if you choose to project something different.
- **Your stakeholder has the same psychological wants and needs as any other person.** As we learned in Part II on "Intrinsic Inspiration," everyone wants to feel competent and connected. So, they want to be informed and reassured about what you're doing, and they want to feel their views are being taken on board. **If those needs aren't met, it can tip them into *defensive mode*.** In this context, that stress response might show up as snappishness, inflexibility, or an inability to focus on what matters most.

If that last bit feels all too familiar, I'm sorry to hear it. And I'm not here to excuse any of the difficult behavior you've observed. But remembering that they're as human as you are is actually a proven step in shifting a relationship back into more positive territory. Research tells us that **when we make an effort to imagine someone else's situation—a process**

known as *perspective-taking*—we become better able to collaborate with them.[4] That's the goal. You don't have to drop your complaints forever; you just want to be able to bridge the divide enough to work with them productively. This chapter shows you how to do that with care and authenticity.

THE ROLE MODEL

Michelle Low is the head of leadership development at a global management consultancy. In her firm, senior partners generally make the key decisions about how the company is run, and functional leaders like Michelle need to work with those partners closely to get things done. So she couldn't be good at her job without being skilled at handling complex stakeholder relationships—and it's a capability she's honed over decades.

Michelle says she took an especially big step up in her ability to manage strong personalities when she was choosing new leadership training courses for her firm a few years ago. "I ended up taking all the courses myself, to check that they would work for our very analytical partners," she says. "Many of the courses were great, and almost by accident, I ended up learning a lot of useful things myself—particularly on interpersonal skills. As a result, before getting really angry or frustrated with someone, I started being quicker to see them as a human being. I got more curious about what was going on with them—and with me. It has done a lot to help me connect effectively with my senior colleagues, even when I feel like saying 'What the…?' in response to something they do."

She told me about a recent situation that required all of those relationship skills, and we'll use it as our focus here. Here's the setup: Michelle had a senior stakeholder she'd worked with successfully for about a year, receiving good feedback from him along the way. (We'll call him Lin.) But there was a recurring sour note, which was Lin's inability to create space for Michelle in meetings. Even when Michelle's team had done the work, and even in areas unfamiliar to him, she says, "he wanted to be the one to talk through the content, and control everything in the meeting."

Michelle remembers one meeting where she was asked a direct question in her area of established expertise, but Lin texted her to say: “Do not speak! I will answer!” She was taken aback. “I’m wondering what on earth is going on,” she says, “because I’ve been here long enough to know how to handle myself in senior meetings like this.” Rather than let it fester, she decided to talk to him about it. She described a mild version of what had happened, saying to him: “You’d said it would be good for me to join this meeting to talk about the team’s work. But I got the feeling you wanted to run the show alone—could we talk about it?” Lin took this surprisingly badly, replying sharply, “The problem is that you’re a terrible communicator.” Michelle was surprised, and baffled: “I thought, ‘Gosh, that’s bizarre. I’ve actually always received positive feedback on how I communicate.’ ”

It wasn’t the conversation Michelle had hoped for, but that was just the start of the story. After that, Lin started lashing out at Michelle in front of her team. When she spoke in the next big gathering, he said out loud: “See, you’re doing it again. Look, this is what I mean.” He found a number of other ways to belittle Michelle in public, on issues unrelated to communication. Michelle says her initial instinct was to think, “I never want to see this man again.” But she realized, “Well, that’s not practical—I have to somehow find a way to work with him. So what’s the best thing to do?”

If you’re worrying about where this is going, let me tell you that all is well—she sorted it out, by applying the insights I’ll describe in this chapter, and Lin eventually ended up seeing Michelle as a close confidant. So let’s explore what she did.

THE ADVICE: THE BRIDGE MODEL

You can’t necessarily resolve every aspect of a difficult stakeholder relationship, but you have more ability to improve it than you might imagine. To get started, it can help to think of building a suspension bridge

across the divide between you. Like any good bridge, it needs a few elements to be secure: solid foundations on both sides, connections that hold everything together, and an approach to meeting in the middle. Here's the blueprint we'll walk through:

TOWER 1: Analyze them to understand their concerns and sources of stress
TOWER 2: Analyze yourself to understand your reaction to them
CABLES: Strengthen connection through appreciation, involvement, and elevation
DECK: Meet in the middle with a bridge-building conversation

(By the way, if you're reading this and thinking, "I'm not sure my issue with this person involves serious tension—it's just a straightforward disagreement," flip back to Chapter 6, which contains the Common Ground technique for resolving differences of opinion. Try that, paying particular attention to the step where you list all the places you agree—it will be useful for you to make that list, even if you just do it on your own as a thought exercise. And then, if your differences keep presenting themselves, turn back here for broader relationship guidance.)

TOWER 1: Analyze them to understand their concerns and sources of stress

Let's look at the other person more closely. When someone is being difficult in some way, it's easy to leap to negative conclusions about who they are as a person. And maybe they do have a challenging personality. But very often, their behavior is being shaped by factors beneath their consciousness or outside their control, rather than by deliberate malevolence. So, start by asking yourself:

- *What is it that they really care about most?*
- *What might they be worried or fearful about?*

Then, given that:

- *What could be going on for them that would make their behavior make sense, without assuming bad intent?*

At this point, you're guessing. (In a moment, we'll get to how you can have a decent conversation with them.) But even if your guess is wrong, the research on *perspective-taking* tells us that the mere process of putting yourself in their shoes can improve the dynamic between you. Here's why: When you imagine a more generous hypothesis than "They're deliberately trying to make my life difficult," it shifts your demeanor toward them slightly. You take one step away from pure annoyance and one step toward recognizing they're a fellow imperfect human. And everything we know about *emotional contagion* suggests that if you carry that more sympathetic view into your next conversation with them, it will improve the tone.

So Michelle pondered these questions about Lin. Initially, his controlling behavior and public attacks felt inexplicable. But as she stepped back and observed him more carefully, she began to piece together a more complete picture: "I realized that although he is very senior and successful by most measures, I have a feeling he wanted more recognition than he's received over the past few years. There was a promotion he missed out on, and it might have made him extra sensitive." Just thinking about this helped soften her stance a little when talking to him.

Consider the classic sources of stress

If you're struggling to think of potential benign explanations for the other person's behavior, remember that the average brain gets stressed by **demanding** situations that feel both **unpleasant** and **uncontrollable.** Might your stakeholder be dealing with something of that flavor? Could you have done anything that might have caused them that kind of stress, unintentionally?

If you're rolling your eyes at that last question, please know that I'm not saying they're right and you're wrong. But the *illusion of transparency* tells us that although we think our good intentions are obvious, they may not be to others.[5] If we do something that isn't ideal—maybe we forget to

copy them on an important message one day—we think it's clear that we mean no real harm. But if they see the exclusion as deliberate, it can drive a spiky response.

So, consider what might be pushing their buttons, remembering that the goal is simply to humanize them in your own mind. The question throughout is: Could they perceive that this is the case, even if it's not really what happened? For example:

- Have they recently been **criticized or challenged** about something?
- Might they feel they've been **insufficiently consulted** on an important issue?
- Could they be feeling **overstretched** by something going on at work or at home?
- Might they be feeling **insecure** about their own position?
- Has your team **failed to do something** you said they would do?
- Could they feel as if things are **not under control** for any other reason?

When Michelle reflected on this, she recognized that her past behavior with Lin might well have touched a particular nerve with him. She says, "I can be a bit outspoken. I had commented on his written communication in the past, saying things like 'This is just too wordy, we need to cut it down,' and then I would edit things he had drafted. My intention was to add value, not to make him feel seriously critiqued. But it's possible I overstepped the mark. If I'm honest with myself, maybe this contributed to our breakdown."

TOWER 2: Analyze yourself to understand your reaction to them

Next, let's look at what's going on for you in this relationship. What has your stakeholder done to you or your team that feels stressful? And how are you reacting to this, exactly? Any work you did in Chapter 15 on your habitual stress cues may already have given you broad clues about why this person is pushing your buttons. The trick now is to clearly articulate what exactly has you riled, and how exactly you're reacting to it. This is not

about wallowing or complaining—it's back to the calming effect of *affect labeling,* and the power of being as granular as possible in doing it.[6],[7]

Getting specific about what they're doing has another benefit for you: It can make the problem feel smaller and more manageable. We can find ourselves repeating a mental script about a particular person, using absolute language: "She's always dismissive," "He never listens." Try rewriting the stuck story in your head without the sense of "always" and "never" in it, and get more precise. So, for example: "He doesn't listen" could become "He listens when I frame things with data." Michelle says her story about Lin, which was originally "He always tries to control things," became "He wants to control things when he feels less secure about the people we're meeting with." This isn't just semantics; removing absolute language is more likely to lead to an insight you can use.

Here's one additional angle to consider: When a particular person rubs you the wrong way, it's not always because of what they're doing right now; it can be about what your brain expects them to do. As we've learned, your brain is constantly working to predict what's about to happen, so it can get you ready for whatever's next.[8] Those predictions are partly shaped by what's in your memory banks. For example, suppose your stakeholder seems to have ignored a recommendation you made. Your brain might match this to the memory of an unpleasant former boss who often overruled you—and then it might launch a preemptive stress response as if the old problem were about to happen again. As a result of going into *defensive mode,* you might say something uncharacteristically brusque to your current stakeholder—and then, if they respond to that in kind, tension can rise between you out of nothing.[9]

So, if your reaction to a particular person feels oddly intense, pause and do a bit of analysis on yourself. Again, the aim is not to excuse any bad behavior—it's to get yourself off autopilot, to create more room for you to consciously choose your response.

Ask yourself these questions:

- **To get specific about what's pushing your buttons:** *What exactly is my reaction to their behavior—and what is it that I am really reacting to?*
- **Optional, to understand if there's a deeper pattern:** *Who or what does this person remind me of? And what is different about this situation today, versus what happened in the past?*

Michelle became aware that she did in fact have a deeply grooved pattern of reaction to Lin: "I noticed that I was just freezing whenever he lashed out, whether he did it with me or with people on my team. When that first frozen moment happened, I couldn't speak up for myself, which is not like me." She found that naming this pattern was already helpful.

Then, after some reflection, Michelle realized this situation with her boss reminded her of her father. (Michelle's dad had many good traits, but he was an easily irritated man. She had childhood memories of him shouting, and of feeling unsettled by not knowing when he was going to flip out.) Once she realized her brain was partly responding to an outdated memory, she found she was able to have a more measured response to Lin's present behavior: "It's obviously not the same situation as with my dad. I'm an adult now, not a powerless child. I found that after I saw that connection, I was able to stop freezing up."

CABLES: Strengthen connection through appreciation, involvement, and elevation

To continue the bridge metaphor: Now that you've strengthened your two towers of understanding, you need to strengthen the cables that hold your bridge together. These are the ongoing actions you can take to bolster the connection between the two of you. Each of them—**appreciation, involvement,** and **elevation**—builds more of the goodwill that makes a relationship more resilient.

Appreciation

As we learned in Chapter 12, appreciation boosts people's sense of competence and connection, even if it's only a tiny bit of praise about a tiny thing someone's done. So, see if you can **find something to sincerely appreciate** about your difficult person. I'm not advocating flattery or forced friendliness—just that you recognize their input or perspective when it feels appropriate. (Think about how you would feel if one of your team said to you: "I liked the way you answered that question from the client. I'm going to learn from that approach." That's the feeling to aim for.) Michelle says it was not hard to do this with Lin: "He's very smart, and he's good at strategizing and crystallizing ideas. Sometimes he'll say something that really makes me stop in my tracks and think, 'Oh, that's interesting.' And I found that saying this out loud to him, as it happened, was helpful."

Involvement

Another key relationship "cable" is being deliberate about keeping the other person informed and involved. For example, could you do more to **explain your choices and trade-offs**? It can help to walk through your logic on big decisions with something like the ACORN model in Chapter 4, to demonstrate that you've taken a thoughtful approach. You can also look for chances to proactively **ask for their advice**. Perhaps you don't strictly need their input, but by welcoming their point of view, you create more of a sense of being on the same team (and it goes without saying that you might, in fact, find their comments useful).

As Michelle says, "In general, it's a good strategy to ask your boss, 'Where do you have time and energy to be included? And what kind of role do you want to play on this?' " But in her relationship with Lin, something had slipped on this front. After the bridge-building conversation that Michelle had with Lin (which we'll hear about in the next section), Lin told Michelle that he'd been feeling excluded at times, and admitted that his need for control in meetings often stemmed from a fear of being left out of important conversations. Michelle adapted immediately: "I now take extra care to make sure he knows what's going on, and when someone tells me

something he should know, I often suggest they speak to him directly to keep him in the loop."

Elevation

The third way to strengthen your connection is to think more actively about how to make the other person successful. This isn't about ignoring your own needs, or rewarding bad behavior. It's about recognizing that when people feel competent and in control, they find tough situations more manageable, which helps keep them out of defensive mode—and ultimately, that makes your life easier. Michelle discovered this was especially helpful with Lin. "If I can do more to set him up for success, he feels more comfortable, and that's better for his performance. And in turn, that's better for our relationship." Her approach became: "I figure out what's the most important thing for him in any given situation, why it's important, and what could make it go as well as it can. He's got no doubt that I've got his back."

DECK: Meet in the middle with a bridge-building conversation

If you do all the steps above, the strain in the relationship might start to dissipate even without a deep, dedicated conversation. If it doesn't, and if the relationship matters, there's no substitute for a discussion about the sticking points. At the risk of overdoing the metaphor: An open conversation is the most direct route for you to meet in the middle of your bridge.

This step is more likely to succeed if you've done the groundwork above—particularly the work to understand why they might be triggering <u>your</u> defenses, and what you might be doing that's triggering <u>theirs</u>. That's because it's crucial for you to get your head in the right place before embarking on a bridge-building conversation. Whatever your state of mind before the discussion, it's going to shape what you perceive. If you wade in feeling full of complaint and with the goal of "I'm going to tell them what's what!" you'll create an oppositional dynamic that isn't going to build any bridges, and *confirmation bias* will make sure you notice everything that

confirms you were right to complain. But if you truly have an intention to improve the relationship, and you get very clear on that in your mind before you start, your demeanor can be a positive influence on where your attention goes and what you radiate into the room. (Tip: Reread Chapter 5, on mental preparation for meetings, for a deep dive into setting the right intentions for a great conversation.)

Let's borrow the Factual Feedback model from Chapter 12—which we know is built to minimize defensiveness—and retool it for this relationship-focused purpose. Here's how to apply it now:

- **Intention:** State your positive goal for this relationship. This doesn't have to be unrealistically optimistic—just hopeful and fair.
  - Before you speak to them, think about why this working relationship matters to you, and what you'd ideally like it to feel like.
  - Out loud, say something like: *"Our working relationship is important to me, and I'd like to make sure it's as strong as it can be. Do you have a few minutes to talk about how we're working together?"*
- **Observation:** Describe factually what you've observed, without interpretation or generalization. The aim is to be as dry and specific as possible, so that what you're saying is hard to argue with.
  - *"I've noticed…[factual observation]."* (For example, "I noticed a look on your face when I said XYZ," not "I think you're angry with me.")
- **Implication:** Explain why you care about this issue. Say something like:
  - *"It makes me concerned because…"* (For example: "It makes me concerned because if we're not connecting as well as we could, I know I'm not making the most of your expertise.")
- **Invitation:** Find out their side of the story. Make no assumptions or guesses about what's going on—just ask:

    - *"Can you tell me how you see it from your side?"*

- **Collaboration:** Do some mutual problem-solving on what you could do differently in how you interact.
    - *"I'd love to work better together. Can we talk about what might help us both?"*
    - *"Could we try a small experiment in how we handle XYZ?"*

  Not all differences can be bridged, but there's usually at least one practical change you can experiment with, to smooth the way—for example, a tweak to the way you communicate or approach decisions.

Michelle used this full Factual Feedback model with Lin. She says, "I was very clear and very factual in my observations, saying, 'These were the events, this is what I observed.' I didn't mention every single incident, but I covered several of the occasions where he had belittled me in front of others. Then I really owned the implication: 'This is how it made me feel, and this is the worry I have about how it's going to impact our working relationship.' "

The conversation ended up being a turning point in her relationship with Lin, as he suddenly understood the impact of his behavior. His response was profusely apologetic: "I am so ashamed of myself. I'm so sorry. I can't really explain or defend it. The only thing I can say is that I'm stressed, and it's affecting how I'm behaving." Michelle says, "It was helpful to see how quickly he acknowledged what he'd done." They then talked about how to shift the way they worked together, with the practical upshot that Lin agreed to give Michelle more airtime, and Michelle agreed to do more preparation with Lin before meetings to get him comfortable. More generally, she says, "we started spending more time working out how to divide and conquer, and understanding what each other's concerns might be."

Of course, another benefit is that it settled and reassured Michelle's team to see her and Lin working together more smoothly again. Michelle says the experience might even have been a good thing for them to observe, overall, because "they got to see how an important relationship can recover, rather than ending up as a permanent rift."

The quality of Michelle and Lin's interactions has been far better since she started using these techniques. "I think the fact that I've been honest with him has built real trust—he knows now that with me, 'what you see is what you get,' " Michelle says. "And now, in return, he confides in me a lot. He calls me if one of his meetings hasn't gone well, and I'll help him interpret or reframe what happened, and suggest a way forward." She adds, "I may once have thought I could change his behavior in exactly the way I wanted, but I'm not trying to mold him like that anymore—I'm trying to support his own efforts to be a better version of himself." Thanks to Michelle's bridge-building, it's a working relationship that's been lifted all around.

CHAPTER 18

How to Help a Colleague Who's Struggling

THE CHALLENGE

Imagine a situation where one of your team members seems unusually stressed or distracted. You're not sure what's wrong, but something's off—they're less engaged, less calm, or less thoughtful than usual. It's not a performance issue, as such. You've given them feedback on their work, but something broader seems to be going on. So, what do you do?

You could ignore it, and hope that things will resolve on their own. I've heard executives say things like "They're grown-ups—it's not my job to coddle them!" But leadership is ultimately about two things: getting the best out of your team, and doing it sustainably over time. So, if someone is flagging, lagging, or generally seeming less reliable, it is part of your job to figure out whether you can help them fix the issue. The cause could be something personal and temporary, like a tricky housing situation or minor breakup, which some patience and advice will solve. But if something more serious is going on for them, the last thing you want to do is lose a good employee over something that could have been made manageable with the right support.

I speak from experience here. In my early thirties, I had a slow-moving health crash as a result of a virus I couldn't shake, along with some family-related stress. I loved my job, so I tried to push through it all while becoming increasingly exhausted. I'll never forget how my boss, Tim, gently asked what was going on, and then helped me reconfigure my team

so I could take a proper break to recover. It was instrumental in enabling me to keep working for the same firm for another decade.

What I was forced to learn back then is that physical health affects mental health, and vice versa—and that both of them affect people's ability to perform at their professional best. In summary:

- **When a person feels mentally distressed, their body responds as if it's fighting a physical invader**—and over time, that can lead to an inflammatory response which harms immune function and cardiovascular health.[1],[2]
- **When people are physically worn down**—for example, by being short of sleep or fighting an illness—**they're less likely to feel mentally resilient** to the ups and downs of work.[3]

This cross-talk between mental and physical stress happens for a reason. When someone's brain is trying to assess how bad a situation is, it not only evaluates information from the outside world, but also looks for signals of ease or strain from inside their body (that's *interoception* again).[4] So when people are fatigued or sick, they're far more likely to get stressed by work that they'd fly through when feeling stronger. And once their brain is in *defensive mode,* research tells us that it's hard for them to think, behave, and perform at their best.[5]

This means that sometimes, to get a colleague back on track professionally, it helps to know how to talk to them about what's going on with their life more broadly. It's often possible for leaders to spot emerging issues and take practical steps that help people get back on their feet, both mentally and physically—as Tim did with me, many years ago—and that's what this chapter will guide you through.

THE ROLE MODEL

Mariah Levin is a leader who's particularly skilled at handling situations like this. For many years, she was the director of the prestigious World Economic Forum's program for Young Global Leaders, and she's now the executive director of beVisioneers: The Mercedes-Benz Fellowship—an

organization that channels seed funding to young entrepreneurs from around the world. Across these roles, she has managed, encouraged, or mentored around a thousand professionals. That gives her a large enough sample to know that even the most dedicated of colleagues can have ups and downs in their life and work—and she has a strong track record of knowing how to manage and support them when it happens.

What's striking about Mariah's approach is that it involves no compromises on the quality of work her teams deliver—she sets a high bar for excellence, with no "coddling." But at the same time, she's thoughtful, realistic, and practical in her response to employees who are struggling. She says, "I think they know I care about them as people—even when the work they're doing isn't satisfactory." Her approach is always to "give them a sense that we're in it together, that it's about solving the problem together. It's not just on them to fix it."

Let's understand some of the things you can do to help them "fix it." Then, we'll draw on Mariah for some examples of putting it into practice.

THE ADVICE: THE CALM APPROACH

As we've learned, negative stress happens when people face situations that feel demanding, unpleasant, and uncontrollable. The demanding and unpleasant parts of a struggling colleague's situation may not be set to change anytime soon, but that still leaves one area where leaders can usually help: shifting the feeling of "uncontrollable" to something a little closer to "manageable." That said, you want to make sure you're solving the right problem before you dive in. As leaders, we often have a natural instinct to jump into problem-solving mode as soon as possible. But there are three steps I suggest before you spring into action—**Check, Ask,** and **Listen.** And although it might feel a bit cute to have the acronym CALM for this advice, I'm hoping this will stick in your mind enough to remind you not to leap straight to the M for making things **Manageable.** Here's what we'll cover:

1. **CHECK your assumptions:** Assume "good person, bad situation"
2. **ASK factual questions:** Explore the issue with them, carefully
3. **LISTEN and learn:** Understand more deeply where they're at
4. **Make things MANAGEABLE:** Look for practical ways to help

» Bonus Tip: Get to know your team as people

1. CHECK your assumptions: Assume "good person, bad situation"

Suppose you've got a colleague who's started to be late to every meeting. Before you barrel into a discussion with them, it's important to notice and check your assumptions about what's going on. If someone's behavior is slipping, try not to jump to the idea that they're being deliberately difficult or disengaged. As we know well by now, as soon as you make that kind of guess, *confirmation bias* will make sure you see (and perhaps even invent) things that confirm you're right—while potentially missing any signs that they're off their game for a totally different reason. For example, if you think someone's looking tuned out because they lack a solid work ethic, you might mark them down on attitude—when in fact they're just tired because they have a child who isn't sleeping through the night.

So keep an open mind, and start by assuming this is a good, well-intended person who has tumbled into a bad situation of some sort (my shorthand for this is "good person, bad situation"). It will broaden the solution space you're working with, and increase your chances of a successful resolution. As Mariah says, "If I feel myself getting frustrated at someone, I know that's not going to produce the right environment for a successful conversation—so I make sure I do not have the discussion right there and then. I wait and make sure I'm in the right frame of mind before talking to them, so that I'm able to give them the benefit of the doubt."

Mariah says she does this "not because I'm trying to be likeable" (though I hope she'll allow me to say that she is, in fact, likeable). "It's because I want people to succeed in their roles, and I know they're more likely to do well if I assume good intent and start from a place of trust." She

likes to remind herself that "no one on my team is sabotaging on purpose. Everyone is doing the best that they can. That's the starting point."

2. ASK factual questions: Explore the issue with them, carefully

The second step of CALM is to make time for a careful, undistracted talk with your colleague—and keep yourself in that open, inquiring mindset. Your goal is to ask questions that help you understand the situation before taking action. Even when you're trying to be helpful, it's easy to misinterpret what's going on and end up trying to solve the wrong problem as a result. For example: If you guess that someone's looking glum because you're not giving them enough opportunities to shine, when in fact they're dealing with a bereavement or an illness you didn't know about, you're going to overload them at just the wrong time.

Mariah says, "I do ask a lot of questions to understand what I think I'm seeing. What I've realized over the years is that the way someone's behaving might remind you of another situation you've seen in the past, either in your own life or with another colleague, and it's easy to assume it's exactly the same story this time around. But it could be something else entirely."

So, tell them what you've observed in their demeanor or behavior, without adding your interpretation of what's driving it. Be as factual and precise as possible, rather than generalizing. Then probe to understand what you're seeing. Here's how I suggest you do it, borrowing the structure of the Factual Feedback model from Chapter 12, but with a couple of key phrases (which I've underlined) tuned to this setting:

> **INTENTION:** *"I care about you and I want to make sure you're able to do your best work, so I'd like to talk to you about something I've noticed, that I'm concerned about."*
> **OBSERVATION:** *"I noticed you doing/saying XYZ."*
> **IMPLICATION:** *"It worried me because…"*
> **INVITATION:** *"I'd like to understand what's happening so that I can help if possible. Can you tell me more about what's going on?"*

Here are a couple of examples of what it means to keep your observations factual and precise, without generalization or interpretation:

- **Instead of:** "You've been making sharp comments in our team meetings, and I think it's because you're frustrated with your colleagues." **Say, without interpretation:** "I noticed that in each of our last two team meetings, you made comments to your colleagues that were sharper in tone than normal. You said, 'That's fine for you to say' and 'I guess there's no point saying anything to anyone anymore.' "
- **Instead of:** "You've been consistently late arriving at work over the past week." **Say, without generalization:** "I noticed on Tuesday that you arrived an hour later than normal and on Wednesday you were 45 minutes late, which I haven't seen happen before."

When you probe to understand what's going on, you'll find that people have different levels of comfort with personal disclosure. Sometimes, all you get in the first conversation is "Sorry, I'm fine." But you're more likely to get them to open up if you follow the format above, which does three things for you: It explains that you're asking out of concern, not criticism; it keeps the observations precise enough to show you're not assuming they're a bad person; and it signals your desire to help. That's why those underlined phrases—"I care about you" and "so I can help if possible"—are so important to say.

By the way, I'm assuming that if this is a simple performance problem, you'll be giving them normal Factual Feedback (as in Chapter 12) and then coaching them using the GUIDE model (in Chapter 13). But in the case where you suspect a broader issue, what you should be listening for is anything that currently feels unmanageable for them.

That might have a psychological component—remember, the brain's *reward system* seeks competence and connection, and a drop in either makes life feel harder. It might have a physical component—for example, regarding their health or sleep quality. And the underlying causes might well reach beyond the workplace into personal concerns about family or

finances. Be alert to it all. Nobody's expecting you to solve everything—you just want to get the relevant facts on the table, so that you can have a better-informed conversation about what will help them get back on a more even keel.

3. LISTEN and learn: Understand more deeply where they're at

Now, hold back your problem-solving instinct for just a little longer. Before you do anything else, the third step of CALM involves taking a moment to acknowledge whatever they've just told you. This isn't just good conversational manners. Acknowledging someone's concerns makes them feel heard, and that alone has been found to be calming—even without you doing anything else.[6] Think about how you feel when you're stressed and someone says:

- *"I hear you—that must be hard."*

There's a kind of release that happens, allowing you to move forward and think about next steps. It works partly because of the power of connection—it makes a situation feel less lonely, which in turn makes it less unpleasant and potentially more manageable. (Feel free to borrow that phrase—I've found it always helps.)

It's even better if you can then do what any good listener does: ask some follow-up questions that show you're listening with real care. Two good options for this exploration are:

- *"What's the hardest part of this?"*
- *"What is still working well, if anything?"*

This pair of questions has a couple of benefits beyond making your colleague feel truly listened to. First, as we've seen before, research suggests that the more specific a person is about the nature of the stress they're facing, the more that talking about the situation will start to calm their brain.[7] Second, getting more precise allows you to gather more information about the likely best solution.

Mariah agrees: “It really is worth spending time breaking things down in more detail and exploring what exactly is concerning them. For example, if they’re tired, I’ll ask, ‘What parts of the job feel most draining right now?’ And I also ask, ‘Where do you feel you can still excel?’ It becomes easier to problem-solve with someone once they’ve spent time on this, because then you can support them in addressing the right pain point—rather than taking a scattergun approach.”

4. Make Things MANAGEABLE: Look for practical ways to help

Now to the last step of CALM. Mariah says, “Once I’m sure I understand the situation, I explore whether I can be helpful. And usually, I find there is something I can do.” Sometimes what leaders can do sits squarely within the workplace, and sometimes it’s about giving people space and support to resolve personal issues. Here are three situations Mariah has navigated, to spark your thinking on the sorts of practical actions you can take.

Situation A: Managing overload by reallocating work

Mariah explains the situation: “I had put a colleague in charge of planning our big annual gathering in China. These gatherings were difficult to organize, and our CEO had strong opinions about how they should run, so there was a degree of pressure on whoever was going to be the event lead. But she was by far the team’s most experienced person at arranging these events, and she’d led them successfully in the past. So it was a relief for everyone that she was in charge.” But, Mariah says, “over time, I noticed that she was seeming unusually tired, and she’d been taking more days of remote work than usual. I also saw her start to be impatient with other colleagues, which was unlike her.”

So Mariah started checking in more often, and eventually she shared her observations with the colleague. The real story surfaced: “It took a while for her to open up. But she admitted to me that workload had become a big problem, and she felt on the verge of burnout.” Constant travel was a big part of the exhaustion, and some family concerns that normally would have felt manageable now felt overwhelming given that her colleague didn’t have

any fuel left in the tank. It became clear to Mariah that her trusted employee was not in good shape to travel to China for eight days to lead an event of such scale. It definitely wasn't laziness: "She felt awful about letting the team down, but I could tell that she was clearly unwell."

Mariah didn't want to lose her high-performing colleague. So she worked out a plan with her, to help her get back to full strength. "We found ways to divide up her workload so that other team members could step in to alleviate some of the pressure." And on the question of who could be on the ground to oversee the event, they came up with a winning solution. "We identified a more junior team member who was excited and ready to step up. We had her shadow another event leader for a little while, then deployed her as the on-the-ground manager in China." Mariah says this ended up having a lasting benefit for the whole team: "It led to us trying out a different method of delivering big events, which distributed the work more effectively across the team and ended up meaning less demanding travel for everyone. That made the work more sustainable—not just for the employee who was overloaded, but for everyone else too."

Situation B: Stress reduction with the Five Resets

Sometimes, more manageability can come from helping people shift their thinking, rather than shifting workload—especially if what's going on is more of a minor hassle than a major life upheaval. The Five Resets (from Chapter 15) can be useful here. These techniques are not only helpful in managing your own stress; you can also teach them to your colleagues, to help them cope with whatever life is throwing their way. Here's a short recap, and guidance on how to talk about them:

- **Recenter:** Share the Awareness, Breathing, Centering (ABC) routine for them to use when they're feeling stressed. You can boil it down to three questions:
  - **A**wareness: What am I feeling right now?
  - **B**reathing: How deep a breath can I take?
  - **C**entering: What really matters most here?

- **Reframe:** Show them how to check and widen their perspective when they're feeling stuck, by asking themselves:
  - What am I assuming here?
  - What could be a different way of seeing this?
  - If there's even a 10 percent chance of that being right, what does that mean I should do now?

- **Reward:** Boost their sense of **competence** and **connection** by helping them see that they're making meaningful progress at work (even if things feel hard right now). For example:
  - Give them positive feedback about things they're doing well.
  - Help them focus on what's doable, and encourage them to break big goals into manageable steps.
  - Make sure they understand how their work makes a positive difference.
  - Check they know who to reach out to for help and support.

- **Recharge:** Remind them that their physical state supports their mental state, and that exercise and sleep should be high priorities. Make clear that you support them in:
  - Building physical activity into the day (even a walk helps)
  - Switching off at the end of the day

- **Reflect:** Encourage them to ask themselves at the end of each day:
  - What went well, however small?
  - What did I learn, that might be useful in the future?

  This is not about pretending everything is awesome. It's about boosting their resilience by helping them rebalance where their attention goes, since negative memories tend to stick more firmly than positive ones. (See Chapter 15 for the references underpinning all these strategies.)

Mariah has been using an approach recently that blends insights from the Reframe, Reward, and Reflect strategies, which involves encouraging

colleagues to focus on what they're learning when things don't go entirely to plan.

Her team has been scrambling to implement several major new processes as they scale up their operations, and it hasn't always gone smoothly. She noticed one colleague in particular was getting disheartened by the fact that the rollouts weren't going perfectly. It turned out he'd been assuming that the only way to see the rollouts as a "success" would be if everything was flawless. So Mariah helped him shift his perspective: "We talked about the fact that when we do something 'wrong,' we're actually learning good information about what it means to do it 'right.' And every part of that learning process is valuable." That was a useful reframe in thinking for him—and getting him to reflect on what he was learning felt rewarding, too, since learning boosts competence and engages the brain's reward system.[8]

To go further on the Reward dimension, she also encouraged his team to spend more time on the kind of retrospectives we learned about in Chapter 7. That made the learning process more of a collective ritual, which strengthened connections within the team. It reminded her colleague that they were all pulling together to build something new and useful. As Mariah says, "All of that helped him develop the patience and tenacity it takes to persevere."

(In the next chapter, we'll dive deeper into how to manage your response to more serious failures. Spoiler alert: Learning will be key to this, too.)

Situation C: Reboot through personal leave

"Sometimes, you can just see that someone needs some time out," Mariah says. She tells the story of a colleague on her extended team who was normally highly motivated and had been eagerly ambitious about taking on a more responsible role. "He'd always been very chatty and effusive in the past. But now, he was showing up at work quite distracted, and often looked upset."

As Mariah probed, it turned out that there were several things going on. First of all, it became clear that he needed coaching on how to prioritize his workload more effectively. But it also surfaced that a bereavement was in the mix as well. His much-loved grandfather had died in his home country on the other side of the world, and it had been difficult for him to grieve healthily with his family, because of the distance and time difference. On top of that, he had a visa issue that needed urgent attention. "Overall, there was a sense of struggle across the board. So I thought, 'Maybe it's time for him to take a break, to get back on track.' "

Giving him time off meant she needed to figure out how to get his work done while he was away. "What you don't want when someone takes a leave of absence is that all their work lands in other people's laps, because you can end up burning out the rest of the team," she says. Sometimes their work can be put on pause. In this case, Mariah says, "we hired a contractor to cover the tasks that were easy for an outsider to take on." And after her colleague took a few weeks off to travel home and hit reset, Mariah says, "he came back in a much better position to contribute."

Personal leave is often needed for people to get on top of complex physical health issues. When I was sick and trying to hold down my job as a management consultant in the early 2000s, I spent many months bouncing from one medical test to the next, ever dizzier and more fatigued. Finally, a neurologist prescribed me two weeks of medical leave to recuperate, which I carefully planned for with my boss, Tim. So it was then a shock to eventually discover that I would need fully six months off before my health improved enough for me to return to work. But thanks to Tim's continued belief in me, and the support of other senior leaders, I had the time off I needed—and I came back far stronger, able to build a path to promotion as a partner.

The moral of the story: Be like Tim. Be like Mariah. In fact, just about all the leaders in this book have a similar story to tell about a colleague they successfully supported through a tough time. So be like all of them, too.

What if it's...not that big an issue?

Sometimes you encounter a situation where the reason a colleague gives for being out of sorts might feel trivial, or even absurd. (One leader in this book recalls being baffled by a colleague who was seemingly unable to work at full steam following the demise of her sister's cat.) When someone's distress seems out of proportion to the cause, it's worth taking a beat before deciding what you're dealing with. Sometimes, a minor pretext masks a major struggle: The death of a cat is standing in for the loss of a person or a relationship. But sometimes, it really is what it seems: a young professional who hasn't yet developed the sense of perspective that working life requires.

The right approach is still to follow all the advice in this chapter, because your first task remains diagnostic. You want to stay curious long enough to uncover what's really going on. Ask a few more follow-up questions (e.g., *"How are you doing otherwise?"*) to test whether the apparent overreaction is a proxy for something deeper. If it isn't, then the situation can become a gentle coaching moment. You can acknowledge their feeling (*"I can see that threw you off balance"*) while also widening the lens: *"Part of moving forward in your career will involve figuring out how to handle life's hiccups without them knocking you off course. Let's talk about how to develop that skill."*

Then, share some strategies for managing frustrations and disappointments, drawing on the stress-management techniques in the Situation B section, above. Handled this way, even the most eyebrow-raising upset can become a useful developmental moment.

Being prepared

If you're wondering how Mariah was able to move so quickly to hire temporary support during her colleague's leave of absence, that's a good question. It turns out that Mariah actually **plans ahead for this financially.** "We set aside some rainy-day funds in our budgeting process to cover this sort of thing," she says. "It's not a lot, which is why we would only outsource lower-level work that doesn't require knowing the person's job inside and out. But we factor in a bit of slack capacity because of life's

uncertainties. It's a worthwhile investment, because it enables us to give someone the time they need if something comes up."

Mariah also has an option that requires no extra budget: She's always ready to encourage her colleagues to **make smart use of all their available vacation and health days.** For example, she might suggest that someone take a long weekend when they're worn down. She finds that even just mentioning it can help: "I had a conversation with a stressed colleague last week where I said, 'Do you think you might want to take Friday off to regroup?' They said, 'Let me think about it.' And ultimately they decided not to. But just reminding people that they have options makes a big difference in helping them feel that they can manage what's on their plate."

Finally, you should of course make sure to **know where you can send people for more serious help** with their mental health. In the largest organizations, you most likely have a counseling or therapy service; be aware of how to put your colleague directly in touch with them. If you're in a smaller organization without an in-house service, keep a list of local or national helplines handy (like this one: https://findahelpline.com).

Even with your best efforts with CALM, it's not always possible to create a manageable path for a colleague who's struggling. Sometimes, a person's stress does end up bleeding into a performance issue that you can't fix through support and coaching—Mariah has had two experiences like that. But those instances are far outweighed by the many times she's been able to retain good performers who were having a temporary wobble. "Even if it doesn't work out, I think there's honor in being able to look back as a leader and say, 'I did what I could.' In general, though, it usually does work out. And I've always found that people are very loyal when you stand by them through these kinds of ups and downs."

≫ Bonus Tip: Get to know your team as people

It's easier to see how to help your people thrive if you know broadly where each of them is at, personally and professionally. That doesn't mean you have to become their therapist; just remember to ask them a more general check-in question from time to time. Mariah says, "I don't know all the details, but I know what motivates them, and I know the contours of people's lives: whether they have a partner, what their life obligations are, if their parents are unwell. I think that matters to people. And it makes issues easier to spot if something isn't right."

Even just occasionally asking *"How are you doing?"* goes a long way, as I've mentioned before—especially if you make sure you're really listening, and are not distracted by your devices or your calendar as they reply. Then, from time to time, try asking your colleagues a couple of more expansive questions, like:

- *"How are you feeling about everything at work?"*
- *"And how are things outside work? Is there anything I should know, to help you succeed and thrive here?"*

Listen for practical challenges like commuting or a second job; caring for children or aging parents; health issues; or any other constraints they're facing, especially those that might affect the amount of sleep they're getting. They may not have anything of that nature to share, and you don't have to probe. But just asking the question is worthwhile, because having a sense of feeling personally supported at work is a strong predictor of employee engagement and performance.[9] And on top of that, if you're a manager of managers, studies suggest there are positive ripple effects—the more you show that you care about your direct reports, the more they pay it forward with their own teams.[10]

CHAPTER 19

How to Respond to Failures and Mistakes

THE CHALLENGE

I don't need to tell you that things don't always go perfectly at work. Colleagues drop balls, and customers feel let down. Technology fails, and workflows stop flowing. How should you respond when disappointment strikes? It matters a lot, because the way a leader behaves when things go wrong will shape their team's performance—both in the short term and over the long term.

First, let's talk about the immediate situation, where your team still needs to fix whatever has gone wrong. Here's what it's good to understand:

- **Fixing complex mistakes requires a lot of intelligence.** It needs both *deep persistence,* to uncover what went wrong, and *mental flexibility,* to generate ideas about solutions.[1] But as we know, **a brain that's under stress tends to flip into *defensive mode,*** which deprioritizes those sophisticated types of thinking in favor of narrowly focused, knee-jerk responses.[2]
- Failure tends to tip people into *defensive mode,* because failure is often a combination of all three of the components of a stressful experience: it's demanding, unpleasant, and uncontrollable. So, just when your team most needs extra sharpness to solve a problem and get things back on track, **stress can make them think less clearly and creatively** about what to do next.

- If you get angry and make people feel even more stressed about having messed up, they'll think even less clearly and creatively. But if you can **help people feel that the situation is somewhat manageable,** by signaling a focus on finding solutions, you make it more likely they'll stay out of *defensive mode* and remain sharp enough to help fix the issue.[3] That doesn't mean you avoid holding people accountable for any mistakes later on—but it does mean avoiding unnecessary drama in the heat of the moment.
- It's even better if you can **signal that you will pull meaningful learning out of the failure.** Helping people take something useful from the experience will make it feel less like an unpleasant waste of effort, and more like a hard-earned lesson that leaves everyone stronger for the next time something bad happens.[4]

So, to recap: Making a failure feel manageable—and even meaningful—is how you get your team's best brainpower directed at improving the situation. I describe that process as drawing people out of defensive mode and into "discovery mode," where they're more focused on the rewards in a situation than on the threats—something we'll explore in the advice below.

This approach also helps you build a high-achieving team culture over the longer term, for two reasons. First: If you react to failure in a measured way, your team is more likely to tell you the next time that something goes off track in the future. (By contrast, if you lose your cool when things go wrong, your colleagues will instinctively hold back from sharing bad news with you, making it harder for you to solve small problems before they become bigger ones.) Second: To keep improving, you want your colleagues to be willing to suggest and try new things, and they'll be less excited to do that if you make them feel there's little room for error. That's why research tells us that **when your team feels it's *psychologically safe* to talk to you about what's not working, it boosts their performance and innovation over time.**[5] So let's see what the playbook looks like for achieving that.

THE ROLE MODEL

Gayle Tait is a board director and CEO who has led teams in organizations of many shapes and sizes, from large multinationals like Google to smaller ventures like circular economy pioneer Trove. She has a brilliant track record of driving strategic and operational transformations. But that doesn't mean everything has always gone to plan throughout her career. She has seen her share of upsets and missteps over the years, and she's thought more than most executives I know about how crucial it is for leaders to respond productively in the face of disappointment.

"I didn't always know how to deal with bad news," she admits. Early in her career, Gayle worked in a company where the culture was more punitive than supportive, and she absorbed the norms she saw around her: "Our meetings focused on what wasn't going well, and it usually wasn't in the context of working with people to understand why something hadn't worked out, or how to fix it. The style was to highlight problems in a way that made people feel bad."

Her style changed after she missed a target herself, and found herself on the receiving end of the punitive approach. "I noticed it wasn't productive when my bosses provoked shame or panic in me. It put me into a really unhelpful spiral that made it harder to solve the issue." At the time, Gayle didn't know about the neuroscience showing that a brain in defensive mode has less capacity for cognitive clarity. But the pattern was clear to her once she tuned into it: "I noticed again and again that beating up on someone made it harder to solve the problem. Since things are going to go wrong all the time, leaders need to develop a healthy attitude toward that reality—ideally one that helps people fix the issue and learn from it."

Each organization Gayle has worked with has had a different culture around handling unexpected results. But the science-based principles in this chapter hold true whatever the context, whether you're surrounded by "let's give it a try" innovators or "if it ain't broke…" traditionalists.

THE ADVICE: THE VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Right after you find out about a failure, your aim should be to draw people's brains out of defensive mode as soon as possible—not to let anyone off the hook, but to create the best possible conditions for moving forward intelligently. The goal is to get everyone calm, curious, and open-minded enough to solve the problem effectively—a state of mind we'll call **discovery mode** (as a counter to defensive mode). To get your team into discovery mode, you'll want to help people feel that there is a way forward, and that there's something useful and interesting to be learned from what's happened. The approach I suggest is called a "Voyage of Discovery." (And at the end of the chapter, I'll share some advice on how to hold people accountable in the right way, once the storm has passed.)

1. **ORIENT YOURSELF:** Get yourself into a discovery-oriented mindset
2. **RALLY THE CREW:** Acknowledge the situation and set a discovery-oriented tone
3. **MAP THE TERRAIN:** Ask questions that involve, inform, and refocus people on what matters
4. **CHART A COURSE:** Evaluate options, make a plan, and get moving
5. **LAND THE LEARNING:** Make sure people reflect enough to learn, adapt, and improve

» Bonus Tip: How to decide on consequences for those responsible

1. ORIENT YOURSELF: Get yourself into a discovery-oriented mindset

Let's start with your immediate reaction. How do you behave at the moment you hear bad news from your team? What's your facial expression, and how do you sound? We've seen in earlier chapters that people take their emotional cues from the most senior person in the room—and when that person looks anxious or annoyed, it can start to scramble the thinking of everyone else.[6]

Your first job, then, is to get yourself grounded. As Gayle puts it, "In a crisis, leaders should always be thinking about how to make the situation

better, not worse. I know the way that I show up sets the tone. If I give an impression that's anything other than calm, it's not going to help."

Gayle says she learned this the hard way: "I had a director who wasn't hitting his targets, and I got really annoyed with him. His reaction was to cover things up and keep telling me that we were on track—until right before the deadline, when he finally admitted we weren't. Which actually left us with a much bigger problem," she says. It was clear her approach was backfiring. "If you get annoyed, it makes people less likely to tell you when things are going wrong. Then you're less effective as a leader because you don't know what on earth is going on. By the time you do know, it's too late. So now I tell myself, 'If you need to have a little personal meltdown, don't do it near anyone else.' "

Managing your demeanor is not optional if you want to create the best possible thinking environment for yourself and others. You can deliver a pointed, sharp, considered response later, but initially you're trying to calm the waters so that people can focus. As Gayle says: "You have to remember that people generally don't do things wrong on purpose."

Here are three grounding thoughts to steady yourself and get yourself out of defensive mode, before you start the process of taking your team to a more positive place:

- *"It's **better to know** about this now than to find out later when it's worse."*
- *"For now, what matters most is **solving the problem,** not assigning blame."*
- *"I need to show **curiosity,** not anger or despair, if I want people to think clearly."*

If you need it, flip back to Chapter 15 for more guidance on staying calm. And make sure to invest some time in whichever activities most effectively clear your head and put your feet back on the ground. Gayle again: "It's really important to keep your energy up when things are going wrong. That is not easy, because in a crisis, you usually need to spend more time

working. But if you don't find a way to restore yourself, you won't be able to think straight."

Her go-to reset strategy is to get outside for a walk, preferably walking her dog. "That helps me get into the right frame of mind, especially before a tough conversation." You'll have your own reliable reset strategy—know what it is, and be ready to reach for it quickly. (Dog optional.)

2. RALLY THE CREW: Acknowledge the situation and set a discovery-oriented tone

If you're feeling tense about things going off track, you can bet your colleagues are worried, too. That's why your next move is to say out loud to your team a version of the three things you just privately said to yourself in the last section, so you can help them get focused on discovery rather than despair:

- *"It's **better for us to know** about this than not."*
- *"Right now, we're **focused on solutions,** not blame."*
- *"What's going to help us solve this is **curiosity,** not despair."*

Whether you're talking to one person or a whole team, make those points explicit. When Gayle is addressing a group, she adds a bigger-picture framing message that goes like this: "I know this is unpleasant. None of us wanted to be in this situation. But we're here, so what really matters now is how we show up, how we solve this, and what we learn from it." That kind of statement does three useful things:

- **It names the difficulty.** You're not pretending everything is fine when it obviously isn't, and that's good—not just because it's more honest, but also because acknowledging the tough situation is part of your broader toolkit as a leader. As we know, naming a difficult emotion (*affect labeling*) can reduce stress-related activity in the brain.[7] It's like telling your colleagues' brains: "We know this is hard. Understood. You can stop raising the alarm."

- **It redirects people's attention toward sources of motivation: competence and manageability.** By framing the situation as a solvable challenge—and perhaps even an opportunity to improve—you reengage the brain's *reward system* and begin to nudge people out of defensive mode.
- **It signals a generative rather than punitive mindset.** As Gayle says, "I'm really trying to convey that we're in learning mode, not blame mode. That doesn't mean there will be no accountability. But for now, it puts everyone in a better frame of mind to fix things."

3. MAP THE TERRAIN: Ask questions that involve, inform, and refocus people on what matters

Once you've calmed yourself and acknowledged the situation, the next step is to actively shift into *discovery mode*—and bring your team with you.

That means asking open questions to surface more of what's going on and get people thinking about possible solutions. (Obviously, you want to avoid irritable non-questions like "Why in the world did you do that?" or "How could you have been so inept?" These are expressions of your distress, not of genuine curiosity.) Useful questions to ask are those that **involve, inform,** and **refocus** people in the right way—like this:

- **INVOLVE:** *"Who else might have a helpful perspective on this issue?"* Sometimes, you can resolve things with the person at the center of the problem. But often, a better path emerges when you tap colleagues or experts with different vantage points (as we learned in Chapter 1). As Gayle puts it: "Cross-functional teams often see the problem differently, and that gives you a much richer set of possible solutions."
- **INFORM:** *"What do we know so far, and what do we not yet know?"* Make two lists—"known" and "unknown"—and capture everything that's relevant. Even in the middle of a crisis, there's usually plenty that is known, and emphasizing this is a way of reducing the state of alert in everyone's brain (as we saw in Chapter 16). **Extra tip:** When

Gayle's team is talking through what's known and unknown, she often adds a simple prompt as she's listening: *"Tell me more about that."* It's one of my favorite leadership phrases, as I mentioned in Chapter 6. Here, it keeps uncovering information on both the known and unknown sides of the ledger, and Gayle says, "It also gives me a moment to pause and think while they're talking, which helps me to stay grounded."

- **REFOCUS:** *"What's the real problem we're trying to solve?"* In stressful moments, teams often leap to conclusions. That's understandable, but it risks missing the bigger picture, for all the reasons we learned in Part I on "Deliberate Wisdom." Taking a step back to widen perspective and properly define the issue makes sure your team isn't getting tunnel vision, as often happens to brains in defensive mode.[8] "I will work with a team for as long as it takes to define the right problem, at the right level," Gayle says. "That has served me so well in multiple crisis situations when we would otherwise have charged down the wrong path."

Case in point: The ton of T-shirts

Gayle once served as the CEO of a re-commerce business that helped fashion brands process their returns and trade-ins sustainably. She remembers a time when her team suddenly found themselves dealing with an unexpected spike in volume: "We had four hundred thousand T-shirts arriving, which was way beyond our forecast. Our warehouse didn't have space, and everyone was panicking."

Gayle took a breath. She did her pep talk to set a discovery-oriented tone, centering on curiosity rather than blame. Then, she asked the **Involve** question (Who else can help?), which resulted in her gathering a cross-functional group of staff to get a balanced perspective on the problem. She then asked them the **Inform** questions, saying: "Let's write down everything we know to be true, and then what we don't know." Here's some of what they discussed:

Known:

- Number of units to expect
- Space available in existing warehouse
- Units will arrive gradually, not all at once

Unknown:

- Exactly when the units will be arriving
- How much physical space the 400,000 units will require

With that clear, they then worked on moving "physical space required" from the "Unknown" list to the "Known" list—which was surprisingly difficult. "Are we talking a garage or a barn? Would you know exactly how much space a T-shirt takes up? None of us knew off the top of our heads," she says, smiling now. "So there we were, weighing and measuring T-shirts to figure out the volume we were dealing with."

Then Gayle asked her **Refocus** question: What's the real problem we're trying to solve? "At first glance, it looked like the issue was that we were going to run out of space, so people started talking about upgrading to a bigger warehouse," she says. "But we actually had a longer-term plan to shut down our warehouse operations altogether and move out of physical processing. We were moving toward a model of providing the software for other companies to do that piece." The last thing they wanted was to undermine that strategic shift—and that became obvious once they'd stepped back to think more broadly. It changed the discussion. "We realized it wouldn't make sense to take on a normal lease or buy a facility. So we got to the real question: How do we find more space temporarily, without making a long-term commitment?" With that more precisely defined problem to solve, it became easier for Gayle's team to move forward.

Look for bright spots

It might feel counterintuitive in the wake of a mistake, but it's helpful in this discovery phase to ask:

- *"What is going well in the middle of all this?"*

This is a smart thing to do, for several reasons. It helps you avoid accidentally disrupting things that are working. It can unearth solutions that might be applied in the problem area. And it also helps keep people off the defensive while you discuss solutions, because it reconnects them to their (potentially wavering) sense of competence.

Some extra helpful prompts to use:

- *"What have we already tried? And what—if anything—has worked?"*
- *"Is there anywhere that things are going better? What might we borrow from that?"*
- *"Where have we solved something like this before? What did we learn then?"*

In the T-shirt situation, Gayle reminded her team that they'd successfully managed the problem of sudden growth before. "During Covid, our business grew unexpectedly overnight, and we handled it well. Reminding the team of that gave them confidence that we could problem-solve our way forward." She puts it this way: "If you only focus on the things that are going wrong, people can start to feel hopeless, and that makes it harder to find a way out of the failure. Looking back at how they've overcome things in the past reminds the team that they have the capacity to figure it out."

4. CHART A COURSE: Evaluate options, make a plan, and get moving

Once you've oriented yourself, acknowledged what's happened, and gotten the right people focused on the right problem, your next job is to help your team move into action. You want to get them crystal clear on what needs to be done, and what exactly happens next.

Clarity on the options

Talking about practical actions can start a helpful flywheel: The sense of taking control pulls people further out of defensive mode into *discovery mode,* which further clears their heads to think about improvements and

solutions. Here are some questions to ask that will get that flywheel turning and help everyone think intelligently about the way forward:

- **CRITERIA:** *"What would be the characteristics of a good way forward?"* "For example," Gayle says, "I often ask people, 'Do we want a solution that maximizes speed? Magnitude of impact? Simplicity? What about cost efficiency, or reputation?' "
- **OPTIONS:** *"What are a few ideas about what we could do?"* It's natural to grab the first option that presents itself. But even if you come back to that initial idea, the team's thinking will be better if you encourage them to consider more than one solution.
- **RATING:** *"Which idea best fits our needs?"* Gayle often has her colleagues take a structured approach to evaluating their ideas, by ranking them against their solution criteria to decide which look like the most promising avenues to explore.

If this process reminds you of the ACORN decision-making model in Chapter 4, that's no accident. Gayle is a fan of that structured approach to decisions, even—and perhaps especially—under pressure. She's seen enough of these situations to have developed her own simple one-page template that includes all the questions above, which she says helps everyone get on the same page, quite literally. She adds: "My experience is that taking this structured approach does a lot to tame the messiness of the problem, so people can think more clearly in the midst of it all."

Back to Gayle's T-shirt team: Once their goal of finding a temporary space was clear, the solution criteria became easier to see. "One criterion was that we needed a specific amount of space. Two: We needed to be able to get out of the rental agreement quickly. Three: We needed it to be as cheap as possible. And four: We needed it the following week, not right away, because not everything was arriving at once." They found an expert in short-term leases and managed to secure a temporary space just down the road from their existing warehouse. Their office park neighbors were spared the sight of buildings buried in T-shirts, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Clarity on the practicalities

Whatever solutions you decide to explore, you need to be clear on the next steps and who is doing what by when—even more than in normal times. When someone is worried, their brain's *working memory* tends to have less capacity, making it harder than normal to keep what matters top of mind.[9] Documenting everything reduces the risk of wires getting crossed.

Gayle puts it plainly: "Write down everything you've agreed. People really do miss things in meetings when they're stressed. It's calming for everyone to know they can refer back to the list—and it really helps with accountability." She continues, "As a leader, it's helped me so many times to go back to the notes and say, 'We agreed that we were going to do this, so did we do that? And if not, why?' "

Be specific about, for example:

- *"What **information** do we need to gather next, and who will do that?"*
- *"When will we **meet again** to review where we are?"*
- *"What needs to be **communicated,** to whom, and through which channels?"*

Gayle echoes some of the advice from Chapter 10 on keeping your language easy to understand: "In a crisis, you want your communication to be human but simple. Use bullet points and fewer words where possible, with less flowery language, so people know what you're trying to say and don't have to guess." Then, if it's a developing situation, keep communicating. As she says, "Silence creates a vacuum that can get filled with speculation and concern. Frequent updates keep people feeling in control of a situation that may otherwise feel unmanageable."

5. LAND THE LEARNING: Make sure people reflect enough to learn, adapt, and improve

Finding a solution to the problem shouldn't be the end of the story. When something has gone wrong, it's vital to extract the lessons from the experience. Not only will that give you all much more chance of preventing

the same thing from happening again—it will also be good for your colleagues' resilience and motivation if you can lift something meaningfully useful out of the ashes.[10]

There's a reason that this comes as the last step in the Voyage of Discovery. Studies show that during the earlier steps, if people are still in defensive mode, they can struggle to achieve the open-mindedness needed to fully learn from their mistakes.[11] But once you've successfully pulled people into *discovery mode* by focusing them on finding a good solution, research shows that people can learn a lot—and retain the lessons—even in the aftermath of a mess.[12]

So get your team together—as well as anyone else who was involved in causing or fixing the problem—and ask:

- *"Why do we think this happened?"*
- *"What have we learned from this?"*
- *"What will we do differently, to make sure it doesn't happen again?"*

There can still be a steely edge. Gayle says at this point in the process, "I'll always say, 'We shouldn't waste a good crisis—it's a chance to learn.' But I also say that I do not expect that we'll be making the same mistakes again. There can be a certain level of tolerance, but that doesn't mean 'anything goes' in terms of performance and accountability."

In the T-shirt situation, something had clearly gone wrong with the company's forecasting process. "We did a retro," she says, "asking, 'How did it happen, what can we learn?' It turned out that someone had made an error in a formula in a spreadsheet. That was partly a process problem—we learned that we weren't doing enough to double-check the most important assumptions we used in our model. And then some of it, frankly, was human error." So her company improved their oversight process for reviewing the most consequential forecast assumptions, and Gayle had a serious feedback conversation with the person who made the error.

≫ Bonus Tip: How to decide on consequences for those responsible

Should those responsible for a big mistake be immediately penalized, or even fired? Maybe. But in most cases, it probably shouldn't be your first action unless it was a major ethical breach. First, you need to work out what feels fair and proportionate to the situation.

People have an intensely sensitive radar for fairness, to the point that people's brains process unfairness like a threat.[13] And for a leader, paying attention to fairness after a failure cuts both ways. On the one hand, you don't want to create the impression that poor performance doesn't matter much; that's something your more talented people can end up finding unfair and demotivating. But you also want to avoid being excessively harsh—especially with someone who was just unlucky or uninformed. You want to strike a smart balance between learning and accountability. In most cases, that means giving someone extremely clear feedback and laying out clear expectations for future performance—not asking them to hand in their badge.

Gayle's very conscious of the balancing act that's needed: "If people see their co-workers getting fired for making any mistake at all, you're going to have a culture of fear that makes it really hard to do good work. But you do need to have a limit to the mistakes you can accept. You're running an organization, and it's important to have high standards." The way she puts it is: "There are mistakes that are okay to make, and then there are mistakes that are not okay to make." So, how do you decide what are "okay mistakes," and make good choices about individual consequences?

Here's what I suggest leaders ask themselves:

- Was this a **systems** failure, or an **individual's** error?
- If it was an individual's error: Is it a **one-off,** or an emerging **pattern** in their work?
    - If it's a one-off, **give them very clear feedback and coaching,** then monitor what happens.

    - If it's a pattern, have you **previously** given them clear feedback and coaching?
        - If not, ramp that up now—quickly.
        - If you have, but they keep making the same mistake, that's when you need to consider sterner action.

Gayle walks through this mental checklist in the aftermath of a misstep, to decide how to handle the conversation with whoever was responsible. First, system versus individual: "If we're experimenting with a new business process, it's almost always a system issue—and things that don't work perfectly are actually helpful for us to know about. It makes us sharper."

But if the individual made an error? "If the mistake was because someone did something silly, like they didn't check a number, I'll talk to them, coach them, and say, 'Please don't do that again.' You can set clear expectations with people around that." This is what happened with Gayle's colleague who made the forecasting error. She adds: "If they're not persistent offenders, then people should be credited for owning up to mistakes they've made, and committing to act on what they've learned from them."

"Of course, if they do end up doing it again, that's going to be a problem," she says. "That's when you need to think about whether the person is in the right role." For more guidance on serious consequence management, turn to Chapter 20, on managing potential exits. But I'd strongly suggest you don't do that before you've mined the material in Chapter 12 on feedback and Chapter 13 on coaching.

Taking a discovery-oriented approach is now second nature to Gayle when her colleagues hit a bump in the road. "Failure is part of doing business," she says, "and while it's often painful, good leaders know how to extract

value from it. I always tell my colleagues that each failure can be the ‘hardest but best’ way to learn how we could improve.” She adds that fully embracing this approach over the years required a change to her own internal monologue: “I had to shift my mindset from ‘If something goes wrong, it must mean I’m not good at my job’ to ‘Things will always go wrong, and being good at my job is about handling it well.’ And that’s about the quality of my reaction—am I able to be curious, and learn something from it?” Making sure that the answer is always a clear yes, both for herself and for her teams, has made her a stronger, more resilient, and more successful leader all around.

CHAPTER 20

How to Handle Exits and Layoffs Fairly

THE CHALLENGE

Eventually, you'll encounter a situation where someone on your team isn't a fit for the role they're in. You hope and hope it isn't the case, but eventually too many things go wrong to make it fair to leave them in their current job. When this happens, you can't just sit on your hands and hope the problem will somehow resolve itself without you doing anything (though I've seen a lot of conflict-averse leaders try that). The most intelligent leaders are proactive, kind, and fair in how they handle this type of situation.

They're **proactive,** because when you have someone visibly falling short, it's not only a drain on your time and ability to deliver—it's often damaging to the rest of your team, too. As we saw in the last chapter, **if you let bad performance go unaddressed, it can feel unfair to your higher performers, who have to carry more load as a result.** And while fairness engages the brain's *reward system,* unfairness engages areas of the brain associated with disgust—which is not a good ingredient in a group dynamic.[1] That's why most leaders I work with have ended up saying at some point: "I wish I'd acted sooner, once I knew there was a problem."

Good leaders are also **kind** in how they handle these situations. The underperforming colleague often knows they're not really nailing the role—which is an unpleasant feeling, because nobody sets out to do a bad job. And as we learned in Chapter 16, uncertainty is generally hard on the

human brain. You see a bigger stress response in someone's brain when they're told they have a 50 percent chance of receiving an electric shock (leaving them uncertain about what will happen next), compared with when they're told they're definitely receiving one.[2] In other words: **Even when it's bad news, it's kinder to tell people what's really going on.** If you let someone know where they stand, they can make a plan for what comes next.

Being **fair** is another quality to call out, because you want to be able to look back and **know that you gave your colleague a reasonable chance to turn things around.** In some countries, that's a legal requirement. Even where it isn't, studies suggest people are more accepting of difficult decisions if they can see that they were made fairly—that's another example of *procedural justice,* which we've seen before.[3] So the more you can show that you've followed a decent process, and weighed all angles appropriately, the more manageable it will feel on both sides if you need to finally tell your colleague that it's not working out.

If they're in the wrong role, there's probably a better fit for their talents elsewhere. And if you do all the things in this chapter, in a way that preserves their dignity, your careful actions can give them the best possible start to finding that fit.

THE ROLE MODEL

Every leader in this book has had to let someone go at some point. It can be a delicate situation to talk about, though, so in this chapter I'm not going to single out one individual story; my advice distills what I've seen leaders do well over the years. I'll call out some insights from a few people already mentioned in the book, where I'm confident that it won't reveal any personal details.

THE ADVICE: COMPASSIONATE CLARITY

Handling serious underperformance in a proactive, kind, and fair way involves you amplifying what you should be doing with your direct reports anyway: setting clear expectations, and giving clear feedback. In my experience, it's often the case that leaders have missed opportunities to give direct feedback when someone's performance started lagging, because they hoped the situation would sort itself out. Whether or not that's where you're at: As soon as you have any inkling that the person may not be a good fit for their role, you need to lean in with additional precision on your expectations and feedback.

In the best-case scenario, you actually can improve the way they're working, through a period of close supervision. Worst case: You gave them the opportunity to raise their game; they weren't able to; and you then have an honest, informed conversation with them about what to do next. Clarity is the watchword at every stage, because it helps you be proactive in your pace, kind in your transparency, and fair in your judgments. Here's what that means as a process to follow—including three careful steps of groundwork to do before you raise your concerns with them:

1. **Clear HEAD:** Get a balanced picture of whether to take action
2. **Clear INFORMATION:** Make detailed notes on what you're observing
3. **Clear FRAMING:** Decide what to tell them about your observations and expectations
4. **Clear CONCERNS:** Raise your concerns with them and lay out what you need to see
5. **Clear REVIEW process:** Keep checking in and giving feedback
6. **Clear EXIT conversation:** If it hasn't worked out, set them up as well as possible for the next phase

Plus advice on: **How to manage larger layoffs as well as possible**

1. Clear HEAD: Get a balanced picture of whether to take action

Many leaders put off taking action on underperformance, and it does nobody any favors in the long run. So I suggest starting with a quick

exercise to help overcome two cognitive biases that can cloud your thinking in difficult situations.

The first is *omission bias.* This is the natural tendency to worry about the risks of taking action, while ignoring the risks of not taking action.[4] When it comes to someone who's performing (or behaving) badly, we might hold back from raising our concerns because we worry about them getting upset, or worry about having a gap on our team if they leave. We forget to worry about the often greater risks of not addressing the issue: the drain on our time from managing a poor performer; the effect on the rest of the team; the effect on our leadership credibility if we're talking to people about (say) the importance of excellence or collaboration even as we're failing to take action on someone who's delivering neither.

Second, *present bias.*[5] It's easier for our brain to assign a value to things that feel tangible, versus things that feel abstract. And the immediate awkwardness of a difficult conversation feels very tangible—so it looms larger in our minds than the general sense that we'll be doing the right thing as a leader if we tackle the situation. We often need to make future benefits feel more concrete and real if we're to properly take them into account.

With that in mind, draw out the following 2 × 2 grid on a piece of paper and take a shot at completing it. (If you don't have a tough personnel decision on your plate right now, try using the grid for any other difficult choice you're procrastinating on.)

	Take action	**Do nothing**
Upside		
Downside		

Because of *present bias* and *omission bias,* when we face an arduous task we tend to focus our attention on the bottom left of the grid: the downside

of taking action. To get a fuller picture of the decision you're facing, take extra care to think about the other quadrants as well, especially:

- The downside of doing nothing
- The upside of taking action

This analysis is not to urge you along the path to letting this person go—with the right feedback and coaching, they may end up being able to rise to your expectations. This analysis is to make sure you're looking at the situation in as clearheaded a way as possible.

One business leader I coached (we'll call her Catherine) knew there was a serious behavioral issue with a key person on her team. He had many strengths, but he also had an anger problem. One source of his anger seemed to be a mismatch between his personal style and the needs of his job: He was rigid and structured in his thinking, but he was in a role that required a tremendous degree of collaborative flexibility. It was becoming clear that he'd be both happier and more effective in a job that had more firmly defined hierarchy and processes. But it was nerve-racking for Catherine to think of taking him out of his role. If he left, who would take over the work he was currently doing?

This concern dominated her thinking for months. But the downside of doing nothing became clearer when a few valued people left the team after experiencing the colleague's anger. The upside of taking action came into sharper focus as well, because Catherine was trying to build a culture of mutual support—and she realized it was going to be a lot easier to drive that change if she took decisive action on the person who was most visibly behaving in the opposite way. This clear-eyed view of the upside of action and downside of inaction unblocked her thinking about the situation.

What could you do to offset the possible downside of taking action regarding your underperformer?

As with Catherine, the main downside for most leaders making this kind of decision is the worry that they'll have a gap on their team, and a gap in their ability to deliver as a result. If this is where you're at, look that downside

straight in the eye. What could you do to mitigate that risk? Are there undramatic ways you could reduce (or at least, stop increasing) your reliance on this person, whether or not they end up staying in their current role? For example, could you:

- Route new assignments to someone else, so you don't add to their current workload?
- Pair the person with another colleague on key pieces of work?
- Get more information about what they're doing, so you can step in more easily if needed?

For Catherine, a no-regrets move was to find out whether the angry colleague's team could handle his work on their own if they had to. So she started to pay a little more attention to that team in the regular course of business, and ended up feeling quite reassured about their capabilities. By reducing some of her nervousness around the possibility of moving the problematic person out of the team, she was able to think more clearly about whether or not it was the right thing to do.

Again, none of this kind of analysis prejudges the outcome of the steps that follow. The goal is simply to have your choices be driven by clear, balanced thinking—rather than by the brain's default settings.

2. Clear INFORMATION: Make detailed notes on what you're observing

As soon as you think it's even slightly possible that someone isn't going to work out in their role, start taking detailed notes about what you're observing them do well and do badly. Be as factual as you can: Write down what they did or said, with what results, on which date. You're going to need these highly specific observations to have an effective "this is serious" conversation with them, and your notes will help you approach it with objectivity rather than just gut feel. And, importantly, the things you see them do well will give you data on their strengths—so that if you do end up having an exit conversation with them, you can do it in a fair and kind way.

Elena Sukacheva, the CEO of UCAN and our delegation role model from Chapter 11, advises taking notes on their attitude and demeanor as well as their performance. “If someone is falling short, I start observing closely to try to understand if something in their personal circumstances has changed—which might mean it’s a temporary problem. Then I watch to see if they seem to have the mental horsepower, flexibility, and desire to do well. That helps me see whether there might be a different place for them in the company, even if this particular role doesn’t work out.”

3. Clear FRAMING: Decide what to tell them about your observations and expectations

Next, prepare for a deep, direct conversation. You probably already have a cadence of one-to-ones set up with them—so you can dedicate time in one of those sessions, or suggest a longer meeting if you’re likely to end up running short of time in your regular one. Make a plan for what you’re going to say on each of the following:

- **STRENGTHS: What you’ve observed that they’re doing well, or have done well in the past.** Mentioning these will preserve their self-respect and make them slightly less defensive in the conversation—which you care about, because a brain in *defensive mode* will find it hard to process what you’re saying.
- **ISSUES: What you’ve observed that they’re not doing well.** You’ll probably have several detailed observations to share. But the longer the list, the more likely they’ll end up (unintentionally) tuning out as their brain’s *working memory* fills up. If you can outline three or four big themes and group your observations under those, it will help them process what you’re saying.
- **REQUIREMENTS: What exactly you need to see from them, by when, to feel they are meeting the bar.** This usually takes a bit of thought. What specifically do you need to see them deliver or do? How long do you feel you can give them, to be fair to all involved (including the colleagues around them)?

If you have an HR team, notify them in advance that you have a serious performance issue to handle, and check the process they suggest you follow. They will likely encourage you to do all of the above, especially the points about sharing clear feedback and setting a clear timeline for reviewing the person's progress in acting on that feedback. But there may be other specific formalities that your organization or your country requires. Get up to speed on them now, so you're confident that you're handling things correctly as you go on.

4. Clear CONCERNS: Raise your concerns with them and lay out what you need to see

Have the meeting with your colleague, and walk through your concerns in a structured way. This is a pivotal moment, and it needs to be handled calmly and carefully. Here's a good agenda for your conversation. Try not to skip any step—they all make a difference to the likelihood that your colleague will be able to process what they're hearing from you.

- **Why their work matters:** Start by affirming the importance of their role: *"It really matters that this work is done well, because it enables XYZ to happen."*
- **The headline:** Right up front, let them know: *"I have concerns about how things are going."* Don't hedge or fudge—be direct.
- **What's good:** Share what you've seen them do well, however small. This is important for two reasons: it's kind, and it shows you're taking a fair, rounded view of their work.
- **What's bad:** Then move to the specifics of what isn't working. Give feedback that you can back up with factual observations, grouped under themes if you have a lot to say.
- **What will happen next:** Lay out the path forward. Remember that giving them clarity regarding your expectations is kinder than leaving them uncertain.
    - Describe what good performance from them would need to look like in concrete terms, over a clear timeframe (e.g., over the next

one, two, or three months).
    - Be explicit about what needs to change, by when.
    - Be clear when you'll meet with them again to review progress.

One tip on closing the conversation (channeling Vivek Bapat from Chapter 16). Because you want to be fair and honest, be careful about saying, "I'm sure you can do it." You can't actually know for sure that they will succeed. But you can say something encouraging that's rooted in your hope and belief that they can improve, like this:

- *"I know this is going to be hard work, but I believe you can do it."*

One leader I know raises the importance of **capturing your improvement expectations in writing after the meeting.** He says: "If you don't, in my experience, you'll regret it later. Particularly if you're fond of the person, you can find yourself feeling optimistic that they'll be able to raise their game, and it can feel too formal to write it all down. But then, if they can't improve and you need to have a more serious conversation with them, it's harder to hold them accountable if you have nothing on paper about what they needed to do." It doesn't need to be in the style of a full performance review; a clear, short email summarizing the conversation's key points is usually enough. (You might even draft that email in advance, so you have it ready to send immediately after the meeting. Doing this beforehand can also sharpen in your own mind the things you need to say most clearly in the conversation.)

5. Clear REVIEW process: Keep checking in and giving feedback

Once you've made your concerns and expectations clear, keep checking in with your colleague to review their progress against the expectations you've set—and keep giving them Factual Feedback (using Chapter 12 as a refresher, if needed). Don't go light on this; you want to feel that you gave them every chance possible.

If you take the time to evaluate their work carefully, and you find that your colleague is in fact able to act on the feedback you're giving, that's a big win for everyone. You've saved both your colleague and your team a lot of upheaval. However, if your check-ins determine that your colleague isn't making sufficient improvement, it's better to surface this early so that everyone knows where they stand.

Darcy Verhun (the CEO of Canada Diagnostic Centres we met in Chapter 8) has learned to take action as soon as a performance gap becomes apparent, "not to rush the exit, but to rush to clarity" with the person on what's needed. "I'm quicker than I used to be in identifying gaps and talking to them about it. I don't let it fester," he says. "I make it absolutely clear what I need from them, both in terms of performance and in terms of their behavior. I'm very clear on when and how I'll follow up. And then, I double down on trying to help them." As he says, "If someone is blindsided about being let go, that's really on you as the leader. It should never come as a complete surprise to them."

He shares a story of a senior person on a team he was leading who turned out to be missing several key skills for his role—skills he'd simply never had the chance to develop. Darcy spelled out the gap in calm, clear terms, and then "bent over backward" to help him close that gap. Just as it was becoming clear that the colleague wasn't likely to meet the bar, he called Darcy and said, "I don't think I can make it." Ultimately, the colleague came to his own conclusion about the right answer. That's the ideal outcome, where it ends up feeling like a joint decision—and it happened because Darcy created a clear structure within which the colleague could acknowledge the truth, with dignity.

6. Clear EXIT conversation: If it hasn't worked out, set them up as well as possible for the next phase

If your colleague hasn't managed to meet your expectations by the time you said you'd make a decision, and they haven't made the call for themselves, it's time to prepare for and hold an exit conversation. This should include clarity on the following: the **message,** the **terms,** the **communication,** the

support—and, ideally, a fifth thing, which is the set of **strengths** you believe they can build on as they find a new path.

a. Clarity on the message (again)

Explain what you didn't see them able to do or produce by the time you'd agreed, and why this role is therefore not the right fit for them. The aim is to be precise about what they haven't managed to deliver, rather than making a broad commentary on who they are as a person. You're looking for words like "We appreciate your hard work, but sadly you haven't been able to get to the level we needed to see on [important element of their job]. As a result, we've come to the difficult decision that this role isn't a fit, and we're going to need to let you go."

b. Clarity on the terms

You'll need to be clear on whether they are leaving the organization, or whether there's a chance there might be a different role for them on another team. You'll also need to be clear about the timing of their exit, and the financial terms.

All of that will depend on how long they've been with your organization, and the circumstances of their departure. But wherever you can, err on the side of generosity. Remember that you want to keep everyone else on your team motivated, and the way you treat people who are leaving is closely watched by those who stay. You want them to feel you've been fair and kind in your approach, because it signals how they'll be treated if this ever happens to them. You can often find ways to be generous beyond severance pay—for example, it can make a real difference to the departing colleague to be able to keep benefits for a period, or keep their old (security-wiped) laptop or phone.

Speaking of technology: Unless you have a real reason to believe that your exiting colleague will behave badly, give them time to hand over their work and say their goodbyes, rather than immediately cutting off their access to internal systems. It's usually possible to lock access to files containing sensitive IP while allowing them to continue using your

messaging systems. A seasoned CHRO I know says, “I prefer to assume the best in people. You can always have your IT team on standby to revoke access, if that should be needed”—but she says that’s a situation which has been “extremely rare” in her three-decade career.

(Once again: If you have an HR team, work closely with them to get clear on all of this before the meeting. Plan to send your exiting colleague to talk to them after the meeting for further guidance.)

c. Clarity on the plan for communicating to the organization about their departure

This is especially important if they manage other people. You want to be clear on the timing of the announcement, and also on how much you’ll tell others about the reason for their departure. Some specific advice on this:

- Unless there’s been serious wrongdoing, tell them the announcement will be positive and focused on their achievements: “Jo has had a big impact here, and we thank Jo for their service.”
- If it’s obvious that they’re being exited rather than leaving of their own accord, agree that you’ll use neutral wording that assigns no blame: “We’ve come to a mutual agreement that it’s not the right fit.” Don’t go into detail about what didn’t fit.
- For senior colleagues, it’s appropriate to give them a chance to comment on—and even shape—any external narrative (e.g., for customers or investors). Tell them when they can expect to see a draft of the announcement.

d. Clarity on any support you can give them to find a new role

Is there an option to provide career coaching? Could you give continued access to training courses or other resources? Is there an honest reference you could give that highlights their strengths? All helpful.

e. Ideally, also tell them what you see as the strengths they might lean on in a future role

Talking about their strengths in the exit conversation can make for a very different type of discussion. As we learned back in Chapter 13 on coaching, people usually feel more fulfilled in a role that lets them draw on their strengths. If you can say even a sentence or two on this, it helps to give your colleague a sense there that could be a manageable path forward, in the middle of what will be one of their most difficult days at work.

Feyzi Fatehi, who we met in Chapter 15, echoes the power of talking about strengths. He recalls: "One time, a man's wife called me after I'd had to let him go, and she said something unexpected to me: 'I just wanted to say thank you. My husband came home, and he was able to be upbeat despite the news.' " It turned out this was because of the conversation Feyzi had had with him about his strengths, where they discussed how he might play to them more fully in his next job. Not every exit conversation goes as smoothly as that. But as Feyzi says, "You can be in a position where you need to tell someone their skills are not a fit with your company. But that obviously doesn't make them a bad person. You need to be truthful, but you can accentuate all the positives about them and help them think about what comes next."

Feyzi also does what he can to be generous on the financial side. There are two arguments for giving good severance packages, he says: "First of all, it's the right thing to do for the employee who's leaving, for humanistic values. Second, it gives the remaining employees a sense of security. If you let someone go without support, people who are still on your payroll become constantly worried about what happens if they get laid off, and that hits their energy and productivity. So it's the right thing to do for the business, as well as for my values."

How to manage larger layoffs as well as possible

Sometimes, you're not exiting just one person for performance reasons; you need to make more significant cuts, for financial or strategic reasons. Many leaders I've worked with have had to do what's sometimes known as a reduction in force (RIF). To state the obvious: Layoffs are always hard—especially for those asked to leave, but also for those who stay. If handled

badly, there can be a deep impact on staff morale.[6],[7] But there are ways for leaders to handle this hard decision comparatively well. The key is to keep kindness, clarity, and fairness at the fore. Just as with individual exits, that means giving the exiting employees as much transparency and support as possible. Below is a list of tips on how leaders in this book have managed to do that humanely and effectively.

Before anything is finalized

- **Treat layoffs as a last resort.** Do whatever is possible to reduce non-payroll costs and use natural attrition before making the tougher (and more irreversible) choice to reduce headcount.
- **Use a structured decision process.** Applying something like the ACORN approach (from Chapter 4) will help you make a thoughtful, robust decision. (ACORN means a clear Aim, defined Criteria for the best outcome, consideration of multiple Options, Rating of those options, and clarity on Next Steps.) It ensures that you know why you're doing this, and that you can explain it to others.
- **Keep the inner circle tight.** Involve the smallest possible number of people as you work out the cuts that are needed. Be extremely clear with that inner circle about what information needs to be kept confidential, and for how long, to avoid crossed wires later on.
- **Don't procrastinate.** Take the time you need to make a thoughtful, structured decision—but then act on it as promptly as you can. The more you delay, the more likely it is that the news won't stay contained.
- **If news leaks, consider a holding statement.** If it does start to become more widely known that cuts will be needed, consider saying something to reduce uncertainty. You could share what will be decided by when, even if you don't yet know the final scale or shape of the cuts.
- **Maximize support for those leaving.** That includes the financial runway that comes from giving people decent severance pay, any

extension of health insurance or other benefits, offers of introductions at other companies, and provision of career coaching and guidance.

Planning ahead of the announcement

- **Minimize time in limbo.** Map out your announcement timings so that you don't leave people dangling for hours or days. I've seen different approaches work well; what's common across all of them is the deliberate intention to minimize people's stress. Often, the right approach includes an all-company announcement, followed by the affected people then meeting with their manager and HR for a short but caring conversation.
- **Equip your managers.** Don't ask your managers to have the conversation with their staff without guidance. Before the announcement, give them a fact sheet explaining the decision, describing the next steps, and laying out the benefits and support available. If you're in a manager role and haven't been given any guidance, the broad outline should be something like: *This is happening, this is the reason, it's not your fault, I'm sorry this is happening, and here's how we'll support you.*
- **Build in time for handoffs.** Wherever possible, as with individual exits, plan to give people some time to wrap things up gracefully—including handoffs and goodbyes.
- **Plan to keep your schedule mostly open after the announcement.** You might prefer to go and put your head down on your desk in a dark room, but if you're in a leadership role, people will want to see that you are present, both emotionally and physically. (And digitally—your profile should show that you're online and available.)
- **Prep for the hardest questions.** You will be asked questions, and you want to be ready to put your best foot forward in your answers. Thinking seriously about the worst questions you might be asked isn't a fun exercise, but you'll be glad you thought ahead.

Making the announcement: What you actually say

- **Don’t forget to thank people.** Remember that you want to make people feel that their work has been meaningful and worthwhile, even if it hasn’t ended as everyone hoped. Remind colleagues what they should feel proud of having achieved.
- **Show your work.** Explain the financial pressure or strategic changes that are driving the need for cuts. (Without this, cuts will always seem unfair.) If you can give some sense of the reasoning and decision process you followed, people are more likely to feel you’ve approached this logically and equitably.
- **Once again: Give people clarity where you can.** Tell them what will happen when, with as much specificity as possible.
- **Speak like a human.** Use everyday language, not the kind of clinical financial terms that might have been used in a decision memo on the need for cuts. Avoid the temptation to cut and paste the text from one document into another when creating the staff announcement; write it fresh. (We’ve all seen all-colleague announcements on layoffs that read like they’ve been drafted by shareholder-value-optimizing robots.)
- **Show regret, but not self-pity.** It’s good to say that you’re sad about having to do this. It is not good to talk about how hard this is for you personally, even though you may well be upset. Be honest and caring, but don’t say anything that sounds like you expect sympathy. However bad you feel, it’s worse for the people leaving.
- **Don’t promise that it won’t happen again.** It might. At least one of the leaders in this book has had to go back on an initial promise of this sort. The more structured and forward-looking you are in making the difficult layoff decision, the less likely you are to have to do it again. But you can’t be sure, especially in a tough economy. When you’re asked about this in the Q&A, what you can say is that you have no intention of making future cuts.

After the layoffs

- **Help people look to the future.** Great leaders work to give remaining colleagues a sense of security and purpose, while also acknowledging the pain of what has just happened. This can involve focusing attention on your shared mission, helping people see how their work connects to that big picture, and laying out a clear path forward. To create space for that, it can help to increase the frequency of all-hands meetings to bring the organization together.
- **Give people time for the ache to fade.** Often, leaders feel a sense of relief after the layoff has been announced, because they've known about it longer than their teams and have carried the stress of it for some time. Recognize that others have had less time with the news, and will therefore need some time to process and recover.
- **Reprioritize what people are working on.** If the organization continues forward with the same volume of work, but now spread across fewer staff, it can be a recipe for burnout. Communicate clearly what's most important in the new context, and what can go on the back burner for now.
- **Work on personal resilience.** Leaders need to find a balance between managing the sadness they feel and keeping everybody motivated. (Reread Chapter 15 for some help on this.)

If some of the advice in this chapter seems obvious to you, I'm glad to hear it. But in general, these good practices aren't followed as universally as they could be. That's partly because when any of us are under stress and in defensive mode, it can be easy to lose sight of our good intentions, and to forget about approaches that would be obvious in better times. So, hopefully you won't need this advice anytime soon, but know that it's here if you need to reach for it at some point down the road. And remember that your executive mantra on this—whether you're concerned with one person, or working through a bigger choice—is compassionate clarity, underpinned by proactivity, fairness, and kindness.

CHAPTER 21

How to Build Healthy Resilience in Your Team

THE CHALLENGE

Sometimes, building resilience isn't a matter of helping one person who's off their game, or getting your team through a single tough episode. Layers of stress can accumulate over time, especially when your team is tackling challenging work over an extended period. In this case, the broader leadership question becomes: How can you build a team culture that helps everyone stay strong and keep thriving, even in the face of sustained pressure?

It's important to be proactive about this, **to lower the risk of burnout.** Burnout is more than a buzzword—it's **medically defined as an erosion of resilience** that shows up as exhaustion and disengagement, usually after extended exposure to stress.[1] It happens because long-lasting stress undermines people's mental and physical health in tangible ways: It impairs the brain's ability to regulate emotion and think critically,[2],[3],[4] while raising inflammation, cardiovascular risk, and general vulnerability to illness.[5],[6],[7],[8] You may even have experienced burnout yourself, because research suggests it isn't related to motivation or ability—the most driven employees can be prone to it precisely because they push hardest.[9]

There's a lot you can do to protect against it, though. Research suggests that **when workplace stress turns into burnout, it's usually due to practical factors that a leader can control:** workload allocation, role clarity, schedules, and so on.[10] Leaders who manage those factors

intelligently can significantly reduce the likelihood of chronic stress taking hold, and create the conditions for higher performance and well-being in their teams overall.[11]

If you've adopted the habits I suggested in the earlier team-focused chapters (Chapters 7 and 14), you're a long way toward that goal, because teams that know how to support and challenge each other constructively are less likely to burn out.[12] This chapter is about one final layer of interventions that will directly support your team's mental and physical resilience over time.

THE ROLE MODEL

Vlad Gheorghiu is a helpful guide for us here, because he's lived both sides of the story. Early in his career, Vlad was a high-flying manager who had a tendency toward overwork—and eventually, he burned out. He decided to break the cycle by changing his career path, and moved into a role managing his company's well-being and mental health program. It was an eye-opening experience, he says, because "it made me realize there was very little guidance and help for leaders on how to proactively prevent burnout in their teams." So he made it a personal mission to address that issue.

He went on to co-found and lead Kyan Health, an enterprise-level digital platform for people leaders that combines data and tools to support employee resilience. And as you would hope, Vlad applies everything he's learned to the way he leads his own company—taking steps to ensure that he and his colleagues manage their time, workload, and energy effectively. Meanwhile, his company has achieved the kind of sustained fast growth that most startups would envy. Vlad's company won the prestigious Swiss Economic Award and now serves clients across more than ninety countries—all while living up to the very practices that they encourage other organizations to adopt.

Let's dive in and learn more about the resilience-building, performance-sustaining practices I recommend, illustrated by Vlad's experience along the way.

THE ADVICE: THE 5 CS OF TEAM RESILIENCE

Each of these practices tackles a different angle on resilience. Together, they operate as a system that I call the 5 Cs, and they'll leave your team better equipped to handle the challenges on their plate. Here's what's included:

CONVERSATION: Set aspirations with your team and track progress
CALENDAR: Help your team make time for things that keep them healthy
CALM: Encourage recovery breaks for the brain, daily and seasonally
CAUSE: Connect the team's work to its broader meaning and purpose
CAPACITY: Stay alert to workload pressure points, and adjust quickly

CONVERSATION: Set aspirations with your team and track progress

As with any goal, you're more likely to succeed in building team resilience if you're clear on what you're aiming for. The best way to set those clear aspirations starts with a conversation with your team, rather than you presenting proposals to them. That's partly because everyone will have different ideas, experience, and needs. But it's also because leading a team conversation about resilience and burnout is a smart intervention in its own right—it boosts people's optimism that their working life is going to stay manageable.

At Kyan, every newly formed group starts by having this kind of discussion. As Vlad says, "It makes your intentions clear, so people see that resilience is important to you. And it really helps to make everyone's implicit expectations explicit."

So, set aside time with your team to talk about what it takes to create a healthy working environment for chasing your goals. Here's how I suggest you do it:

- **Frame the conversation.** You might say: *"I want us to be a team that does great work, and stays healthy and strong while doing it. Let's*

talk about how we do that."

- **Explore the ideal environment you might shoot for as a team.**
  - Ask: *"What does a healthy, resilient team environment feel like at its best, in your experience?"* (They might describe it as calm, collaborative, focused, or energized.)
  - Ask: *"What enables that environment? And what does the leader do to help, ideally?"*
- **Then, explore what it looks like when a team is going off the rails.** People often know the warning signs in themselves—more tension, more mistakes, more silence, less creativity—but may not have talked about what to look for as a team. Naming those signals together helps everyone spot trouble sooner.
  - Ask: *"What are the early signs that we're running low on resilience as a team?"*
- **Then dig into the practical steps needed to sustain your collective resilience, and make a list of suggestions.**
  - Ask: *"What will help us all stay centered and energized in our work, so we can achieve all that we want?"*

Within that discussion of practical steps, aim to touch on your team's approach to focus, personal routines, and behavioral norms. Here are a few words about each of those:

A team approach to focused work

Research shows that when your team can focus their attention on one thing at a time, they feel less stressed, make better decisions, and get important things done significantly faster than if they are multitasking.[13] (You can find more evidence on this in "The Core Science of Deliberate Wisdom.") The challenge in the modern workday is that digital interruptions readily fragment people's attention. Some teams truly do need constant contact—maybe you work in a hospital emergency room, or you launch rockets for a living. But most leaders should be encouraging their teams to adopt a no-drama norm around going offline periodically, so everyone can do better-

quality thinking on their most important tasks. It doesn't have to be for long stretches to make a difference. What often works well is for a team to agree on standard wording for a short message: "Going offline for 30 minutes to work on XYZ, back soon."

Syncing up across personal routines and constraints

To maximize team resilience, it helps to surface any individual commitments and preferences that might shape the ideal rhythm of the team's work—family responsibilities, body clocks, commuting constraints, and so on. For example, Vlad says, "some people might tell the team they need to step out midafternoon to pick up kids, or be home every day at six to look after a sick parent, but they can reconnect online later." It's not about special favors—the same work still gets done by the same people—but it makes everyone's daily routines feel more feasible. Vlad takes a matter-of-fact approach to it: "In my experience, these don't need to be awkward conversations. They just enable each team to sequence and plan its workflow in a way that makes it easy for everyone to contribute their best."

As you discuss personal routines, it can help to know that studies suggest that giving people some discretion over where they work doesn't seem to lower performance or productivity—and it often makes it easier for people to handle the practical demands of their lives.[14] Vlad says he prefers for his colleagues to be in the office as much as possible, for collaboration and apprenticeship, but he recognizes there are times when working from home makes life more manageable. He trusts his team to approach this professionally. As he puts it: "I tell them, 'You have a clear set of objectives, and you're measured by your results—it's your responsibility to make good choices.' "

Positive behaviors for the team to keep reinforcing

Team resilience isn't just about schedules—it's also about having a supportive team culture, which has been found to be a powerful buffer against burnout.[15] In Chapter 7, I talked about setting team norms for

expressing disagreement respectfully, and taking time for reflection; in Chapter 14, I covered how to set norms that develop more trust and mutual support across your team. So as you think now about adding resilience-specific norms, don't overlook those earlier commitments—they're all part of building a healthy culture. For example, at Kyan their pro-performance, anti-burnout list of team commitments usually includes behavioral items like the following:

- We communicate expectations clearly.
- We can admit mistakes without fear of repercussion.
- We ask for advice, and we welcome constructive feedback.

And then: Keep checking in on progress

Whatever your team decides on as its resilience recipe, keep the conversation going with your teammates so that your aspirations don't fall by the wayside as soon as work gets busy. Decide on a rhythm for checking in on progress—perhaps at a longer team meeting once a quarter. Ask:

- *"What are we doing well that is helping us stay strong and healthy?"*
- *"What could we do better or differently, to make us all more resilient?"*

Vlad says, "I sit with my team, and we rate the things we agreed we wanted to do, using an app to keep track. Then we can all see very clearly where we need to do some work."

CALENDAR: Help your team make time for things that keep them healthy

As the boss, you have a huge influence on how people spend their time—and, in particular, on whether they feel they can spend time on activities that sustain their long-term mental and physical health.

Vlad understands this. He says: "We encourage people to block out time for the things that keep them well." And, importantly, he leads by example. His schedule includes five recurring categories: Work (which is of course

the largest on most weekdays), Mind, Body, Relationships, and Rest and Recharge. “I put blocks in my calendar for each of those throughout my day and week. And that calendar is visible to the entire company, so people have full transparency on how I use my time.” As a result, he says, “it’s pretty clear to everybody that I prioritize the things that science shows will keep us healthy and productive, and it backs up what I say about wanting everyone else to feel they can do the same.”

His calendar’s Mind category might include time Vlad spends reviewing something he’s learning, or thinking through how to handle a difficult situation. (This kind of reflective process allows space for the kind of techniques shown in Part I on “Deliberate Wisdom,” and it’s associated with higher leadership performance.)[16] The Relationships category is about time spent with family and friends, which again makes a lot of sense: Sustaining social connections is one of the most important keys to long-term mental resilience.[17] Finally, the Body category is about physical well-being, and Rest and Recharge is about properly switching off. Let’s explore both of those last two a little more.

Double-click on that “Body” category

As a leader, you should be glad to support anyone on your team who wants to make time to exercise. Physical activity obviously improves people’s physical health, but it’s also one of the most proven ways to reduce stress—and, more positively, one of the most reliable ways to boost focus and alertness.[18] Vlad sees this in himself: “I know that for me personally, if I don’t get enough time in a week to exercise, there’s a real downward shift in my mental clarity.”

The challenge for most of us is that physical activity can all too easily get chased out of the average workday, especially if your company has a fully in-person office policy. However, leaders can still choose to be actively supportive of any colleagues who want to squeeze in some physical activity before, after, and during their workday—knowing that you’ll all reap the dividends as a team.

It doesn't always have to involve going to the gym, either, because fitness can be boosted in small and pragmatic ways during the workday. Many people use "walking meetings" to get their steps in, which is a smart move because (as we saw earlier in the book) even a short stroll lifts people's mood.[19],[20] (The first time I met one of my most treasured colleagues, we talked while walking twenty times around Bryant Park in New York City, and felt very pleased with ourselves.)

CALM: Encourage recovery breaks for the brain, daily and seasonally

Let's do a deeper dive into the Rest and Recharge calendar category, because it can be one of the most important for the long-term resilience of your team. The human brain is like a Formula One racecar: It performs better and breaks down less often if it gets frequent high-quality pit stops, plus a proper rebuild from time to time. So, to create a resilient team, you want to build recovery time into the way that work flows through your team. Make it normal, easy, and appealing for people to rest, reset, and return with energy—again and again. Let's walk through the science and practice of doing that, starting with the shortest breaks and building up to longer ones.

Short breaks, better brains

As we learned earlier in the book, people's brains perform best when they have short breaks from being "always on." You've probably noticed that people often come back with more energy and insight after a short break in a long meeting—and that's exactly what scientists find in studies. Even a couple of minutes between meetings can do a lot to refresh and reboot.[21], [22]

One way Vlad encourages short breaks is to use a company-wide default meeting setting that schedules meetings for 25 or 55 minutes, instead of 30 minutes or a full hour. "It's a small change," he says, "but it makes a big impact on people's energy and focus, because you get a few minutes to breathe and reset before the next thing. When you look at your

calendar and see 'I have five minutes now,' it feels great." (Most major calendar apps have this kind of "speedy meeting" option if you look for it.)

Rest after the rush

Studies show that allowing some recovery time after a period of high-intensity work enables people to consolidate learning, restore their motivation, and avoid long-term exhaustion.[23] Conversely, without a breather, their performance is likely to drop.[24] So if your team is heading into a demanding push, help them look ahead to when they'll come up for air.

Vlad encourages his colleagues to plan recovery time after big deadlines, and again, he walks the talk. Recently, when Kyan closed a major funding round, Vlad didn't dive straight into post-deal execution. "I was exhausted," he says. "So I took time to recover and get back to the mental acuity I had before. That pause was essential." The same principle applies across the company. After high-stakes launches or big projects, he says, "we tell our teams to shift into a lighter phase. People still work, but with lower intensity and fewer meetings. We're intentional about that—if you see that somebody's schedule is mostly empty in a recovery week, you don't add meetings to their calendar. It's quite frowned upon."

The expectation of vacation

Some people don't make full use of their vacation allowance, often because they don't believe they'll be able to actually disconnect or because they worry they'll be seen as a slacker.[25] Yet people who do take vacations have been found to get a boost in cognitive flexibility, physical health, and overall well-being—as long as they actually shift gears and switch off while they're away.[26],[27] Vacation habits vary across countries, of course. But what's common to the strongest organizations and teams I've worked with is that time off is planned and respected, with clear team norms about protecting the time.

At Kyan, Vlad has thought hard about how to encourage people to take appropriate vacation time. He discovered that "it turns out that what doesn't

work is unlimited time off." Though it sounds generous, he found that employees took fewer vacation days on average. That's backed up by research: When people don't know what the standard is, many worry that taking time off will make them look less committed.[28] So Kyan now sets a clear number of expected vacation days, with additional days being available if needed.

Create space for sleep

Then there's the most powerful recovery tool of all: sleep. As we've seen at several points in the book, good sleep makes people sharper, faster, and calmer under pressure (flip back to Chapter 15 for a review of the evidence on this). It adds up—one estimate suggests that when someone consistently sleeps less than six hours a night, they're less productive to the tune of six full workdays a year.[29]

Vlad admits that he used to try to function on five or six hours of sleep a night, even on vacation. "I thought I was fine. But then I started getting eight hours a night, and it was like seeing color for the first time. I have more clarity and I'm in a better mood if I get enough sleep. When it's slipping, I'll cut back on other activities to catch up. And I encourage everyone else to prioritize good sleep, too."

As a leader, the biggest thing you can do to support your colleagues in getting healthier sleep is to agree on team-wide norms about when it's okay to unplug from messages. (As you probably know, that's because looking at lit screens late at night makes it harder to fall asleep.[30])Set guidelines for your team on when they're expected to be able to respond fairly promptly to messages—and, just as crucial, when they're not. If you occasionally feel the urge to send a late-night message, consider using the scheduling option to deliver it in the morning, or at least say in your note that no response is needed until the next day.

CAUSE: Connect the team's work to its broader meaning and purpose

Studies show that people are better able to cope with everyday pressures and challenges when they feel a sense of purpose in what they're doing.[31], [32],[33] It makes sense: Feeling that your effort is meaningful makes challenging situations feel less negative—and therefore makes them at least a little less likely to trigger a stress response in the brain.[34] (It's telling that one of the classic symptoms of burnout is a growing sense of cynicism and distance from work.[35]) This is why part of your team resilience toolkit reaches back to the material we covered in Chapter 8, on the power of helping people feel that their work matters and has positive impact. Feeling like there's a point to what you're doing puts extra fuel in people's tanks when they need it most.

At Kyan, Vlad is a self-described evangelist on this point. "Working here is not always easy. But I've seen how reminding people that we're doing something meaningful, that's changing lives, is a really powerful way of giving all of us the energy we need to solve tough problems. I might even be getting a bit boring with how much I talk about our mission, but I know it helps."

Of course, you don't have to work in mission-driven healthcare tech to give people meaning. The key is to connect the dots between daily effort and long-term impact. Echoing some of the themes from Chapter 8, you can do that in many ways:

- Remind people of **who they're helping**, and how.
- Share **stories** that highlight your team's positive influence.
- Ask your team what they're **proud of.**

Ndidi Okezie, who we met in Chapter 7, asks a simple question in team meetings that does the trick nicely: *"What part of our work in this past week felt most worthwhile?"* Just asking that is a quick way of helping people reconnect to the purpose of it all.

CAPACITY: Stay alert to workload pressure points, and adjust quickly

You can lay out the ideal norms for team behavior and time allocation, and keep people inspired by a sense of purpose—but if your team's workload doesn't feel under control, people can still struggle. The more that someone's brain gets overloaded, the more they'll make mistakes, as their *working memory* fills up.[36] So, take a hard look at what you're actually asking your people to do. Two common pain points emerge in the research on this: volume and clarity. Here's how you can get ahead of each of them.

Volume management

Most leaders know they need to stay alert to rising pressure on team capacity, and be ready to respond. Burnout doesn't come from hard work alone—it comes from sustained overload combined with the fear that no relief is on the way, making the situation feel unmanageable. And sometimes, that overload is emotional rather than logistical. If someone is handling an increasing amount of conflict or crisis, they may need more support even if their hours aren't getting longer.

At Kyan, Vlad says, "we're keenly aware of the amount of work that people are doing. If someone works late one day, fine. But if someone's working very late several days in a row, that's a signal, and we pay attention." When Kyan's operations team was suddenly swamped—their workload doubled in just two months—it didn't take long for alarm bells to ring. The team spoke up, Vlad says, because there was a culture of talking about optimal workload management. "We hired another operations manager to rebalance things, and we did it quickly because we knew it mattered."

You can also set broad expectations about what's appropriate for people's workload. Many of the leaders in this book actively coach their direct reports on how many goals it's realistic to be chasing at any one time. One of them guides his colleagues to pursue no more than three big wins each quarter; another asks his team to name two top priorities each week in their team meeting. These prioritization practices don't require fancy software or analysis. The trick is to get into the habit of asking *"What matters most right now?"* before people hit the wall.

Role clarity

A less obvious way to reduce workplace stress is to make sure that people know what they're responsible for. When assignments aren't clear, it's hard for people to know whether they're doing a good job, which can feel unpleasant, demanding, and uncontrollable. As you know by now, that's the trifecta recipe for stress—and it's why studies tell us that giving people more clarity on their responsibilities can reduce the risk of burnout, as well as making it easier for people to do a good job.[37],[38],[39]

This may sound basic. But on fast-paced teams, role boundaries often blur without anyone noticing. And when several people on your team have unclear roles, you're likely to end up with the kind of overlapping turf concerns that can test a team's collaborative spirit.

Vlad saw this happening as soon as Kyan grew beyond a few dozen people. "Everyone was still on board with our mission," he says, "but our projects were getting out of sync, and it caused tension." He realized he needed to create more defined objectives and key results (OKRs) for each person, to help people coordinate better. "We're not perfect at it," he says, "but having clearer goals now helps us spot misalignment well before it causes any conflict. And everyone has a much better sense of what other people are doing."

You don't necessarily need formal OKRs to do this, but you do generally need some structure. Some leaders I work with ask each of their colleagues to lay out their accountabilities on a single page, or create a "who's doing what" slide for each major deliverable. The format doesn't matter; the clarity is what counts.

A final word on role modeling

Leaders like Vlad walk the talk very deliberately. They take steps to shore up their own energy for the ups and downs of work, and they make sure that their colleagues see them doing it. As Vlad puts it: "In the end, it almost doesn't matter what you say as a leader—it matters what you do. My own personal operating model is far from perfect. But in general, I'm paying

attention to it, and I'm showing people that I'm paying attention to it." Ask yourself:

- *What habits do you have that might be sending the wrong signal—given the evidence that people perform better and feel better if they get enough rest, sleep, exercise, social connection, and time to focus?*
- Reflecting on this chapter (and the material in Chapter 15): *What single small change could you make that would improve your own mental and physical energy and resilience?* And, importantly: *How could you make that change very visibly, to send a message to your team about its importance?*

From a standing start, Vlad's business has now grown to support three million people across the world. He's been successful in large part because he's worked hard to maintain physical and mental resilience in himself and in his colleagues, even as the business has grown rapidly. "There's a lot that I'm super proud of, and I know that it's <u>because</u> we're looking after our well-being that we can be as effective as we've been in expanding our business and our impact." He adds: "We hear so much about 'hustle culture'—people working fourteen-hour days, seven days a week. But I hope we're showing that there's a way to succeed that's more sustainable."

CLOSING WORDS

Congratulations—you now have a whole playbook of smart, science-backed techniques for handling the kinds of leadership challenges that come up week after week. The three strengths we've explored—Deliberate Wisdom, Intrinsic Inspiration, and Reasoned Resilience—aren't fixed personality traits that you either have or don't have, or instincts you need to wait decades to acquire. They're skills you can cultivate through intentional practice. So, how do you make sure these ideas get woven into the way you lead? Here's what I'd encourage you to do to make the most of your new leadership intelligence.

First, pick a specific situation where you want to show up differently as a leader. Maybe it's a tricky decision that requires real wisdom, or a person on your team who needs more inspiration, or a challenge that's testing everyone's resilience. Choose the technique from the book that feels most relevant, and commit to trying it out. Make some notes on what you want to do, and make sure your notes are easy to reread and retrieve. Finally, decide exactly when you'll try the new approach, and go for it.

Then, after your first attempt, "Reflect, Repeat, Remind":

- **Reflect on what worked and what you learned.** Is there anything you said or did that landed especially well? What helped you remember your intentions in the heat of the moment? Make a note of anything you want to keep hold of. (Don't rely on your memory alone.) Also, jot down anything you learned that might lead you to tweak things next time.
- **Repeat the approach, with any adjustments you'd like to try.** Repetition is how we reinforce the new neural pathways that we just

started to lay down by doing something new. The more we repeat it, the stronger those pathways get, and the easier and more habitual the behavior becomes. If you catch yourself reverting to your default settings, don't beat yourself up. Just notice it—that's progress in itself—and recommit to trying again.

- **Remind yourself what you're trying to do.** Set up reminders in whatever format works best for your routine: a recurring note in your calendar or task list, a Post-it on your desk, a weekly check-in with a trusted colleague. Create the simplest possible system that brings these ideas back to the front of your mind before they get buried by other demands on your time. You might even keep this book somewhere visible as a physical prompt, so you can flip back to the chapter that addresses whatever challenge you're facing.

As you practice these techniques, behavior that once took real effort will start to feel more natural. You'll find yourself routinely making smart choices with clarity and ease, bringing out the best in others by understanding what makes them tick, and handling difficult situations with insight and grace. That's when leadership feels at its most energizing—when you're leading with intelligence, not just instinct, and it shows in everything you do. Keep learning and experimenting, keep lifting your team to new heights, and I'll be cheering you on for every step of the journey ahead.

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remember—like “Competence and Connection”—so that the motivational importance of self-worth and social relevance are top of mind for you in managing your colleagues from day to day.

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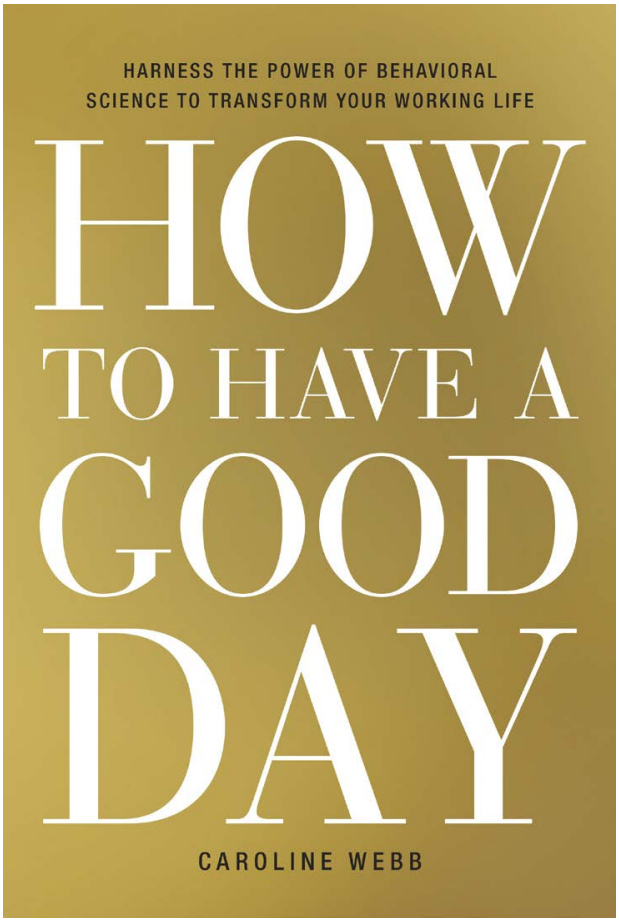
Read on for an excerpt from Caroline Webb's *How to Have a Good Day*



"Webb has given us a great gift: she has synthesized all the advice coming out of labs around the world, filtered it for quality, and illustrated it with well-chosen examples. *How to Have a Good Day* is so wonderful that I assign it in every course I teach at NYU Stern…This is the best self-improvement book of the past ten years."

–JONATHAN HAIDT,

Professor of Ethical Leadership at NYU Stern and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Anxious Generation*

Look for this wherever books are sold

INTRODUCTION

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.

—ANNIE DILLARD

Thirty years ago, I picked up my first paycheck. It wasn't a check, in fact—just a small collection of bills and coins in an envelope, my wages for working as a clerk in a local supermarket. On the face of it, it wasn't a great job. It was poorly paid, and certainly not glamorous. I stacked shelves, mopped floors, and wore a company-issued uniform marked with stains from its previous owner. The manager was gruff and kept an eye on the store from a booth high above the shop floor. And yet, somehow, I liked it. There was camaraderie among the staff, and even the occasional night out together. I took pride in pleasing customers with my speed at the register. I felt useful.

Six years later, I landed a far more upscale role as a researcher at an economics institute. I had my own office and a surprisingly large number of recycling bins all to myself. But I soon felt strangely miserable. I couldn't get anyone to pay attention to my work, and I drifted. I wrote an enormous, earnest report—on economic development in post-Communist Europe—that I'm pretty certain nobody read. I was dealing with what we'd these days call a "first-world problem," and I knew I was lucky to have the job. But it became hard to summon the energy to turn up to work every day. And at that point in my life, I didn't know how to turn it around. I treaded water till my contract was up, then quietly moved on.

Over the course of my life, I've done a lot of different types of work, some of it worse and some of it better than those two early jobs of mine. I've been a hotel maid, receptionist, and waitress. I've had demanding careers as an economist, a management consultant, and an executive coach. I've worked

in the private sector and the public sector; I've been part of a huge global company and I've launched my own tiny start-up. And through it all, I noticed the same thing over and again: that the quality of my day-to-day experience wasn't necessarily defined by my title. It was possible to have good days in "bad" jobs, while the more prestigious roles didn't always correlate with great contentment.

That paradox seeded my lifelong curiosity about what it takes to flourish at work, both mentally and emotionally. It became something of a personal cause as I sought to find the right way to handle the increasing intensity of my professional life—and even more so once I noticed how my colleagues and clients often felt frustrated and worn down, making it hard for them to function at their best. In fact, survey after survey suggests that half (or more) of all employees feel disengaged in their work.[1] Add to that the off days experienced by those of us who generally feel motivated and happy, and we're looking at a lot of lost human potential. Yet we often talk about professional dissatisfaction as if it's a casual disappointment, something to be endured until the weekend rolls around, and perhaps joked about with friends. ("What happened to you today?" "Oh, work, you know." "Ha ha. Me too. Have a drink.")

So I've devoted much of my career to figuring out how to improve our chances of saying a cheery "yes, thanks" when we're asked "Did you have a good day?" My twelve years with McKinsey & Company (the management consultancy) helped greatly in my pursuit of that goal, since it gave me the opportunity to find out what everyday life was like inside hundreds of workplaces. I specialized in projects that helped organizations shift their culture in a more positive direction, which meant I spent a lot of time studying behavior, attitudes, and processes. And whenever I could, I'd ask my clients the same three questions: What does a good day look like for you? What about a bad one? What would it take to have more good days? Then, I'd get to work, helping them turn their bad days into better days. Sometimes that would involve coaching individual leaders; other times, I'd convene large groups to help them rethink the way they worked together. Repeatedly, I observed how fairly small changes—for example, fine-tuning the way people

set priorities or handled disagreements—could result in major improvements to performance and job satisfaction. It was uplifting to see.

Throughout those years, my work leaned heavily on the growing body of behavioral science findings on what it takes for human beings to thrive. My first career was in economics, but I became deeply interested in developments in the other behavioral sciences, too, so I did some additional training in psychology and neuroscience. Then I spent countless hours reading academic articles and books (more than six hundred at last count) in the three disciplines, looking for findings that I could translate into actionable advice for my clients. And that abundance of research and practical experience is the bedrock of *How to Have a Good Day*.

SO WHAT IS A GOOD DAY?

Over the years, I noticed some common answers to my "what is a good day" question—answers that resonated with the small delights of my humble supermarket job. First, people often talked about getting a buzz from feeling productive, and from knowing that their efforts counted toward something worthwhile. The best days also tended to involve people feeling confident that they were doing a fine job, and that they had the support they needed from others. Finally, people talked about good days leaving them feeling more energized than depleted, overall. I don't mean that the work wasn't physically or mentally tiring—just that it gave back enough enjoyment and motivation to make up for whatever it was taking out of them.

Of course, whether we get to have all that agreeable stuff on a given workday is partly the result of luck. If we're handling a cranky colleague or a crisis, it's obvious that we're not entirely in control of the way the day feels. But my experience has led me to a heartening conclusion: we have more room to maneuver than we generally realize. The secret lies in learning some of the science explaining how the brain works, and why people behave the way they do. Less of the day seems driven by chance once we understand some of the forces that shape our choices and our emotions, and once we recognize how our thought patterns can affect everything from our perception

of reality to the moods of those around us. Grasp these essentials, and it becomes far clearer how to bring the best out of ourselves and others. And that puts us in a much stronger position to create the kind of day we really want to have.

For example, an executive who shares his story later in the book talks about starting to have "unexpectedly great meetings" after he learned something that behavioral scientists know well: that even small challenges to a person's sense of competence will put their brain on the defensive, making it harder for them to think clearly (in turn creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy). In his meetings, the executive's take-no-prisoners personal style had inadvertently been triggering this defensive reaction in the people around him, and it was causing a lot of tension. But once he tweaked the way he expressed his views, the quality of his interactions changed within moments.

Elsewhere in the book, another seasoned professional tells us about "suddenly" securing new promotion opportunities after trying out new science-based techniques to sharpen her focus and self-confidence. We hear about a leader who delightedly discovered hidden talents in her team after acting on research showing that people think more creatively when given a particular type of space to think. Once an entrepreneur learns a little about the brain's reward system, he finds he can say no to people while making them feel almost as good as if he'd agreed to their requests. And so on.

How to Have a Good Day is all about the ways we can create more of these sorts of lucky breaks once we know more about the science of our magnificent minds.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

I've arranged the book around seven building blocks that echo the themes in people's answers to my "good day" question. First, there are two sections designed to give you a strong foundation for everything you're doing, by showing you how to set the right kind of priorities and make the best possible use of your time. Next, you'll find three sections that explain how to transform more of your tasks into a pleasure and a triumph, by helping you to

ace every interaction, maximize your creativity and wisdom, and boost your personal impact. Finally, I've written two sections on ways to maintain your joie de vivre throughout the workday, by showing you how to boost your resilience in the face of disappointment, and laying out strategies for generating more energy throughout it all.

As a bonus, you'll find advice at the back of the book showing you how to use the book's insights to improve two fixtures of modern working life: meetings and emails. There's also a handy checklist to help you use the book's tips to reinvigorate your morning-to-night routine.

SCIENCE, STEPS, STORIES

Throughout the book, you'll find a blend of scientific evidence, practical techniques, and real examples from people who've used those techniques in their own lives. Let me say a few words about each of those.

First, every piece of advice in *How to Have a Good Day* is backed up by rigorous scientific evidence from psychology, behavioral economics, or neuroscience. I've taken care to focus only on findings that are widely accepted and have been replicated by multiple research teams, though I've sometimes picked out quirky experiments that manage to illustrate a particular point while raising a smile (or a groan). My aim has been to keep the science as simple as it can be while remaining correct. To help with that, in the "Science Essentials" section which appears right after this introduction, I've written a short guide to three big cross-cutting themes that frame every idea in the book. That's all you'll need to navigate this fascinating evidence with ease.

The central purpose of the book is to translate all that science into step-by-step techniques for improving your day-to-day life. Each chapter is designed to allow you to quickly find the advice you need, because the practical pointers are highlighted with bullet points; each chapter also ends with a box that summarizes its advice for quick reference. I've laid out the chapters in a sequence that I hope is helpful—but if you're wrestling with a specific challenge at work right now, you might choose to flip ahead to

material that speaks directly to your current concern. Skipping around should work, especially if you've first read the Science Essentials section.

As I've already hinted, you'll also hear real stories from dozens of successful people who describe how the advice in this book has helped them improve their working lives. Together, they represent most major industries and span every continent of the world (except the coldest one). Some are at the peak of their careers, while others are on their way up. I've used their real names in all but a couple of cases, although I've not included their surnames or organizations to keep them from being deluged with requests for advice once their wise ways are made public. I hope you'll find them as inspiring as I do. And in case you're wondering, I *do* take my own medicine every single day—so I'll also share some examples of times that these techniques helped me flourish in my career.

SPREADING THE WORD

As well as showing you how to be in top form, *How to Have a Good Day* can be used to help you bring the best out of people you lead, manage, or collaborate with. Most of the techniques here can be used in groups, to improve team interactions, or provide structure for important meetings—whether or not you refer to the science behind the techniques. (If you would like to gather colleagues together to talk about the book's suggestions, you'll find materials to help you facilitate group discussions at www.howtohaveagoodday.com.)

I've also seen the book's advice make a positive difference in settings beyond conventional workplaces. Whether you're a college student or a community volunteer, a retiree or a homemaker, you can use the principles in this book to boost your effectiveness and your enjoyment of the day. Many of my clients have even confided to me over the years that these techniques have improved their marriages and strengthened relationships with children and friends. Some grin when I ask them how it's going, telling me they've surreptitiously used their nearest and dearest as guinea pigs before trying out

new approaches at work. So do have some fun experimenting with these suggestions, wherever you are.

◆◆◆

We all face things we can't change. But behavioral science is sometimes startling in showing us just how much influence we have on the way we experience the world. When we choose to take this evidence on board, the effect can be nothing short of transformational. We can exert more control and start to enjoy more "well-planned luck." And as a result, we can all have many more good days. Now let's get started.

HOW TO HAVE A GOOD DAY

FIRST OF ALL...

PRIORITIES

Set intentional direction for your day

◆◆◆

PRODUCTIVITY

Make the hours in the day go further

THEN IN EVERY TASK...

RELATIONSHIPS

Make the most of every interaction

◆◆◆

THINKING

Be your smartest, wisest, most creative self

◆◆◆

INFLUENCE

Maximize the impact of all you say and do

...AND THROUGHOUT THE DAY

RESILIENCE

Sail through setbacks and annoyances

◆◆◆

ENERGY

Boost your enthusiasm and enjoyment

Penguin Random House

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