Leadership Handbook

What to know before you lead people, teams, and yourself.

Most people step into leadership and figure it out as they go — learning from failures that were preventable, making decisions that damage trust, and discovering what the job actually requires only after they're already in it. This handbook is the briefing they never got.

Seventeen chapters. Five parts. Four appendices. Everything grounded in the specific decisions that determine whether leaders succeed or fail — before the consequences become irreversible.

Part of the Before You Commit series — practical guides for decisions that are difficult to reverse.

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Part I

What Leadership Actually Is

Before you can lead well, you need an accurate picture of what the job actually involves — not the version from the promotion announcement, not the version from the leadership book, but the version you'll face on a Tuesday morning when something is going wrong. This part builds that picture.

- Chapter 01 · The Job Nobody Describes Honestly
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Chapter 01

The Job Nobody Describes Honestly

What you're actually signing up for

There is a version of leadership that gets described in job postings, performance reviews, and company all-hands meetings. And then there is the actual job. They overlap — but the gap between them is where most new leaders get surprised.

When someone is promoted into a leadership role, the announcement typically emphasizes vision, impact, and opportunity. The congratulations flow in. What doesn't get said clearly: the thing you were rewarded for doing well is no longer your primary job. You are now responsible for creating the conditions in which other people do that thing.

What a Promotion Actually Transfers

A promotion into leadership is the organization saying: we trust you to make decisions and own outcomes in ways you haven't owned them before. That transfer comes with two things that are rarely stated explicitly. First, your manager is still accountable for everything you do — if you fail, it is on them. They are taking on risk and investing in you. Second, you are starting with training wheels, not finishing the race. The work gets harder, not easier. The expectation is that those wheels come off — that you grow into the areas where you're not yet ready.

This reframes what the title actually means. It is not a reward for past performance. It is a bet on future development, made by someone who has decided the bet is worth the risk. Leaders who treat promotion as arrival — as the end of proving themselves — misunderstand what they've been given.

> **The ownership shift**
>
> As an individual contributor, you were accountable for your own outputs. As a leader, you are accountable for all outcomes within your function — including decisions made despite your objections, mistakes made two levels below you, and results affected by forces outside your control. You don't get to explain. You get to solve.

There is a related shift that catches most new leaders off-guard: the safety net disappears. Up to the point of promotion, most career systems are designed to guide your development and catch you when you stumble. After it, that system stops working in your favor. Retire any remaining expectation that the organization is designed to set you up for success. You are now one of the people responsible for setting the organization, your team, and your manager up for success. Often abruptly, you're expected to align the pieces around you — rather than waiting for the pieces to be aligned for you.

■ *Will Larson — 'Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track' (2021)*

The Fundamental Shift

Individual contribution is visible and measurable in real time. You write the code, close the deal, design the interface — and you can see the result. Leadership is different. Your output is other people's output. Your decisions create conditions that manifest as results weeks or months later, often through chains of cause and effect you can't fully trace.

This is disorienting for high performers. The feedback loops that told you how you were doing — immediate, concrete, yours — disappear. They are replaced by slower, more ambiguous signals that are harder to interpret and easier to rationalize. Skilled individual contributors often struggle in their first leadership role not because they lack intelligence or dedication, but because the job requires a fundamentally different relationship with accountability.

> **The competence trap**
>
> The skills that earned you the promotion are not the skills that will make you effective in the new role. Worse: the more naturally talented you were as an individual contributor, the harder the transition tends to be. High performers are used to being the best person in the room at something. Leadership requires learning to be effective without being the best.

The research on this point is worth knowing. Intelligence — the single most-studied predictor of leadership effectiveness — accounts for about 4% of the variance in outcomes. Personal qualities, behaviors, and traits explain relatively little. What explains far more: the quality of the relationship between leader and group, the clarity of shared goals, and whether people feel the leader is genuinely acting on the group's behalf. The ultimate proof of leadership is not what the leader is like or does — it is what the people they lead do. Without followership, there is no leadership; there is only a title.

■ *Haslam, Alvesson & Reicher — 'Zombie Leadership' (The Leadership Quarterly, 2024)*

Management Is Not the Same as Leadership

One of the most persistent confusions in the early stages of a leadership role is conflating management and leadership. They are related but distinct. Leadership is setting a vision and bringing people toward it — inspiring, aligning, making the 'why' behind goals clear. Management is something different: the act of making the people around you better. Figuring out who they are, what they're good at, what motivates them, and then aligning the work with their role and their growth areas.

You can be a leader without being a manager. You can be a manager without being a strong leader. Sometimes both live in the same person. Often they don't. Understanding which role you're actually in — and which one you're being evaluated on — prevents a great deal of misdirected effort.

> **The management test**
>
> The simplest way to assess whether you're succeeding as a manager: Are the people around you growing? Are they taking on more? Are you seeing them change in meaningful ways? If the answer is yes, you're probably managing well, regardless of what the output metrics say on any given week. If the answer is no — if people are static, checked out, or shrinking — something in your approach needs to change.

■ *Molly Graham — '6 Counterintuitive Rules for Being a Better Manager' (First Round Review)*

Strip it down further and the manager's job is exactly two things: deliver an aligned result, and enable the success of the people on your team. Everything else — the frameworks, the models, the leadership philosophies — is in service of those two things or it's noise.

■ *Russ Laraway — 'Stop Overcomplicating It' (First Round Review) / 'When They Win, You Win'*

What the Job Actually Requires

The work of leadership can be roughly organized into three categories that rarely appear in job descriptions: decisions, context, and relationships. Leaders make some decisions directly, but more important they shape the conditions under which hundreds of decisions get made by others. They provide the context — the why — that enables autonomous good judgment at scale. And almost everything hard in leadership happens through relationships: feedback, alignment, retention, navigating tension upward. Everything else is in service of these three things.

Things Nobody Tells You

- You will spend a significant portion of your time in meetings that don't feel productive — and your job is often to make them more productive, not to escape them.

- The people who report to you will hold back information from you — sometimes intentionally, more often because they don't know what you need to know. Creating conditions where information flows upward is an active management task.
- Your emotional state is legible to your team in ways you cannot fully control. If you're anxious, they will be anxious. If you're disengaged, they will disengage. This is not unfair — it is the structural reality of the role.
- Some of the best decisions you make will be unpopular. Some popular decisions will be wrong. Learning to distinguish between the two — and to make good decisions anyway — is a core leadership skill.
- You are now managing up, managing across, and managing down simultaneously. These three directions often have conflicting requirements, and you will regularly have to disappoint someone.
- When leadership makes a decision you disagree with, your job is to implement it as if you made it yourself — not to signal to your team that you're on their side against the organization. Distancing from decisions you're responsible for implementing damages the chain of authority you depend on.
- People and roles evolve at different rates. What you signed up for in year one may look very different in year five — the job grows harder and more complex as the organization matures. Leaders who succeed long-term are those who keep growing with it.

The Loneliness Problem

Most new leaders are surprised by how isolating the role can be. You are no longer a peer to the people you manage. You are not fully a peer to the leaders above you. The social fabric of your work life has shifted, and you may not have built relationships at the new level yet. This is normal. It is also something you need to address intentionally, because leaders without peer support make worse decisions and burn out faster.

The isolation can be managed. As you build trust up and down the chain, you will develop a small number of people you can think out loud with, vent to, and test ideas against. Not everyone is a candidate for this — some people lack the maturity to maintain a close relationship with their boss without it affecting how they work. Take it slowly. But the goal is to reach a state where you have trusted agents at multiple levels: people who keep you informed, help you stay calibrated, and give you someone to laugh with in hard stretches.

■ *Jocko Willink — 'Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual' (St. Martin's Press, 2023)*

> **The default failure mode**
>
> The most common first-year leadership failure is not incompetence. It is a leader who stays in individual contributor mode — doing the work rather than enabling others to do it, solving problems rather than building the capability to solve them, and getting short-term results at the cost of long-term team development.

On Feeling Unready

Many new leaders feel like they're not quite ready for the role — that they're not fully qualified, and that someone might figure it out. This anxiety has a name: imposter syndrome. It is worth reframing. The leader who feels unready is the leader who prepares. They study, they ask questions, they think carefully before acting. The opposite — the leader who is completely certain they're ready, who doesn't feel the need to prepare or listen — is the one who destroys teams.

The anxiety is not a sign of unsuitability. It is a sign of appropriate humility about a genuinely hard job. The goal is not to eliminate it but to use it productively: as a reason to prepare more thoroughly, ask better questions, and treat the role with the seriousness it deserves.

■ *Jocko Willink — 'Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual' (St. Martin's Press, 2023)*

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Before You Accept

If you are reading this before stepping into a leadership role, consider these questions carefully:

- Do you want the actual job — not the title, not the salary, not the status, but the work of developing people, navigating ambiguity, and being accountable for things you can't directly control?
- Are you willing to be less visibly competent in the short term while you develop new skills?
- Do you have the emotional capacity to hold other people's difficulties without taking them on as your own?

- Are you internally driven — motivated by the work itself and the impact you can have — or primarily by external recognition? External motivation produces different decisions under pressure.
- Do you have enough support — mentors, peers, a relationship with your own manager — to navigate what's coming?

None of these questions have wrong answers. Some excellent people should not be in leadership roles — not because they aren't capable, but because the job is genuinely not what they want. Knowing that before you commit is valuable.

Organizations that understand this build dual tracks: separate growth paths for individual contributors and people leaders, so that seniority and compensation don't depend on taking a management role. If your organization doesn't have one, you can still make the choice explicitly. The traditional link between promotion and management responsibility is a convention, not a law.

■ *Google Project Oxygen / BetterUp — betterup.com/blog/project-oxygen*

A related trap once you are in the role: Proof of Worth tasks. Because leadership is a generalist role that works alongside specialist functions, many cultures — implicitly or explicitly — require leaders to perform non-core tasks just to demonstrate they deserve to be in the room: writing SQL queries, taking detailed notes, answering support tickets, sitting in on every call. Early in a role, some of this is useful context-building. Continued indefinitely, it consumes the time that should go to the highest-leverage work only the leader can do. The question to ask regularly: is this task something I'm doing because it provides genuine leverage, or because I feel I need to prove I've earned my seat?

■ *Shreyas Doshi — 'Advanced time management principles' (x.com/shreyas)*

Chapter 02

Authority, Influence, and the Gap Between Them

How leadership actually gets done

Authority is the formal right to make decisions and direct others. Influence is the actual ability to shape what people do. New leaders often confuse these — assuming that the title gives them the second when it only grants the first.

Authority is assigned. It comes with the role. But authority alone does not make people want to do good work, exercise good judgment, bring you problems early, or stay when they have other options. Those things require influence — and influence has to be earned.

The distinction matters at a fundamental level. Leadership is less about power *over* followers and more about power *through* them — getting people to want to contribute, rather than making them. A leader who relies primarily on compliance produces the minimum required. A leader whose team is genuinely motivated by the work and the direction produces something that cannot be extracted by authority alone.

■ *Turner (2005) — via Haslam, Alvesson & Reicher, 'Zombie Leadership' (The Leadership Quarterly, 2024)*

What Authority Can and Cannot Do

Authority can compel compliance. It cannot compel engagement. A leader who relies primarily on authority gets the minimum required output from people who are waiting to see if they actually have to follow through. This produces mediocre results and is exhausting for everyone involved.

Authority is most useful when decisions need to be made quickly, when there is genuine disagreement that cannot be resolved by consensus, or when someone is not meeting a clear expectation and needs to understand there are consequences. Using it constantly — or as a substitute for building relationships — signals something is wrong with how leadership is being exercised. General Dan Caine, a career military leader, recounted that he gave approximately two direct orders across his entire 33-year career. The rest was persuasion, example, and earned credibility.

■ *General Dan Caine — via Ryan Holiday, '24 Leadership Principles' (ryanholiday.net)*

There is also a subtler problem: authority changes the person who holds it. When people are put into positions of power, three things happen reliably. They focus more on their own needs and concerns. They focus less on the needs and concerns of others. And they begin to act as if the rules don't apply to them. This isn't a character flaw — it is a documented pattern that affects almost everyone under conditions of persistent authority. The leader who is aware of this tendency, and actively works against it, is the exception.

■ *Bob Sutton — 'Fight Like You're Right, Listen Like You're Wrong' (First Round Review)*

How Influence Is Built

Influence accumulates through consistent behavior over time. The primary sources are competence, character, and care.

Competence

People follow leaders who demonstrate sound judgment — not necessarily technical expertise in the team's work, but the ability to frame problems clearly, make reasonable decisions under uncertainty, and course-correct when wrong. Competence in the relevant domain matters early on; competence in judgment and decision-making matters throughout.

Character

Does the leader say what they mean? Do they do what they say they'll do? Do they treat people consistently, regardless of who is watching? Character is assessed through patterns, not statements. 'I have an open door' means nothing if people who walk through it get subtle pushback for raising problems.

Care

People extend trust to leaders who demonstrate genuine interest in their success and wellbeing — not performative interest, but the kind that shows up in how feedback is delivered, how workload is managed, how recognition is given, and whether the leader advocates for their team in rooms the team isn't in.

> **Influence debt**
>
> Every time you use authority in a way that feels arbitrary, inconsistent, or self-serving, you are borrowing against future influence. Leaders who over-rely on authority often find themselves in a downward spiral: low trust means more resistance, which prompts more use of authority, which further erodes trust.

The Peer Influence Problem

Much of what leaders need to accomplish requires influencing people they have no authority over: peers in other functions, senior leaders, external partners. This is where formal authority is entirely useless and influence is the only currency.

Building influence laterally requires the same foundations — competence, character, care — but the relationship-building is more deliberate. People who lead well across organizational lines understand what matters to the other person, invest in relationships before they need something, and create situations where both parties benefit from cooperation.

The mechanics matter. Imparting energy is often more important than sharing information. People like you when they feel liked by you — when you greet them in a way that signals you're genuinely glad to see them, when you listen with enough focus to ask specific follow-up questions rather than nodding while mentally elsewhere. Acknowledge your own fallibility honestly. Offer unvarnished opinions rather than managed ones — the people worth building relationships with can tell the difference. And end every meeting on a high note: the feeling you leave someone with is what they'll remember about you.

■ *Chris Fralic — 'How to Become Insanely Well-Connected' (First Round Review)*

The Conviction Calibration Problem

Before they earn a title, aspiring leaders often make one of two opposite mistakes with their opinions. The first: stating a position and then immediately backing down at the first sign of pushback — changing their view before any new information has been shared. This looks like a lack of conviction, and senior leaders notice it.

The second mistake is the mirror image: holding positions so rigidly that no amount of new information or argument moves them. This looks like an inability to function on an executive team where trade-offs require genuine give-and-take.

The calibration that earns trust is different from both: form a view, be willing to defend it, and change it when the argument — not the social pressure — warrants it.

> **The authority trap for aspiring leaders**
>
> People who demand a title in order to get things done have usually gotten the sequence backwards. The title follows demonstrated influence, not the other way around. If you can't move people without formal authority, adding a title rarely fixes that. Prove effectiveness without the authority first. The authority becomes most useful when you no longer strictly need it.

To Lead, You Have to Follow

Effective leaders don't split the world into a binary of leaders and followers — they move in and out of both roles depending on what the situation requires. Until you learn to follow genuinely, you can only lead through others' resignation rather than real alignment. The people around you will comply rather than commit, and the difference shows up in every hard moment.

The most effective leaders spend more time following than leading. In practice this means: be clear about your true priorities and don't dilute yourself across everything. For things you disagree with only slightly, let someone else lead and give them your genuine support. A useful test: 'Will this matter to me in six months?' If not, follow. Give your support quickly to other leaders working to make improvements — someone trustworthy leading a project will almost always find a good outcome, even if their starting approach isn't yours. Make your feedback explicitly non-blocking. If you find yourself uncomfortable letting a trusted person move forward, examine whether the issue is them or your own difficulty ceding control.

■ *Will Larson — 'Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track' (2021)*

From Being Right to Being Understood

Most people have worked with someone who thinks they're never wrong — who leans in, dominates the debate, and continues until their view wins or time runs out. They are often right. But right in a way that empties the room: over time, what they interpret as persuasion is the resignation of their colleagues.

The shift required is from winning arguments to reaching understanding. This means going into a meeting not with the goal of getting agreement but with the goal of agreeing on the problem, understanding what people in the room actually need, and identifying what has to happen before alignment is possible. Three disciplines help:

- **Listen through questions.** Ask three good questions before sharing your perspective. Questions asked with genuine intent open up a conversation, create safety for others to contribute, and free the answerer from the obligation to defend their position. They sharpen the conversation rather than narrowing it.
- **Define the purpose.** In any discussion that feels stuck or circular, pause and confirm what the group is actually trying to decide. 'Just to check — our goal here is to decide whether to postpone the launch by two weeks?' Named purpose often dissolves an argument before it begins.
- **Read the room.** If the room is ready to make a decision, land it. If the room isn't ready, don't force it. Forcing a decision the room isn't ready for produces the appearance of

alignment and none of the reality.

■ *Will Larson — 'Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track' (2021)*

Part II

People Decisions

The decisions you make about people — who to hire, how to onboard them, how to address performance problems, and when and how to let someone go — have longer-lasting consequences than almost any other decisions you will make as a leader. They are also the decisions that new leaders most often underestimate, delay, or handle poorly.

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Chapter 03

Hiring: What You're Actually Deciding

The decisions inside the decision

Hiring feels like a search problem — find the best available candidate for the role. It is actually a series of harder decisions that most hiring processes aren't designed to surface: what the role actually requires, what 'best' means in this specific context, and how much weight to give different kinds of evidence.

Define the Role Before the Search

The most common hiring mistake happens before any candidate is considered: the role isn't clearly defined. Not just the job description — the actual decisions the person will make, the problems they will need to solve, and what success looks like in the first year. Without this, every candidate evaluation becomes impressionistic and the hire is essentially random.

- What are the three or four decisions this person will make most frequently, and what does good judgment in those decisions look like?
- What does this person need to accomplish in the first 90 days to be considered on track?
- What is the hardest part of this role, and what does the person need to handle it?
- What failure modes are you most worried about, and what in a candidate's history should make you confident or nervous?
- What strengths do we not already have on the team — and are we hiring to complement the team or replicate it?

The Evidence Problem

Interviews are a poor predictor of job performance. This is well documented and consistently ignored. They are systematically biased toward confident, articulate people who are good at interviews, which is not the same as being good at the job. Work samples, structured references, and past-behavior interviews are more predictive.

On structured interviews

Using the same questions with every candidate and scoring answers against a defined rubric before discussion reduces bias and improves predictive validity. It feels less natural than conversational interviewing. It is more likely to surface who will actually perform.

Questions That Reveal

The best interview questions are specific enough to resist a prepared answer, and open enough to show how someone thinks. The most revealing questions ask about the past, not the hypothetical:

- Among the people you've worked with, who do you most admire and why? — reveals values and what they notice in others.
- What do you want to do differently in your next role? — reveals honest self-assessment and what they learned.
- Tell me about a time you took unexpected initiative. Then: tell me about another. — the follow-up matters; a pattern is harder to manufacture.
- When was the last time you changed your mind about something important? — reveals intellectual honesty and whether they update on evidence.
- Why shouldn't we hire you? — tests self-awareness and candor under pressure.
- What have I not asked you that I should have?

What References Actually Tell You

Most reference calls are useless because they are conducted poorly. References become valuable when you ask specific questions about specific situations, probe for detail when answers are vague, and pay attention to hesitations and what isn't said. The most informative question is often: 'What would you say this person's growth areas are?' — then stay quiet until you get a real answer. You are also looking for rate of improvement: not just where someone is now, but the direction they're moving.

The Bias Audit

- **Similarity bias:** preferring candidates who remind you of yourself in ways that may not be relevant.
- **Halo effect:** letting one positive signal overwhelm the overall evaluation.

· **Affinity bias:** rating candidates higher when you liked the conversation, independent of their answers.

· **Overconfidence in gut feel:** treating a strong intuition as evidence rather than a signal to investigate further.

When interviewers disagree significantly, that is information — not a problem to be resolved by the most senior person in the room. Understand what each person saw that others didn't, and why.

The Offer Decision

The question is not 'Is this person good?' but 'Given what we know, what is the probability this person succeeds in this role, in this organization, at this time?' A genuinely strong candidate who is a poor fit for the specific context is a worse hire than a strong candidate who fits well.

What Your Answers Reveal

Hiring is not one-directional. A candidate with any seniority or options is evaluating the organization at the same time the organization evaluates them — and the 'do you have any questions for us?' portion of the interview is where they do it. Strong candidates increasingly ask pointed questions at this stage, and how a hiring manager answers them shapes the decision as much as anything from earlier in the process. It's worth knowing what these questions actually test, because you will be asked them:

· **'Why is this role open?'** Growth, replacement, and restructuring are all normal answers. A pause before the answer, or a version that avoids the direct question, tells a candidate there's a story underneath — and invites a harder follow-up.

· **'What's something the team is genuinely bad at?'** A polished non-answer — the humblebrag disguised as a weakness — signals practiced evasion. A specific, honest answer signals a team that can look at itself clearly, which is exactly what a strong candidate is trying to assess.

· **'How does the team handle disagreement with a decision from leadership?'** Vague reassurance about alignment reads as either dishonest or unreflective. A described process — where it's raised, what happens, whether reasons are given even when decisions don't change — reads as a team that actually functions.

· **'What does success look like at six months, and what does failure look like?'** The failure half of this question is usually unscripted, which means your answer reveals what failure mode you've actually seen in this role before — whether the role is ambiguous, political, or genuinely hard in a specific way.

None of this means fabricating comfortable answers. It means recognizing that hesitation, deflection, and polish read as clearly to a candidate as they would to you if the roles were reversed — and that the honest answer, even when it's not flattering, is usually the one that earns trust rather than costs it.

■ *Louise Deason — 'Nine Questions I Now Ask in Interviews' (louisedeason.substack.com)*

Chapter 04

The First 90 Days of Someone New

Onboarding as a leadership responsibility

The first 90 days of a new hire are the highest-leverage period for setting someone up for long-term success. They are also the period that most organizations and leaders treat as primarily an HR administrative function. The result is predictable: new hires who take far too long to become effective, and who form lasting impressions that are hard to change.

What New Hires Actually Need

New employees need three things in their first weeks: clarity about what success looks like, enough context to make good decisions, and relationships with the people they'll need to work with. Most onboarding programs deliver compliance training and org chart orientation. These are not the same things.

Clarity

What are the specific outcomes expected in the first 30, 60, and 90 days? What decisions does the new hire own, and which require consultation? Without explicit answers, new hires either over-step or under-perform.

Context

Context means understanding why things work the way they do: the history behind current decisions, the relationships between teams, the unwritten rules about how decisions actually get made. Leaders can accelerate this by sharing it deliberately — including the things that won't appear in any document.

Relationships

The speed at which a new hire becomes effective is largely determined by the quality of their relationships with peers and cross-functional partners. Leaders who facilitate deliberate introductions — with context about why each relationship matters — compress the time to effectiveness significantly.

The Manager's Role

- Meeting weekly (or more frequently) in the first month, with enough time to surface confusion before it becomes a problem.
- Sharing a guide to how you work — your communication preferences, what you care about, where you tend to be wrong. This builds psychological safety faster than anything else.
- Actively introducing the new hire to key stakeholders, not just copying them on an announcement email.
- Sharing context about organizational dynamics, politics, and history that would take the new hire months to learn otherwise.
- Giving feedback early and specifically — not waiting for the 90-day review.
- Asking directly: what's confusing? What are you missing? What would make the next 30 days more productive?

Career Development Starts at Onboarding

One of the manager responsibilities most often deferred is career development. Most managers treat it as a later-stage conversation, after the person has proven themselves. This is backwards.

When someone joins, they have ambitions. If those ambitions go unacknowledged, people assume the organization doesn't care about them and begin looking elsewhere within months. A brief, genuine conversation in the first weeks — what do you want to learn here, where do you want to be in two years — signals that the manager sees them as a person with a trajectory, not a function to be filled. That signal has outsized retention value.

The 90-day checkpoint

At 90 days, have an explicit conversation: Is the person on track against the outcomes you set at the start? If not, is it a capability issue, a context issue, or a setup issue? Most early underperformance is a setup issue — something the organization failed to provide — not a hire quality issue. Be honest about which it is.

Chapter 05

When Performance Starts to Slip

Addressing underperformance before it becomes a crisis

Performance problems don't usually arrive as emergencies. They arrive as small signals: a deliverable that's late, work below the usual standard, a change in someone's engagement or behavior. What leaders do in response to those early signals determines whether the situation improves, stabilizes, or deteriorates.

Why Leaders Wait

The most common response to early performance signals is avoidance. Leaders tell themselves they need more data. They're worried about being wrong. They don't want to damage the relationship. These are understandable instincts. They are also the primary reason that manageable performance problems become terminations.

Early feedback — given promptly, specifically, and with genuine care — is one of the highest-leverage things a leader can do. It respects the person enough to give them accurate information about how they're doing. And it means that if the performance problem continues, everyone involved has been treated fairly.

Diagnosing Before Acting

- **Does the person know what's expected?** Sometimes underperformance is a clarity problem, not a capability or motivation problem.
- **Do they have what they need to meet expectations?** Resources, information, authority, support from other teams?
- **Do they know there's a problem?** Leaders sometimes assume feedback has been given clearly when it has been given only obliquely.
- **Is something happening outside work?** A person in the middle of a difficult personal situation may need a different kind of support.
- **Has something changed at work?** A role change, a team change, a loss of a colleague they depended on — these affect performance in ways that aren't always visible.

Coaching as a Discipline

Most leaders conflate feedback and coaching. Feedback tells someone what happened and what needs to change. Coaching helps them figure out how to change it — and builds the capability to keep improving without the manager in the room. A team that can only perform well with active feedback is fragile. A team that has internalized how to think about its own performance is robust.

What coaching actually looks like

Coaching is primarily questioning, not advising. When someone brings a problem, the coaching response is not to solve it — it is to ask questions that help them solve it themselves: What do you see as the root cause? What options have you considered? What are the trade-offs? What's your instinct? The leader's job is to sharpen the thinking, not to replace it.

> **The coaching test**
>
> If the people who work for you bring problems and leave with your solutions, you are not coaching — you are deciding. Ask yourself how often people leave your conversations with their own answer rather than yours.

Two specific questions make this discipline concrete rather than aspirational. First, when someone gives you their initial answer, resist the urge to act on it — ask 'And what else?' The first answer is rarely the real one; it's the socially acceptable one, or the first thing that came to mind. Asking again, once or twice, surfaces what's actually going on and often produces the person's own best thinking, which they wouldn't have reached if you'd jumped in after the first response.

Second, when someone comes to you visibly stressed or stuck, resist assuming what kind of help they need. Ask 'How can I help?' rather than immediately offering advice, taking over the task, or reassuring them. Often what they need is simply to be heard, or to think out loud — not a solution. Assuming the wrong kind of help wastes your time and can leave the person feeling more managed, not less stuck.

■ *Michael Bungay Stanier — 'The Coaching Habit' (Box of Crayons Press, 2016)*

The corollary: when someone makes a costly mistake, the first question is not how to discipline them but what they learned. IBM CEO Tom Watson once called an executive into his office after a venture had lost ten million dollars. The executive assumed he was being fired. Watson reportedly told him: 'Fired? I just spent ten million dollars educating you. I want to be sure you learned the right lessons.' A mistake that has already been made is sunk cost. The only question is whether it produces capability going forward.

■ *Ryan Holiday — '24 Leadership Principles' (ryanholiday.net)*

The Performance Conversation

- Be specific about what you've observed, not general about your impression. 'The last three reports were submitted late and contained errors' is actionable. 'Your work quality has been off' is not.
- Ask before you explain. 'I've noticed X. What's your read on it?' often surfaces information you didn't have.
- Check whether the person is in a headspace to hear feedback before delivering it — asking first makes it more likely to land.
- Be clear about what needs to change and by when. Vague aspirations don't give people enough to work with.
- Follow up. A performance conversation with no follow-up signals you weren't serious.

> **The feedback timing principle**
>
> Feedback is most useful when given as close as possible to the behavior it addresses. A quarterly review is not a feedback mechanism — it's an accounting exercise. The goal is to make feedback so regular and specific that reviews contain no surprises. Ideally during the first 90 days, give an exorbitant amount of feedback. You could have fixed something six or nine months earlier by pulling the person aside immediately.

■ *Michael Lopp (Rands) — First Round Review*

Framing Feedback With Ownership

How feedback is framed determines whether it gets heard. A critique delivered as accusation produces defensiveness. The same substance delivered as a question about what the leader could have provided produces collaboration. Compare:

- Instead of 'You didn't get this done on time' — try 'What support could I have given you so we could have finished this on time?'
- Instead of 'You didn't understand the objective' — try 'I don't think I explained the objective clearly enough. What was your read on it?'
- Instead of 'Your communication with the client was off' — try 'I think I've let some standards slip here, and that's on me. Here's what needs to change going forward.'

This is not a technique for avoiding accountability. It is the opposite: a genuine recognition that most underperformance has a setup dimension — something the leader failed to provide. Owning that makes the feedback land. And more often than it looks, the ownership is accurate.

■ *Jocko Willink — 'Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual' (St. Martin's Press, 2023)*

Most feedback fails not because it's unwelcome but because it's vague, late, or unverified. Three rules that address all three problems:

· **Immediate.** As soon as someone steps off the path or veers into dangerous territory, let them know. Delayed feedback loses the moment and loses specificity.

· **Granular.** Give specific examples of the mistake and how things would look different if the behavior changed. 'Your communication style ' needs work' tells someone nothing. 'In Tuesday's meeting, you interrupted the client twice before they finished their sentence, and they disengaged for the rest of the call' tells them exactly what to change.

· **Verified.** Have the person repeat back what they heard until what they're saying matches what you mean. Too often people believe they know what's expected of them — and still fail to meet expectations. The gap is almost always in the translation, not the intent.

■ *Michael Lopp (Rands) — First Round Review*

Strategy, Not Self-Expression

The most common reason feedback conversations fail is not cowardice or unclear language — it is self-expression. The feedback giver has been sitting with frustration, and when finally given the opening, they use it to vent. They describe the damage in detail. They want the person to understand how they felt. They want acknowledgment of wrongdoing. At the end of the conversation, the recipient is defensive and demoralized — and has no clear idea what they should do differently.

A feedback conversation is a sales conversation. Its purpose is behavior change — not catharsis, not having the last word, not teaching someone a lesson. Before speaking, apply one filter: *Is this strategy or self-expression?* Strategy means only saying the things genuinely likely to move the person toward change. Self-expression is everything else. Strategy is roughly 10% of what you initially want to say.

Practically: process the emotion before entering the room, not during. Talk to a trusted person beforehand. Come in with neutral or positive energy — your recipient will be more open when they believe your intent is good, and most people cannot fake good intent for long. Then ask them to reflect back what they heard: 'What parts are resonating most with you?' This surfaces misunderstandings and lets the person commit to change in their own words — which is more powerful than anything you can say for another twenty minutes.

■ *Wes Kao — 'Strategy, Not Self-Expression' (newsletter.weskao.com)*

The same discipline that applies to giving feedback applies to receiving it. Most leaders don't get accurate feedback about themselves because they don't chase it actively enough. When someone is reluctant to give feedback, don't let them off the hook — keep asking. Use silence after a vague answer; it creates space for the real answer to emerge.

When someone does give you useful criticism, reward it. Thank them explicitly. Praise the act. And most importantly: take action on it if you can. A leader who visibly changes behavior in response to feedback builds a reputation for being safe to be honest with — which generates more honest feedback in a compounding loop.

Don't confine feedback-seeking to scheduled meetings. Chase it in one-to-two minute conversations between engagements — after a presentation, after a difficult decision, after a team meeting. The compounding effect of small, frequent feedback loops over months produces far more calibration than quarterly 360 surveys. Sheryl Sandberg actively chased a banker for feedback during Facebook's IPO process. The relentlessness is the point.

■ *Kim Scott — Radical Candor / First Round Review*

When You Are the Problem

You will make mistakes as a manager. You will give feedback that lands wrong and damages someone's confidence. You will make a decision that seemed logical but turns out to be completely misguided. You will forget something important you promised to do. You will lose your patience when you should have stayed calm. The question is not whether this will happen. It's what you do after.

The skill that most distinguishes great managers is repair: going back after you've made a mistake, owning it specifically, and reconnecting. When you own your mistakes completely and specifically, something unexpected happens — your team trusts you more, not less. The manager who never acknowledges errors is the one people leave. The manager who comes back and says 'I put you in an impossible position and I'm sorry for the stress that caused' builds trust even through the mistake.

■ *Terrible Software — 'The Management Skill Nobody Talks About' (terriblesoftware.org)*

· **Be specific about what you did wrong.** Not 'mistakes were made' or 'things could have gone better,' but 'I interrupted you three times in that meeting and dismissed your concerns. That was wrong.'

· **Don't make it about you.** This is not the time for a long explanation of your stress levels or why you acted that way. The repair is about acknowledging the impact on the other person.

· **Actually change the behavior.** An apology without changed behavior is empty words. If you keep making the same mistake, it is no longer a mistake — it's a choice.

· **Give it time.** One conversation doesn't instantly repair broken trust. It's a starting point, not a finish line.

Don't Neglect Your High Performers

Most managers spend disproportionate time on struggling performers while their best people receive relatively little attention. The logic seems sound — the people who are struggling need help, and the people who are succeeding are fine. But 'fine' is not the same as 'developing,' and high performers who don't grow leave.

A related trap: expecting from others what you expect from yourself. Leaders who set exceptionally high personal standards are often perpetually frustrated with their teams because they hold everyone to the same bar. Marcus Aurelius found a different approach. According to Cassius Dio, 'so long as a person did anything good, he would praise him and use him for the service in which he excelled, but to his other conduct he paid no attention.' The standard is for you. For others: find what is strong, lean into it, and meet people where they are.

■ *Ryan Holiday — '24 Leadership Principles' (ryanholiday.net) · Cassius Dio*

The highest-leverage time investment a manager can make is often in their strongest performers. These are the people with the most room to develop further, the most potential impact on the team, and the most options if they feel neglected. A neglected high performer doesn't complain loudly — they update their resume quietly.

■ *Molly Graham — '6 Counterintuitive Rules for Being a Better Manager' (First Round Review)*

From Essential to Adjacent

One of the best measures of long-term leadership success is that the organization around you increasingly benefits from, but does not rely upon, your contributions. Many leaders reach senior positions by being the go-to person — the one who makes the call, carries the context, solves the hardest problems. That capability is what got them there. It is not what makes them effective at the next level.

The transition from essential to adjacent is difficult because it requires giving away work you're good at — and trusting that others will get to a good answer even if they'd take a different path than you would. When you make a key contribution, pause and ask: what would it take for someone else to make that contribution next time? Then invest in making that happen rather than repeating the contribution yourself. This is not abdication — it is the deliberate transfer of capability into the organization.

· In meetings: shift from giving answers to asking questions. Ask the questions that open the problem up rather than closing it. Pull in the person who hasn't spoken. Take notes — it frees others to contribute more and destigmatizes the work.

· In decisions: write down your reasoning before announcing it. Documentation transfers judgment in a way that presence in the room cannot. Others can act on written reasoning without you being there.

· In sponsorship: the most senior form of development is not mentorship (advice) but sponsorship (actively advocating for someone's advancement in rooms they're not in). Sponsor over mentor.

■ *Will Larson — 'Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track' (2021)*

Chapter 06

Letting People Go

The decision and how to handle it

The decision to end someone's employment is among the hardest a leader makes. It is also, when it is necessary, one of the most consequential things a leader can do for the health of a team. Leaders who avoid this decision when it's clearly required pay for the avoidance for months or years.

When Letting Go Is the Right Decision

A termination may be appropriate when: the person cannot or will not meet clear expectations despite genuine support and feedback; their behavior is damaging to the team in ways that cannot be corrected; or the role has changed in ways that require capabilities the person doesn't have and can't develop in the timeframe required.

The test is not 'Is this person a good human being?' The test is whether there is a realistic path to this person meeting the requirements of this role, in this organization, at this time. If the honest answer is no — and if the feedback process has been fair — then the decision is clear, even if it is painful.

Before the Decision

Before addressing what to check, it's worth naming why leaders delay this decision even after the answer is clear. Kim Scott identifies four specific rationalizations leaders use to avoid acting — recognizing them by name makes them harder to hide behind:

· **'Things will get better.'** Ask directly: better how, and what exactly are you or the person doing differently that would cause it? If there's no concrete answer, this is a hope, not a plan.

· **'Someone in the seat is better than no one in the seat.'** Often false. An underperforming person in a role can cost more — in rework, in the team's confidence, in the standard it sets — than an open seat costs in lost capacity.

· **'Let's transfer them to another team.'** This frequently just relocates the same problem and burdens a different manager with the same decision, later and with less context.

· **'The termination will hurt morale.'** Usually the reverse: tolerated underperformance is what damages morale, because it signals to the rest of the team that standards aren't real.

■ *Kim Scott — 'Radical Candor' (St. Martin's Press, 2017)*

· Has the person received clear, specific, documented feedback about what needs to change?

· Have they had a genuine opportunity to address it — with support, resources, and reasonable time?

· Is the standard being applied consistently with other team members?

· Have you consulted HR or legal as required by your organization?

· Are you certain the problem is the person, not the role, the team dynamics, or something you could address differently?

How to Have the Conversation

· Do it in person, in private, early in the week (not Friday afternoon).

· Get to the point quickly. Long preambles are unkind, not kind.

· Be clear about the decision: 'We've decided to end your employment' not 'We're going to have to make some changes.'

· Explain the severance and next steps practically.

· Allow the person to respond. Listen. Don't argue.

· End the meeting. A termination conversation that goes on for an hour does not help anyone.

Two further principles worth holding onto. First, don't hand off the conversation to HR — it is the manager's responsibility, and doing it yourself is part of what makes it humane. Second, be generous where you reasonably can: with severance, with a reference, with help finding the next role. The person you're letting go today may be a colleague, a client, or a reference for someone else tomorrow, and how they're treated on the way out says as much about your leadership as anything else you do.

■ *Joel Peterson — 'Firing with Compassion' (Harvard Business Review, 2020)*

The cost of avoidance

Every week that a leader delays a termination they know is necessary, the team pays the cost: in morale, in the work that doesn't get done, in the signal to everyone else about what standards actually mean. The compassionate choice for the team is often the harder choice for the leader.

Part III

Team Decisions

A team is not a group of people who happen to report to the same person. It is a system — with structures, norms, communication patterns, and a culture that shapes how people behave, what they share, and how they perform. Leaders design and maintain that system, whether deliberately or not.

- Chapter 07 · Building a Team That Works
- Chapter 08 · The One-on-One
- Chapter 09 · Meetings, Communication, and Information Flow
- Chapter 10 · Delegation and Accountability
- Chapter 11 · When the Team Is Broken

Chapter 07

Building a Team That Works

What makes teams effective — and what gets in the way

Teams don't become effective by accident. The conditions that allow a group of people to produce results together — trust, clear roles, shared goals, productive conflict — have to be created deliberately. This is the leader's job.

The Foundation: Psychological Safety

The most consistent finding in research on team effectiveness is that high-performing teams have high psychological safety — an environment where people can raise concerns, ask questions, share half-formed ideas, and disagree with each other without fear of ridicule or retaliation. This is not the same as comfort or congeniality. Teams with high psychological safety have more conflict, not less — but productive conflict rather than silence or politics.

Psychological safety is primarily established by the leader's behavior, not by team-building exercises or declared values. The team watches how the leader responds when someone raises a problem, challenges a decision, or makes a mistake. Those responses — not the stated norms — define the actual culture.

Research consistently shows that the variables people assume matter most have surprisingly little effect on team effectiveness. Google's Project Aristotle found that colocation, consensus-driven decision making, extroversion of team members, individual performance levels, workload size, seniority, team size, and tenure all had relatively weak effects. What matters is how the team communicates, whether people feel safe to speak up, and whether the leader creates the conditions for both. Project Aristotle identified five factors that distinguish high-performing teams from the rest:

1	**Psychological Safety**	Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable with each other.
2	**Dependability**	Team members get things done reliably and meet a high bar for quality.
3	**Structure & Clarity**	Team members have clear roles, plans, and goals.
4	**Meaning**	Work is personally important to team members.
5	**Impact**	Team members believe their work matters and creates change.

■ *Google re:Work — Project Aristotle research on team effectiveness (rework.withgoogle.com)*

A companion study — Project Oxygen — asked the same question about individual managers rather than teams. Google's People Innovation Lab launched it with the explicit goal of proving that manager quality has no impact on performance. The data proved the opposite. Statistical analysis of performance reviews, engagement surveys, and employee interviews found that manager quality made a substantial difference — and identified eight consistent behaviors that distinguished the best managers from the rest, in ranked order:

1	**Is a good coach**	Asks before telling. Develops capability rather than solving for people.
2	**Empowers — does not micromanage**	Delegates outcomes with authority, not just tasks with instructions.
3	**Cares about success and well-being**	Expresses genuine interest in each person's growth and life outside work.
4	**Is productive and results-oriented**	Stays focused on outcomes; removes obstacles rather than creating them.
5	**Communicates well — listens and shares**	Listens fully, shares context generously, keeps no one in the dark.
6	**Supports career development**	Has explicit conversations about growth; invests before it's urgent.
7	**Has a clear vision and strategy**	Keeps the team oriented on direction; connects daily work to bigger goals.
8	**Has relevant technical skills**	Understands the work well enough to advise — not to override.

Two things about this list are worth sitting with. First, coaching is at the top — not strategy, not technical expertise, not results. Second, technical skills rank last. Being excellent at the work does not make someone an effective manager of people who do that work. This is the data behind what Ch01 describes as the competence trap: the skill that earned the promotion is the least predictive of success in the role it unlocked.

■ *Google re:Work — Project Oxygen research on manager effectiveness (rework.withgoogle.com) · BetterUp / Madeline Miles*

What Leader Behaviors Actually Move People

The O.C. Tanner Institute's 2023 Global Culture Study quantified the impact of specific leader behaviors on employees' sense of belonging and community at work. The effects are large enough to be striking:

- **Connects the purpose of my work with what I value:** +194% odds of a strong sense of community.
- **Clearly communicates what success looks like:** +133%.
- **Introduces me to potential mentors:** +122%.
- **Is a strong advocate for my development:** +104%.
- **Champions my decisions:** +78%.
- **Works to understand what I do:** +63%.

The top behavior — connecting the purpose of someone's work to what they personally value — nearly triples the odds of a strong community. This is not a soft outcome. Teams with high belonging have lower turnover, higher engagement, and better performance. The behaviors that produce it are specific and learnable.

■ *O.C. Tanner Institute — 2023 Global Culture Study*

Teams function poorly when people are unclear about who owns what, or when individual goals conflict with team goals. The leader's job is to create enough clarity that people can make good decisions independently.

- Every team member should be able to articulate the team's top three priorities and how their own work connects to them.
- When two people could both reasonably claim responsibility for something, one person should have explicit ownership.
- The team should have a shared understanding of what success looks like at the end of the quarter, not just at the individual level.

Productive Conflict

The absence of visible conflict on a team is usually not a sign of alignment — it's a sign of suppressed disagreement. Problems that don't surface in meetings surface later, in the form of passive resistance, poor implementation, or people going around the decision-maker.

Leaders who build teams capable of productive conflict model disagreement themselves, distinguish between productive tension and unproductive conflict, make it safe to change one's mind, and close debates with clear decisions rather than letting ambiguity persist.

Developing People and Recognizing Contribution

Individual development is not just a manager-to-report conversation. The best teams create conditions where people develop through the work itself — through ownership, stretch assignments, honest feedback from peers, and visibility into how their contributions connect to outcomes that matter.

Recognition matters more than most leaders think, and it is more specific than most leaders make it. Generic praise is wallpaper. Specific recognition — naming what someone did, why it mattered, what it says about them — is signal. Sending recognition upward through the organization, so that people two levels above become aware of strong work, has outsized impact on retention and motivation.

■ *First Round Review — 'The 25 Micro-Habits of High-Impact Managers'*

On Stated Values

Teams accumulate norms — unspoken agreements about how decisions get made, what behavior is acceptable, what gets rewarded. Writing those norms down as explicit values can be useful. But the order of operations matters: values consolidate change that has already happened; they cannot start it. Stating that you value psychological safety does not create it. Consistently modeling the behavior that psychological safety requires — and holding leaders accountable when they undermine it — creates it. The written value comes after, to make the change durable and legible to newcomers.

Before writing down a team value, test it against three questions:

- **Is it reversible?** Can you restate it as a legitimate opposite without the result being nonsensical? If not, it's probably an identity statement ('we are excellent') rather than a guide to behavior. Reversibility is what makes a value a real choice rather than a platitude.
- **Is it applicable?** Can someone actually use it to navigate a real decision — in a planning session, a performance review, a hiring discussion? If the value is so broad that two reasonable people can't agree whether it applies to a given situation, it won't guide

anything.

- **Is it honest?** Does it describe how effective people on this team actually behave today — not how you wish they would? A slightly aspirational value can work if the behavior is already mostly there. A purely aspirational value becomes a trap for well-intentioned people and is ignored by everyone else.

The practical implication: don't introduce team values to drive cultural change. Drive the cultural change first — through your own behavior, through who you hire and promote, through what you recognize and what you hold accountable. Then document the values to make that change permanent and accessible to people who weren't there when it happened.

■ *Will Larson — 'The Engineering Executive's Primer' (O'Reilly, 2024)*

Your Standards Set the Ceiling

As a leader, your standards are the maximum of what your team will deliver. Not the minimum, not the average — the ceiling. Your team's output will rise to meet your expectations and rarely exceed them. This is not a comfortable fact, but it is a clarifying one: if the team's work is consistently passable rather than strong, the place to look first is not the team's capability but the bar you are setting and holding.

The obstacle to raising standards is almost never a leader who wants mediocrity. It is a leader who believes their standards are already high — and therefore stops looking for the gap. The most common signal that standards have drifted: when challenged on quality, the team reaches for one of these three defenses:

- **'It's good enough.'** This is almost always used before reaching the actual threshold of good enough. The tell: applying the MVP label to work that is minimum but not viable.
- **'There's a speed/quality tradeoff.'** True in theory; invoked in practice well before the team is actually close to that boundary. Most teams have significant room to improve on both dimensions before a genuine tradeoff appears.
- **'We're past the point of diminishing returns.'** Usually said before returns actually diminish — used to justify stopping, not as the conclusion of an honest analysis.

A related challenge: you cannot watch everything. You need your team to hold standards in the moments when no one is looking — which is most moments. That requires them to have internalized the standard, not just complied with it when under observation. The distinction shows up in the work they bring you without prompting.

■ *Wes Kao — 'Are Your Standards Too Low? In Defense of Raising the Bar' (newsletter.weskao.com)*

Building a Culture of Rigorous Thinking

Rigorous thinking is the norm that any idea can be examined, and that careful examination is a sign of respect for the idea — not rejection of it. Teams without this norm produce two failure modes: half-baked ideas that the manager has to veto repeatedly (which trains the team not to bring ideas), or ideas that go unquestioned until they fail in execution.

The opposite of rigorous thinking is lazy thinking — making assumptions you don't even realize are assumptions. Lazy thinking treats the hard part of a problem as 'the details' that someone else will handle. It relies on a black-box middle step: idea → [something happens] → great outcome. The black box is where most projects actually fail.

Building the norm requires that it starts at the top. When you model rigorous examination of your own ideas — naming the risks, identifying the assumptions, acknowledging what could go wrong — you signal that this is what thinking looks like here. The goal is a team where members stress-test their own ideas before bringing them to you, and where the vetting process ends with the person realizing for themselves why an idea needs work, rather than being told.

> **The right format for a rigorous idea**
>
> Any idea is welcome. But when you bring one, come prepared to walk through: what you recommend and why you believe it will work; the downside and risks; how you'd mitigate those risks with a small experiment or staged approach. This isn't bureaucracy — it is the thinking you should have done anyway before investing time in execution.

■ *Wes Kao — 'Rigorous Thinking: No Lazy Thinking' (newsletter.weskao.com)*

Chapter 08

The One-on-One

The primary instrument of management

The regular one-on-one with each direct report is not a meeting. It is the primary instrument through which a manager does the actual work of management: understanding how people are doing, removing obstacles, giving feedback, coaching toward development, and building the kind of relationship that makes honest conversation possible. Most leaders underinvest in it or run it badly.

What the One-on-One Is Actually For

The one-on-one is not a status update meeting. If the majority of the time is spent on 'what did you work on this week,' the format has been captured by the wrong purpose. Status can be shared asynchronously. The one-on-one is for things that require human conversation: what's hard, what's unclear, where the person is stuck, what they're worried about, how they're developing, what they need from you.

Think of it as having three modes that should each get airtime, though not necessarily in the same meeting every time:

Operational

What is blocking progress? What decisions need to be made? What context does the person need that they don't have? This is the mode most one-on-ones default to entirely — and the mode that matters least, because much of it can be handled asynchronously.

Developmental

How is the person growing? Where do they want to go? What are they working on improving? What feedback do they need? This is the mode most one-on-ones skip — and the mode that most directly determines whether people feel valued, stay, and develop.

Relational

How is the person actually doing — as a human, not just as an employee? Is there something going on that is affecting their work or energy? Is there anything unsaid that needs to be said? This mode builds the trust that makes the other two modes possible.

Running It Well

- **Let the report set the agenda, at least in part.** Ask them what they want to cover before the meeting. This signals that the time is theirs, not yours — which changes how they use it.
- **Be fully present.** No multitasking. No glancing at other screens. The one-on-one is one of the few times you are entirely focused on one person. Wasting it by being distracted is noticed and remembered.
- **Never cancel.** Canceling a one-on-one sends a louder signal than the meeting itself — that this person's time and concerns are lower priority than whatever replaced the slot. If you must reschedule, do it in advance and hold the rescheduled time.
- **Ask before you advise.** When someone brings a problem, your first move should be a question, not a solution. 'What are you considering?' surfaces their thinking before you overlay yours.

- **Follow through.** If you commit to something in a one-on-one — to remove an obstacle, make an introduction, provide information — do it before the next one. Consistency here builds the trust that makes the rest of the conversation honest.
- **Reserve time monthly for career development.** Weekly one-on-ones tend to be absorbed by operational urgency. Put a monthly conversation explicitly about development on the calendar so it doesn't get crowded out.

Questions That Open Things Up

The questions a manager asks in a one-on-one shape what kind of information they receive. The best one-on-one questions are open, specific, and make it safe to say something the person might otherwise hold back:

- What's the most important thing you're working on right now, and how is it going?
- What's getting in your way?
- What's something you wish I knew that I might not?
- What's one thing I could do differently that would make your job easier?
- What are you learning? What do you want to learn more about?
- Where do you see yourself in two years, and how does this role serve that?
- Do you feel like your work is challenging enough? What would stretch you more?
- Are you enjoying the work? What do you find most and least energizing?

> **The question that matters most**
>
> Most managers ask 'How are things going?' and accept 'Fine' as an answer. The one-on-one only works if people feel safe enough to say something other than fine. That safety is built over time through how you respond to difficult things people do share. If the first time someone is honest with you about a problem, you react badly — even subtly — you will not hear difficult things again. A useful signal: if a report says 'Everything is fine' for multiple weeks in a row, that is the moment to probe further, not to accept it.

■ *Julie Zhuo — 'The Essential Questions That Have Powered This Top Silicon Valley Manager's Career' (First Round Review)*

Making Yourself Legible

One of the most effective things a manager can do early in a relationship is to give their direct report a guide to how they work. Not as a curated self-presentation, but as genuine transparency about the things that are hardest to learn about a manager from observation alone. The goal is to set clear expectations on how to collaborate without extra second-guessing — and to compress what would otherwise take months to learn by accident.

A good manager guide covers at minimum:

· **How you give feedback.** Do you prefer to address things in the moment or schedule a dedicated conversation? How direct are you, and what should someone do if they disagree with your feedback?

· **How you like to receive feedback.** What's the best way to tell you something you don't want to hear? How do you respond when you're surprised by criticism — and what should someone do if your reaction is discouraging them from being direct?

· **Your communication preferences.** When do you want to be looped in, and when do you want people to handle things independently? How urgent is email vs. a message vs. a meeting?

· **What you care about most.** What do you notice and reward? What frustrates you disproportionately?

· **Your failure modes.** Where do you tend to be wrong? What do you do under stress that others might misinterpret? What should someone do if they think you're making a mistake?

· **What the first months should look like.** What would make you confident a new working relationship is going well? What does success look like at 30, 60, 90 days?

The most valuable and most skipped section is the failure modes. It requires genuine vulnerability. But that vulnerability is precisely what builds psychological safety faster than anything else — because it models the thing you're asking for from others.

■ *Jay Desai — 'The Indispensable Document for the Modern Manager' (First Round Review)*

Meet People Where They Are

Not every one-on-one starts from the same place. A useful diagnostic before each conversation: where is this person right now? Someone dealing with job insecurity, health problems, or financial stress is not in a position to engage meaningfully with long-term career goals or stretch assignments. They need support and presence first. Trying to discuss personal development with someone who doesn't feel safe in their role is like trying to paint the walls while the ceiling is leaking.

Maslow's hierarchy — from basic needs through safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization — is a useful mental model here. Your engineers arrive somewhere on that hierarchy, and it shifts. Someone who was fully engaged last month may be dealing with something that has pulled them down several rungs. Ask yourself before each conversation: where is this person today, and what do they actually need from this meeting?

> **The question that locates the person**
>
> Before moving to agenda, ask something that surfaces real state: 'How are you doing — genuinely?' Then listen to the answer. If the answer suggests someone is under significant pressure from outside work, or anxious about something in the team or organization, address that first. The developmental conversation can wait. The relationship damage from ignoring it cannot.

■ *Dunya Kirkali — 'Make 1:1s Matter' (blog.incrementalforgetting.tech)*

Translate Strategy Into Meaning

One of the most overlooked functions of the one-on-one is translation: helping your direct reports understand not just what the organization is doing, but why. Strategy communicated without context produces compliance at best. Strategy communicated with genuine rationale — why this direction, why now, what it means for their work — produces engagement and accountability.

Use a portion of each one-on-one to share what you are hearing from leadership, what is changing, and what it means for the person in front of you. The clearer the 'why,' the more they can act autonomously within it — which is exactly what you want.

■ *Dunya Kirkali — 'Make 1:1s Matter' (blog.incrementalforgetting.tech)*

Chapter 09

Meetings, Communication, and Information Flow

How information moves — and how it stops

Communication is not something leaders do in addition to their work. It is the work. The information environment a leader creates — what gets shared, with whom, in what form, at what cadence — determines whether the people around them can make good decisions, act with confidence, and bring problems early.

Communication as Infrastructure

Every message a leader sends, every meeting they run, every question they ask or fail to ask is a communication. Silence is a communication. The leader who says nothing when a decision is being made has communicated something — and often not what they intended. Because you cannot prevent communication, the only question is whether to do it deliberately or by default.

Effective leaders layer their communication: the core message is simple enough to be repeated in a sentence; the next level adds context and rationale; the full detail is available for those who need it. And they consider the second-order audience — not just the people in the room, but the people those people will talk to next. A message that can be repeated accurately by others at high fidelity has far more reach than one that requires the original speaker to deliver it.

■ *Andrew Bosworth — 'Communication is The Job' (boz.com)*

The Meeting Audit

Before adding any new meeting, the right question is: what is the problem this meeting is supposed to solve? If the answer is 'we need to stay aligned' or 'we need to share updates,' there is almost certainly a better solution — asynchronous documentation, a shared dashboard, a brief written summary. The meetings worth protecting are those that can only happen synchronously: real-time problem-solving, decisions that require discussion of nuance, relationship-building that requires human interaction.

For the meetings that do survive the audit, one discipline determines whether they're productive: know what kind of meeting it is before it starts. A meeting to make a decision, a meeting to share information, and a meeting to generate ideas require different formats, different attendees, and different definitions of success. A meeting that drifts between all three usually accomplishes none of them.

■ *Peter Drucker — 'What Makes an Effective Executive' (Harvard Business Review, 2004)*

Information Flow Downward

Leaders systematically underestimate how much information their team needs to do good work. The practical result is that teams make decisions based on incomplete information, duplicate work already done elsewhere, and disengage when they feel they're operating blind.

- What organizational decisions have been made that affect this team's work, even if they weren't consulted?
- What are you hearing from senior leadership, from peers, from customers that your team would benefit from knowing?
- What context about why a decision was made would help your team implement it more effectively?

The Thread of Why

Explaining the 'why' is necessary but not sufficient. The why has to connect all the way back to the person receiving the message — otherwise it lands as noise. A CEO who announces the company is profitable for the first time in two years, and explains that this is why they cut costs and reduced headcount, has communicated the organizational why. What the team hears is different: 'You removed resources we depended on' and 'You fired my colleagues and left us understaffed.' The organizational why and the individual why are not the same thing.

The thread of why runs from the strategic rationale all the way down to what it means for the person in front of you. Profitability → advertising → leads → sales → lower unit cost → price competitiveness → growth → job security and advancement for the people on this team. That is the full thread. Leaders who give only the top of the thread — 'we hit our numbers' — and assume the team will fill in the rest are routinely surprised by the silence that follows.

> **Test your why against their perspective**
>
> Before communicating any significant decision or result, ask: how does this sound from where they're standing? 'We cut costs' and 'we reduced headcount' are neutral facts from the executive level. From the team's level they mean something specific and often uncomfortable. The message has to acknowledge that reality before it can move past it.

■ *Jocko Willink — 'Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual' (St. Martin's Press, 2023)*

Information Flow Upward

Most leaders have an information gap in the opposite direction: they don't know what they don't know, because bad news travels slowly upward in most organizations. Creating conditions where people bring problems early requires explicit effort.

The same principle applies in your relationship with your own manager. Your boss hates surprises — not because they're controlling, but because being caught flat-footed about something in their own organization makes them look out of touch. If something significant happens in your function and your manager hears about it from someone else first, trust erodes in both directions.

> **The no-surprise principle**
>
> Your goal is to eliminate the experience of being surprised by a problem your team has known about for weeks. This requires making it safe to bring bad news early, asking explicitly about problems, and responding to early warnings in ways that don't punish the messenger. Apply the same standard in reverse: your manager should never learn something important about your function from someone other than you.

When Communication Fails

When people aren't doing what you expect despite what you've communicated, the instinct is to blame the audience. Resist it. When there is a gap between what you intended and what people heard, the responsibility is yours. Sit down and ask questions from a place of genuine curiosity — what did they take away? Then correct the message for everyone, not just the person in front of you.

■ *Andrew Bosworth — 'Communication is The Job' (boz.com)*

Managing Up: A Reference

Managing up is the discipline of actively creating the conditions your manager needs to trust you, give you autonomy, and advocate for your work. It is a skill that applies at every level — and one that most people underinvest in until it becomes a problem.

15 Principles for Managing Up — Wes Kao

1 Embrace it You don't have to manage up — but your career will go further if you do.	**2 Punchline first** Lead with what matters. Assume your manager is switching tasks between meetings.
3 Show your thinking Explain rationale, risks, and first step — not just your conclusion.	**4 Flag issues early** Surface problems before they're red flags, with your read on severity.
5 Solutions, not complaints If you're raising a problem, bring at least a direction for solving it.	**6 Information hierarchy** Recommendation or question at the top; context below for those who need it.
7 Close the loop Say what you'll do → do it → tell them you're doing it → tell them you did it.	**8 Communicate better first** Before labeling it micromanagement, ask: am I giving them what they need to trust me?
9 Over-communicate The volume you think is too much is usually about right, especially remotely.	**10 Proactively assert** Don't just wait to be told. Propose the next action and what you're going to do.
11 Share your view Don't only ask questions. Bring a perspective, even if you hold it loosely.	**12 Anticipate questions** Think through what your manager will ask next — and answer those questions in advance.
13 Know when to exit If the relationship is genuinely broken and unrepirable, that's information too.	**14 Be explicit about needs** Don't hint. State directly what you need — feedback, a decision, air cover.
15 This never ends Managing up is not a phase. It is a permanent part of working in organizations.	

Source: Wes Kao — '15 Principles for Managing Up' (newsletter.weskao.com)

The biggest failure mode in managing up is assuming you understand what your manager's job actually involves. You see a small sliver of what they do. Each step up the management hierarchy brings different pressures — different stakeholders, different time horizons, different information they're holding that they can't share yet. Building context about what your manager actually faces is harder than it looks, and most people skip it.

A useful calibration: your area of responsibility is 100% of your time, but it may be 10% of your manager's time. They have other direct reports, are preparing for their own manager's meetings, are shielding the team from requests you never hear about, and are holding a dozen threads you haven't seen. The responsibility for managing upward belongs to the person with more bandwidth to focus on the relationship — which is you.

■ *Wes Kao — '15 Principles for Managing Up' (newsletter.weskao.com)*

The foundation of a productive upward relationship is explicit alignment on two questions that most pairs never ask directly: What does success look like for you personally in your role? And what does success look like for your manager's team? If you and your manager have different answers, every conversation about priorities will be slightly off. These aren't one-time questions

— as a company's goals shift, the answers shift too. They belong in regular one-on-ones, not just onboarding.

■ *Julie Zhuo — 'A Tactical Guide to Managing Up' (First Round Review)*

Understanding what signal your manager uses to trust your work is equally important. Is it peer validation? Metrics? Written updates? Identifying the mechanisms they rely on and meeting them there removes friction from nearly every other interaction. Communicate in the format and cadence they actually absorb, not the one that's easiest for you.

The Communication Loop

The most common managing-up failure is not dishonesty or incompetence — it is a gap in the loop. The four steps are: say what you're going to do; do it; tell your manager you're doing it; tell your manager you did it. The problem almost always occurs when one of the middle steps gets skipped. You may be doing the work — but if you don't close the loop, your manager has no way of knowing it's being handled.

A corollary: before every significant communication, think through the next two or three questions your manager is likely to ask, and answer them in advance. If you're sharing a problem, include your read on severity and your proposed response. If you're sharing progress, anticipate whether they'll want to know about risks or dependencies. A communication that pre-empts the follow-up questions signals judgment as much as the content does.

> **Over-communication is usually the right amount**
>
> Most people underestimate how much communication their manager needs. The level you think is too much — providing updates they didn't ask for, confirming things that seem obvious — is usually closer to the right amount, especially in distributed teams where silence reads as absence. If your manager is following up repeatedly to find out what's happening, the communication cadence needs to increase, not the work output.

■ *Wes Kao — '15 Principles for Managing Up' (newsletter.weskao.com)*

The dial that determines the right amount isn't fixed — it should move as trust is established on a specific task. Andy Grove's concept of task-relevant maturity is the useful frame: how closely someone should be monitored should be based not on general trust in the person, but on their track record with that specific task. A skilled leader who is doing something new for the first time may need closer monitoring than a junior person handling something they've done twenty times before. As performance on a given task improves, the intensity of monitoring should decrease correspondingly — for both directions of the relationship. Recognizing which task you're currently building a track record on, versus which ones you've already established it, tells you where more communication is warranted and where it's no longer necessary.

■ *Andy Grove — 'High Output Management' (1983), via Wes Kao's newsletter*

How to Structure What You Communicate

Most business communication is structured the way thinking happens: context, background, analysis — then the conclusion at the end. This is exactly the wrong order for busy readers. The Minto Pyramid Principle inverts it: answer first, supporting arguments beneath, evidence under each argument. Readers get what they need immediately and can stop at whatever level of detail is enough.

The practical entry point is the SCQA framework — a four-part structure for introducing any communication:

- **Situation** — the context everyone already agrees on. The current state of affairs, fact-based and unambiguous. Anyone on any side of an issue should be able to read this and agree it's a fair description. Keep it brief — it is not where the value is.
- **Complication** — what has changed, or what tension exists, that makes this communication necessary. The crisp statement of what's making things harder or different from the situation.
- **Question** — the specific question the complication raises. It almost always reduces to: what should we do? Stating it explicitly focuses the audience before you deliver the answer.
- **Answer** — your recommendation, conclusion, or key message. State it first. Support it with arguments. Support each argument with evidence. The answer must resolve the complication completely.

One detail that determines whether the supporting arguments actually land: keep each one discrete, and don't interleave topics. If two of your three arguments are about cost and one is about timeline, make all the cost points before moving to timeline — don't alternate between them. Mixed groupings force the reader to hold multiple threads at once, which defeats the purpose of the structure.

■ *Barbara Minto — 'The Pyramid Principle' (via Product Mindset newsletter)*

This is not a formatting tip — it is a career issue

People use the quality of your communication to judge what must be going on in your head. A manager with first-class intellect, work ethic, and judgment who communicates in a disorganized way gets silently moved from the high-potential bucket into the 'not sure they can handle it' bucket — and rarely knows it happened. Minto-izing a communication takes five extra minutes after you've practiced. The career cost of not doing it compounds invisibly over years.

What it looks like in practice

Consider a manager asked by a CEO: 'How's it going in your category?' A narrative response wanders through context, half-buries a concerning metric, floats some ideas, and ends without a clear ask. The CEO responds 'OK, thanks' — and silently revises their assessment of that manager. The same information, structured as SCQA, opens with situation (the category's importance to the business), states the complication directly (a metric that's down and what it costs if it continues), implies the question, and leads with three specific actions and the evidence behind each. Same facts. Completely different signal about the person who sent it.

Adapting SCQA to context

- **Collaborative environments:** Send SCQ and note that the A is being developed with stakeholders. Or stamp it 'draft' — invite input on the answer before it's finalized. The skeleton stays; the delivery adapts.
- **Short-form (Slack, hallway):** Stop at SCQ. Offer to share the A separately, or link to a document with the full argument. Don't try to compress a complex A into a message format that can't hold it.
- **Warmth and tone:** SCQA is a skeleton, not a script. Decorate the writing however the culture requires. What you cannot lose is the underlying architecture — answer first, arguments beneath, evidence supporting each argument. That structure is the gift to the reader.

■ *Barbara Minto — 'The Pyramid Principle' · Michael Dearing, Harrison Metal — 'Executive Communication' (Heavybit, heavybit.com/library/video/executive-communication)*

Chapter 10

Delegation and Accountability

How to give people real ownership

Delegation is one of the highest-leverage leadership tools and one of the most poorly executed. Done well, it develops people, frees the leader for higher-value work, and builds team capability. Done poorly, it creates confusion, abdication, and resentment.

What Delegation Actually Means

Delegation is not the same as task assignment. A task assignment tells someone what to do. Delegation gives someone ownership of an outcome, including the authority and discretion to determine how to achieve it. Accountability without authority is demoralizing and dysfunctional.

The Delegation Conversation

- **What is the outcome?** Not the task list — the result you need achieved. Be precise about what 'done' looks like.
- **What authority goes with it?** What decisions can they make independently? What requires consultation? What requires approval?
- **What are the constraints?** Budget, timeline, resources, relationships they need to navigate.
- **How will you stay informed?** Define the update cadence upfront, so they know when to loop you in and when not to.
- **What support is available?** Don't delegate and disappear.

The Spectrum: Absentee, Thought Partner, Micromanager

Every manager operates somewhere on a spectrum between two failure modes. At one end is the micromanager — over-involved in everything, unable to see one right way other than their own, telling people how to solve problems without real knowledge of the actual issues. At the other end is the absentee manager — so committed to not micromanaging that they effectively disappear, leaving people without the guidance, recognition, and support they need.

In the middle is thought partnership: the manager who is present enough to understand what each person needs, who empowers rather than controls, who enables rather than ignores. Most managers don't think they are at either extreme. But most have a direction they drift toward under pressure — and knowing which one is the first step to correcting it.

The absentee trap

One of the most common management mistakes is ignoring the people who are doing the best work because 'they don't need me' or 'I don't want to micromanage.' As Twitter CEO Dick Costolo put it: 'That's like saying, to have a good marriage, marry the right person and then avoid spending any time with them.' Every minute spent with a strong performer pays off in team results far more than equivalent time spent managing someone who is struggling. Ignore your top performers and you lose them — quietly, without warning, to a manager somewhere else who noticed them.

■ *Kim Scott — 'Why People Really Quit' (Medium) · Dick Costolo*

The micromanager failure is equally corrosive, but more visible: someone who delegates a task and then, within hours, is asking how it's going — offering their preferred approach, effectively taking the task back. The person being managed loses any sense of ownership, spends energy managing up rather than doing the work, and eventually leaves the manager even if they like the company. They leave the manager. Not the job. Not the organization. The manager.

■ *Kim Scott — 'Why People Really Quit' (Medium / Radical Candor)*

There is a mirror image of this failure worth naming: some of what gets labeled micromanagement by the person being managed is actually a response to insufficient communication. A manager who is following up repeatedly on status, asking for updates they were never given, or checking in on work they can't see is not necessarily controlling — they may simply lack the information they need to feel confident letting go. Before concluding that a manager is a micromanager, ask honestly: am I proactively giving them what they need to trust the work is happening?

■ *Wes Kao — '15 Principles for Managing Up' (newsletter.weskao.com)*

The trap leaders fall into: delegating the task but not the authority, then checking in so frequently that the person never truly owns anything. Or the opposite: delegating and disappearing, then being surprised when the outcome isn't what they expected.

Accountability is created through clear outcomes, defined check-in points, and consistent follow-through when things are off track. It is not created through surveillance. People who feel accountable for outcomes — rather than monitored on tasks — produce better results and develop faster.

Radical Delegation

The Eisenhower Matrix — urgent vs. important — is a useful early-career tool. Delegate the unimportant, delete the trivial, focus on the urgent and important. The problem at senior levels is that even after delegating and deleting everything below the line, what remains in the top half is still impossibly long. The conventional approach has hit its ceiling.

Radical Delegation goes further. Instead of starting with the bottom half and working up, it starts with the full set of important tasks and delegates most of those too — with a clear delegation contract. This leaves the leader with a small, genuinely irreplaceable set of work, while developing team members through meaningful stretch assignments. The spirit, as Charlie Munger described the Berkshire Hathaway system, is delegation just short of abdication.

The prerequisite is trust — in the team's judgment and in your own ability to set clear enough outcomes that the work doesn't need your constant involvement. Leaders who cannot reach this level of trust either haven't built it yet, or haven't done the work of setting sufficiently clear expectations. Both are solvable problems.

■ *Shreyas Doshi — 'Advanced time management principles' (x.com/shreyas)*

Chapter 11

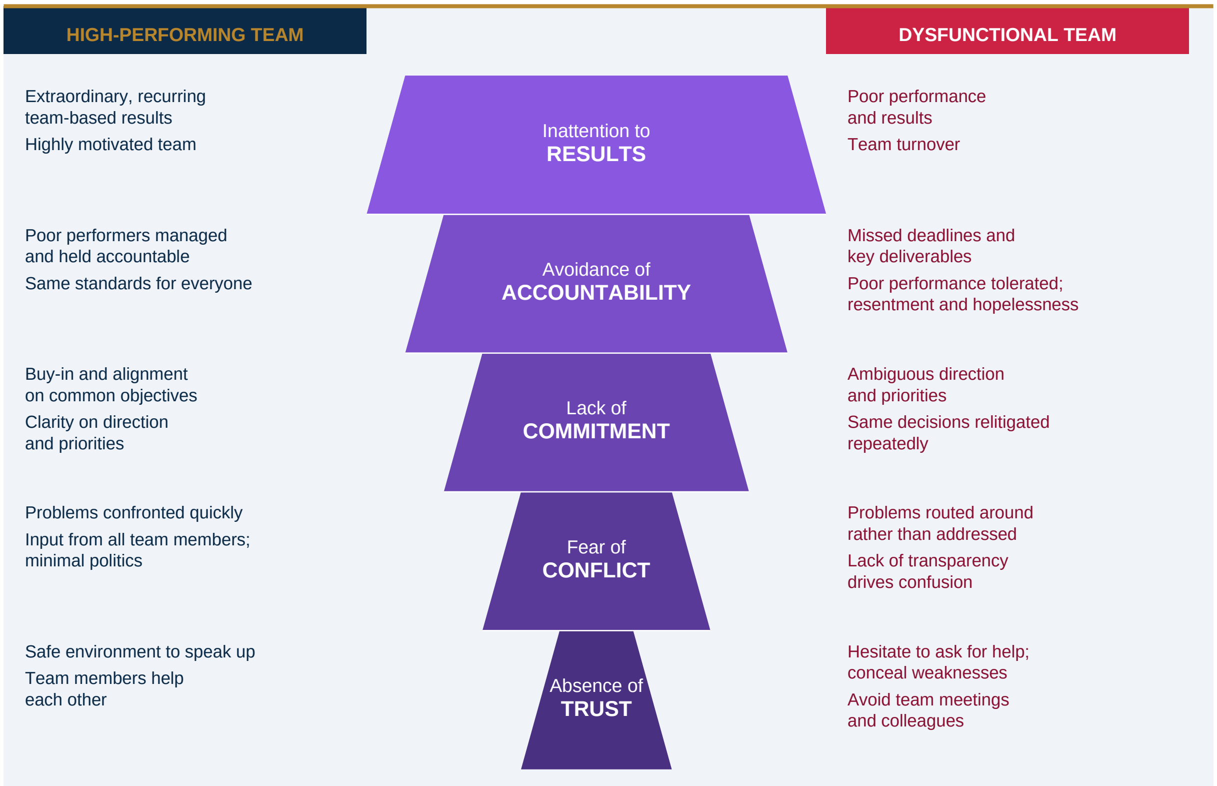
When the Team Is Broken

Diagnosing and addressing team dysfunction

Team dysfunction is rarely dramatic. It is usually quiet: the energy that used to be in meetings has disappeared, people are routing around each other, and the results have drifted in a direction nobody is quite willing to name. By the time it's obvious, it has usually been going on for months.

Common Patterns of Dysfunction

The patterns of team dysfunction are not independent — they form a causal chain. Patrick Lencioni's research identified five that build on each other from the bottom up: the presence of each dysfunction enables the next. Trust is the foundation; without it, genuine conflict is impossible. Without productive conflict, real commitment is impossible. Without commitment, accountability collapses. Without accountability, results suffer. Diagnosing which level is broken tells you where to intervene.



Source: Lencioni — 'The Five Dysfunctions of a Team' (2002)

■ *Patrick Lencioni — 'The Five Dysfunctions of a Team' (2002)*

Diagnosing Before Intervening

The temptation when a team is struggling is to act — to restructure, reset, or replace. These interventions can be right, but they're most useful when the root cause is clear. Spend time understanding what's actually happening before deciding what to change.

Talk to team members individually. Ask what's working, what isn't, and what they think needs to change. Pay attention to what they say, what they don't say, and whether different people's accounts are consistent. The pattern across those conversations tells you more than any one conversation does.

The leader's role in team dysfunction

In most cases of persistent team dysfunction, the leader has contributed to the problem — through unclear expectations, inconsistent follow-through, inadequate conflict resolution, or tolerating behavior that should have been addressed. Honest self-assessment is a prerequisite to effective intervention.

Rebuilding Trust

Diagnosis tells you where the break occurred. It doesn't repair it. Trust, once broken, doesn't return through a single conversation or a team-building exercise — it returns through the accumulation of small, consistent behaviors over time. The distinction worth holding onto: trust on a team isn't just believing a colleague will do what they said (predictable behavior). It's believing you can be honest about a mistake, a weakness, or a half-formed idea without it being used against you later. That second kind — vulnerability-based trust — is what Lencioni's pyramid is actually built on, and it's the harder one to rebuild.

■ *Patrick Lencioni — 'The Five Dysfunctions of a Team' (2002)*

Three actions rebuild trust reliably, though slowly:

· **Communicate, even without answers.** Trust breaks down fastest in the absence of information — people fill the silence with their own stories, usually worse than the truth. 'I don't know yet, but I'll tell you as soon as I do' is a trust-building statement. Silence is not.

· **Keep your word, visibly.** Every commitment kept rebuilds a small amount of trust; every commitment missed erodes far more than it should. Reference your own follow-through explicitly: 'Last week I said I'd update you once I knew more — here's what I know now.' The visibility of the pattern matters as much as the behavior itself.

· **Recommit to stated values under pressure.** Trust is usually damaged when a leader's actions diverged from stated values under stress. Rebuilding requires deliberately checking decisions against those values again — not as a slogan, but as an actual filter — until the team has enough evidence to believe it's not a one-time correction.

■ *Matt Mallory — 'Three Steps to Rebuilding Trust Within Your Team' (Fisher College of Business, Ohio State University)*

None of this is fast. Rebuilding trust that took months to break usually takes months to repair, and the leader should expect the team to test the new behavior against the old pattern before it believes the change is real.

Part IV

Leading Yourself

The most persistent leadership problems are not organizational. They are personal: the leader who can't make decisions, the leader who burns out, the leader who stops getting honest feedback because they've stopped being able to hear it. Self-leadership is not a soft topic. It is the foundation.

- Chapter 12 · Your Operating System
- Chapter 13 · Managing Your Time and Energy
- Chapter 14 · Staying Calibrated

Chapter 12

Your Operating System

Understanding how you actually work

Every leader has an operating system — a set of ingrained tendencies, default responses, and habitual patterns that determine how they show up under pressure. Most leaders don't know what theirs is. They discover it, in real time, when something goes wrong.

What Your Operating System Includes

- How you respond to conflict — do you move toward it, away from it, or against it?
- How you respond to uncertainty — do you decide quickly, defer, or gather more data?
- How you respond to criticism — do you take it in, defend against it, or shut down?
- How you respond to failure — your own, and others'.
- What triggers disproportionate reactions in you — and what those reactions look like to other people.
- Whether you are internally driven — motivated by the work and its impact — or primarily externally driven, seeking recognition and validation. This distinction matters because it predicts the decisions you'll make under pressure.

Making Yourself Legible to Your Team

One of the most effective and underused tools in a leader's kit is explicit disclosure: telling the people you work with how you actually operate. Not as a curated self-presentation, but as genuine transparency about your working style, what you care about, where you struggle, and what you need from others.

Done honestly, this serves two purposes. It accelerates psychological safety by modeling vulnerability first. And it gives the people around you information they need to work with you effectively, rather than spending months learning your failure modes the hard way.

Getting Accurate Data About Yourself

Most leaders have an incomplete picture of how they come across. The data they receive is filtered through people's reasonable desire not to upset the person who determines their salary and career. Getting accurate data requires active effort: structured 360 feedback, explicit requests for honest input, and enough psychological safety that people actually give it.

When you receive feedback that surprises you — especially if it's consistent across multiple sources — the appropriate response is curiosity, not defense. Surprise is information: it tells you there is a gap between your self-perception and how others experience you. Actively chasing feedback — seeking it out proactively, especially after high-stakes situations — signals that you mean it.

What defensiveness actually looks like

Most leaders believe they receive feedback well. Most are wrong. Defensiveness is rarely as obvious as an argument — it shows up in subtler forms that still shut down the flow of honest information:

- Arguing against the feedback or asking for proof of it.
- Explaining the context that makes the feedback unfair.
- Acting as though you were already aware of the issue.
- Providing your own feedback to the giver immediately afterward.
- Expressing visible discomfort, irritation, or disbelief.
- Complaining about the feedback to someone else later.
- Going quiet in a way that signals displeasure.

Each of these responses teaches the person giving feedback that the cost wasn't worth it. They will give you less next time, or couch it until it's useless. The only response that keeps the channel open is a genuine acknowledgment and, where relevant, follow-through.

Habits That Undermine Leaders

The operating system has failure modes beyond how you respond to feedback and conflict. Some leadership habits are so corrosive that they deserve explicit naming. These are the patterns that erode trust and credibility faster than almost anything else:

- **A zero-sum mindset.** Treating organizational resources, credit, and success as fixed pies where others' gains are your losses. Leaders with this mindset create competition where collaboration is needed.
- **A sense of entitlement.** The belief that your position grants you deference rather than responsibility. Entitlement makes leaders resistant to feedback and blind to how they affect others.

- **Being motivated by compliments.** When external validation drives your decisions, you optimize for looking good rather than being right. This is the external motivation problem from Ch01 made concrete.
- **Relationships with pure takers.** The people you spend time with shape your thinking. Advisors who only validate and never challenge accelerate the loss of calibration.
- **Pretending you know.** Performing certainty when you have none damages trust and models exactly the behavior you don't want from your team. The phrase 'I don't know — let's find out' is not a weakness; it's a signal of intellectual honesty.
- **Keeping grudges.** The inability to move past conflicts once they're resolved poisons working relationships and signals to everyone watching that it's dangerous to disagree with you.
- **Telling people how busy you are.** Communicates that they are an inconvenience. Whatever the intent, the message received is: you are not a priority.

There is a related mechanism worth naming: the hubris trap. Research on leadership effectiveness shows that when leaders are placed on a pedestal — treated as exceptional, paid dramatically more, celebrated disproportionately — the psychological distance this creates between them and their teams actually undermines their effectiveness. Team members become less willing to provide honest feedback, less motivated to contribute beyond the minimum, and more likely to let the 'great leader' carry the load. The praise itself damages the leader's calibration and the team's willingness to engage. The antidote is not false modesty — it is actively maintaining the connection between yourself and the people you lead, and treating their contributions as the actual source of results.

■ *Haslam, Alvesson & Reicher — 'Zombie Leadership' (The Leadership Quarterly, 2024)*

The Accidental Diminisher

There is a version of this that doesn't look like the list above at all — it's not entitlement or grudges, it's competence deployed in a way that quietly shrinks the people around you. Liz Wiseman's research distinguishes leaders on a single underlying assumption: Multipliers operate from the belief that people are smart and will figure it out. Diminishers, often without realizing it, operate from the belief that nothing gets solved unless they solve it. The second belief is common among leaders who were excellent individual contributors — the same competence trap from Chapter 1, showing up in daily interactions rather than in role definition.

The leaders who diminish teams most often aren't tyrants — they're capable, well-intentioned people who don't realize the effect they're having. A few recognizable patterns:

- **The Rescuer.** Jumping in to solve a problem the moment someone starts to struggle, before they've had the chance to work through it themselves. Feels like helping. Actually communicates: I don't think you can do this without me.

· **The Rapid Responder.** Answering questions so quickly and confidently that people stop bringing you half-formed thoughts — they only bring you things they're already certain about, which cuts you out of the moments where your input would matter most.

· **The Idea Fountain.** Generating so many ideas in a discussion that the team spends its energy chasing your latest thought rather than developing their own. The intent is usually enthusiasm, not control — the effect is the same.

Two low-effort diagnostics: what is your talk-to-listen ratio in a typical team meeting — closer to a monologue or a conversation? And when someone gives you an answer, is your instinct to accept it at face value or to ask a genuine follow-up question before responding? Leaders who default to the first answer in both cases are more likely to be diminishing without intending to.

■ *Liz Wiseman — 'Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter' (2010)*

Chapter 13

Managing Your Time and Energy

The resource allocation problem

Time management in leadership is fundamentally different from time management as an individual contributor. The problem is not how to be more efficient. It's how to be in the right places — making the right investments — given that there is always more to do than can be done.

Attention as the Actual Constraint

Leaders have time constraints, but their more fundamental constraint is attention — the cognitive and emotional capacity to be fully present and effective. A leader who is in back-to-back meetings all day is present for none of them in the way that produces real value. Managing energy and attention, not just calendar slots, is the actual work.

Where Leaders Should Invest Time

· One-on-ones with direct reports — real conversations about what's hard, what's unclear, and where people are developing. Not status updates.

· Strategic thinking — time with no agenda except to think about where the team is going and what it needs.

- Cross-functional relationships — investing before you need something from someone.
- Feedback and coaching — the highest-leverage investment in team development.
- Protecting time for your own thinking. If you do your best thinking in the morning, that time should be guarded. Most leaders give it away first because it feels selfish to protect it.

Snacking and Preening

At senior levels, you increasingly self-determine what you work on. This is a privilege that comes with a trap: without external accountability, it is easy to spend most of your time on work that feels productive but isn't. Two patterns are worth naming explicitly.

Snacking is doing easy, low-impact work. When you've run out of work that is both high-impact and easy, the choice is between hard and high-impact or easy and low-impact. Snacks are psychologically rewarding — they give a sense of accomplishment, they clear the inbox, they satisfy the productivity instinct. But they consume the time that should go to harder, more important work. Others could do them. Some of them would be genuine development opportunities for your team.

Preening is a seductive variant: low-impact work that is highly visible. Organizations that conflate visibility with impact inadvertently reward preening — the leader who is constantly presenting, writing internal posts, and appearing at the company all-hands can easily displace the leader who is actually doing the work that matters. If you find yourself drawn to work primarily because it will be recognized, that is a signal worth taking seriously.

■ *Will Larson — 'Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track' (2021) · Hunter Walk*

The Energy Management Problem

Leadership is emotionally demanding work. It involves holding other people's difficulties, navigating conflict and ambiguity, making decisions with incomplete information, and often being the calm presence in situations that are genuinely stressful. Leaders who don't actively manage their energy deteriorate — their judgment degrades, their patience shrinks, and they become less effective without realizing it.

> ### The sustainability question
> The pace at which you are currently operating — is it sustainable for a year? For three years? If not, what needs to change? This is not a question about work-life balance in the abstract. It's a practical question about whether your current approach to the job can be maintained long enough to actually lead well.

Emotional Fitness Is Preventive, Not Remedial

Most leaders wait until something has gone wrong — a relationship has damaged, a decision has been made in anger, a team has lost confidence in them — before they start thinking seriously about their emotional health. This is the equivalent of waiting until you're sick to start exercising. Emotional fitness, like physical fitness, is most valuable as an ongoing proactive practice rather than a reactive repair.

The traits that make emotional fitness observable in leaders are not the absence of difficulty — they are the capacity to navigate it well. Self-awareness: knowing what you're feeling and why. Empathy: genuinely understanding others' experience without being consumed by it. Curiosity about feedback instead of defensiveness. Resilience: recovering from setbacks without carrying them into the next interaction. And the ability to own your impact — to acknowledge how your behavior affects others, separate from your intentions.

The very traits that make leaders effective — the ability to work autonomously, push through exhaustion, not let criticism deter them — can become liabilities when unexamined. Leaders who invest in their emotional fitness don't just become better at managing themselves. Their teams become more resilient, their cultures become healthier, and the problems that compound silently under stressed leadership surface and get resolved instead.

■ *Dr. Emily Anhalt — 'Hit the Emotional Gym' (First Round Review)*

Not All Tasks Deserve Equal Effort

One of the most persistent time drains for leaders is the compulsive perfectionist instinct — treating every task as equally deserving of full effort. This is both exhausting and strategically wrong. A useful correction is to classify every task before working on it:

- **Leverage tasks** are the ones only you can do, where excellence has outsized impact — a key hiring decision, a strategic document, a critical conversation. These deserve your best work and your highest-energy time slots.
- **Neutral tasks** need to be done competently but don't benefit meaningfully from exceptional effort. Good enough is the right standard.
- **Overhead tasks** are necessary but low-value — administrative work, routine updates, housekeeping. The goal is minimum viable effort, or delegation. Some can be batched and processed during low-energy periods.

Labeling tasks before starting them — even mentally — forces intentionality about effort level. The failure mode the LNO framework prevents: spending the same high-focus energy on an overhead task that should take twenty minutes as on a leverage task that deserves two hours.

■ *Shreyas Doshi — 'Advanced time management principles' (x.com/shreyas)*

What Needs to Be Done, Not What You Want to Do

Before any prioritization framework, there's a prior question worth asking directly: are you working on what needs to be done, or on what you personally find interesting? Peter Drucker observed that effective executives ask 'What needs to be done?' — not 'What do I want to do?' — and then, critically, concentrate on no more than one or two of those things at a time. Most leaders can correctly identify several things that need doing. Far fewer can resist spreading their attention across all of them at once, which produces mediocre progress on everything rather than real progress on the two things that actually matter most this quarter.

A related discipline: focus on opportunities rather than problems. Problems are usually more urgent, more visible, and easier to justify spending time on — which is exactly why they crowd out opportunity-focused work. Solving a problem restores the previous state; pursuing an opportunity creates a new one. Both matter, but only one of them compounds.

■ *Peter Drucker — 'What Makes an Effective Executive' (Harvard Business Review, 2004)*

Your Calendar Is Telling You Something

A to-do list is a theory. A calendar is a commitment. The discipline of slotting tomorrow's tasks into actual calendar blocks — before the day begins — does two things. It forces honesty about how long tasks actually take (most leaders are optimistic by default). And it surfaces the real constraint: if you cannot fit your priority tasks into the available time, something has to come off the list, not get done badly.

Most leaders' calendars show how other people want them to spend their time. It does not have to be that way. Blocking time for deep work — and protecting those blocks with the same discipline applied to meetings — is a choice. The practical rhythm: plan the next day at the end of each workday; plan the next week on Friday. Going into the weekend with a clear list is not a small thing. It is the difference between genuine recovery and low-grade anxiety.

■ *Shreyas Doshi — 'Advanced time management principles' (x.com/shreyas)*

Make Time for Insight Work

The highest-leverage work a leader does is not operational — it is insight work: developing a genuine point of view on strategy, synthesizing what's being learned, writing the thing down clearly enough that others can act on it. This work is almost never urgent. It is almost always important. And it is systematically crowded out.

There is also a moral dimension to this. General James Mattis argued that it is unconscionable for a leader to get their education solely by experience, one mistake at a time — because the people who depend on their judgment pay for each mistake with real consequences. Learning from others who have faced the same problems is not self-improvement; it is a duty to the team.

■ *General James Mattis — paraphrased via Ryan Holiday, 'Leadership Principles' (ryanholiday.net)*

The crowding-out mechanism is not usually a lack of time. It is avoidance. Writing strategy is hard. Having a real point of view means being accountable to it. So leaders fill their calendars with operational tasks — necessary, concrete, satisfying to complete — and tell themselves they'll do the insight work when things calm down. Things do not calm down.

The practical solution is to treat insight work like a meeting: block it in the calendar, protect the block, and change environment on that day if possible. The brain associates places with task types — working from a coffee shop or a different space on a deep-work day signals that this time is different from the operational default. And like any skill, getting better at the job is itself a time investment that compounds — a workable heuristic is 10–20% of career time allocated to deliberate improvement, not passive consumption.

■ *Shreyas Doshi — 'Advanced time management principles' (x.com/shreyas)*

Chapter 14

Staying Calibrated

Maintaining accuracy about yourself and your context

One of the most insidious leadership failure modes is the gradual loss of calibration — the slow drift from accurate self-assessment and contextual awareness toward a distorted picture that is more comfortable but less useful. Leaders at the top of an organization are most vulnerable; so are leaders who have been very successful.

How Leaders Lose Calibration

- **Information gets filtered:** People stop telling leaders things they don't want to hear.
- **Confirmation bias accumulates:** Leaders seek out information that confirms existing beliefs.
- **Success creates overconfidence:** Past success makes leaders more certain about the correctness of their current approach.
- **The echo chamber closes:** Leaders stop hearing dissenting perspectives because dissenters have learned it's not worth it.

Staying Accurate

Staying calibrated is an active practice: seeking out people who will tell you the truth, including people outside your organization; asking specific questions ('What's the thing I'm most wrong about right now?'); treating surprising or uncomfortable feedback as valuable signal rather than noise to be dismissed.

Bob Moses, one of the most effective leaders of the civil rights movement, was described by a colleague as having a 'capacity for reflection and distance from the thing that you are very much in the midst of and even leading.' That phrase captures something precise: not detachment, but the ability to maintain perspective while fully engaged. George Washington described the same capacity as looking at events through the 'calm light of mild philosophy.' Both are describing the leader who can be present without being captured — who can act under pressure without being distorted by it.

■ *Ryan Holiday — '24 Leadership Principles' (ryanholiday.net) · Thomas Ricks, 'Waging a Good War'*

Calibration also means maintaining an accurate picture of your context: what is actually working, what isn't, where the organization is vulnerable, and what assumptions you're making that might be wrong. Leaders who lose contextual accuracy make decisions that seem internally consistent but are increasingly disconnected from reality.

Controlling the Temperature of the Room

Your emotional tone is not just personal — it is organizational infrastructure. If you signal fear, the room becomes fearful. If you signal contempt for a decision, that contempt spreads. The same information can be delivered in ways that produce panic, paralysis, or productive response. Leaders who understand this calibrate not just what they say but how they say it, intentionally rather than by default.

Confidentiality as Discipline

At higher levels of leadership, what you know — and who you share it with — becomes a significant responsibility. Information shared prematurely or to the wrong people can collapse deals, damage relationships, violate legal obligations, and undermine carefully coordinated communication plans.

Leaders who develop the habit of sharing sensitive information loosely — even with good intentions, even to build rapport — erode trust with the people above them. That trust is difficult to rebuild, and its absence limits the information they're given access to next time. Being a vault is not a passive state. It requires active judgment about what to share, with whom, and when.

Measuring the Right Things

Calibration also depends on what you measure. There are two fundamentally different kinds of metrics. Vanity metrics are surface-level — large, impressive numbers that are useful for comparing yourself to others or for communicating to the outside world. Clarity metrics are operational — they reveal the hidden gears that drive actual performance and tell you whether things are actually getting better or worse.

Leaders who rely primarily on vanity metrics lose calibration with reality. They know how they look but not how they're doing. The discipline is to identify the behavioral metrics — the leading indicators that actually predict outcomes — and to track those consistently, even when they're harder to measure and less flattering than the headline numbers.

■ *Lloyd Tabb — 'I'm Sorry, But Those Are Vanity Metrics' (First Round Review)*

The pre-mortem habit

Before making a significant decision, ask: 'Why might this not work?' Run through the specific ways the plan could fail. This is not pessimism — it's calibration. Imagining failure before it happens surfaces risks that enthusiasm would otherwise obscure, and produces better decisions than post-hoc analysis of what went wrong.

A related calibration problem: when someone keeps asking for more data, the issue is often not data. Measurement requests can be a proxy for trust deficits. If you provide metrics and the person remains unsatisfied and asks for a different set of metrics, push past the surface request. Ask what concern the metrics are meant to address. In most cases you'll find the underlying issue — and the actual conversation that needs to happen — is not about measurement at all.

■ *Will Larson — 'The Engineering Executive's Primer' (O'Reilly, 2024)*

Part V

Hard Moments

Leadership is tested not in the ordinary but in the difficult: when you have to deliver news that no one wants to hear, when conflict is damaging things, when the situation is genuinely uncertain and people are looking to you for steadiness you may not feel. These chapters are about those moments.

- Chapter 15 · Delivering Hard News
- Chapter 16 · Conflict, Politics, and Difficult People
- Chapter 17 · Leading Through Uncertainty and Crisis

Chapter 15

Delivering Hard News

How to say difficult things well

The ability to deliver hard news — clearly, compassionately, and without distorting the message to make it easier to deliver — is among the most important and underrated leadership skills. Most leaders are not good at it, because they optimize for their own discomfort rather than the recipient's need.

Engineering the Conversation Before It Happens

Most leaders walk into difficult conversations underprepared — not underprepared in what they want to say, but underprepared in their understanding of the other person. The conversation fails not because the message was wrong but because the messenger hadn't thought through what the recipient actually needs, what their pressures are, and what paths forward would be acceptable to both parties.

Before a hard conversation, ask yourself: Does this person feel like I've got their back? Do they understand why what I'm about to say matters, and why I'm the one saying it? What do they actually need from me — not what do I need to deliver? What would a reasonable path forward look like from their side of the table, and can I identify it before we sit down? Externalizing these questions — even briefly, in writing — helps you see the situation more concretely and reduces the chance that your own anxiety drives the conversation into a corner.

■ *Maggie Leung — 'These 13 Exercises Will Prepare You for Work's Toughest Situations' (First Round Review)*

The Clarity Imperative

The primary obligation when delivering hard news is clarity. The person receiving the news needs to understand what is happening, why, and what it means for them — with enough specificity to act on it. Leaders who soften difficult messages to the point of ambiguity do not make the conversation kinder. They make it more confusing, which extends the person's distress.

- Say the hard thing early. Don't bury it in preamble.
- Use direct language. 'We're eliminating this role' not 'We're making some organizational adjustments.'

- Explain the reasoning — not to justify the decision, but to give the person context they need.
- Be clear about what happens next — for them and for you.

Making Space for the Response

After delivering hard news, stop talking. Give the person time to process. Ask what questions they have. Listen fully to the response without becoming defensive or reflexively reassuring. People need time to absorb difficult information before they can engage productively with it.

Don't Incept What You're Trying to Prevent

A specific failure mode in hard conversations: naming the negative you're trying to avoid causes the person to think of it. When you open with 'I'm not saying this to discourage you,' the word 'discourage' lands before everything else. When a manager says 'I don't want you to feel attacked,' the recipient now feels attacked. The denial doesn't undo the frame — it reinforces it by making it concrete.

The practical rule: lead with what you want them to think or feel, not with the negative you're hoping to avoid. Instead of 'I'm not trying to undermine your confidence,' say what you actually mean: 'I'm sharing this because I think it'll make you more effective.' Instead of 'I don't want to seem like I'm piling on,' get to the substance directly. Caveats that reference the bad outcome you're trying to prevent tend to produce that outcome.

■ *Wes Kao — 'Avoid Incepting Negative Ideas' (newsletter.weskao.com)*

Chapter 16

Conflict, Politics, and Difficult People

Navigating what most leaders avoid

Conflict avoidance is one of the most expensive habits in leadership. The conflicts that don't get addressed don't disappear — they calcify, become harder to resolve, and exact ongoing costs in team performance and morale. The leader's job is to move toward difficulty, not around it.

Types of Conflict and How to Approach Them

Task conflict

Disagreement about the best way to solve a problem or achieve a goal. This is the most productive form of conflict and should be encouraged. The leader's role is to ensure it stays focused on the problem, not the people.

Relationship conflict

Interpersonal friction that interferes with collaboration. This needs to be addressed directly, not managed around. Most conflict happens because people don't feel heard — the first intervention is usually to listen carefully, summarize what each person said back to them, and let that defuse before trying to solve anything.

When two people are in conflict, there is almost always truth in each person's account. The manager's job is not to adjudicate — picking a winner usually increases tension and damages the relationship with both parties. The stronger intervention is to insist that each person grapple with the legitimacy of the other's perspective. Listen to one person's story, then challenge them to look past the specific words or actions that upset them and find the substance worth considering. Then do the same with the other person. Reconnect them directly once each has genuinely engaged with the other's view.

■ *Andrew Bosworth — 'Two Things Can Be True' (boz.com)*

Political conflict

Competition for resources, credit, or organizational influence. This is the most corrosive form and often the least visible. Leaders who don't engage with organizational politics don't avoid them — they simply lose them, while their teams pay the cost.

Engaging with organizational politics is not the same as being political in the pejorative sense. It means understanding the system you're operating in clearly enough to navigate it intentionally. Game theory provides a useful diagnostic: before any significant cross-functional effort, map the game you're in.

- **Who are the players?** List all parties with something to gain or lose from this situation — stakeholders, peers, leadership, adjacent teams. Include those who benefit from the status quo.
- **What are the rules?** Who can interact directly, and where do you need to work through intermediaries? Who has formal authority, and who has actual influence? What are the decision processes and their timelines?
- **What does each player value?** Not what they say they value — what actually moves them. Some are motivated by delivery timelines, some by visibility, some by protecting their team's capacity, some by relationships. Understand their drivers before you make your ask.

· **What resources are available?** What do you control that others need? What do others control that you need? Most organizational negotiation involves exchanging value, not just requesting it.

· **What are the possible outcomes?** Given each player's likely moves, what results are actually available? You can only attain what's achievable by the moves on the board — not what would exist in an ideal world.

The goal is not to win at others' expense but to find the equilibrium — the outcome where each party's interests are sufficiently served that the arrangement holds. That requires being transparent about what you have to offer, not just what you need. Leaders who are opaque about their own interests make it harder for others to find the mutually beneficial arrangement that exists.

■ *Esko Lehtme — 'How to get what's available: Game theory' (tsoon.com)*

Negotiating Through Disagreement

Much of a leader's conflict work is, underneath the surface, a negotiation — over a resource, a deadline, a decision, a scope. The Harvard Negotiation Project's core insight is the single most useful distinction in this territory: a position is the solution someone has already decided on; an interest is the underlying concern that led them to that solution. Two people can hold incompatible positions while having entirely compatible interests. Arguing at the level of positions produces a standoff. Working at the level of interests usually reveals a solution neither side had proposed.

· **Separate the person from the problem.** Address the substance directly, without treating a disagreement as a referendum on the other person's competence or character. This keeps the relationship intact regardless of the outcome.

· **Ask what's actually driving their position.** 'Help me understand why that timeline matters to you' surfaces the real constraint — which is often solvable in a way the stated position isn't.

· **Generate options before committing to one.** Separate the act of inventing possible solutions from the act of evaluating and choosing between them. Deciding too early collapses the option space before better ones surface.

· **Use objective criteria where they exist.** Market rate, prior precedent, an agreed-upon metric — anchoring to a standard both sides can point to is more durable than anchoring to whoever argues more forcefully.

Know your BATNA — your Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement — before the conversation starts. It's the answer to 'what happens if we don't reach agreement here?' A clear BATNA tells you the actual floor below which walking away is better than accepting, and strengthens your position even if you never mention it. Without one, it's easy to accept a worse outcome than necessary simply because any agreement feels better than an open conflict.

When the other party won't engage in good faith — makes personal attacks, refuses to move off a position, tries to pressure rather than reason — the instinct to counter-attack usually escalates things further. The more effective move is to deflect the attack back onto the problem: ask questions about what's driving their position, and keep steering the conversation back to interests and objective criteria rather than matching their tactics.

■ *Roger Fisher & William Ury — 'Getting to Yes' (Harvard Negotiation Project, 1981)*

Difficult People

Most 'difficult people' problems are one of three things: a role fit problem (this person is in the wrong job), a relationship problem (this person and their manager or a peer have unresolved conflict), or a clarity problem (this person doesn't understand what's expected of them). Diagnosis before intervention applies here as everywhere.

Driving Change Through Resistance

Leaders who want to drive meaningful change routinely encounter resistance that stops them before the change lands. Much of that resistance goes unaddressed not because the leader lacks the right idea, but because they don't know how to categorize and respond to what they're hearing.

Disagreement on outcome

The other person doesn't agree the problem exists, doesn't think it matters, or wants a different end state. No amount of refining the solution will address this — it requires going upstream: making the case for why the problem is real, quantifying what's at stake, and understanding what threshold would make this person consider it a problem worth acting on.

Disagreement on mechanism

The other person shares your goal but disagrees with your proposed approach. This is substantially more workable. Their objections are information — they may be seeing risks or constraints you haven't accounted for. The response is to engage with the specific objection: accept it, reject it with reasoning, or modify the proposal to incorporate it.

The diagnosis before the argument

Before defending your position, determine which kind of resistance you're facing. Arguing for your solution when the real disagreement is about whether the problem matters is wasted effort. 'Do we agree this is a problem worth solving?' often cuts weeks of circular debate.

Chapter 17

Leading Through Uncertainty and Crisis

When the map is wrong and the territory is shifting

Every leadership career will include periods of genuine uncertainty — when the situation is unclear, the right answer is unknown, and people are looking to you for steadiness that may feel at odds with what you're actually experiencing. How you show up in those moments defines your leadership more than how you show up when things are going well.

The uncertainty is rarely singular. A 2024 survey of 556 senior executives found that leaders are typically navigating several major strategic challenges at once — not sequentially, but concurrently. The ten most commonly reported:

Challenge	% of Senior Leaders Reporting
Changing Customer Expectations	33%
Transforming the Business Model	32%
Managing CEO / Leadership Transition	31%
Competition From New Entrants	29%
Shifting to a Hybrid World of Work	28%
Driving Accelerated Growth	25%
International Expansion	22%
Talent Acquisition, Retention & Dev.	21%
Market / Industry Disruption	19%
Post-Merger Integration	18%

Source: Molinaro (2024). Community of Leaders. N=556 U.S. senior executives and C-suite leaders.

■ *Vince Molinaro — 'Community of Leaders: What it Takes to Drive Strategy, Culture & Change' (2024) / Leadership Contract Inc.*

What People Need From You in Uncertainty

The impulse under pressure is to project confidence. This is often the wrong instinct. People can tolerate uncertainty better when they believe their leader has an accurate picture of the situation — even if that picture is incomplete. What they cannot tolerate well is discovering that the confidence they were shown was manufactured.

- Be honest about what you know and what you don't.
- Separate what is within your control from what isn't — and focus your team's energy on the former.
- Communicate more, not less, even when you don't have new information to share. Silence reads as bad news.
- Stay grounded. Your team is watching your emotional state, and it is contagious in both directions.

Decision-Making Under Uncertainty

In uncertain conditions, the goal is not to make the right decision — it's to make a good decision with the information available, while preserving the ability to correct course. This means: decide at the right level of urgency (neither too fast nor too slow), be explicit about what assumptions you're making, and build in review points where you'll revisit the decision as more information becomes available.

> **The leader's internal work**
>
> Leading through crisis requires managing your own emotional state — not suppressing it, but processing it in ways that don't destabilize the people around you. This often means having a small number of trusted advisors with whom you can be genuinely uncertain, so that the steadiness you project to your team is grounded in something real, not just performed.

When to Write Strategy

Most leaders treat strategy as something written annually or before a planning cycle. A better trigger: if you've had the same discussion three or four times without resolution, write the strategy. Repeated conversations about the same topic are almost always a sign that the underlying decision hasn't been made explicit — people keep relitigating it because no one has documented what was actually decided and why.

Good strategy is boring. This is a feature, not a failure. The purpose of a strategy document is to enable teams to make quick, confident decisions without escalating every choice — not to showcase the leader's most innovative thinking. If a strategy reads like a vision statement or an innovation manifesto, it won't work. If it reads like a set of clear constraints and priorities that someone could actually act on, it will. Write all your brilliant ideas in a separate document, delete it, and then write the strategy.

■ *Will Larson — 'Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track' (2021) · Camille Fournier*

Leading Large-Scale Change

When the uncertainty isn't situational but structural — when the organization itself needs to change significantly — the failure mode is almost always the same: moving to implementation before the conditions for change have been built. John Kotter's research on organizational transformation identified eight steps that distinguish changes that stick from changes that don't. The sequence is the point.

- **Establish urgency.** Identify the threat or opportunity clearly enough that people feel the cost of not changing. A compelling narrative that motivates action now, not eventually.
- **Build a guiding coalition.** A team of influential stakeholders with authority, expertise, and credibility to champion the effort. Change driven by one person rarely survives them.
- **Develop a vision and strategy.** A clear picture of what the change achieves and a credible path to get there. Without this, urgency becomes anxiety.
- **Communicate the vision.** Use every available channel. Ensure the message can be understood and repeated at every level — not just at the top.
- **Empower broad-based action.** Remove the obstacles: outdated processes, resistant individuals, structural constraints that block people from acting on the new direction.
- **Generate short-term wins, consolidate, and go deeper.** Achieve visible results early to build momentum. Then use that credibility to push for the deeper changes that early wins make possible. Don't declare victory before the work is embedded.
- **Anchor in culture.** Changes that aren't reflected in how people are hired, developed, and recognized don't last. The last step is making the new way the normal way.

■ *John Kotter — 'Leading Change' (Harvard Business Review Press)*

One of the most persistent errors in leadership is treating an organization as a machine — a system where inputs reliably produce predictable outputs, and where control is achievable with enough information and will. Organizations are not machines. They are complex adaptive systems: large numbers of elements interacting in nonlinear ways, exchanging information with their environment, self-organizing without central direction, and adapting continuously in response to conditions that keep changing.

The practical implication is fundamental: you cannot control a complex system. You can only influence the conditions within it. The brain, economies, ecologies, immune systems, and organizations all share this property — they are governed by feedback loops and emergent behavior, not by top-down command. Interventions that work in one context can fail or backfire in another, because the rules are always shifting. The only thing certain about complex systems is that they are unpredictable.

This reframes what crisis leadership actually requires. The goal is not to find the right answer and execute it — it's to shape conditions, run experiments, observe what emerges, and adapt. Leaders who succeed in genuinely uncertain environments are those who build adaptive capacity in their teams: the ability to sense and respond rather than predict and plan. That means high psychological safety (people surface problems early), distributed information (no single point of blindness), and short feedback loops (corrections happen before errors compound).

■ *Complex Adaptive Systems theory — Stacey, Holland et al.*

Appendix A

Leadership Biases

Cognitive biases affect every leader's decisions, including yours. The goal is not to eliminate them — that isn't possible — but to know which biases are most likely to affect you in which contexts, and to build processes that compensate for them.

Confirmation bias

Seeking and weighting information that confirms existing beliefs. Particularly dangerous when evaluating people (we see what we expect to see) and strategy (we dismiss evidence the current approach isn't working).

Attribution error

Explaining other people's failures as character flaws while explaining your own failures as situational. This distorts performance assessments and reduces empathy.

Sunk cost fallacy

Continuing to invest in a failing course of action because of what's already been spent. Particularly relevant to personnel decisions and strategic commitments made publicly.

Availability bias

Overweighting recent or memorable events. The most recent hire failure makes us overly cautious; the most recent team success makes us overconfident.

Overconfidence

Systematic overestimation of our own accuracy and predictive ability. Leaders are especially susceptible after periods of success.

In-group bias

Favoring people who are similar to us in background, style, or identity. In hiring and promotion, this produces homogeneous teams that miss perspectives their leaders lack.

Anchoring

Over-relying on the first piece of information encountered. In salary negotiations, performance reviews, and budget discussions, the first number stated shapes all subsequent judgments.

Halo / Horn effect

One positive or negative trait colors the entire evaluation. Happens in interviews, performance reviews, and ongoing assessment of team members.

Status quo bias

Preference for the current state, even when change would be beneficial. Leaders use this bias to justify inaction by describing it as stability.

Optimism bias

Underestimating the probability and impact of negative outcomes. Results in project timelines that are too short, budgets too lean, and risks underplanned-for.

Appendix B

Conversation Templates

These templates are not scripts. They are starting points — structures that have worked in the types of conversations that leaders most often handle poorly. Adapt them to your context and your voice.

The One-on-One Check-In

1. Start with the person's state, not the agenda: 'How are you doing — genuinely?' If they're dealing with something significant outside of work, or anxious about something in the team, address that first. The developmental conversation can wait.
2. Open yourself to their needs: 'What do you need from me right now? Is there anything I can do to help?'
3. Surface day-to-day reality: 'What's something frustrating you right now that I might not be aware of?' This is the Gemba question — what's actually happening at the real place where work happens.
4. Personal development: this is the most important section and the one most often crowded out. 'Where are you on the goals we set together? What would you like to work on next?'
5. Translate strategy: share what you're hearing from leadership and what it means for them. The clearer the 'why,' the more they can act autonomously within it.
6. Dynamic topics last: sensitive or complex topics go at the end, when the person is in the right headspace to engage with them. Not at the start, when they're still arriving.
7. Close by confirming anything you've committed to do, and by when.

The Career Development Conversation

1. 'Where do you want to be in two years? Three years?'
2. 'What do you want to learn while you're in this role?'
3. 'What aspects of your current work do you find most energizing? Most draining?'
4. 'What would a stretch assignment look like for you right now?'
5. 'How can I help you get where you want to go?'
6. Schedule this monthly — not annually.

The Coaching Conversation

1. When someone brings a problem, resist the urge to solve it first.
2. 'What do you see as the root cause?'
3. 'What options have you considered?'
4. 'What are the trade-offs of each?'
5. 'What's your instinct about the right path?'
6. 'What would you need to feel confident moving forward?'
7. Your role is to sharpen their thinking, not replace it.

The Performance Feedback Conversation

1. Open with observation, not judgment: 'I want to talk about something I've noticed. Over the last few weeks, [specific observation].'
2. Ask for their perspective before explaining yours: 'What's your read on this?'
3. Be clear about what needs to change: 'What I need to see is [specific behavior or outcome] by [timeframe].'
4. Ask what they need: 'What would help you get there? What support do you need from me?'
5. Confirm understanding: 'Can you tell me how you're thinking about this?'

The Termination Conversation

1. Get to the point: 'I want to be direct with you. We've decided to end your employment, effective [date].'
2. Give the reason briefly: 'As we've discussed, [clear, honest reason].'
3. Cover the practical details: severance, benefits, equipment, last day.
4. Give them space: 'I know this is a lot to take in. What questions do you have?'
5. Do not negotiate the decision. Listen with respect. End the meeting.

The Hard News Conversation

1. Frame what you're about to share: 'I have some difficult news I want to share with you directly.'
2. State the news clearly — avoid softening it to the point of ambiguity.
3. Explain the context and reasoning.
4. Be honest about what you know and don't know yet.
5. Give them room to respond: 'What questions do you have? What's your reaction to this?'
6. Discuss what happens next.

Addressing Conflict Between Team Members

1. Talk to each person separately first — understand each perspective before bringing them together.
2. In the joint conversation: establish that the goal is a path forward, not to relitigate the past.
3. Have each person articulate what they need — not what the other person did wrong.
4. Identify where those needs are compatible and where they conflict.
5. Establish specific agreements about working together going forward.
6. Check in after an agreed period to see if the agreements are holding.

De-escalating an Angry Team Member (Reflect and Diminish)

1. Do not tell them to calm down — that will make them angrier and close off the conversation before it starts.
2. Become an ally first. Reflect their frustration back at a slightly lower intensity: match their energy enough to show you understand, but diminish it so the room starts to de-escalate. 'You're right — that's completely unacceptable. How long has this been going on?'
3. Once the intensity drops, shift to solving: 'Here's what we're going to do about this. What do you need from me to get through the immediate problem?'
4. Separate the short-term fix (what happens right now) from the longer-term fix (what changes so this doesn't happen again).
5. If you have contributed to the situation, say so explicitly. Owning your part makes the other person more willing to own theirs.

Appendix C

Question Banks

Questions organized by purpose. Use them in reflection, in one-on-ones with a manager or mentor, in hiring, or in peer discussions. The most useful questions are often the ones that are hardest to answer.

Hiring

For interviewers — designed to reveal past behavior and judgment

- Among the people you've worked with, who do you most admire and why?
- What do you want to do differently in your next role?
- Tell me about a time you took unexpected initiative. Follow-up: Can you tell me about another?
- When was the last time you changed your mind about something important?
- Why shouldn't we hire you?
- What have I not asked you that I should have?
- For the last few companies you've been at: when you left, why did you leave? When you joined the next one, why did you choose it?
- Imagine yourself in three years. What do you hope will be different about you then compared to now?
- What's something outside of work you're irrationally passionate about?
- What would your previous manager say is the area you most need to grow in?

One-on-Ones

For weekly and monthly check-ins with direct reports

- What's the most important thing you're working on right now, and how is it going?
- What's getting in your way?
- What's something you wish I knew that I might not?
- What's one thing I could do differently that would make your job easier?
- Where are you on the development goals we set together?
- Are you enjoying the work? What's most and least energizing right now?
- Do you feel like you're being challenged enough? What would stretch you more?

- Is there anything unsaid between us that we should talk about?
- What would you do if you were in my position?
- How can I support you better?
- What's something frustrating you right now that I might not be aware of?
- What's getting in your way that I haven't removed yet?
- How can I help you?
- What do you think?
- Do you understand what I'm asking you to do — and does it make sense to you?
- How can I improve my communication with you?
- What's next for you?

Coaching

For helping people think through their own problems — ask, don't tell

- What do you see as the underlying root cause of the problem?
- What options, potential solutions, or courses of action are you considering?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
- What would the worst possible outcome be? What's the most likely outcome?
- What have you already tried?
- What is your initial inclination for the path you should take?
- Is there another solution that isn't immediately apparent?
- Is this an either/or choice, or is there something you're missing?
- What would happen if you did nothing at all?
- Is there anything you might be explaining away too quickly?
- How would you define success in this scenario — and how will you know?
- What would you do if you knew you could not fail?
- If you had to advise a friend facing the same decision, what would you tell them?
- How might you view this choice five years from now?
- How do you feel about the project thus far?
- What have you accomplished so far that you are most pleased with?
- How would you describe the way you want this project to turn out?
- Which of these objectives will be easiest to accomplish? Which will be most difficult?
- What key things need to happen to achieve the objective? What support do you need?

- What is a viable alternative?
- Can you more fully describe your concerns?
- How would you describe the current reality?
- What are a few options for improvement?
- What will you commit to do — and by when?
- What other options can we think of?
- What resources have we never used?
- What do we expect to happen if we do that?
- What is stopping us?
- How do you think we might find the answer?
- What's been the best part of your week so far?

■ *Michael Marquardt — 'Leading with Questions' · Marilee Goldberg, Mark Harper (ConocoPhillips), Ron Edmondson*

Career Development

For explicit conversations about growth and trajectory

- Where do you want to be in two years? In five?
- What do you want to learn while you're in this role?
- What aspects of your work do you find most energizing? Most draining?
- What would a stretch assignment look like for you right now?
- What skills do you want to develop that you're not currently using?
- Who do you most want to be like in 10 years, and what are they doing that you're not doing yet?
- Are you happy in this role? What would make it better?
- What do you appreciate most about this team that you've never told anyone?
- What changes could we make that would improve your work life?
- What would you do differently if you had my position?

Strategy and Problem-Solving

For thinking through direction, prioritization, and hard decisions

- What do we want to be true in a decade that is not true today?
- What is our current competitive advantage, and is it durable?
- What are the most pressing threats we will face over the next twelve months?
- What are we missing or forgetting?

- Where should we be placing our best energy?
- What would the most expansive way to state this problem be? What is the most pinpointed way?
- What have others done to solve this problem successfully?
- What do the people closest to this problem say about it?
- What metrics will we use to determine whether our intervention worked?
- How will we generate buy-in for the plan?
- What rule or assumption would you break just to see what new ideas emerge?
- What option might you be overlooking because it seems too unconventional?
- What matters most right now?
- What is one problem I can turn into an opportunity?
- What is our customers' greatest pain?
- How will I be more strategic?
- How can I make swift yet smart decisions?
- What leadership skill can — and should — I get better at?
- How will I recognize success?
- What is my biggest fear, and how will I face it?
- What can we learn from this?
- How can we do it better next time?

■ *Gayle Lantz (WorkMatters) · Ron Edmondson — via Michael Marquardt, 'Leading with Questions'*

Self-Assessment

For leaders reflecting on their own performance and blind spots

- What did you think this job was going to be, and how does it differ from what it actually is?
- In what situations do you still default to individual contributor mode? What's the cost of that?
- Who do you talk to honestly about how the job is going? If nobody, why not?
- What's the failure mode you're most worried about in yourself right now?
- What feedback have you received that you initially dismissed and later realized was accurate?
- What are you most defensive about? What does that defensiveness protect?
- What's the thing you're most likely to be wrong about in your current role?
- Who challenges your thinking in ways that have actually changed your mind?

- Is the pace at which you're currently operating sustainable for another year?
- What would you stop doing if you had to free up 20% of your time?
- Do people feel safe with me? How do I know — not from observation, but from what I've actively tested?
- Do I allow my team to make mistakes? How do they react when they do?
- Am I motivated by the work itself, or primarily by how it looks?
- What's something I believed about leadership two years ago that I now think was wrong?
- How can I improve? What are my shortcomings? How can I help one of my reports today?
- Am I spending more time with my struggling performers than my strongest ones? What is the cost of that imbalance?
- When did I last make a mistake that affected my team? Did I go back and acknowledge it specifically — not vaguely — and reconnect?
- Would my reports gladly work for me again? For each one: can I say with confidence that the answer is yes? If I have to ask, it's probably no.
- Why might my current approach not be working — even if it has worked before?
- How many of my team's successes have I celebrated recently, and was the recognition specific enough to be meaningful?

Conflict

For managing team conflicts — separating people from problems, finding common ground, and generating options both sides can accept

- How can we separate the people from the problem — diagnose the cause of the conflict without making it personal?
- What goals are actually in conflict here?
- What does each side want — and what do they need underneath that want?
- Do all sides have a clear understanding of the issues as the other side sees them?
- How can I encourage each side to view the conflict from the other side's perspective and to practice active listening?
- What are the common areas of interest between the two sides?
- What are the underlying issues — not just each side's stated position?
- How can each side get what it needs without requiring the other to lose?
- What are the issues that are genuinely incompatible between the two sides?
- What are the most important goals of each side — the ones they will not compromise on?

- How can we generate options that could solve the problem — options neither side has considered yet?
- What objective criteria will we use as a basis for our decisions, so the outcome isn't determined by who has more power?
- How can we disagree in an agreeable fashion — maintain the relationship while resolving the substance?

■ *William Ury — 'Getting to Yes' (Fisher, Ury & Patton) / 'Getting Past No'*

The Manager Event Loop

A daily/weekly/monthly cadence of questions across four domains — use as a structured self-check rhythm

People

- **Daily:** Do I need to check in on someone? Any recruiting decisions needed quickly?
- **Weekly:** Did I promise someone a follow-up last week? Do I have a 1-on-1 scheduled with everyone?
- **Monthly:** Is everyone aware of the expectations for next month? How is team morale on average?

Project

- **Daily:** Are all projects/epics on track? Are any tickets blocked because of me?
- **Weekly:** Do I need to update anyone on project status?
- **Monthly:** Any projects on the back burner that should be picked up? Do all projects still make sense, or is sunk cost keeping something alive?

Process

- **Daily:** Anything that needs to be discussed at stand-up? Have I written my goals for tomorrow?
- **Weekly:** Are the tickets groomed for next week? Any action items from the retro assigned to me?
- **Monthly:** Is the process too bloated — can we automate something? What could we do differently? What's working well that we should do more of?

Me

- **Daily:** Am I prepared for my meetings — can any be cancelled? How am I feeling on a scale of 1–10? Am I delegating enough?
- **Weekly:** How was my progress this week? Did I carve out time to learn something new?

- **Monthly:** Am I living up to my expectations? How can I create more flow at work? Am I available enough for my team?

Measuring Yourself as a Manager

Google's manager feedback survey — the 13 questions employees answer about their manager, based directly on the Project Oxygen behaviors

- My manager gives me actionable feedback that helps me improve my performance.
- My manager does not micromanage (get involved in details that should be handled at other levels).
- My manager shows consideration for me as a person.
- The actions of my manager show that he/she values the perspective I bring to the team, even if it is different from his/her own.
- My manager keeps the team focused on our priority results and deliverables.
- My manager regularly shares relevant information from his/her manager and senior leaders.
- My manager has had a meaningful discussion with me about career development in the past six months.
- My manager communicates clear goals for our team.
- My manager has the technical expertise required to effectively manage me.
- I would recommend my manager to other team members.
- I am satisfied with my manager's overall performance as a manager.
- **Open:** What would you recommend your manager keep doing?
- **Open:** What would you have your manager change?

■ *Google Project Oxygen — manager feedback survey instrument*

Appendix D

Source Library & Online Resources

The ideas in this handbook are grounded in research and practitioner experience accumulated over decades. What follows is an annotated reading list and online resource index — not a bibliography, but a guide to going deeper. Every online source that informed handbook content is logged here per the standing rule.

On Leadership Fundamentals

The Manager's Path — Camille Fournier

The clearest practical progression through technical leadership levels. Especially strong on the transition from individual contributor.

High Output Management — Andy Grove

Grove's framework for managerial leverage remains the most useful operational model for how leaders create output through others.

An Elegant Puzzle — Will Larson

Systems-level thinking about engineering leadership, useful well beyond its technical context.

The Making of a Manager — Julie Zhuo

An honest account of what it's actually like to step into leadership for the first time.

Zombie Leadership: Dead Ideas That Still Walk Among Us — Haslam, Alvesson & Reicher (The Leadership Quarterly, 2024)

Peer-reviewed paper identifying eight debunked-but-persistent beliefs about leadership: that it resides in the individual, that great leaders have special qualities, that leadership skills transfer across contexts. Core correction: leadership is a relationship, not a property. The proof of leadership is what followers do. Power through people, not over them. Informed Ch01, Ch02, Ch12. Open access: doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2023.101770

Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual (Expanded Edition) — Jocko Willink (St. Martin's Press, 2023)

Practitioner field manual drawn from SEAL leadership experience. Key additions: imposter syndrome reframe (feeling unready produces humility and preparation; arrogance destroys teams); thread of why (the why must connect all the way to the individual, not just the organization); Extreme Ownership feedback framing (own your part before critiquing theirs); Reflect and Diminish de-escalation; trusted agents at multiple levels as antidote to leadership isolation. Informed Ch01, Ch05, Ch09, App B.

Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track — Will Larson (2021)

Career guide for senior individual contributors. Key additions: safety net disappears at senior levels (you now set the organization up for success, not the reverse); to lead you have to follow (effective leaders spend more time following; leading through resignation vs. genuine alignment); learn to never be wrong (shift from winning arguments to reaching understanding; three disciplines: listen through questions, define the purpose, read the room); from essential to adjacent (create space for others; sponsor over mentor); snacking and preening (named failure modes for low-impact and high-visibility work at senior levels); good strategy is boring (write it when the same discussion recurs 3-4 times). Informed Ch01, Ch02, Ch05, Ch13, Ch17.

The Engineering Executive's Primer — Will Larson (O'Reilly, 2024 — Early Release, Ch6-7)

Executive-level guide. Two additions: (1) values framework — stated values consolidate change already in motion, not start it; test values for reversibility (viable opposite), applicability (guides real decisions), and honesty (reflects actual behavior today). (2) Measurement requests as trust proxies — repeated demands for different metrics often indicate a trust deficit, not a data gap. Informed Ch07, Ch14.

On People and Teams

Work Rules! — Laszlo Bock

A rigorous, evidence-based look at what actually predicts performance in hiring, development, and management. Includes the Project Oxygen research.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team — Patrick Lencioni

A practitioner's model of team dysfunction that is widely used for a reason — the underlying framework is sound.

Radical Candor — Kim Scott

A useful framework for feedback and the relationship between caring about people and being honest with them.

Thinking in Bets — Annie Duke

On decision quality under uncertainty — essential for leaders who need to make decisions with incomplete information.

On Communication and Influence

The Pyramid Principle — Barbara Minto

The foundational McKinsey framework for executive communication: start with the answer, group supporting arguments beneath it, order evidence under each argument. The SCQA structure (Situation, Complication, Question, Answer) provides the entry point for any communication. Informed Ch09.

Leading with Questions — Michael Marquardt

A thorough treatment of questioning as a leadership discipline — how to use questions to coach, problem-solve, and develop others.

A More Beautiful Question — Warren Berger

On the power of inquiry in organizations, with particular strength on the failure modes of problem-focused leadership.

Humble Inquiry — Edgar Schein

A short, incisive argument for why asking is more effective than telling in most leadership situations, and what gets in the way.

On Self-Leadership and Judgment

Thinking, Fast and Slow — Daniel Kahneman

The foundational text on cognitive bias and judgment. Dense but essential — read at least the first half.

The Checklist Manifesto — Atul Gawande

Why expertise is not enough to prevent predictable failures, and what systems thinking can do about it.

Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me) — Carol Tavris & Elliot Aronson

The definitive account of self-justification and how intelligent people convince themselves they were right when they weren't.

Leadership and Self-Deception — The Arbinger Institute

An exploration of self-deception in leadership — more practically useful than the narrative format suggests.

On Hard Moments

Getting to Yes — Roger Fisher, William Ury & Bruce Patton

The foundational text on principled negotiation: separate people from problems, focus on interests not positions, generate options for mutual gain, use objective criteria. Ury's 13 conflict questions in Appendix C are drawn from this framework. Informed App C, Ch16.

Crucial Conversations — Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler

A practical framework for having high-stakes conversations without either avoiding the difficulty or creating unnecessary conflict.

Difficult Conversations — Stone, Patton, Heen

The Harvard Negotiation Project's framework for understanding what difficult conversations are really about.

Team of Teams — General Stanley McChrystal

On leading distributed, adaptive organizations in genuinely chaotic conditions — applies well beyond its military context.

Leading Change — John Kotter

The eight-step model for organizational transformation: urgency, coalition, vision, communication, empowerment, short-term wins, consolidation, cultural anchoring. The sequence is as important as the steps. Informed Ch17.

On Leadership Fundamentals (additional)

When They Win, You Win — Russ Laraway

The manager's job distilled to two things: deliver an aligned result, and enable the success of the people on your team. Data-backed case against charisma as a leadership quality; for the Big Three of direction, coaching, and career. Informed Ch01.

Online Resources

The following articles and essays were drawn on in developing handbook content. They are worth reading in full.

How To Be Successful — Sam Altman

blog.samaltman.com/how-to-be-successful

Thirteen principles on building an outlier career: self-belief balanced with self-awareness, internal vs. external motivation, compounding leverage, and the value of long-term thinking. Informed Ch01, Ch12, Ch14.

Communication is The Job — Andrew Bosworth (Meta CTO)

boz.com/articles/communication-is-the-job

Eight principles for leaders on communication as an unavoidable and primary responsibility: layering messages, considering second-order audiences, communicating defensively, and debugging miscommunication. Informed Ch09.

Being Strategic — Improving Executive Presence — Joseph Gefroh

blog.jgefroh.com/p/being-strategic-improving-executive

Executive presence as a learnable discipline: owning outcomes without blame-shifting, emotion regulation, receiving feedback without defensiveness, controlling room temperature, confidentiality. Informed Ch01, Ch12, Ch14.

How to Drive Meaningful Change — Handling Objections — Joseph Gefroh

blog.jgefroh.com/p/how-to-drive-meaningful-change-handling

A taxonomy of resistance to proposals — disagreement on outcome vs. disagreement on mechanism — with specific approaches for each type. Informed Ch16.

Subtle Behaviors That Disqualify You From Leadership — Joseph Gefroh

blog.jgefroh.com/p/subtle-behaviors-that-disqualify

Small, often-invisible behaviors that erode leadership credibility: demanding authority before demonstrating influence, local optimization, failing to keep managers informed, conviction calibration. Informed Ch01, Ch02, Ch09.

The 25 Micro-Habits of High-Impact Managers — First Round Review

review.firstround.com/the-25-micro-habits-of-high-impact-managers

Tactical practices from across the First Round community on the small things great managers do: ownership delegation, vulnerability, thought partnership, empathy, specific recognition, career development. Informed Ch04, Ch05, Ch07, Ch08.

40 Favorite Interview Questions from Some of the Sharpest Folks We Know — First Round Review

review.firstround.com/40-favorite-interview-questions

Forty interviewer-recommended questions with explanations for why each works — organized by what each is designed to surface. Informed Ch03, Appendix C.

I Asked 100 Founders, CEOs and VCs About Career Transitions — First Round Review (Sasha Orloff)

review.firstround.com/i-asked-100-founders-ceos-and-vcs-about-career-transitions

On the divergence between founder and CEO roles as companies mature, and the broader principle that people and organizations scale at different rates — what the role needs may fundamentally change over time. Informed Ch01.

Notion Leadership Resource Collection — Various (compiled)

app.notion.com/p/ratip/How-to-be-the-Perfect-Manager-7538cce98b604e5eb85a73e3d3b767cc

A curated collection including Google Project Oxygen research, manager effectiveness survey questions, 1-on-1 question frameworks, Kotter's change model, and book summaries on questioning and inquiry. Informed Ch05, Ch07, Ch08, Appendix B, Appendix C.

The Management Skill Nobody Talks About (Repair) — Terrible Software

terriblesoftware.org/2025/08/22/the-management-skill-nobody-talks-about

The skill of repair: going back after a management mistake, owning it specifically (not vaguely), and reconnecting. Four steps: be specific, don't make it about you, actually change the behavior, give it time. Informed Ch05.

Two Things Can Be True — Andrew Bosworth (Meta CTO)

boz.com/articles/two-things

On mediating interpersonal conflict: both parties usually have legitimate grievances. The strongest intervention is to steel-man each person's perspective to the other — listen, find the substance worth considering, flip the script, reconnect. Informed Ch16.

6 Counterintuitive Rules for Being a Better Manager — First Round Review (Molly Graham)

review.firstround.com/6-counterintuitive-rules-for-being-a-better-manager

Management is not leadership — they are distinct skills. The job of a manager: are the people around you growing? Spend more time with high performers, not just struggling ones. Management by walking out of the room. Give away your job every few months. Informed Ch01, Ch05.

35 Impactful Questions Managers Should Ask Themselves Regularly — First Round Review

review.firstround.com/35-impactful-questions-managers-should-ask-themselves-regularly

Community-sourced self-reflection questions for managers: team morale, cross-functional relationships, self-assessment. Pre-mortem framing: 'Why might this not work?' Informed Appendix C.

I'm Sorry, But Those Are Vanity Metrics — First Round Review (Lloyd Tabb, Looker)

review.firstround.com/im-sorry-but-those-are-vanity-metrics

Vanity metrics (surface-level, for external comparison) vs. clarity metrics (operational, behavioral, predictive). Track behavior over time, not headline numbers. Informed Ch14.

23 Tools to Make Feedback Meaningful — First Round Review (Phin Barnes)

review.firstround.com/23-tools-to-make-feedback-meaningful

Feedback is help, not a verdict. Establish a baseline of belief first — remind people why they were hired. Separate the person from the work. Best idea wins culture. Don't use a shotgun on a mosquito. Informed Ch05.

The Essential Questions That Have Powered This Top Silicon Valley Manager's Career — First Round Review (Julie Zhuo)

review.firstround.com/the-essential-questions-that-have-powered-this-top-silicon-valley-managers-career

Questions as a manager's best tool. Litmus test: if a report says 'Everything is fine' for multiple weeks, probe further. 'Would my reports gladly work for me again?' Informed Ch08, Appendix C.

The Indispensable Document for the Modern Manager — First Round Review (Jay Desai)

review.firstround.com/the-indispensable-document-for-the-modern-manager

The manager user guide / readme: a written document on how you operate, covering feedback preferences, communication style, what you care about, failure modes, and what the first months should look like. The goal is to set blindingly clear expectations without extra second-guessing. Informed Ch08, Ch12.

Fight Like You're Right, Listen Like You're Wrong — First Round Review (Bob Sutton, Stanford)

review.firstround.com/fight-like-youre-right-listen-like-youre-wrong

The magnification effect: leaders get ~50% of blame/credit for outcomes they're responsible for ~15% of. Power poisoning: three things happen reliably when people hold authority. Be perfectly assertive — know when to push and when to back off. Informed Ch02.

A Tactical Guide to Managing Up: 30 Tips — First Round Review

review.firstround.com/a-tactical-guide-to-managing-up-30-tips

Managing up as a two-way relationship. Two alignment questions: what is success for you personally, and what is success for your manager's team? Communicate in the format and cadence your manager actually absorbs. Informed Ch09.

Hit the Emotional Gym — The Founder's Framework for Emotional Fitness — First Round Review (Dr. Emily Anhalt)

review.firstround.com/hit-the-emotional-gym-the-founders-framework-for-emotional-fitness

Seven traits of emotional fitness: self-awareness, empathy, mindfulness, curiosity, resilience, owning your impact, capacity to play. Emotional fitness is proactive, not remedial — like physical fitness, most valuable as an ongoing practice, not a crisis response. Informed Ch13.

How to Become Insanely Well-Connected — First Round Review (Chris Fralic)

review.firstround.com/how-to-become-insanely-well-connected

Seven rules for building lasting professional relationships: convey genuine appreciation, listen with intent, use humility markers, offer unvarnished honesty, end every meeting on a high note. Imparting energy matters more than sharing information. Informed Ch02.

These 13 Exercises Will Prepare You for Work's Toughest Situations — First Round Review (Maggie Leung)

review.firstround.com/these-13-exercises-will-prepare-you-for-works-toughest-situations

Dynamic empathy: quickly understanding what someone needs and acting on it. Question sets for internally preparing for hard conversations before they happen — performance discussions, managing up, cross-functional work, conflict. Informed Ch15.

Project Oxygen: An Inside Look at What Makes a Good Manager — BetterUp / Madeline Miles

betterup.com/blog/project-oxygen

Detailed breakdown of Google Project Oxygen: the study launched to prove managers don't matter that proved the opposite. Key insight: technical skill ranks last; coaching ranks first. Case for dual-track promotion paths and feedback culture as a manager responsibility. Informed Ch01, Ch07.

Stop Overcomplicating It: The Simple Guidebook to Upping Your Management Game — First Round Review (Russ Laraway)

review.firstround.com/stop-overcomplicating-it-the-simple-guidebook-to-upping-your-management-game

The manager's job is two things: deliver an aligned result, enable the success of the people on your team. The broken system of promoting best ICs. Charisma vs. brush-and-floss managers. The Big Three: direction, coaching, career. Informed Ch01.

2023 Global Culture Study — O.C. Tanner Institute

octanner.com/global-culture-report

Quantified impact of specific leader behaviors on employees' sense of community. Connecting work purpose to personal values: +194%. Communicating what success looks like: +133%. Introducing to mentors: +122%. Informed Ch07.

Advanced Time Management Principles (for senior PMs & leaders) — Shreyas Doshi

x.com/shreyas/status/1492345140492472321

Nine principles for leaders whose scope has outgrown brute-force approaches: LNO framework (Leverage/Neutral/Overhead task classification), calendar as commitment over to-do list, Proof of Worth task trap, Radical Delegation, making time for insight work, Opportunity Cost vs. ROI thinking, 10-20% career time for skill development. Informed Ch01, Ch10, Ch13.

Executive Communication w/ Harrison Metal — Michael Dearing (Harrison Metal) — Heavybit Speaker Series

heavybit.com/library/video/executive-communication

Video presentation on the Minto Pyramid Principle and SCQA framework as tools for structuring executive communication: answer first, supporting arguments beneath, evidence below that. No public transcript available; content sourced from Minto's original framework. Informed Ch09.

Make 1:1s Matter — Dunya Kirkali (Incremental Forgetting)

blog.incrementalforgetting.tech/p/make-11s-matter

Practical 1-on-1 framework: Maslow hierarchy as a diagnostic for meeting people where they are (don't discuss growth when safety needs are unmet); Gemba mindset (surface real day-to-day friction); structured agenda sequence (state first, Gemba, development, translation, dynamic topics last). Informed Ch08, App B, App C.

How to get what's available: Game theory — Esko Lehtme (tsoon.com)

tsoon.com/posts/game-theory

Game theory applied to organizational politics: five-question diagnostic (players, rules, motivations, resources, outcomes) for navigating cross-functional situations. Nash equilibrium as the goal — finding outcomes where all parties' interests are served without threatening others. Informed Ch16.

Why People Really Quit — And How Great Managers Make Them Want to Stay — Kim Scott (Radical Candor / Medium)

kimmalonescott.medium.com/why-people-really-quit

Three-position management spectrum: absentee (choose and ignore), thought partner (empower and enable), micromanager (control and surveil). Dick Costolo marriage metaphor for absentee management. Every minute with a strong performer pays off more than equivalent time managing someone struggling. Informed Ch10.

24 Leadership Principles From The Greatest Business, Military, Political and Sports Leaders — Ryan Holiday (ryanholiday.net)

ryanholiday.net/24-leadership-principles-from-the-greatest-business-military-political-and-sports-leaders

24 historically-grounded principles drawn from military, business, and civic leaders. Key additions: Mattis moral argument for deliberate learning (Ch13); Bob Moses 'capacity for reflection and distance' / Washington 'calm light of mild philosophy' (Ch14); Watson $10M teachable moment (Ch05); General Dan Caine — approximately two direct orders in 33-year career (Ch02); Marcus Aurelius / Cassius Dio — your standards are for you, meet others where they are (Ch05). Informed Ch02, Ch05, Ch13, Ch14.

15 Principles for Managing Up — Wes Kao (newsletter.weskao.com)

newsletter.weskao.com/p/15-principles-for-managing-up

Managing up as a skill — not optional but career-defining. Key additions: the 10% asymmetry (your area is 100% of your time, 10% of your manager's); the 4-step communication loop (say / do / tell them you're doing it / tell them you did it); anticipate the next 2-3 questions and answer them in advance; over-communication is usually the right amount; micromanagement reframe (some 'micromanagement' is a response to insufficient communication from the person being managed). Informed Ch09, Ch10.

Are Your Standards Too Low? In Defense of Raising the Bar — Wes Kao (newsletter.weskao.com)

newsletter.weskao.com/p/raise-the-bar

Your standards are the maximum of what your team will deliver — not the minimum. Most people believe they already have high standards, which is the primary obstacle to raising them. Named excuses: 'it's good enough' (usually before it is), 'speed/quality tradeoff' (usually before the threshold), 'diminishing returns' (usually before returns actually diminish). Team must hold standards when no one is watching. Informed Ch07.

Strategy, Not Self-Expression: How to Decide What to Say When Giving Feedback — Wes Kao (newsletter.weskao.com)

newsletter.weskao.com/p/strategy-not-self-expression

A feedback conversation is a sales conversation — its purpose is behavior change, not catharsis. Self-expression (venting, having the last word, wanting remorse) is everything that doesn't serve that goal. Strategy is ~10% of what you initially want to say. Process emotion before entering the room; ask the recipient to reflect back what they heard. Informed Ch05.

Avoid Incepting Negative Ideas — Wes Kao (newsletter.weskao.com)

newsletter.weskao.com/p/avoid-incepting-negative-ideas

Naming a negative frame — even to deny it — makes the audience think of it. 'I'm not saying this to discourage you' plants discouragement. Lead with what you want people to think or feel; don't open by referencing the bad outcome you're trying to avoid. Practical reframes for feedback conversations, hard-news delivery, and customer communication. Informed Ch15.

Rigorous Thinking: No Lazy Thinking — Wes Kao (newsletter.weskao.com)

newsletter.weskao.com/p/rigorous-thinking

Rigorous thinking = stress-testing ideas before bringing them; being able to defend upside, downside, and mitigation. Lazy thinking = making assumptions you don't know are assumptions; treating the hard part as 'the details.' Building the norm requires it to start at the top; ask questions so the team reasons their way to the conclusion rather than being told no. Informed Ch07.

Lies Managers Tell Themselves to Avoid Firing Someone — Kim Scott — 'Radical Candor' (St. Martin's Press, 2017), via Tom Tunguz

tomtunguz.com/lies-managers-tell-themselves

Four specific rationalizations leaders use to delay a termination they know is necessary: 'things will get better,' 'someone in the seat beats an empty seat,' 'let's transfer them instead,' 'it'll hurt morale.' Naming the rationalization makes it harder to hide behind. Informed Ch06.

Firing with Compassion — Joel Peterson (Harvard Business Review, March-April 2020)

hbr.org/2020/03/firing-with-compassion

Don't wait for a single 'firing offense' to justify a decision already supported by the evidence. Don't hand the conversation off to HR — it is the manager's responsibility. Be generous with severance, references, and help finding the next role; the person may become a future colleague, client, or reference. Informed Ch06.

Three Steps to Rebuilding Trust Within Your Team — Matt Mallory (Fisher College of Business, Ohio State University, 2020)

fisher.osu.edu/blogs/leadreadtoday/blog/three-steps-to-rebuilding-trust-within-your-team

Three-step framework for rebuilding broken team trust: communicate even without answers (silence gets filled with worse stories); keep your word visibly and reference your own follow-through; recommit to stated values under pressure. Cites Lencioni's Five Dysfunctions as the underlying model. Informed Ch11 (paired with the vulnerability-based vs. predictive trust distinction from Lencioni's own work).

McKinsey's Pyramid Framework for Storytelling — Product Mindset newsletter (productmindset.substack.com)

productmindset.substack.com/p/2836-mckinseys-pyramid-framework

Secondary explainer of Barbara Minto's Pyramid Principle. Mostly overlapped with existing Ch09 SCQA content; the one additive detail was horizontal logic — keep supporting arguments in discrete, non-interleaved groupings (finish all cost points before moving to timeline, don't alternate). Informed a single paragraph in Ch09.

The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever — Michael Bungay Stanier (Box of Crayons Press, 2016)

boxofcrayons.com/the-coaching-habit-book

Seven-question coaching framework. Two of the seven passed the admission test against existing Ch05 coaching content: the AWE Question ('And what else?') — don't act on someone's first answer, it's rarely the real one; and the Lazy Question ('How can I help?') — don't assume what kind of help is needed. The other five (Kickstart, Focus, Foundation, Strategic, Learning questions) overlapped with material already covered. Informed Ch05.

Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter — Liz Wiseman (2010)

thewisemangroup.com/books/multipliers

Multiplier vs. Diminisher framework, distinguished by a single underlying assumption: 'people are smart and will figure it out' vs. 'nothing gets solved unless I solve it.' The Accidental Diminisher concept — competent, well-intentioned leaders who suppress their team without realizing it — was the genuinely new contribution; named patterns (Rescuer, Rapid Responder, Idea Fountain) and two diagnostics (talk/listen ratio, accepting vs. questioning first answers). The five formal disciplines (Talent Magnet, Liberator, Challenger, Debate Maker, Investor) mostly overlapped with existing delegation and psychological safety content. Informed Ch12.

What Makes an Effective Executive — Peter Drucker (Harvard Business Review, June 2004)

hbr.org/2004/06/what-makes-an-effective-executive

Eight practices of effective executives, distilled from a 65-year consulting career. Two passed the admission test: 'What needs to be done?' (not 'what do I want to do?') paired with focusing on no more than one or two priorities at a time — and focusing on opportunities rather than problems, since problems are more urgent but only opportunities compound. Also added meeting-type discipline (know whether a meeting is for deciding, informing, or generating ideas before it starts). The remaining practices (action plans, responsibility for decisions/communication, thinking 'we' not 'I') overlapped with existing content. Informed Ch09, Ch13.

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In — Roger Fisher & William Ury (Harvard Negotiation Project, 1981)

www.pon.harvard.edu/tag/getting-to-yes

Principled negotiation — a genuine gap in the handbook, which had no negotiation content before this. Four principles: separate people from the problem, focus on interests rather than positions, generate options before deciding, use objective criteria. Plus BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) as the practical floor for any negotiation, and 'negotiation jujitsu' — deflecting attacks back onto the problem instead of counter-attacking. Informed Ch16.

Nine Questions I Now Ask in Interviews That I Wish I'd Asked Five Years Ago — Louise Deason (louisedeason.substack.com)

louisedeason.substack.com/p/nine-questions-i-now-ask-in-interviews

Written from the candidate's perspective (questions to ask an employer) — inverted for use here. Ch03 had no content on what a hiring manager's own answers reveal to candidates during the reverse-interview portion. Four questions selected and reframed as a mirror-check for hiring managers: why the role is open, team weaknesses, handling disagreement with leadership, and the failure mode at six months. Informed Ch03.

This handbook is part of the Before You Commit series — practical guides for decisions that are difficult to reverse.