

Memoirs of a Mediocre Manager

*Surviving Cross-Functional Chaos
with Grace, Grit, and Gallows Humor*

Manager (noun): A person who attends meetings about work so that others can work between meetings. Subspecies include Project, Product, Program, and Parent. Distinguished by their ability to sound confident while waiting for a spreadsheet to load.

You may not have “manager” in your title, but if you’ve ever answered an email you didn’t need to, congratulations: you qualify.

Harsha Cheruku

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From the Corporate Field Manual,
2025 Edition

Welcome Kit for the Well-Meaning!

Before you enter the labyrinth, here's a quick translation guide for those who still believe meetings have meaning.

Mediocre: Statistically inevitable. Roughly 90% of people sit in the middle 90% of performance ratings, not because they lack talent, but because the system needs a middle to function.

Receipts: Screenshots, links, and meeting notes that prove you weren't hallucinating progress.

DRI: Directly Responsible Individual. The name you write down so everyone else can feel relieved.

OSDM: One-Slide Decision Memo. Where nuance goes to die, beautifully formatted.

KRs: Key Results. The part of OKRs that everyone forgets until Q4.

Calendar Thunderdome: Meeting invite with more attendees than decisions.

Slack Enlightenment: A moment of clarity achieved when you mute #random.

Promotion Mirage: The brief illusion that a new title will fix old meetings.

Reorg Whisperer: A survivor fluent in new org charts and old loyalties.

Innovation (Inside the Box): Trying something new, with legal's permission and finance's budget code.

Burnout Olympics: Competitive exhaustion disguised as commitment.

Quiet Promotion: When your job expands but your title doesn't.

The Middle: Where work happens. Also known as "career purgatory with snacks."

DRI: Directly Responsible Individual. The person who regrets volunteering first.

OKR: Objectives and Key Results. Collective wish list disguised as strategy.

KR: Key Result. The number you'll massage in Q4.

OSDM: One-Slide Decision Memo. A single PowerPoint slide pretending to be democracy.

EBR: Executive Business Review. Theatre for decisions already made.

PTO: Paid Time Off. Theoretically possible.

Table of Contents

Author's Note	1
Cast of the Corporate Opera	9
Welcome to the Middle!	13
 ACT I: The Hype Cycle	 23
CHAPTER 1: The Loop of Destiny	25
CHAPTER 2: The Onboarding Olympics	61
CHAPTER 3: The Promotion Mirage.....	81
 ACT II: Rituals That Run the Place.....	 97
CHAPTER 4: Calendar Thunderdome	99
CHAPTER 5: Slack Enlightenment	119
CHAPTER 6: OKR Astrology.....	143
 ACT III: Structural Adaptation	 163
CHAPTER 7: Bell the Curve.....	165
CHAPTER 8: Reorg Whisperer.....	193
CHAPTER 9: The Great Layoff Bingo.....	233
 ACT IV: The Slow Realization	 259
CHAPTER 10: The Burnout Olympics	261
CHAPTER 11: The Executive Update Theatre	287
CHAPTER 12: The Quiet Promotion.....	311
CHAPTER 13: Exit Interview with a Bot.....	333
EPILOGUE: The Art of Thriving in the Middle	355

Author's Note

I didn't set out to write a satire. I set out to make sense.

For years, I tried to explain modern work to myself, and the only language that consistently made the math add up was a mix of honesty and humor. If you're holding this book, you probably speak that language too: the dialect you learn in hallways and Zoom chats; the shorthand you build with the designer who fixes your sloppy edges, the analyst who catches your wishful thinking, the recruiter who knows which "stretch role" is really a "stress role," the engineer who can quote your spec back to you with the parts you were hoping no one would read aloud. This book was born out of those conversations—late-night DMs, "back from lunch?" strolls, one-on-ones that turned into real talk, and the kind of coffee meetings where the cup cools while two people warm up enough to admit what the slides never say.

I've worked in rooms where strategy was a posture, in teams where it was a verb, and in both kinds of companies that insist they are the other kind. I've managed, been managed, been "matrixed," "realigned," "right-sized," and occasionally "celebrated." I've watched good people burn out because they confused "urgency" with "importance," and I've watched average people thrive because they learned the quiet craft of being useful in the same direction as reality. Somewhere along the way I realized that modern work is both absurd and sincere,

both bureaucratic and beautifully human—and if you can laugh at the absurd parts without laughing at the people, you can keep going.

A lot of the pages you're about to read grew out of small, specific, mostly unglamorous experiences. I remember a meeting called "Decision Sync" that produced exactly one decision—to schedule a longer Decision Sync. I remember an OKR that measured "cross-functional collaboration" at "+20%" without a ruler in sight. I remember a Slack thread where the thoughtful paragraph got zero reactions and the **:fire:** got seventeen, which is when I learned that attention is a currency and emojis are the coins. I remember the first time I understood promotion wasn't a ladder as much as a mirror angled toward whoever owned the light. I remember the week a reorg landed and a teammate who had never used the word "weather" in a sentence suddenly said, "It'll pass." It did. They always do, eventually.

If these memories sound familiar, it's because none of them are mine alone. They were handed to me by designers and data scientists, PMs and EMs, recruiters and finance, legal and support, by executive assistants who know how empires actually schedule themselves, by HR business partners who keep secrets like surgeons keep instruments sterile, by interns who arrive fluent in our acronyms and by veterans who carry a private dictionary of what those acronyms used to mean. I started jotting what I heard and what I learned, first in notebooks, then in files with names like `final_v4_ really_final`. A pattern emerged: the funnier a line sounded, the truer it was trying to be. I followed that thread.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Satire has a reputation for cynicism. I didn't want that. I have no appetite to sneer at the place where people earn their mortgages and their health insurance and the stories they bring home. I wanted a satire with a pulse, a mirror that doesn't distort, a decoder ring that helps you pick the right fight, a translator that lets you hear the human intent beneath the corporate accent. The jokes in these pages are not aimed at people; they're aimed at the gap between what we say and what we mean. If you've ever heard "We're like a family" and thought "A family that schedules 8 a.m. stand-ups," you already understand the tone.

There's a thread of optimism running through the book on purpose. It's easy to mistake fatigue for wisdom. It's easy to mistake brevity for clarity. It's easy to mistake a schedule full of meetings for momentum. But the longer I worked, and the more I listened, the more I found reasons to be quietly hopeful. Teams can become kinder without any approvals. Leaders can become clearer without any budgets. An organization can learn to publish the quiet part—"We're hedging while we learn"—and discover that honesty buys more time than bravado ever did. A meeting can become useful if one person writes down what was decided, who funds the regret if we're wrong, and when we'll stop pretending indecision is strategy. None of that requires permission. It requires intent, and five extra minutes.

Some readers will come to this book for the laughs. I'm glad; laughter is how the truth fits. But if you stay past the punch lines, you'll find a rhythm I tried to keep faithful to the real work: one scene that stings with familiarity, one translation that names what we're doing, one small tool that someone could actually try Monday morning, and one reminder that

lands soft but stays sharp. The best feedback I've ever received at work sounded like this: "That was funny, and I used it." That's the bar I held myself to here.

The lessons I've collected are not universal; they're biased by where and how I've worked. But the conversations that inform them cross titles and floors and time zones. I've learned more from an ops lead who could map a process in a single pen stroke than from a white paper; more from a support specialist who knew how to apologize without confessing to a crime than from a keynote on servant leadership; more from a staff engineer who measured architecture in the number of decisions it prevented than from a dashboard with colors that scold. Every role taught me a sentence. Collect enough sentences and you get a language. Translate enough of that language and you get a way to live.

Why call it *Memoirs of a Mediocre Manager*? Because I needed to make peace with a word that used to scare me: **middle**. Middle as in middle of the bell curve and middle as in balanced. The middle is where systems meet humans, where slides meet calendars, where "vision" meets the Tuesday you have. The middle is the antidote to the romance of extremes—the fantasy of the outlier, the tragedy of burnout. In the middle, you practice a kind of modest excellence: being obvious in the kind of way that helps, being dependable in the kind of way that frees other people to do their best work, being generous with credit like it's cheap (because it is) and stingy with confusion like it's expensive (because it is). The middle is not mediocrity; it's maintenance of what matters. It is where 90% of all work force lands 90% of the times while trying to "Bell the Curve". If you know, you know!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you want to know what kept me writing on the days the jokes felt thin, it was remembering the faces attached to these lessons. The designer who taught me that taste is a schedule. The finance partner who taught me that numbers are opinions wearing uniforms. The recruiter who taught me that kindness compounds faster than referrals. The IC who gave me their trust on a week when I had not yet earned it. The manager who quietly shielded a team from chaos and never put it on a slide. The teammate who messaged, “Are you okay?” with no agenda. The leader who changed their mind in public and made it look like strength, because it is. They’re in here, disguised, but intact in spirit.

I should confess something else: I like work. Not every meeting, not every quarter, not every slogan we attach to a calendar year as if branding can bless outcomes—but I like the human project of building and staffing and learning and shipping and apologizing and improving and trying again. Work is one of the ways we find out what we can be together. If the systems we build sometimes calcify into rituals that forget their purpose, well, that’s why we have translators and jokes and little tools with names like “Receipt Density” and “Default-By.” We can fix what we can name.

Will this book fix anything? No book can. But a book can give you language for what you’re living, and language changes posture. If you read a chapter and find yourself sitting an inch taller in a meeting, or adding a single line to your notes—“Who funds the regret?”—or swapping one hour of performative alignment for fifteen minutes of real decision-making, that’s enough. If you send a translator tile to a teammate and both of you laugh and then do something slightly braver, that’s more than enough. If the only change is that you feel

less alone in a place that sometimes confuses “silent” with “fine,” that’s enough and then some.

There are a few things I hope you’ll carry past the last page:

Humor is not how we avoid the work; it’s how we stay human while doing it. The best jokes in this book are operating manuals smuggled in as punch lines.

Clarity is a kindness. Publish the quiet part. Tell people what you know, what you don’t, what you’re trying, and when you’ll revisit it. Ambiguity is the most expensive perk we never budgeted for.

Receipts beat rhetoric. Keep a small, living document of what shipped, what changed, who benefited. Your memory won’t have to argue with anyone else’s story; you’ll have your own.

The middle is not a compromise; it’s a practice. Be useful, be kind, be findable. If you can’t be exceptional on demand (almost none of us can), be reliably helpful on purpose.

People > Process > Performances. Processes matter. But people matter more, and public performances matter least. If something must be beautiful, let it be how you treat each other when you’re tired.

If you’re new to work, I hope this book spares you a fraction of the confusion I bought at full price. If you’re in the middle of your middle, I hope it feels like someone kept you a seat near the outlet and saved you from one meeting that should have been a memo. If you lead, I hope you find scripts you can borrow so your courage doesn’t depend on your calendar.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

And if you're leaving (for the day or for good), I hope you leave with a little more grace for the systems that tried, and a little more gratitude for the people who did.

I didn't set out to write a satire. I set out to make sense. What I learned is that sense often shows up dressed as humor, especially at work. I wrote the book I needed when I was measuring my worth in adjectives and my days in invites. If it finds you at a similar moment, I hope you recognize yourself, laugh more than once, and close the cover with a sentence you can use.

Thanks for reading. Thanks for the conversations that built these pages, for the DMs that turned into paragraphs, for the patience of teammates who lived the drafts with me. If we bump into each other in a hallway or a comment thread, tell me your translator tile. I'm still collecting.

Think of this less as a book and more as a well-organized brain dump - notes, messages, slides, and occasional sighs collected over several years. Formatting varies. So does tone. That's by design. The goal isn't polish, it's recognition. If you've ever spent too long fixing a slide font, you'll fit right in.

Here's to the middle!

Harsha K Cheruku

Cast of the Corporate Opera

Alex Reed, The Accidental Philosopher of Process

Our narrator and unwitting ethnographer of corporate absurdity. Half analyst, half anthropologist, Alex believes in structure the way monks believe in silence: as the only path to peace. He builds order out of PowerPoints, meaning out of metrics, and accidentally writes poetry in Slack. His true superpower is calm under recurring calendar invites.

Priya, The Real CEO (Chief of Everything Obvious)

Alex's onboarding buddy, unofficial mentor, and translator of corporate dialects. Fluent in both SQL and sarcasm. Priya is the reason most fires go unnoticed, because she puts them out before anyone starts a Slack thread. She's the conscience of the middle, disguised as a data lead with a coffee dependency and the patience of someone who has seen ten reorgs and lived to meme about them.

Kara, The Manager Who Knows Too Much

Stoic, strategic, and permanently 20 percent tired. Kara is the manager every "people leader" claims to be until the metrics start crying. Her management style is part triage, part therapy, part courtroom. She measures success in linkable evidence and unspoken relief. If corporate life were a survival movie, Kara would be the one calmly rationing the Wi-Fi.

HR Bot, The Company's Friendly Ghost

A sentient pop-up powered by positive intent and machine-learning apathy. Appears when morale drops, birthdays occur, or ethics training is due. Speaks exclusively in gratitude and conditional tense ("We hope you feel supported"). Thinks "empathy" is a dropdown. Accidentally delivers the most profound lines while trying to close tickets.

Darren, The Slide Whisperer

A consultant-turned-deck-evangelist who treats PowerPoint like religion and gradients like gospel. Believes stories need "motion to resonate." Can turn a sentence into a cinematic trailer for metrics that don't exist yet. His spiritual home is "Slide 4 of 17." Underneath the transitions and drop shadows, there's a surprisingly kind optimist who just wants applause to mean alignment.

Silent Witness (The Plant)

Alex's unofficial therapist and co-manager of oxygen supply. Has survived every quarter, every burnout cycle, and one incident with scented goals. The plant doesn't speak, but its leaf-drops and angles are the truest performance reviews. Symbol of persistence; metaphor of hope; better at emotional regulation than most directors.

Cameos & Background Characters

- **Ethan:** The bar-raiser who interviews like a philosopher and exits calls like a magician.
- **Basil:** Gatekeeper of the data warehouse; speaks softly and carries admin rights.
- **Legal:** A chorus of polite doom with impeccable sentence structure.
- **Finance Security:** Dresses like adults, speaks like auditors, moves like glaciers.

CAST OF THE CORPORATE OPERA

Summary Mood: Every one of them is a mirror of modern work: capable, exhausted, ironic, and mostly sincere. They don't represent dysfunction, they represent *maintenance*. Because someone must keep the system believable between the slides.

Welcome to the Middle!

Calendar invite: *Calibration – 60 mins*

Agenda: Justice, but with spreadsheets.

There are seven of us in a glass conference room on Floor 9, the kind of room that thinks it's a greenhouse but grows only laptops. Someone has already dimmed the lights to make the projector feel important. On the wall: a list of names arranged in a grid that looks like a Sudoku designed by a guidance counselor.

“Okay,” says Darren, whose job is slide velocity. “Let’s start with Priya.”

A silence falls—the reverent kind people reserve for weddings and quarterly earnings.

“Strong Meets?” offers HR, with the voice people use for yoga and layoff emails.

“I mean...” says someone from Finance, “she had great visibility.”

“Great visibility,” echoes someone from Legal, nodding like a metronome.

I'm the only one who worked with Priya last quarter. She finished a migration everyone else pretended was a hobby. She hand-held two teams through a fire drill no one saw because she put it out early. She mentored a new hire who thought Git was short for "get it done."

But the words in the room aren't about work; they're about narrative. "Leadership." "Impact." "Stretch." These nouns fly around like bees that forgot pollen was the point.

"We just need to bell the curve," someone says, gently, like they're tucking a child in.

The phrase lands like corporate scripture. Bell the curve. It's the annual harvest: the taking of messy human crops and stacking them into clean bins. The spreadsheet is a temple; we've brought our offerings.

There are no villains here. Everyone is trying to be fair. We calibrate performance the way NASA calibrates satellites—by losing people in orbit.

"If adjectives were impact," I write in my notebook, "we'd all be billionaires."

The discussion moves on. We triangulate Priya's "story." We weigh her "scope." We add a "growth vector," which I believe is when a compliment refuses to commit. We land on Strong Meets. It feels both sensible and like a magic trick where the rabbit is your career.

I look around the glass room. Half empathy, half spreadsheet. Nobody mentions the actual migration. Nobody mentions the

WELCOME TO THE MIDDLE!

2 a.m. cutover or the frozen burrito that tasted like the inside of an outage. But they talk about how she “showed up.” How she “was present.” How she’s “ready in role.”

I sign the consensus. I believe Priya is strong. I believe the grid is a grid. I believe in gravity. I believe we will all go home tired.

As we move to the next name, a small, unhelpful laugh escapes me. The kind you apologize for without looking up.

“Something funny?” Darren asks, smiling too hard.

“Just... even fairness needs an average,” I say. “So most of us have to be ordinary by design.”

Nobody writes that down.

The hallway after a calibration meeting is always brighter than it should be. I lean against a Ficus tree that has seen too much and let my mind slow to a speed I can hear.

The bell curve arrives without being invited: left tail, right tail, and the fat compassionate middle that keeps the whole thing from falling over. I watch it expand on the white wall as if our projector followed me out here.

On the far left, strugglers: new hires who are still finding the bathroom, folks miscast into roles tuned for someone else’s hands, people who had a hard year in a life that doesn’t care about Q4. On the far right: the promoted, the poached, the burned-bright. I’ve been right-tail adjacent twice. It felt like sprinting on ice in socks—fun until you look down.

And then the middle—the infrastructure of everything. The group chats that answer at 7:12 a.m. The “quick sync?” people who make the syncs quick. The colleagues who hit deadlines, escalate early, and carry the stapler of institutional memory from reorg to reorg so the new floor plan still has paper.

“Most of us don’t fail the system,” I think. “The system needs most of us to be the middle.”

If you’ve worked more than a year anywhere with a cafeteria and a login, you know the feeling. You present clearly. You mentor kindly. You get “Meets Expectations,” which sounds like a shrug until the lights stay on because you did.

Congratulations: you’re average by design. Not because you are the median human, but because the machine can’t declare everyone a miracle without collapsing into a church.

Here’s the small, rude math I wish someone had handed me at twenty-five:

Performance = Delivery x Perception x Politics

If any variable drops to zero, the result becomes zero.

Ship everything you promised, but if nobody knows, it’s a whisper. Be universally loved, but if the work didn’t move a metric, it’s a vibe. Join every steering committee, but if you don’t deliver on something boring, it’s theater. Multiplication is unforgiving. Welcome to adulthood.

Standing with the Ficus, I’m weirdly comforted. The curve isn’t a conspiracy; it’s a shape. The middle isn’t a verdict; it’s a

WELCOME TO THE MIDDLE!

role. In the corporate ecosystem, someone has to be the control group. That's us!

* * *

Back in my desk chair, I open a fresh note and type: *Field Notes from the Middle*. The title makes me feel both smaller and more useful.

Because here is a truth I will say once and then spend an entire book proving: performance culture tries to scale fairness, not truth. Truth is context. Context is expensive. Fairness is consistency. Consistency fits on a slide.

We won't fix that here. We don't have a slide big enough.

But we can translate it. And translations help you stop picking the wrong fight.

I create a little two-column table, the translator tile I wish I'd kept taped to my monitor years ago:

What they say

"Stretch goals."

"Strong Meets."

"Ready in role."

"Calibrate."

"High bar."

"Scope is evolving."

"Leadership signal."

What they mean

"We won't fund this."

"We like you, but not that much."

"Please keep the trains on time."

"Redistribute feelings."

"We need fewer Exceeds."

"Scope is escaping."

"You hosted three meetings and no one cried."

I add one more, just for me:

“Visibility.” - “Invite us to the link we didn’t open.”

It’s not cynicism. It’s literacy. A gentle decoder ring for the place where budgets meet adjectives.

Then, because I know some of you will ask for math even in your satire, I jot a second formula:

$$\text{Fairness (F)} = \text{Consistency} / \text{Context}$$

Context is expensive; consistency scales. Which is why the system will always privilege the rubric over the room.

The day I truly understood that, I stopped trying to be exceptional at everything and started carrying a pocket of receipts.

* * *

My name is Alex Reed. I manage a team that manages the chaos. My title changes sometimes; the calendar does not. I used to think my job was to be extraordinary. Now I think my job is to be obvious, in the kind of way that helps.

I’m not here to teach you to rebel. I’ve tried rebellion. It’s fun until procurement. I’m here to help you stay visible, sane, and slightly amused. If we can’t be exceptional on demand, we can be reliably useful with a sense of humor—and strangely, that’s rarer.

This book covers the rituals that actually run the place: interviews that measure whether you can narrate your own

WELCOME TO THE MIDDLE!

competence without sweating through a blazer; meetings that exist less to decide and more to keep the risk communal; Slack, where attention is currency and the mint is fatigue; OKRs, the astrology of progress; reviews, where we calibrate belief; reorgs, where we rename the furniture; burnout, the tax for pretending calendars are infinite.

At the end of each chapter, I'll leave you with *Field Notes from the Middle*—one truth you can pin to your corkboard, one tiny tool or script you can paste into Slack without blushing, one Monday action you can try without booking an offsite, and one reminder that lands soft but stays sharp.

Humor is not how we avoid the work. Humor is how we stay human while doing it.

This isn't a book about escaping the system. It's about playing inside it with your eyes open, and occasionally your mic muted.

If you came for recipes that turn you into right-tail royalty by Q3, I'm not your chef. If you came to feel seen and leave with one small thing you can actually do, I've been saving you a seat near the outlet.

* * *

Here's the year ahead, short enough to hold in your head and long enough to fill your calendar:

An interview loop that starts with "Tell me about a time you influenced without authority" and ends with you influencing the recruiter to let you use the bathroom. A week-two onboarding sprint where Okta asks you to click all bicycles

and you fail because the scooter is ambiguous. An “Objective” that could sell skincare. A meeting called “Decision Sync (60m)” whose only decision is to schedule “Decision Sync (90m).” A Slack thread in #general that begins “Quick thought:” and achieves herd consciousness. A mid-year “calibration” we will market as accountability and practice as weather. A reorg where leadership says “no immediate changes” and you learn to translate “immediate.” An innovation offsite that produces tote bags more robust than the roadmap. Mindfulness Wednesday, optional but required. A stakeholder map with names, not teams, because people move; needs don’t. A promotion that gives you a nicer way to say no. An exit interview, either yours or someone’s, where truth and diplomacy tie at one-one and shake hands.

It will be chaotic and familiar. You will do more good than you witness. You will want to be exceptional and will settle for durable. You will, if you’re lucky, find a way to be freer without changing desks.

By the end of this year, I won’t be more successful. I will be clearer. Clarity feels like success when you’re done auditioning for it.

And if I have my way, you will laugh just enough to keep going, and long enough to remember why.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle (pin these)

Truth: The system isn’t broken; it’s averaged. The curve needs a middle, and most days, that’s mercifully us.

WELCOME TO THE MIDDLE!

Tool: Receipt Density: Create a living doc titled “Receipts.” Each month, paste **three links** that prove impact (a shipped PRD, a before/after chart, a stakeholder DM that says “This helped.”). That’s it. Three. When review season comes, your memory won’t have to.

Try This Monday: Start a “WINS” doc. One line, every day you work: one thing that worked, even if no one noticed. (Pro tip: screenshot small graphs. Future-you loves pictures.)

Reminder: The curve needs someone in the middle. Today, it’s you. Be useful, be kind, be findable.

* * *

You don’t have to agree with all of this. You only have to recognize yourself enough to keep reading. If the book does its job, each chapter will give you one tool, one laugh, and one inch of permission to stop mistaking the spotlight for the sun.

Welcome to the middle! We keep the lights on, the decks updated, and the world moving. We may not exceed expectations all the time, but we exceed endurance every single quarter.

* * *

“It always regresses to the mean!”

Eventually, ninety percent of us drift toward the ninety percent in the middle, pulled there by process, politics, and probability. It’s not failure; it’s gravity. The system needs the middle filled, and we’re the ballast that keeps it stable.

Every system has an audition, and ours starts with the interview loop, seven hours to prove you can smile under fluorescent lighting.

Ready? Loop 1 begins.

ACT I:
The Hype Cycle

CHAPTER 1:

The Loop of Destiny

Loop 6/7: “Tell me about a time you influenced without authority.”

Me: “This one. Right now.”

I deliver it like a line I’ve rehearsed, because I have. I smile in a way that suggests both humility and a 3-point lighting setup. He smiles back in a way that suggests he just saw a Slack ping that has more power over his nervous system than payroll.

We are on Zoom, which is to say, we are in a sanitized version of each other’s homes. He’s backlit by a window that makes him look like a witness in a true-crime documentary. I’m front-lit by a ring light that makes me look like a person who has spent actual American dollars to be likable at 11:10 a.m.

“Great,” he says, eyes flicking to the left, the universal sign for “someone just typed ‘?’ in #leadership-announce-ments.” “Go ahead.”

I begin a story about a product launch that wanted to die but was too well-funded to be allowed to. I use nouns and verbs like a responsible adult. I include numbers that sound round enough to be plausible but precise enough to be true. I say things like “cross-functional” and “unblocked” and “risk budget,”

which are less words than they are keys that open conference rooms.

He nods on the beat, one-two-three like a metronome for empathy. His head tilt says, keep going. His eyebrows say, I might have to drop in a second. His Slack ping says, You already dropped.

Here is what we are doing: we are not evaluating competence. We are staging a small play called **“Trust Me With Your Reputation.”** I am auditioning for a role with lines like “I’ll follow up” and “I’ll land this” and “Before EOD.” He is watching for flinches. I’m selling the absence of flinches.

I tried to count my interview rounds the way people count dogs in airports—half for joy, half for the reportable statistic. This is my sixth loop today if you include the one where someone told me they had a “hard stop” and then left me alone in the Zoom room with my own face. The waiting room message - **“Your interviewer will join shortly...”** - has become both a promise and a threat, a kind of modern purgatory where you rehearse your smile like it’s a password.

“Tell me about a time you disagreed with a stakeholder,” he says, later, like we are pulling Tarot cards from a deck labeled **Corporate Horoscope**. The cards are always the same: **Ownership, Conflict, Influence, Bias Toward Action, Stakeholder Management**. Each has a glossy finish and a vague aura of inevitability. If you squint hard enough, any story fits any card. That is the comfort and the trap.

“Everyone asks the same question in different fonts,” I say to myself, out loud by accident. He laughs, which I decide to claim as rapport even though it might have been a cough.

I tell the conflict story. I keep it clean. No blood, just choreography. I plot my arc like a weather forecast: **Pressure built; lightning; cooler heads prevailed; a measurable rainbow.** The rainbow is usually a customer metric. Rainbows are rarely qualitative.

He nods again, then glances left. Slack's siren song. I imagine the ping: "Quick one, can you approve the thing?" I imagine the response: "Circle back offline." I imagine our future together, both of us circling like airplanes that never land because the runway is booked for an all-hands about how well the airport is doing.

I finish the hour with him thanking me for my time and me thanking him for his. Two professionals who have achieved orbital politeness. As I exit, the Zoom insists on showing me myself for half a second longer than necessary, as if to say: **Are you sure this is the face you wanted to send?**

I am sure of nothing except this: I am not interviewing for a role; I am interviewing for **trust**. For the idea that I can be put in rooms and not cause regret. That I can hold the brand in my mouth without chewing it.

The next meeting starts in four minutes. I refill my water. I rehearse my smile. I practice my laugh on mute, just to make sure it still sounds like a person.

Somewhere between loops, a different realization slides in: I am not the only one auditioning. The company is, too. The difference is they can send a calendar invite to a thousand people with the subject line **"We're building something special."** My version of that is **"Thanks for the great conversation!"** followed by a polite willingness to never hear back.

Loop 7 is “culture fit.” I save my last battery for that.

For now, the waiting room returns: “Your interviewer will join shortly...” I stare at it like it owes me rent. I think: **This is modern work’s loading screen, optimized for hope.**

The clock flips to :00. A new face materializes, already smiling. It’s contagious. We start again.

“Tell me about a time—”

I have so many times.

And all of them are two minutes long.

Behavioral interviews are therapy sessions where you only talk about the times you triumphed. I decide not to say that out loud. I save it for the book I swear I’ll never write.

* * *

Cut to a montage. Short bursts. Quick costume changes. The same ring light, different shirts. A parade of muted enthusiasm.

Interview 2: The Case Question.

Prompt: “Design a product to reduce meetings.”

The interviewer, a PM with the expression of someone who has seen a roadmap, asks me to solve meetings. Not a meeting. Meetings—in general. I consider proposing electricity. Instead, I propose a system with progressive friction: if you invite

more than five people, you must write down what happened last time. If you invite more than ten, you have to include a metric you intend to move and a kill date for the series. If you invite the entire department, the software pops up a photo of a baby and asks, “Are you sure?” with a second line, “No, but really.”

I invent personas because that seems to be how modern empathy is measured. **Sam the Scheduler** wants clarity. **Priya the IC** wants fewer calendar Tetris nightmares. **Darren the Slide Guy** wants one canonical deck, which is also what **Lisa from Legal** wants except the deck is a policy. I draw little boxes with my words. I call it a “lightweight decision spine” because that phrase sounds like it could win a grant.

He asks, “How would you measure success?”

I say, “Latency from decision proposed to decision recorded, and the number of recurring meetings that self-extinguish after the stated kill date. Bonus: average invitee count trending down, average artifact quality trending up.”

He nods. We both pretend this will happen in the real world.

Interview 3: The Culture Add.

“What’s your superpower?” she asks, eyes bright with the conviction that everyone is a Marvel franchise waiting to be greenlit.

“My superpower,” I say, “is structured optimism.”
She smiles. “Say more?”

“I can respond to vague prompts with a frame, and I can keep hope alive long enough to ship a smaller thing.”

She laughs. “You mean scope control.”

“I mean optimism with borders.”

She types something. I imagine her writing ‘**scope control.**’ I am fine with this.

They ask about **values**. I start collecting them like enamel pins: **Ownership, Customer Obsession, Craft, Growth Mindset, One Team, Be The Change, Move With Heart, Invent And Simplify, Write The Memo, Trust And Candor, Respect The Calendar, Rigor, Kindness, Experiment, Learn, Iterate.**

If you string them all together, you get a poem called “**We Want You To Work Hard Without Being A Jerk.**”

Interview 4: The Hiring Manager Deep Dive.

“Tell me about your biggest failure.”

This one always wants confession without consequence. Not the failure where people bled. The failure where you learned—a neat little jewel of humility you can hold up to the light.

I pick a safe failure. A roadmap that slipped because I believed a date like it was a friend. I name the delta (-21 days). I name the cause (unvalidated dependencies). I list the fix (weekly risk reviews, explicit kill criteria, two-way SLAs). I add a joke—“I also stopped trusting estimates that came with a free hoodie.” He laughs in that I-might-hire-you way.

By the fourth loop, I start answering with parables.

“Walk me through your decision-making process,” someone says.

“Once,” I say, “we had three doors: build, buy, or pretend we had already built. We chose buy, because reality was due.”

They laugh. I am rewarded for mythologizing governance.

The pattern emerges, then ossifies. The questions are different windchimes tuned to the same breeze. They weren’t testing how I think. They were testing whether I could **narrate the act of thinking while smiling**. It’s a live audiobook of my inner project manager, except the author is trying not to sound tired.

Somewhere in the middle of the montage, I write this on my notepad in block letters:

**Interview Success = Storytelling x
Timing x Laughter Density**

I underline it twice. Then I add, like a footnote I don’t want to admit I believe: **x (Perceived Seniority)** which is a function of **calm nouns + past tense + one useful metric**. The math checks out mostly because I made it up.

I also start keeping a **translator table** because reality is funnier when subtitled:

Question

What They Mean

“Walk me through your decision-making process.”

Entertain me while I judge you.

“Tell me about a failure.”

Prove you failed in an acceptable way.

“What motivates you?”

Say something about impact, not free cereal.

“How do you handle ambiguity?”

Can you create your own job description without suing us later?

“Why here?”

Do you know what we do, or did you just apply everywhere the stock chart goes up?

Each answer gets tighter. Sincere to performative to survivalist.

Sincere is me telling the whole truth, which is long.

Performative is me telling a cleaner truth, which is short.

Survivalist is me telling the useful truth, which is short and has a metric.

Between loops, I practice **story containment**, which is like portion control for memory. Two minutes. Nouns and verbs. One decision, one delta, one why. I call it the **Decision Story Framework** in my head, because naming something is the first step to pretending it's a method and not just coping.

Decision Story Framework (pocket version):

Situation → Decision → Delta (metric shift)
→ Why It Mattered → One Lesson.

No swirls. No backstory about the fiscal year. Past tense. Put the result near the front so the listener relaxes.

The montage speeds up. A recruiter smiles like a flight attendant preparing you for turbulence. A staff designer asks me how I collaborate with design, and I say “like a person,” then recover with **“I anchor on problem frames, not wireframes, then we converge once we’ve killed the wrong questions.”** A data lead wants to know how I instrument behavior, and I say **“start with cut-table events that map cleanly to decisions, not vanity counters, our goal is to shrink time-to-signal.”** He looks pleased. We both agree to pretend the logging pipeline is not a hydra.

A loop titled **“Cross-Functional Collaboration”** arrives wearing a branded fleece. The interviewer speaks in nouns: **Roadmap. Alignment. Dependencies. Sequencing.** I speak back in verbs: **Clarify. Route. Decide. Publish.**

We are two sides of a well-meaning coin. I tell a story about a dependency that wasn’t; we only realized it after the API turned out to be a PDF. He winces in a way that suggests he, too, has integrated a PDF.

“Ownership,” someone says, as if invoking a saint.

“I write down what I own and I publish the artifacts,” I say. “Then I own those, too.” They nod. Ownership, in practice, is mostly documentation with a good attitude.

As the day lengthens, my answers compress. A joke here, a metric there. The rhythm becomes the message: **I can be brief on purpose.** Seniority, it turns out, is partly a form of brevity. There is a world in which I am already hired; I can feel it hovering in the way the hiring manager says “when” instead of “if,” then catches himself like he almost tripped.

I keep a list of **mini-jokes** to drop when the air needs oxygen:

- “By the fourth loop, I started answering with parables.”
- “They asked if I had leadership experience. I said I once led a calendar invite through adversity.”
- “My superpower? Responding to vague prompts with structured optimism.”

They land not because they’re hilarious, but because they signal **I will not make your meetings worse.** That is the secret social contract of interviewing: can this person absorb ambiguity without turning it into noise?

Between loops I pace. The apartment is a small procession of confidence props: the ring light, the printed resume that no one will ever ask for, the glass of water that has achieved consensus alignment with my mouth. I keep glancing at my email in a reflexive superstition. The subject lines stack like dominoes: “**Next Steps,**” “**Next Steps,**” “**Re: Next Steps,**” and then—my favorite—“**Quick Note (No Action Needed).**” Every note in tech is quick. Every action is needed.

Interview 5 arrives with the solemnity of a mid-tier holiday. It is with an engineer who measures authenticity in units of latency. He asks me to explain a system we built. I diagram

with words: **Requests in, throttled, queued, processed, idempotent by design, retries on non-fatal, circuit breaker when downstream throws a tantrum.** He smiles. I add, “**And we instrumented the thing we were afraid of, not just the thing we shipped.**” That wins me a nod. Fear-driven instrumentation: the only true north.

He asks, “What do you do when you don’t know the answer?”

“I narrate what I’d try, in order,” I say. “And I try it. If it smells like ego, I invite a witness.”

He laughs. The phrase “**invite a witness**” makes people feel safe because it promises receipts.

We are moving, he and I, toward the same point: **we can work together without hating Thursdays.** That is the most any of us want.

At some point, I catch myself explaining the same story for the third time that day, the edges sanded down to a smoothness that worries me. When a story gets too smooth, it starts to feel like something that happened to a more impressive stranger. I add back one small imperfection: I admit I over-committed, once, and someone else paid for my optimism. I say their first name out loud in the room to remind myself I’m not a machine. Then I add the fix: **I started defaulting decisions to dates instead of vibes.**

The interviewer writes something down. I like to imagine he wrote “**defaults to dates.**” It is such a small sentence. It keeps projects alive.

The day ends with me on mute, smiling at a void while someone tries to find a microphone. I sit in the ritual like a monk with a calendar. I have learned things: my face from the left is friendlier; drinking water is the only legal performance enhancer; saying “let me think about that” buys you exactly three seconds if you breathe audibly.

When I close the laptop, my silence rings. I stand there, in my not-quite office, in my not-quite suit, thinking about the whole pageant. **It isn't that interviews are fake.** It's that interviews are **staged**. And staging is a skill. The world is full of thoughtful, capable people who hate the stage. The world is also run by calendars. Guess which one promotes faster.

Still, I'm not bitter. Cynical, yes. But not bitter. The ceremony serves a function. Large systems cannot read souls; they can barely read emails. So we perform rituals that produce artifacts—the story, the rubric, the thumbs. The goal is to generate **the appearance of fairness** for a decision that is, at best, half data and half vibes. We line up, we take turns, we say the words, and then we wait to see if the spreadsheet remembers us kindly.

I clean my desk like I'm closing a bar. The ring light clicks off. The room reverts to honesty. I write one last thing in my notebook before I forget:

Narrate thinking. Smile. Land numbers. Leave room for laughter.

Then, a postscript:

If you can do it in under two minutes, you sound senior. If you can do it in under one, you sound mythical.

Tomorrow is the final round, the so-called **bar-raiser**, a person flown in from the highlands to ensure we do not accidentally hire a gremlin. I am told they calibrate for “**raising the talent bar.**” I hope they also calibrate for “**I can tell a story without panicking.**” That is, currently, my edge.

Before bed, I try to remember a time in my life when I was evaluated for anything that wasn’t, in some way, my ability to tidy cause and effect into an edible shape. Childhood report cards: narrative. College essays: narrative. First job: narrative pretending to be Excel. The interview loop is just the latest room where cause and effect are asked to hold hands and smile.

I laugh, once, in the dark. If anyone heard it through the wall, I hope they thought: **That guy just remembered a good metric.**

* * *

The calendar invite says **Culture Fit — Nina (People & Possibility)** which is the kind of title you only get in companies with snack budgets and a belief in lowercase miracles. I hydrate like I’m about to run a 10K and open the Zoom.

Nina arrives already nodding, as if she’s been briefed that I am, at minimum, bipedal.

“Hi, Alex! I’m Nina,” she says with warmth that lands like a heated blanket. The virtual background is a gradient that suggests sunrise, or brand equity. A houseplant leans just out of frame like a consultant who bills by the fern.

“Hi, Nina,” I say. “Big fan of People *and* Possibility.”

She laughs the way you laugh when you've been on back-to-back calls since 8 a.m. and need each human to be slightly delightful. We exchange the ritual—How's your day? Busy in a good way?—the corporate equivalent of tapping swords before we duel with smiles.

“So,” she says, hands folded in HR-priest posture. “I’m here to understand how you align with our values.”

She says values the way a conductor says *allegro*. I picture a laminated card with words like **Ownership, Craft, Impact, One Team, Growth Mindset, Candor, Empathy, Customer Love**. If you arrange them in a circle, you get a summoning spell for a well-behaved unicorn.

“Great,” I say, and mean it. I like values. They’re like horoscopes for behavior: vague enough to be inclusive, specific enough to feel like guidance. Also, they are how **vibe checks** get legal coverage.

She begins with **collaboration**. “Tell me about a time you collaborated across functions.”

I deploy the **Decision Story Framework** like it’s muscle memory:

Situation: Infrastructure migration blocked a customer-facing milestone; design and data were out of phase; legal was worried about consent.

Decision: I paused a scope line, merged the timelines around a new weekly ritual - “**Risk Review Wednesdays**” - and moved two engineers to instrument the scary part first.

Delta: Time-to-signal dropped from two weeks to four days; consent errors down 73% by week three; shipped the slim slice on time.

Why It Mattered: We avoided a midnight rollback and stopped arguing with hypothetical dashboards.

Lesson: Default decisions to dates, not vibes. Keep consent near the front.

Nina nods like every sentence is a brand activation. “Love that,” she says, typing. “And how did you bring people along?”

“I borrowed certainty,” I say. “When I didn’t have it, I invited a witness.”

That line always lands. It says I believe in sunlight and calendars.

She asks about **ownership**. I talk about a bug that wasn’t mine and a document that was. I say, “I own my artifacts,” which sounds like a slogan but is really just a coping mechanism. She asks about **feedback**. I say I like getting it “**while the paint is wet.**” We share a brief smile over the image of smearing improvements before they dry into policy.

Then she moves to **work–life balance**, carefully, like stepping onto a dock that may or may not float.

“How do you think about balance?” she asks.

“I value it so much,” I say, deadpan, “we stretch it to 24 hours.”

She tilts her head, then laughs. “That’s very real.”

“I optimize for **predictable** intensity,” I say. “Panic is expensive. Quiet cadence is cheap.”

She writes something. I imagine: “**predictable intensity.**” I hope it becomes a slide.

We talk **conflict**. I say, “I escalate by writing, not volume.”

We talk **candor**. I say, “I can disagree while still designing your deck.”

We talk **kindness**. I say, “Kindness is latency-reducing.” That one surprises even me. But it’s true: people move faster when they’re not armoring up.

Nina smiles like I just offered her a new bumper sticker for the employee handbook. She leans in.

“Let me ask it this way,” she says. “What do you think *culture fit* really means?”

The room goes pleasantly quiet, rare oxygen in Zoomland. I decide to be useful without being a poet.

“I think,” I say, “culture fit is a company’s way of asking: **Can you survive our chaos without making us feel bad about it?**”

She exhales the laugh of someone who has sat in the blast radius of six reorgs. “That’s... succinct.”

“It’s also why I add,” I continue, “that **culture add** is better. Fit can calcify sameness. Add lets you bring a different instrument without changing the key.”

She types again. The houseplant nods in the non-wind.

We do the **values dictionary**, she says a word, I translate to behavior:

- **Ownership** = publish the plan *and* the receipts; own the receipts when the plan blows a tire.
- **Collaboration** = narrate decisions, not just tasks; invite a witness when stakes rise.
- **Growth Mindset** = write the “What I’d do differently next time” paragraph before anyone asks.
- **Customer Obsession** = instrument the scary path, not the happy path; count pain, not just clicks.
- **Candor** = say the quiet part kindly and on the record.
- **Craft** = leave behind an artifact that would help a stranger ship without you.

She nods like a conductor satisfied the woodwinds can count. Then the **vibe check** intensifies. We have entered the Soft Skills Olympics, events include **Smile-Laddering**, **Active Listening Head Tilt**, and **You Go First But I’m Brave Too**.

She asks my favorite question in HR: “What’s your superpower?”

“Structured optimism,” I say, same as the montage, but softer now. “I can keep hope alive long enough to ship a smaller thing.”

“And your kryptonite?”

“Unstructured optimism.”

We both laugh. It’s true enough to feel safe.
A small silence. The good kind.

“Before we wrap,” she says, “anything you’re worried about, culture-wise?”

“Yes,” I say. “I’m allergic to **heroics-as-process**. If the only way to ship is to light ourselves on fire, I’ll try to change the work or the calendar. I burn, but I prefer candles to bonfires.”

She blinks, then smiles. “We’re... working on that.”

I want to tell her we are all working on that. Instead, I say, “I can help.”

She closes with the most expensive phrase in modern business.
“We’ll circle back soon.”

I nod. “I’ve started to suspect that circling is the actual work.”

We wave in that careful way humans wave to screens. Zoom claps the window shut. For a beat, I sit with the **equation** that found me mid-call:

$$\text{Culture Fit} = (\text{Competence} \times \text{Agreeableness}) \\ + \text{Threat Perception}$$

It’s inelegant math, but sturdy. Increase competence and you look helpful. Increase agreeableness and you look safe. Reduce

perceived threat and you look promotable. You can do all three by telling **short, true stories** with nouns, verbs, and one measurable outcome, **story containment** as corporate pacifism.

I write it down and underline **Threat Perception**. That lever is the sneakiest. Speak softly. Source your claims. Leave room for someone else's win. Promise receipts. Smile like a person who starts meetings on the minute.

I stand up, refill the glass, and prepare for the bar-raiser.

* * *

The Final Round: "The Story of Visibility" **(first half)**

The invite calls him **Ethan: Sr. Director, Strategy & Quality**. The comma implies he owns two nouns and surely a portion of the calendar. The folklore says bar-raisers float between orgs like benevolent auditors, protecting the **Talent Bar** from erosion via panic-hiring. In pictures they wear cardigans and distant stares.

I join three minutes early because myth requires offerings. The waiting room delivers its sermon: "**Your interviewer will join shortly...**". I use the time to widen my smile by five watts and lower my shoulders by two centimeters. This is seniority in the wild: a ritual of posture.

Ethan arrives late, camera off. A voice joins the room before a face does—calm, slightly amused, like the narrator of a documentary about wolves who attend standups.

“Hey, Alex. Sorry—overran by a hair. Mind if we go camera-off for a bit? I’m, uh, rescuing a sandwich from extinction.”

“I respect conservation,” I say. “Audio works.”

He chuckles, then turns the camera on. We meet a face that looks like it has weathered several OKRs and at least one product named after a gemstone. Behind him: shelves, books, a plant that has known loss and recovery.

“Alright,” he says, leaning back. “Why here?”

It’s the laziest question and, weirdly, the most honest. The right answer is never **“Because comp is competitive”**. The right answer lives somewhere between **I researched your S-1** and **I want to be useful in the chaos you actually have**.

I decide to tell the truth with edges sanded for travel.

“Because,” I say, “I like building clarity in places that default to noise. Your surface area is large, your ambition is noisy, and the job is to turn both into a small set of decisions people can actually execute. I am good at that. Also—”

I pause long enough to be human.

“—this particular problem space matters to me. You make things that reduce friction for people who don’t have time to think about your product all day. That’s my favorite audience: civilians.”

He smiles. “Civilians,” he says, tasting it. “Okay. And what’s the hardest version of the job we’re not telling you?”

“Two,” I say, holding up a finger he can’t see. “One: you’re going to ship a success that looks like a failure because the metric you picked won’t move for 90 days, and no one will remember why you said that was okay. Two: three teams will be right, at once, in different frames. Someone has to fuse frames without turning them into a sludge of compromise.”

He nods slowly, which is either agreement or the sandwich. “And what do you do when leadership isn’t aligned?” he asks.

I smile, reflexive. “Oh, we’re always aligned,” I say. “We’re aligned on different sentences.”

He laughs. It loosens the room.

“Okay, Alex,” he says, like we just earned first names. “Give me your favorite failure, fast.”

I resist the urge to run an encore of my montage hits. Instead I pick a smaller, uglier failure—one that never made it onto a slide.

“Quarterly plan,” I say. “I believed an estimate because I liked the person who gave it. We missed by 21 days and deserved to. I apologized in writing, reset the plan, and changed the ritual: we stopped accepting estimates without dependency receipts. We also put the **‘kill date’** on every recurring meeting title so momentum didn’t impersonate evidence.”

He’s nodding. “And what did you *do*?”

“I wrote the doc that made it impossible to repeat. Then I asked a peer to audit me for three weeks.”

“That last part,” he says. “Why?”

“Because I didn’t trust that my newly improved self would last longer than a week without accountability.”

He grins. The plant behind him approves.

He pivots. “What do you look like on a bad day?”

“I over-explain. I try to charm time. I forget that ‘We’ll see’ is not a plan.”

“And on a good day?”

“I publish a clear decision, narrative included, that lets ten people move without pinging me.”

“Alright.” He glances at something off-screen. “Let’s talk *visibility*,” he says, enunciating like a thesis.

Here we are: the heart of the thing.

“People confuse visibility with performance,” he says. “What’s your relationship to it?”

I take a breath. “Respectful. Strategic. Lightly skeptical. I think visibility is a **tool**, not the work. But if you ignore it, you’ll do the work in a closet and wonder why no one visits. So I manage visibility like I manage caching: **warm it just enough** so decisions don’t cold-start.”

He smiles with his eyes, which is a director-level trick.

“Walk me through that.”

“Three layers,” I say, holding up invisible fingers.

“**Up:** I send the one-paragraph ‘Here’s the decision, the bet, and the risk’ note with a date to revisit.

Sideways: I publish receipts where neighbors live, so we don’t re-argue last Wednesday.

Down: I run ‘Friday Firsts’—one first we shipped that helped a real user, even if the metric won’t twitch for weeks.”

“Friday Firsts,” he repeats, writing it down. “That’s cute.”

“It’s also existential,” I say. “Teams go numb without evidence of forward motion. A tiny truth on Friday keeps Monday from being a rumor.”

He laughs softly. The room feels briefly safe.

“Okay,” he says. “Tell me something you would *not* do here.”

“I would not invent urgency to motivate people. It works once and breaks trust forever. I would also not let a roadmap calcify just because it’s pretty. We pin it, then we pin it again.”

He nods. “And what’s your bar for shipping?”

“Two-part test. **Would I ship this to my own mother? And Is the rollback plan written by someone who actually knows how to roll back?**”

He snorts. "Alright, I like the mom test."

"Second only to the 'nobody wakes up to be a metric' test," I say. "We ship for humans; metrics are how we keep score without making up legends."

He leans forward, elbows on desk. "You seem... collected," he says. "How do you do when things go sideways?"

"I narrate the plan," I say, "out loud, at a pace people can breathe with. Then I shrink the next step until someone can do it without asking permission. Panic is mostly a scheduling problem."

He sits back, thinking. The sandwich is now a memory. We have slipped into that rare zone in interviewing where two people are trying on the future without lying to each other. It feels like trust; it might just be good lighting.

He asks one more question, of the bar-raiser variety.

"If I called three people who hated working with you," he says, "what would they say?"

I don't flinch. "They'd say I negotiate scope like a lawyer when deadlines are real. They'd say I sometimes turn meetings into documents. And they'd say I defend IC focus time like it's a wildlife preserve."

"And would they be wrong?"

"Only about the lawyer part," I say. "I'm nicer."

He laughs. “Okay, Alex. Last one: **Why should we *not* hire you?**”

I consider the honest answers, because I will try to adjust the calendar before I adjust humanity, because I will ask you to pick a bet even when it ruins a slide, because I am not impressed by heroics that are just poor planning with better stories.

“Because,” I say, “if your culture runs on last-minute adrenaline, I’m going to try to replace it with earlier oxygen. If you need a firefighter who loves gasoline, that’s not me.”

He nods slowly. “Fair.”

We sit in a gentle silence. If we were in person, this would be the part where he stands and escorts me to a door while telling me nothing and somehow everything. On Zoom, it’s two faces contemplating the same sentence: **Can we do good work together without apologizing to our weekends?**

“Thanks, Alex,” he says, reaching for the polite close. “This was... useful.”

“Likewise,” I say. “Tell the sandwich it did great.”

He smiles, then gives me a small human thing, the rarest currency of the loop. “You’re very clear,” he says. “That’s not common.”

“Clarity is a mood stabilizer,” I say, because I can’t help myself. He laughs once more, then we do the waving thing. The screen goes black.

For a long ten seconds, I stare at my reflection in the dead monitor. It looks like a person who could be hired. It also looks like a person who knows that **merit is measurable only when someone remembers to update the spreadsheet.**

I close the laptop and let the room breathe.

* * *

The ten seconds after a bar-raiser always feel like standing in a doorway you can't see. I make tea on purpose—ritual is gravity for the mind—and try to route my attention to anything not named **Inbox**. It works for eleven minutes. Then I look.

Nothing.

I decide to virtue-signal to myself and open a book I have definitely been reading for three months. The sentence I land on is about “attention as an act of love,” which is either profound or a roast of my email habits. I flip the book upside down like that will slow time. It does not. Time, like Roadmap Item 3.2b, moves when it wants.

My phone vibrates with the **soft buzz that changes your posture**. The subject line is a Rorschach test for hope:

Thanks for your time

I open it like a person peeling a bandage from an expensive tattoo.

Hi Alex,

Thank you for spending time with the team. We'll be in touch soon with next steps.

— *Recruiting*

Recruiting has learned the art of **saying nothing with excellent formatting**. I picture a room full of very kind people trying to make sadness sound neutral. I close the email and remember the one loud truth of the loop: **you are not the protagonist of the process**. You are a tab in somebody else's Thursday.

I take my tea to the window and watch a delivery driver become a poem about momentum. That line makes no sense. It feels right anyway. The mind, deprived of closure, will romance anything that moves.

The next morning, the real verdict comes at a time of day that implies someone is batching decisions off a spreadsheet: **8:12 a.m.** Subject line:

Decision on your application

The body is a three-paragraph haiku about fairness and volume. It thanks me for my excellence and tells me they went with a candidate who more closely matches the role at this time. I always admire the phrase **at this time**; it keeps the door open just enough for drafts. The email contains two performative kindnesses: (1) **Let's keep in touch**, and (2) **We'll retain your resume**. The first is true if I keep in touch. The second is true if you consider **/archive** a folder.

I sit for a beat, feeling two clean feelings: disappointment and relief. Disappointment because effort loves outcomes; relief because the audition is over and I can stop pretending a chair is a stage. The third feeling arrives late and dressed plainly: **clarity**. I don't have to hold this in my head anymore.

I reply anyway—brief thanks, real gratitude for the human time spent with me, a small note about “**If you think there's a near-miss somewhere adjacent, I'm happy to explore it.**” It is not a plea. It is a hand left out in weather.

Then I do the thing that has saved my career more times than ambition: I **write it down while it's still noisy**.

- What worked: **Story containment**. The two-minute arcs landed.
- What wobbled: **Metric placement**. I hid the number too late in two stories; seniority reads fast.
- What surprised me: The bar-raiser's hunger for **visibility hygiene**. The **Friday Firsts** line might have been the interview.
- What I'd repeat verbatim: “**Panic is mostly a scheduling problem.**” That sentence opened doors inside his face.

I also write the sentence I didn't say because it belongs here, not in a Zoom: **Merit is measurable only when someone remembers to update the spreadsheet**. It's not bitter; it's logistics. Visibility is a sibling of memory. If no one saw it and no one wrote it down, it barely exists in systems that make decisions by simile.

I close the notebook and decide to leave the apartment before I start staging imaginary rebuttals for people who are definitely

at lunch. On the way out I grab the ring light, then put it back. It isn't cursed. It's a tool. So am I.

On the sidewalk, a bus exhales; a dog makes eye contact like we share a secret about **treats**; a construction crane draws a straight line in the air and calls it progress. I feel mildly ridiculous for narrating my own morning. I also feel better. Narration is how I metabolize ambiguity. That is the real gift of the loop: it forces you to practice telling the truth in small containers.

By mid-afternoon, an email lands from Nina, warm enough to reheat a mood. She offers real, specific feedback. This is rarer than stock options vesting during a reorg. She says I was "clear, concise, wise about risk," and adds one line that pries something open:

"You read as very senior, if anything, we wanted one spikier story where you took a risk that scared you."

I thank her quickly because gratitude has a half-life. Then I copy that sentence into my notebook and draw a small box around **spikier**. There is a version of me that sanded off too many edges to look safe. I could have brought one scar in high resolution. I did not. I was trying to pass the ritual. I forgot that sometimes the ritual wants to see blood (ethically sourced, metrics attached).

I spend an hour finding that story, not for them but for me: the risk that scared me **and** paid off **and** taught me a rule I still use. I sketch it in the Decision Story frame, then run it through the two-minute cutter. It fits. It's truer with the bruise still visible.

By evening, the fail has turned into a **tool**. I don't feel victorious. I feel employed by my own standards again.

I order dinner I can pronounce in under two syllables. I put my phone across the room like it's contagious. The loop is over. The work resumes: live a good day, write it down, tell it short.

A week later, because the universe enjoys symmetry, a different company calls. A simpler loop, three people, one bar-raiser with a sense of humor and an allergy to heroics. The offer email arrives on a Tuesday at 4:06 p.m., a time that suggests a decision made by actual humans. I accept with the same clarity I brewed as tea: **not because I am owed a Yes**, but because I have a job I can do without lying to my weekends.

It's not triumph. It's alignment.

I say yes, because the work fits and the people sound awake.

Not because I "won," but because I won't have to pretend so hard.

Twelve weeks later, the earlier company emails again:

A similar role has opened up, are you still interested at this time?

I laugh, gently. Of course the circle completes itself. Maybe I'll talk to them. Maybe I won't.

Either way, I finally understand the loop:

You pass when you stop needing the outcome to prove your worth.

I passed the interviews but lost the illusion that they were about me.

And that, ironically, is what made me ready for the job I did get.

Truth Check

1. **The loop isn't talent discovery; it's fairness theater.**
The point is not to find the single "best" candidate—because that concept collapses under variance and committee voting. The point is to generate artifacts (scores, rubrics, summaries) that make a decision **defensible** in a system that must believe it is fair. When you accept that, you stop performing genius and start delivering **containable truth**.
2. **You're graded on narrative control under latency.**
Interviews measure your ability to **compress reality** on demand. That's why the same stories work across loops: the real evaluation is, *Can you put a messy past into a small box without lying?* Senior reads as **calm nouns + past tense + one metric**.
3. **Visibility is a cache, not the source of truth.**
You warm it just enough so decisions don't cold-start. **Up** (one-paragraph decisions), **sideways** (receipts where neighbors live), **down** (**Friday Firsts** so teams remember progress). Visibility unmanaged becomes rumor; visibility over-managed becomes politics. Manage it like **TTL**, not like religion.
4. **Culture fit is a vibe check with a budget.** Here's the real equation:

$$\text{Culture Fit} = (\text{Competence} \times \text{Agreeableness}) \\ \times \text{Threat Perception}$$

You can reduce **Threat Perception** without faking it: speak briefly and precisely, source claims, promise receipts, defer credit out loud. That's not submission, it's **latency reduction** for trust.

5. **Merit exists; memory decides.**

If no one wrote it down, it did not happen in the systems that make promotion and compensation decisions. Write the doc you wish someone else would write about you. Then write the one you owe your team.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: The Loop of Destiny

Truth: Interviews reward **visibility**, not **virtue**. Virtue helps; visibility wins ties.

Tool: The 30-Second Outcome Pitch (Decision → Delta → Why It Mattered).

- **Decision:** Name the choice in plain language.
- **Delta:** Quantify the change (metric, % or days).
- **Why It Mattered:** Tie to a human or a risk you eliminated.
- Optional **Lesson** for senior seasoning: *"Next time I'd..."*

Try This Monday: Record **three** "decision stories." Keep each under **60 seconds**.

- Story A: **Scope you killed** (and why it helped).
- Story B: **Risk you instrumented** (before shipping).
- Story C: **Stakeholder you unblocked** (with a doc, not a meeting).
- Play them back until you can hear **verbs** and at least **one number** per story. If you can DM it as a single Slack message, it's ready for the loop.

Micro-habits that compound:

- **Default to dates.** Replace “We’ll see” with a revisit date.
- **Invite a witness.** When stakes rise, add a peer to your decision trail.
- **Publish receipts.** One page, one decision, one owner, one metric.
- **Friday Firsts.** Share one first you shipped that helped a real user—small, real, weekly.
- **Kill heroic process.** If fire drills are the only way to ship, change the calendar, not the people.

Self-checks you can run in 30 seconds:

- **Breath Test:** Can you say your story in one breath without panicking? If not, the story is still a rant.
- **Noun Test:** Count nouns vs verbs in your answer. Tilt toward verbs.
- **Metric Placement:** Put the number in the top third of the answer. Seniority is a sprint, not a scavenger hunt.
- **Anti-Blame Filter:** If your story makes you the lone genius or the lone victim, it's not ready.

Mini-frames you can steal:

- **Decision Spine:** *We chose X over Y because Z; risk is R; we'll revisit on D.*
- **Visibility Sandwich:** *One-paragraph up; receipts sideways; Friday Firsts down.*
- **Kindness-as-Throughput:** *Politeness lowers latency; precision lowers rework.*

Sentences worth keeping in your pocket:

- “Let me narrate what I’d try, in order.”
- “I can give you the decision now and the receipts by end of day.”
- “The risk isn’t shipping; it’s believing our first metric.”
- “I’ll default this to a date so we don’t confuse momentum with evidence.”
- “I don’t need credit; I need the API.”

A note for the anxious (hello, friend): You can be both **authentic** and **prepared**. Prepared does not mean fake; it means you practiced telling the truth **concisely**. The loop is a stage, bring your real stories, tighten the script, trim the adverbs, keep one scar visible.

A note for the confidently chaotic (also hello): Your charm is not a metric. Put one number in the first sentence. Ship the number, then charm the room.

The one-sentence heuristic for “senior”: You sound senior when you can explain a hard thing to a busy person without making them feel dumb or late.

THE LOOP OF DESTINY

A slightly rude reminder: No one is hiring you to **change the system** on Day 1. They are hiring you to **survive it elegantly**, and, when the calendar trusts you, to make it slightly less stupid.

CHAPTER 2:

The Onboarding Olympics

My first day began with a 19-page checklist titled **Welcome Aboard** and ended with a help-desk ticket titled **Still Here**.

Step one: log into the portal to request access to the portal. Step two: confirm my identity by selecting all squares that contained a traffic light. Half the grid was traffic. One square was an orange sunset pretending to be a caution signal.

I chose therapy. Okta disagreed.

HR had sent a pre-boarding message the night before: “So excited to welcome you, Alex! **:party:** Please complete these light modules.” Light, in this context, meant three security trainings, an insider-trading video narrated by a man who had never blinked, and a 90-minute course titled **Email Tone for Leaders**.

It taught me how to write “Per my last note” without sounding like I meant “Per my last note.” There was a practice quiz. I passed three security trainings before learning what my job was securing.

The VPN melted on contact. “Authentication failed,” it said, like we’d gone on one date and it didn’t feel a spark. The help-desk bot, Chirpy, immediately DM’d me on Slack.

Chirpy: Hi Alex! I'm your friendly IT companion. Try turning it off and on again! **:smile:**

I turned it off and on again. The VPN respawned as if summoned by a ritual. For a moment, the world held.

Then: email. I was greeted by precisely 31 "Welcome, Alex!" notes in the general channel, complete with confetti, emojis, and profile photos blurred by the witness protection program. I thanked everyone individually. The channel auto-archived my replies for "high activity." Somewhere, a machine defined me as spam.

Access confirmations rolled in with the certainty of a horoscope. "Your request for Finance-Shared-S3 is Pending." "Your request for Analytics-Prod-BigQuery is Pending." "Your request for Pending is Pending." Every step promised access; every confirmation email said pending, like the company's favorite word was a cliffhanger.

At 11:00 a.m., a calendar notification arrived: COMP—Anti-Harassment Training (LIVE). Good. Live humans. The host was punctual, cheerful, and muted for ten minutes. Someone finally typed "MUTE?" in the chat. The host unmuted to say, "Can everyone hear me?" The chat exploded with clapping emojis that sounded like rain on a tin roof. We progressed. I answered each poll with the answer most likely to keep me employed.

By lunch I had two badges, five logins, and exactly zero access to anything I could name in a sentence. I had learned that my team sat in "Growth & Partnerships," which was either sales or not sales depending on whether we hit quota. My manager, Maya, sent a warm welcome:

THE ONBOARDING OLYMPICS!

Maya: Thrilled you're here. Let's keep the first week light. Shadow, listen, absorb. We'll get you access to everything.

I believed her. Systems, however, believe in themselves. There's no villain here, just code that defends itself from entropy.

At 2:40 p.m., the LMS quizzed me: "Is data privacy important?" I clicked "Yes", just in case they were watching. It congratulated me for demonstrating leadership potential.

At 4:10 p.m., the VPN kicked me out for inactivity while I was typing. I logged a ticket on the internal help desk:

Title: VPN disconnects during typing

Impact: Medium (my soul is leaving my body)

Steps to Repro:

1. Type
2. Keep typing
3. Watch it all go dark

Chirpy replied instantly: "We have received your request! SLA: 3–5 business days." I pictured my request queue as a very small raft drifting down a very large river, past a sign that read Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Want Access.

At 5:02 p.m., a final email landed: "Your direct deposit has been set up." Good. At least my money could get into the system. I closed my laptop. The ticketing portal pinged one last time: Status Updated: Still Here.

On paper, I had joined. In practice, I was spectating.

* * *

Day two, I tried to do the thing you do at a job: use data to understand what we sell and why we sell it. The data lived in a warehouse named for a sea creature. If you know, you know. I didn't. I opened a ticket.

Title: Access to **Abyssal-Prod**

Reason: Analytics (new hire)

Approver: Unknown (the form asked me to name my gatekeeper)

The ticket traveled like a rumor through departments. Data Ops read it and re-labeled it Analytics Infra. Analytics Infra re-labeled it Finance Security because the tables lived near money and money carries a scent only certain teams can smell.

I asked my onboarding buddy, Priya, how this worked. She sent a smile that felt like a hug.

Priya: Shadow systems. The docs say "open a ticket." The real way is "DM Sagar, ask nicely, and include your manager on the thread."

Alex: Why isn't that in the docs?

Priya: Because the docs are folklore written by survivors.

I started a private doc called *Things That Exist / People Who Know*. Page one was a list of tools with names that sounded like indie bands:

THE ONBOARDING OLYMPICS!

- **Cradle** (HRIS): for pretending hiring plans are real
- **Nimbus** (Billing): for translating revenue into moral victories
- **Hatch** (Access Control): for requesting the right to request things
- **Abyssal** (Data Warehouse): for numbers that answer “maybe”

Next to each tool, I added “Ask ____” with a person’s name. Next to each name, I added “Peak hours: ____.” Because people were time zones pretending to be colleagues.

The ticket pinged back: “Insufficient justification.” I escalated with more adult words: “Product analysis to support Q3 run-rate forecast.” It moved forward one square like a pawn that didn’t believe in itself. Then it stalled again.

I learned the mini game: gather approvals. The form listed potential approvers like a family tree of reluctant uncles. I scheduled fifteen minutes with each of them and used the same script.

“Hi, I’m Alex. New on Growth. Is there any reason I shouldn’t have read-only access to Abyssal-Prod?”

Most were kind. One said, “We’ve had incidents.” I nodded as if I knew what incident meant in this tribe. Another said, “We’re tightening controls.” I said, “Love controls.”

A third said, “Talk to Finance Security.” I said, “I will,” and put Finance Security on my Things That Exist page with three exclamation marks and the note “They dress like adults.”

Meanwhile, Priya coached me through the company's internal dialect.

Priya: Don't say "I need access." Say "I'm trying to support Maya with X, and I'm blocked on Y. Would love your guidance."

Alex: So it's the same sentence, but the verbs pay rent.

Priya: Exactly. Also, attach a calendar.

I attached a calendar. Approvals perked up like cats hearing a can open. A funny thing happened: the more people I put on CC, the more important my access became. Social proof is the lubrication of process.

Still, the system had tricks. One auto-closed my ticket because I replied "thanks" instead of adding a new comment. That's not gratitude; that's sabotage. Another sent me a survey asking if my issue was resolved. I clicked No and it replied, "Great! Closing now." I reopened and wrote a paragraph that would have made my high school English teacher weep.

Sidebar: Mini-Formula

$$\text{Access Time} = (\text{Approvals}^2 \times \text{Time Zones}) \div \text{Patience}$$

I filled in numbers for fun:

- Approvals: 4
- Time Zones: 3
- Patience: 0.75 (measured in coffees per hour)

Result: $(16 \times 3) \div 0.75 = 64$ hours to read a table called orders.
Empirically correct.

While I was waiting, my calendar invited me to a ritual called Analytics Infra Office Hours. Ten of us joined, cameras off, and described our blockers to a man named Basil who spoke softly and moved tickets with the authority of someone who knew where the skeletons were filed.

“My request is awaiting review,” I said.

“By whom?” he asked.

“By the concept of review,” I said.

Basil chuckled. “Add me. I’ll shepherd it.” Shepherd was exactly the word. He guided my ticket through a valley of acronyms and emerged with a URL that opened like a vault. I saw tables. I saw rows. I saw the kind of truth that can only be aggregated.

I messaged Priya in relief.

Alex: I’m in. I can query.

Priya: :party: emoji

Alex: What do I query?

Priya: Oh, right. The schemas are...historical. Start with orders_v3_frozen and **not** orders_current.

Alex: Why not current?

Priya: It's not.

This is how I learned about shadow systems, the parallel maps teams keep because the official one is a museum. There was an internal wiki, yes. It read like a constitution: inspiring, occasionally accurate, and referenced mainly in arguments. The living knowledge lived in DMs, in old decks, in code comments written by people who left with their laptops.

I added a new section to my doc: **“Words That Mean Something Else Here.”**

- **Current** → “Outdated but emotionally relevant”
- **Deprecated** → “In production”
- **Approved** → “Identified for future negotiation”
- **Ownership** → “You own everything until it breaks”
- **Flat org** → “Matrix with altitude sickness”

By Thursday, I had opened enough tickets to qualify for a frequent-flyer program. The help desk sent me a celebratory badge: **Top Collaborator**. I printed it, virtually, and taped it to my virtual wall.

I met Sagar (the folk hero of access) via DM. He wrote three lines of SQL that did more for my week than seven hours of orientation. He also asked no questions, because he'd seen this movie. He sent a link to a private Confluence page titled “Read This, Don't Tell Anyone I Gave It to You.” It was a graveyard of abandoned but lucid explanations.

Sagar: Use this as your starting point. Most of the KPIs were renamed but the math stayed.

Alex: Why?

Sagar: Rebrands migrate faster than systems.

My ticket—the ticket—finally flipped to **Approved** with a timestamp that suggested someone, somewhere, had logged in at 1:13 a.m. to click a button labeled “**Let him see the numbers**”. The portal celebrated with a confetti animation. I watched it in the dark like a small victory parade on a weekday.

Frustration turned into craft. I stopped asking for clarity and started building it.

* * *

Orientation was a Zoom room with 200 names and 0 faces, a constellation of initials vibrating over company wallpaper. The host’s audio fizzed like a soda can, “We’re all one team - some of us twice”, and the chat, an obedient tide, replied with **:claps: :claps: :claps:** as if applause could steady bandwidth.

Slide 1: **Vision**. Slide 2: **Values**. Slide 3: a stock photo of people in blazers laughing at a spreadsheet. Someone posted “Love the culture!” Someone else posted “+1.” The host welcomed us again, now unmuted, and asked for a round of introductions. Silence, the kind that grows a coat, then mercifully the next slide.

The Chief Culture Officer appeared with a square jaw and a springy cadence. “We don’t believe in hierarchy,” she declared. “We believe in **leadership at every level**.” The next slide listed twenty-five vice presidents like a credits roll after a superhero

film: VP, Growth. VP, Growth Strategy. VP, Strategy for Growth. VP, Strategy for VP Strategy. The titles multiplied like rabbits released into PowerPoint.

In the chat, a question: *“How does leadership at every level work in a matrix org?”* Answer: “Great question! We empower ownership.”

I typed a note to myself: **Ownership = You own everything until it breaks.**

Breakout rooms arrived without warning, shuttling eight of us into a virtual vestibule. No cameras. A person named **T** said, “I’m new to Partnerships.” Another, **A**: “I’m returning after two years.” We went around the circle describing roles that sounded like weather reports, partly strategic with a chance of enablement. Someone asked, “What are you most excited about?” The room offered variations of “impact” and “learning” like we were bidding at an auction where the prize was purpose.

Back in the main room, an SVP shared the **Operating Principles**. My favorite was **Bias for Action** delivered via a five-step approval flow. Another was **Frugal by Design**, showcased with an animated slide rendered on a MacBook Pro connected to three monitors. The irony wasn’t sharp; it was ambient, like humidity.

There was a moment of genuinely good content, the Safety team covered real stories with specificity and grace. The chat turned sincere. For a few breaths, we were not performing. Then the moment passed and we were back to the script.

THE ONBOARDING OLYMPICS!

The **Translator Tile** appeared in my head—the small table that helps rationalize the gap between slogans and lived experience:

What they say

“Flat organization”

“Ownership culture”

“High bar for talent”

“Leadership at every level”

“Move fast”

“Stretch projects”

What they mean

Matrix with altitude sickness.

You own it until it fails.

We still don’t have enough chairs.

Staircase with no exit.

Move; then we’ll ask why.

Two jobs with one title.

At Q&A, someone typed: *“How do we balance speed with quality?”* The answer was, “Through collaboration!” Collaboration meant applause emojis and a follow-up deck.

Orientation closed with an anthem reel: quick cuts of product shots, city skylines, and a slow-motion high five blurred into abstraction. The host waved. Our initials waved back. Cameras off; culture on mute.

I didn’t feel lied to. I felt narrated. The words were sincere, the system older than sincerity. The people believed in the story; the story believed in itself. Somewhere inside that loop, I’d have to find reality.

I DM’d **Maya**: *“Orientation complete. Energized, somewhat theoretically.”*

She replied with a smile and a calendar invite titled **Priorities**. A staircase with no exit is still a staircase. You just have to choose your floor.

* * *

The calendar said **Priorities** but the meeting started like a weather report.

“We’ve got big rocks,” Maya said. “Two for this quarter, one for the half.”

“What are the rocks?” I asked.

“Acquisition quality and partner expansion,” she said, which could mean anything from landing the moon to changing button text.

I needed specifics, not barometric pressure. “What does success look like in numbers?” I asked. She paused, not evasion, calibration.

“Good question. I want net contribution per cohort trending up, and time-to-first-value shaving off at least a day,” she said. I nodded like I had a North Star. It felt more like a constellation: pretty, wide, hard to navigate without myth.

I spent the afternoon triangulating. I asked **Sophie** (Product Director) what mattered. “We need a story for QBR,” she said. I asked **Glen** (Sales Ops) what mattered. “We need MQLs that don’t collapse into spam,” he said. I asked **Priya** what mattered. “We need to stop arguing with ourselves in dashboards,” she said.

Three truths, all valid, none portable without context. That’s when **the 3-People Rule** arrived like a species that had always existed, I’d just never named it:

When information conflicts, ask three people: a manager, a peer, and a skeptic.

If two agree and one rolls their eyes, follow the eye-roller.

So I looked for the eye-roll. Not disdain—fatigue. The body language of someone too tired to lie. I found **Tomas**, an engineer whose hoodie looked permanent. He maintained the ingestion pipeline nobody wanted to own but everybody wanted to interrogate.

“What’s breaking us?” I asked.

“Definitions,” he said, not looking up. “Everyone renames the same thing to win their slide.” Then he looked up. “If you want to help, freeze one definition and take the beating for it.”

Warmth flickered under the hoodie. Skeptics are not cynics; they’re guardians who forgot to ask for recognition. I wrote **freeze a definition** on a yellow Post-it and stuck it to my laptop.

I drew a two-by-two on a notepad: (**Agreement, Accuracy**) on one axis, (**Ownership, Ouch**) on the other. I charted answers like weather systems: Sophie’s story was **high agreement, medium accuracy**, strategically necessary cloud cover. Glen’s MQLs were **low agreement, medium accuracy**, stormy but true. Tomas’s definition was **low agreement, high accuracy**, the cold front that clears the air and makes everyone reach for a jacket.

Mini formula on the page, not to be shared, just to convince my brain:

$$\text{Clarity} = (\text{Notes} \times \text{Contradictions}) \div \text{Time}$$

The numerator I could raise; the denominator I could respect.

I asked three more people—**Finance**, **Customer Success**, **Support**—and color-coded their answers on a wall of sticky rectangles that had started to resemble a mosaic of respectable disagreement. A pattern emerged: everyone was measuring **conversion**; no one agreed on the **moment** of conversion. Was it account creation? First active use? Revenue six weeks later?

I pinged Maya: *“I think our first fight is the moment. Can I draft a definition and see who bleeds?”*

She sent back a knife emoji and a heart.

By evening I had a draft: **Time-to-First-Value** meant the span between **first credentialed login** and **first successful core action** (defined per product). Not perfect, but an anchor. I floated it in a small Slack thread: Maya, Priya, Tomas, Sophie, Glen. The reactions were a tiny focus group of the human condition—thumbs-up from Maya, eyes from Priya, check from Tomas, raised hand from Sophie, question mark from Glen.

We debated for 21 minutes. The number mattered less than the ritual: we could now disagree with a shared noun. By the end, we had one sentence we could point at. It would be broken by Friday. That was okay. Craft is maintenance.

The eye-roller DM’d me afterward.

Tomas: Thanks for writing it down. Nobody writes it down.

Alex: I like paper. It loses fewer arguments.

Friday morning, I opened a blank doc and titled it “**One-Pager: Growth - Q3**”. If clarity wouldn’t be granted, I’d in-voice myself.

1) Mission: Help the company grow revenue by increasing the percentage of new accounts that reach first value within 7 days, and by improving net contribution per cohort through higher activation and healthier unit economics.

2) Owners (Humans, Not Slides)

- **Executive Sponsor:** Maya (Dir., Growth)
- **Product:** Sophie (PM), Tomas (Eng)
- **Data:** Priya (Analytics), Alex (me)
- **Ops / GTM:** Glen (Sales Ops), Lina (CS)
- **Finance Partner:** Arjun

3) Decisions (Known / Pending)

- **Known:**
 - TTFV definition = login → first core action
 - Activation metric = completion of 3 core actions in 14 days
 - Primary dashboard =
growth_activation_hub_v1 (Priya to own)
- **Pending:**
 - Incentive alignment for Sales on “qualified activation”
 - Deprecation timeline for orders_current (use orders_v3_frozen)
 - SLA for event completeness (pipeline latency targets)

4) First Wins (2 Weeks, Visible)

- Publish TTFV definition + glossary in Confluence; link in #growth.
- Ship a draft dashboard with cohort view + activation steps.
- Run 5 customer call-backs to validate “first value” moments.
- Send weekly Friday note with progress + blockers (short, human).

5) Risks / Antidotes

- **Risk:** Competing activation definitions re-emerge.
- **Antidote:** Freeze definitions with timestamp; archive past versions.
- **Risk:** Shadow systems undercut credibility.
- **Antidote:** Mirror critical tables into a shared layer; publish owners.
- **Risk:** Orphaned “wins.”
- **Antidote:** Tie each deliverable to a metric and a decision.

6) How We'll Know It Worked

- TTFV median down from 5.2 days → **4.0 days** (Q3).
- 14-day activation rate up from 23% → **30%** for new cohorts.
- Dashboard adoption: **>30 weekly active internal users.**

I kept it to one page the way a dam keeps water to one river. I sent it to Maya and CC'd the humans I'd named. Subject line: **One-Pager: Growth — Q3 (Draft for beating up)**.

Maya replied: “Love this. Let’s do something like this.”

I stared at the screen. **I did.**

Priya added hearts. Tomas added a link to the pipeline SLA draft. Sophie suggested swapping a metric. Glen asked if we could sprinkle some MQL fairy dust. We tweaked, not re-architected. The document circulated quietly, then loudly. People started copying the format, **One-Pager: Billing, Q3, One-Pager: Support, One-Pager: Data Reliability**. If clarity is handmade, templates are looms.

By lunch, my One-Pager had been forwarded twice to people with **VP** near their names. By end of day, the Chief of Staff asked if I could “share the framework at Monday’s leads.” Share, like air. Framework—like furniture. I said yes, and felt the small, private pride of a thing done right for the right reason, even if the reasons would be rebranded later.

At 5:53 p.m., Maya forwarded my doc back to me, cc’ing a wider group, and wrote, “This is a great start, **let’s** build something like this for the org.” The **let’s** landed with the gentle sting of being quoted to yourself. I smiled anyway. It wasn’t theft; it was absorption. Systems don’t steal; they metabolize.

On my desk was the yellow Post-it from Tomas: **freeze a definition**. Next to it, I added another: **publish a page**. Onboarding had been a maze. I wasn’t out of it. But now I had chalk.

Closing reflection, typed into the One-Pager footer where footers pretend to be ignored:

Nobody owns clarity here. You rent it, one page at a time.

Three weeks later, my One-Pager appeared in a promotion deck. The deck was not mine.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: The Onboarding Olympics

Truth: Clarity is handmade. No system delivers it; you manufacture it out of half-sentences, expired docs, and three conflicting calendars.

Tool: The One-Pager, Mission / Owners / Decisions / First Wins. It's less a document than a mirror. Hold it up to your chaos until something coherent blinks.

Try This Monday

- Title a blank doc “*One-Pager – [Team Name] – [Quarter]*”.
- Write three lines you're sure of and two you're still guessing. Label the guesses.
- Send it to your manager and two peers with the subject “Draft for beating up.”
- If it gets forwarded, congrats—you've been promoted to *Unofficial Department of Clarity*.

Micro-habits that compound

- **Name every noun.** If a meeting starts with “they,” ask “who.”
- **Timestamp truth.** Add *as of <today>* to every metric; staleness loves ambiguity.
- **Build a shadow glossary.** It’s folklore until you alphabetize
- **Treat tickets like yoga:** breathe, stretch, release resentment, reopen.
- **Copy your future self.** Write updates you’ll be grateful to reread in three months.

Self-checks you can run in 30 seconds

- **Map Test:** Can you draw your team’s mission on one napkin? If not, it’s not real yet.
- **Access Math:** If you need three approvals to open a file, open a second doc - “*Approvals I Now Regret.*”
- **Slack Audit:** For every emoji reaction you add, subtract one unresolved blocker.
- **Calendar Smell Test:** If half your invites include the word *sync*, you’re out of rhythm.

Mini-frames you can steal

- **The 3-People Rule:** Ask three; follow the eye-roller.
- **The 90-Day Map:** Every Friday, update what you’ve learned, who helped, and what’s still mysterious.
- **The Breadcrumb Loop:** Each time you solve a maze, drop a short note in the wiki so the next wanderer loses less blood.

- **The “Let’s” Detector:** If someone says “Let’s do X,” and you already did, reply “We did, Here’s the link.” Watch evolution happen.

Sentences worth keeping in your pocket

- “I’m new, not lost—just mapping.”
- “I documented it because I love future arguments.”
- “The system isn’t broken; it’s just allergic to first days.”
- “Pending is our company’s spirit animal.”
- “I’ll write it up so we can stop debating adverbs.”

Notes for the freshly hired (hi, friend):

You’re not supposed to know where anything is. Nobody does. The difference between confusion and progress is the doc you write while confused.

Notes for the veterans reading this at 11 p.m.:

If a newcomer asks a question and you sigh before answering, congratulations—you just qualified as the local oracle. Please log the prophecy.

One-sentence heuristic for “senior”:

You sound senior when you can explain a maze to a newcomer without apologizing for its existence or pretending it’s fine.

Slightly rude reminder:

No one’s paying you to endure bureaucracy; they’re paying you to narrate it into something usable. The first draft of leadership is a good README.

CHAPTER 3:

The Promotion Mirage

Subject: :party: Congratulations!

Body: Your title has changed.

Footer: Your life has not.

The email arrived at 5:58 p.m. on a Friday, which is when good news pretends to be a boundary. I'd already closed my laptop in an aspirational way and was staring at the office plant. The plant stared back like a veteran of many reorganizations. It leaned slightly left, which I had decided meant unimpressed.

I reopened the laptop. Inbox: 1 new. The subject line had confetti and a tiny golden trophy emoji, which, if you squinted, looked like a widget the procurement team would decline for budget reasons.

"Dear Alex,

We're thrilled to share your promotion to Leadership Level 2, effective Q1."

We were in Q2.

Leadership Level 2 - The mythical rung between "Doing the Work" and "Doing More of the Work for the Same Pay."

A level so virtual it existed only in PowerPoint and morale decks.

HR called it growth. Finance called it neutral.

* * *

HR Bot replied to the thread before I could.

“:claps: Proud to Announce: Leadership Level 2! You did it, Alex! Learn about your journey → [Leadership Pathway].

The journey was a six-step loop of stock photos. In each photo, a diverse group of leaders pointed at a whiteboard so clean you could eat promotions off it.

My plant leaned a little farther left.

A calendar invite chimed in: “30-Min Quick Sync - Monday - Next Steps for Level 2.” It was from my manager, who had attached a smiling gif and a doc title that sounded like a bicycle: “New Initiative Kickstart.” The body text read, “Well deserved! Tiny favor, could you also take point on the backlog workstream? You’re empowered to lead it end-to-end.”

I Googled my new title. The top result was our own job page, which listed responsibilities suspiciously similar to my old responsibilities, except the verbs were taller.

- Old: “Own the thing.”
- New: “Drive ownership of the thing.”

If a helicopter could be a word, it would be “drive.”

I scrolled down to compensation. There was a tasteful paragraph about “market calibration,” followed by the loving phrase, “We’ll circle back on comp adjustments.”

My inbox called me a leader; my calendar called my bluff.

Slack pinged with a private message from Priya: “Congrats!! Proud of you! Also: does it come with a helmet?” She added a sticker of a cat with a laptop and the caption: boss-ish.

I stared at the email again, and the email stared back with a thousand bullet points. The footer had a legal paragraph that was nervous about my feelings. It said: “This communication is confidential, contains forward-looking titles, and does not constitute a promise of meaning.”

I replied to my manager with a short, responsible smiley. Then I closed the laptop again, less aspirational this time, and told the plant we would not be getting a bigger pot. The plant seemed fine. It had been promoted to Partial Shade years ago and never looked back.

I’d finally earned the right to attend the same meetings from a taller chair.

* * *

At 9:02 a.m. Monday, #general erupted like a volcano of digital kindness. **:party:** and **:claps:** rained down in a thread I hadn’t started. HR Bot kicked it off with, “Let’s celebrate our newest leaders! **:rocket:**” followed by a gif of fireworks that looked like an expensive budget cut.

Then the congratulations started marching in, copy-pasted but sincere. The sincerely copy-pasted version of me felt seen.

“Congrats Alex!!” said Darren, whose slides could sell seawater in a monsoon.

“Welcome to the club!” said Lisa from Legal, who had once saved me from a footnote.

“Long overdue!”, A director I had met once at a coffee machine during an outage.

Template congrats were still congrats. If someone handed me a balloon shaped like a sentence, I would hold it.

HR Bot added a reaction to HR Bot’s message. I respected the hustle.

A new invite popped into my calendar: “Leadership Orientation (Zoom) — 60m — Cameras On.” The agenda promised: “Stepping Up Together!” with an exclamation mark that had the desperation of a startup hoodie.

At three minutes past the hour, thirty small faces appeared in squares, each furtively checking their own square while pretending to listen. There were name labels and kitchen cabinets. We were intimacy adjacent.

The VP smiled with practiced warmth. “Big day, team. Leadership is not about title,” she said, on the leadership call about titles. “It’s about stepping up for our people.”

Slide 2: a staircase illustration. **Stepping Up Together!** The stairs were labeled “Mindset,” “Ownership,” and “Scale,” like a children’s book for adults who could expense snacks.

I took notes in the margins of my own skepticism.

- Same stairs, new slogan.
- “Scale” is “mindset” wearing heels.
- “Ownership” is the same backpack with more rocks.

The VP advanced the deck. “As you grow into Level 2, you’ll find that leadership is a verb. You’ll lead through influence, clarity, and ritual.”

I imagined verbs attending meetings. Influence had a blazer; Clarity was late; Ritual took notes.

The next slide featured a quote in a font so large it felt like a demand. “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” The footer cited “African Proverb or Power-Point.”

In the chat, HR Bot posted a form: Leadership Swag Kit - Confirm Your Size. Two hours later, a brown box arrived at my door with a mug reading Boss Mode, a pen that didn’t write, and a notebook too handsome to use.

Slack continued to celebratory clap in the background like a kind neighbor who would not go home. My DMs filled with microwave-warm messages and a few actual hugs spelled out with parentheses.

Then, the inevitable Translator Tile assembled itself in my head, rubber-stamped by years of attendance:

Translator Tile - Welcome to Leadership

What they say	What they mean
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“Leadership level”	“Now you fill forms.”
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“People first”	“People last, calendar first.”
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“Empowerment”	“Accountability without budget.”
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“Influence at scale”	“Send better emails to more people.”
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“Raise the bar”	“Raise the slide count.”
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The VP smiled into her webcam. “One last thing,” she said. “We’re standardizing on a new One-Pager format for executive updates. Thank you to ‘a cross-functional partner’ whose document set a new standard for clarity last quarter.”

The screen displayed a heavily redacted screenshot, but I recognized the corners and the phrasing. It was the One-Pager I’d written during Onboarding Olympics, now with the identifying metadata shaved off like a witness protection haircut.

I took a screenshot of the redacted screenshot. The plant leaned closer, judging. I considered adding a tiny watermark to my future work: Stolen with Love.

In the margins of my notebook, I wrote our unofficial equation for post-announcement reality:

$$\text{Happiness } \Delta = (\text{Title Change} \times \text{Slack Reactions}) \\ - (\text{New Meetings})$$

Slack reactions peaked around 10:30 a.m. By 10:45 a.m., calendar invites outnumbered confetti by a healthy multiple. One of the invites was named “Leadership Sync - Cohort 8,” followed by “Leadership Sync - Extended,” and “Leadership Sync

- Recurring.” The only thing that scaled faster than leadership was leadership syncs.

In the hallway between Zoom and Slack, I brewed coffee stronger than my self-esteem. The mug said **Boss Mode**, but every sip tasted like schedule.

Back at my desk, I noticed the plant had stopped leaning. It had decided I didn’t need its opinion. Plants are masters of boundaries. It photosynthesized in silence. A professional.

The Orientation wrapped with the VP’s final encouragement: “Remember, leadership is a choice you make every day.” She clicked End Meeting for All like a benevolent god.

Two seconds later, HR Bot pinged: “Complete your Leadership Mindset Training #1 by EOD Wednesday.” I clicked the link and was greeted by a looping video of a man in a cardigan telling me about empathy while a piano begged us to feel something.

Halfway through the module, a Slack ping: my manager.

“Team needs you in the weekly allocator review. Since you’re Level 2 now, you can drive it. LMK what you need from me!”

I wrote back, “Sounds good. I’ll take the first pass.” Then I opened a doc and titled it, **Allocator Review - (Leadership Way)** because parentheses are strategy.

On impulse, I scrolled back to the Orientation screenshot with my One-Pager silhouette. I stared at the lines I recognized like seeing your handwriting in someone else’s tattoo. Credit is a shy animal. It likes to live in meetings you’re not invited to.

At noon, a Slack message from Priya:

“Lunch?”

I typed back: “Calendar says yes, but calendar lies.”

She replied with a fry emoji and the words: “Congrats again. Helmet ETA?”

I took another sip from **Boss Mode** and found, to my surprise, the faint outline of pride underneath all the jokes. I had wanted this. Wanting things inside big companies is messy: the ladder curls back and takes attendance. But sometimes you want the classroom and the field trip.

In the afternoon, the Leadership Swag Pen failed to sign the thank-you card I was writing to the director who had advocated for my promotion. I switched to a normal pen, which did not feel like a betrayal.

Before I logged off, I added a tiny footer to my One-Pager template for next time: Receipts live here → [link]. A superstition. A boundary. A beginning.

Mini-Formula Card (sidebar):

$$\text{Happiness } \Delta = (\text{Title Change} \times \text{Slack Reactions}) \\ - (\text{New Meetings})$$

Units are subjective; results may vary; consult your plant.

Week two at Leadership Level 2 and I had acquired three new things: a mug that believed in me, a calendar that did not, and the professional confidence to rename “status” as “sync.”

“Leadership Sync - Cohort 8” was a meeting where we summarized what we would summarize in “Leadership Sync - Extended,” which existed to align what we aligned in “Leadership Sync - Recurring.” If you looked closely, each agenda had a subtle shading difference, like nesting dolls with different eyebrow confidence.

My manager pinged: “Delegate more this quarter.”

I typed: “Absolutely.”

I did not have reports. Delegation is a spiritual practice when you have nobody to hand things to. I forwarded a task to Future Alex and marked it complete.

To cope, I started a doc called **Decision Logs**. It had a neat table with columns for **Decision**, **Delta**, and **Why It Mattered**. Nobody opened it. In our org, documentation is like a dashcam: vital after the crash, invisible before. Still, the doc earned me two unearned adjectives — *proactive* and *thoughtful* — which in our culture meant “we didn’t read it, but the nouns were aligned.”

HR Bot materialized with the timing of a sitcom entrance:

“Reminder: Complete Leadership Mindset Training #4 by Friday! Today’s lesson: Listening as a Verb.”

By #4, I had learned to nod at 16 resolutions. The course taught micro-expressions: the **Executive Nod** (short, neutral), the **Managerial Squint** (signals diligence), and the **Leader's Lean** (indicates you're in frame with purpose).

Meanwhile, the calendar, my new invisible boss, multiplied. Meetings settled in like cats on warm laundry. I tried to block "Focus Time," but it was promptly invited to a sync.

At "Leadership Sync - Extended," we agreed to "cascade context downward." There was no downward. We were a raft of peers tossing buckets into the same ocean and calling it cascade.

I added a recurring 30-min event titled "*Think*". The calendar flagged a conflict with **it**.

Between syncs, Priya DM'd: "Congrats again. Helmet shipped?"

Also, do you now get a chair with adjustable integrity?"

I typed: "Yes. It can recline into accountability."

The gift box's pen still didn't write. I considered that a metaphor and kept it for morale.

Small absurdities piled up into the shape of a reality:

Promotion Reality = (Old Job + Meetings²) – Time to Think

I taped the formula to the bottom of my monitor like a runner's mantra. Then I opened the Decision Logs and recorded a tiny win: **Killed Scope B** (Delta: -2 sprint weeks, Why: risk to

reliability). I pasted a link into my weekly note to my manager with the subject **Receipts**. It felt like leaving breadcrumbs for a future version of me who might be lost in the woods of performance season.

The plant watched me create a fourth “Leadership Sync.” I whispered, “It’s fine. We’re scaling.” The plant did not scale; it flourished. A professional.

By Thursday, the hallucination had a soundtrack. Every meeting hummed with the same vowels: *strategy, visibility, alignment, scale*. They braided into a rope we used to tow our week into Friday. On the towpath, someone always shouted, “Great energy, team,” as if energy were a deliverable.

My manager sent a late note: “Proud you’re stepping up. Remember, this level is about outcomes, not outputs.”

I looked at the week’s outcomes: more meetings, nicer nouns, fewer sentences of thought. In the quiet after my laptop’s fan stopped, I admitted a small truth that felt bigger than the mug: I cared about outcomes. I’d just accidentally optimized for invitations.

I moved “**Think**” to 8 a.m. The calendar accepted the meeting with a satisfied vibration. Then it invited “**Think**” to **Leadership Sync - Recurring**.

“I became a people manager without the people,” I told the plant. “So I bought a bigger monitor.” The plant approved my budget.

* * *

Quarterly Review season arrived with the crisp smell of evaluative adjectives. “We’ll need a deck,” my manager said, like a doctor saying “You’ll feel a small pinch.”

I opened a blank slide and typed: **Leadership Impact - Q2**. The cursor blinked with a patience I couldn’t match. I dragged in a graph I trusted and felt a surge of competence. Then I counted the bullet points: one. The slide was honest to the point of career risk.

Slide 2 arrived to protect me from Slide 1. It featured a tasteful stock photo of three people high-fiving in a conference room so bright it erased poor decisions. I added the caption: **Alignment as a Service**.

“If performance were measured in transitions, I’d be VP.” I wrote it in my notebook, then underlined **VP** because it made the joke braver.

By Slide 7, the deck had a rhythm - one slide of **Receipts**, followed by two slides of **Vibes**. Receipts were numbers, links, shipped decisions. Vibes were “narrative density”: well-lit arrows, leadership verbs, and that picture where people point to a sticky note like it’s a port in a storm.

I added a slide titled “**What I Unblocked**” and listed three things that would have died if not gently shepherded. Then a slide titled “**Where I Said No**”, because “no” is the shadow that makes “yes” visible. Then “**What I Learned**”, which felt indulgent until I realized learning is one of the only metrics that compounds even when nobody’s watching.

I DM’d Priya: “How many slides is leadership?”

She replied: “12. Impact is slide 3, but they’ll love slide 9’s gradient.”

Dress rehearsal with my manager went well in the same way turbulence is “weather.”

“Great storytelling,” she said. “Maybe add exec-ready framing. Start with ‘Why it mattered.’ Lead with alignment.”

I opened Slide 1 and wrote: “**Why It Mattered**”. Then I told the truth in a font they could read: **We reduced time-to-clarity from 3 weeks to 4 days for Teams A–D by killing Scope B and pre-deciding the defaults.** (Receipts linked.)

We presented to the directors in a room where the air smelled faintly of travel mugs and optimism. I walked them through the numbers, then the narrative. Heads bobbed in the small, synchronized nod that says “we understand and we approve in public.”

A director unmuted. “Love the storytelling,” she said. “Slides per insight is our new unit of truth.”

The deck was forwarded company-wide as “a great example of strategic visibility.” Someone added it to a wiki page titled “**Leadership Exemplars**”. My One-Pager from Onboarding appeared in the appendix as “a template we recommend,” credited to Nobody and Team.

In the chatter after the meeting, praise had the weight of helium. It lifted me an inch and then drifted toward the ceiling where all good intentions gather.

Walking back to my desk, I met the quiet I'd been avoiding. It was friendly. The quiet said: **You just performed leadership theatre.** Not a crime - more like karaoke. Fun, resonant, occasionally cringe.

On the screen, my calendar expanded to fill the afternoon with **Alignment Readouts**. The rectangles pulsed like a tame heartbeat.

"My calendar promoted itself," I told the plant. "I now report to it."

The plant enjoyed its sunlight without a meeting.

I opened the deck one more time and slipped in a final slide I knew nobody would discuss: **Receipts** → three links to decisions with before/after screenshots. The slide had no photo and no gradient. It felt underdressed. It felt like work.

A small calm landed. Complicity with eyes open is different from drift. I wasn't angry. I was... resolved. If the game rewards narrative density, I can narrate without lying. I can keep receipts. I can make the calendar eat last.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: The Promotion Mirage

Truth Check: Promotions often repackage the same work with more visibility. You get more rooms, more rectangles, and more verbs. The risk is mistaking attendance for impact. Titles are costumes; they change how others look at you and how you look at mirrors. But they don't ship on their own. What ships is documentation, decisions, and the unglamorous

“no” that keeps a team from building a museum of half-finished ideas. The moment you stop equating the title with your worth, you free your calendar from needing to prove you. Visibility can create promotion; only ownership creates peace. Keep receipts. Lead out loud when needed, quietly when useful. And give the credit away on purpose — you’ll sleep better, and your inbox will confuse itself.

Truth: Visibility creates promotion; ownership creates peace.

Tool - WINS Log (Decision → Delta → Link): Write three entries per month.

- Example 1: **Decision:** Killed Scope B. **Delta:** -2 weeks. **Link:** /decision-42
- Example 2: **Decision:** Pre-decided defaults for intake. **Delta:** -12 emails/bug. **Link:** /intake-defaults
- Example 3: **Decision:** Moved review cadence to async doc-first. **Delta:** +4 hrs focus/wk. **Link:** /cadence-shift

Try This Monday: Send your manager a “receipt note” with three WINS links. One sentence each.

Reminder: Titles fade; receipts compound.

Leadership gave me a bigger calendar. And the calendar was starving.

* * *

@calendar: Recurring event created — “Leadership Sync (Forever)”

@AlexReed: Added as optional, feels mandatory.

@plant: reacted with :claps:

* * *

Mini Formula Card (design sidebar)

Promotion Reality Index (PRI)

$$\text{PRI} = (\text{Old Work} + \text{Meetings}^2) \div \text{Clarity}$$

Tip: Increase **Clarity** with one doc, one owner, one deadline.
Watch PRI drop without changing your title.

Translator Tile — The Deck

What they say

“Great storytelling”

“This scales”

“Let’s amplify this”

“Exec-ready”

What they mean

“We liked the slides.”

“Other teams can copy the template.”

“Forward to three slacks and a wiki.”

“Shorter, louder, with bigger arrows.”

“My calendar got a promotion too, I now report to it.

ACT II:
Rituals That Run the Place

CHAPTER 4:

Calendar Thunderdome

“Decision Sync (60m). Outcome: schedule longer Decision Sync.”

That was the title, and somehow also the prophecy. Nine little squares arranged like a polite tic-tac-toe where no one wanted to win. Six time zones, two dogs, a toddler in a dinosaur onesie, and me—frozen on a face that looked like I had just been told the role of “Alex” would be recast. Someone said, “Can you see my screen?” and I could. We all could. We had been seeing it for three weeks. At this point, the screen and I were on our second anniversary.

I unmuted, Zoom re-muted me, and a chorus of “You’re on mute” arrived with the punctuality of gravity. When I finally spoke, my audio lagged exactly long enough to make me agree with a plan we had already rejected and buried with appropriate rites. A person driving from a moving car won the unannounced “Best Background” award.

The agenda was a screenshot of last week’s agenda. Someone said, “Let’s align,” which we had collectively learned is corporate for “we aren’t deciding this today.” Someone else said, “Let’s put that in the parking lot,” which is corporate for “delete politely.” “Take it offline” performed its usual function: a hospice blessing for a conversation that will never be seen again.

The facilitator cleared his throat in a way that suggested minutes were being taken, if only by the passage of time. We scrolled through a list of open questions that had accumulated like lint: who was the owner (unknown), what was the metric (uncertain), what did success look like (nice), and when would we decide (calendar willing). I wrote “DECISION?” in my notebook and drew three boxes around it as if I could trap the word with geometry.

My plant leaned into the frame, seeking sun or resolution. The calendar, which has been anthropomorphized in my mind for years, nudged the invite out from 60 minutes to 90, a gentle on-screen prod that read, “This could be longer.” Of course it could. Eternity has fantastic availability.

We concluded heroically by scheduling a longer Decision Sync. A victory shaped like a calendar link.

I left the call two minutes early and felt like I’d shoplifted gum.

The week mutated without asking for permission. Monday’s Decision Sync begat Tuesday’s Pre-Sync, which begat Wednesday’s Retro-Sync. Thursday opened with a “Sync about Retro of the Pre,” the kind of title that makes you question whether language is a shared hallucination. There is a moment in every modern office where you realize you’ve worked all day and only moved meetings around like furniture in a room you never sit in. This was the moment, except it lasted four days and reoccurred every hour.

My manager slid past my desk in the way managers do when they are about to convert you into a concept. “We need more visibility,” he said.

“Then turn the lights on,” I said, mostly to my plant. He laughed, because he assumed it was a joke, and our relationship survived another quarter.

By lunchtime, “Lunch” had moved itself to 3:10 PM, and “Break” had simply become “Email.” I attempted the simple human act of getting a sandwich and was waylaid by three calendar reminders that chimed together like bells at a strange wedding. The pop-ups formed a conga line: Are you joining? Are you joining? Are you joining? The relentlessness was impressive, like the tide. I clicked “Maybe” on one and felt like I had confessed a minor sin to an unforgiving god.

A friend texted to ask how my new role was going. I wanted to answer honestly: imagine signing up to build things, then discovering your primary tool is attendance. Instead, I wrote, “Good! Lots of alignment,” which is the grown-up version of telling your parents school is “fine.”

Back in the grid, new invites arrived with the distressing fertility of fruit flies. “Stakeholder Check-In,” which included no stakeholders and very little checking in. “All-Hands,” which reliably involved two hands and a thousand anxious fingers. “Leadership Sync,” a phrase I respected for its confidence; leadership was implied, sync was promised, neither was regularly spotted. Everything carried the whiff of ritual, a polite incense that said: if we all appear at the same time, no one will be individually responsible for what fails to happen.

Midweek, I tried to decline a meeting. Calendar greeted my rebellion with a soft warning: “Are you sure you want to decline? This is part of a series.” Series is a powerful word. It implies plot, urgency, narrative arc. It suggests that if you skip

this episode, you won't understand the finale. I declined anyway and waited for lightning. Instead I got a follow-up invite titled "Pre-Brief before Series." This is how empires are built.

As the invites piled up, I noticed a new posture in myself: a kind of corporate flinch. Not fear exactly, but a reflex that made me click Yes because No had paperwork. Priya, my co-conspirator in survival, messaged me to ask if we needed another call about "the decision" (a term with so much mileage it should have earned reward points). "Need is a strong word," I wrote. "Like oxygen." She booked it anyway. Title: "Pre-Oxygen." That one actually made me laugh.

If the calendar was a deity, HR bot was its herald. Little reminders to stretch appeared like fortune cookies. Remember to take a ten-minute walk. Please hydrate. Breathe. I replied once that I was already walking, in circles between meetings. The bot responded with a confetti emoji and a link to a mindfulness course. My plant, bless it, remained supportive and green.

On Thursday morning, I tried a new tactic: I turned off my camera and listened. Not to the words—those were fine, a gently seasoned soup of "align," "visibility," "ownership," "risk." I listened for decision. Decision has a sound. When it's real, you hear someone accept weight. Sometimes it's an inhale. Sometimes it's a sentence that ends with a date. We had neither. The closest we got was, "Let's regroup after the offsite," which is like saying we'll cross that bridge when we've rebuilt it in a different city.

There was a quiet embarrassment that spread when we reached minute fifty and no one could name what we were deciding. We filled it with recap. Humans hate silence. Businesses pun-

ish it with calendars. Someone shared their screen again; the screen loved being shared and showed it. I wrote “Who decides?” in my notebook. The question hovered there like a bat.

By afternoon, the week had hardened into the shape of a lava map. I opened the calendar overlay and the hours glowed red and orange, a topography of heat and regret. I found a patch of unclaimed white space at 6:30 PM and felt something like nostalgia. I used to see these all the time. They were called “evenings.”

That night, the breakdown arrived not with drama but as a minor crack. I stared at my whiteboard and drew a small flowchart titled “How a Decision Dies.” It began with an Invite (hope), continued with an Agenda (last week’s hope in screenshot form), traveled through a Conversation (high volume, low wattage), spilled into Action Items (nouns wearing verbs), and then metastasized into Follow-up Call (hope sequel), before concluding with a Retro (autopsy; cause of death: “misalignment”). I looked at the chain and realized the only step not requiring a calendar was the only step that mattered. Writing.

Priya pinged me, and we opened a quick call. The kind that still felt human because it was two people pretending to be offstage. “Decisions don’t happen in meetings,” she said, not unkindly. “They happen in docs people skim during meetings.”

It didn’t even sting. It landed like something I once knew and forgot while trying to be agreeable.

I told her the part that scared me: I had started to measure my days by attendance. When I looked at the week, I could tell you how many “alignments” we had performed, like a chorus repeating the same note, but not how many choices we made, not how many risks we absorbed, not how many people we trusted. I could tell you who showed up, not who stepped up. The difference had compacted into fatigue, the expensive kind you can’t sleep off because it’s a moral one, not just a physical one.

She didn’t fill the silence. Priya is good at letting a sentence stand. “Write it down,” she said. “One page. Or one slide. What we’re deciding, the options, the pick, the date we’ll default if nobody stops us. A DRI. That’s all. If we put that on top of the invites, we might survive.”

One slide. It sounded insultingly simple, like “eat vegetables.” But simplicity can be a weapon—lighter, faster, harder to argue with because there’s less to catch.

I took a sticky note and wrote it in block letters so my future self wouldn’t overcomplicate it: OSDM — One-Slide Decision Memo. Context (two lines). Options (three real ones, not three shades of Yes). Pick + Why (one sentence). Default-by (a date; silence counts as yes). DRI (one name that will not vaporize under scrutiny). Review date (when we’re allowed to be wrong with dignity).

I stuck it to the whiteboard, stepped back, and watched my plant lean toward it like a disciple. I don’t ascribe meaning to plant gestures, but this felt like agreement.

A calendar notification popped up with perfect comic timing: “Your next meeting in one minute: Meeting to Name the Working Group.” I laughed in a way that would have worried a therapist and hit Decline. The room didn’t explode. No corporately anointed lightning struck. The earth continued its rotation. Outside my window, people walked dogs and carried grocery bags and none of them knew anything about “Pre-Oxygen.” It was strangely grounding.

The relief didn’t last. Fatigue doesn’t disappear because you have a good sticky note. But it rotated, like a chessboard flipped, and I could finally see the pieces. I sat down and tried to quantify the thing that had felt unquantifiable. I wrote a small formula and circled it.

Decision Velocity = Docs Written ÷ Hours of Debate.

It wasn’t meant for a slide. It was a private admission. The numerator had been zero for too long.

I imagined the slide itself and felt my heart rate notch up with the clean panic of a first jump off a low diving board. The fear had two parts. Part one: the room would ask, “Is this allowed?” as if I had proposed we compress three weeks of stall into a single sentence. Part two: the room would say yes, and then I would be the person associated with the Yes. A DRI who could be blamed if the decision was wrong. It is easy to worship “alignment” because it’s a church where responsibility dissolves into incense. Writing puts your name back on the offering plate.

I texted Priya that I would do it. She replied with a thumbs up and a small knife emoji, which I chose to interpret as “cut

through it” and not “prepare for battle.” I spent twenty quiet minutes drafting a one-slide template, and the quiet itself felt novel. The house hum lowered. Slack whisper-pings receded to a manageable background murmur. For the first time all week, I was not walking in mental circles. I was pointing.

Between the lines, guilt tried one last negotiation. It reminded me that people feel included when you invite them. It warned me that a slide is a hard border and borders exclude. It said decisions made in writing can feel cold. I answered it with the only mercy I had: a Review Date. We will revisit. We will look again. We will put a number on what “wrong” looks like so we can roll back without shame. Writing can be cold if it’s a verdict; it’s warmer when it’s a promise to check.

I looked up and realized hours had not passed, just the right amount of minutes that return you to yourself. There is a certain peace that arrives when you are holding a small, sharp tool instead of a very heavy, very dull one. The calendar chimed once more. It informed me that a new recurring event had been created by someone with many senior titles: “Post-Alignment Debrief (Weekly).” I felt an affection for the earnestness of it. We were trying, all of us, to make risk feel communal. It’s just that the instrument we were using played only one note.

I closed the laptop and sat quietly in my living room. The absence of little squares felt like a moral victory. I could hear my own breathing and the sound of my refrigerator being employed as intended: to keep food cold, not emotions. For five minutes, nothing asked me if I was attending. The plant looked greener, though I’m aware that might have been the lamp.

On the edge of sleep later that night, I dreamed about a meeting where everyone arrived on time and nothing happened. In the dream, it wasn't frustrating. It was funny. We all turned to the camera and shrugged and then left. The calendar blinked empty for a second and I felt wealthy in the way you do when a day returns some of itself. I woke up with the sentence I would need the next morning: Approve by not disapproving by Thursday.

Tomorrow would bring the Leadership Sync, and I would bring something lighter than our rituals and heavier than our excuses. It might get me praised or ignored; it might get me nothing at all. But it would get me out of the hour alive.

And for now, that was enough.

* * *

Friday morning. Leadership Sync.

Nine faces. Twelve titles. Zero accountability.

This was the calendar's boss level, the final arena where decisions came to die wearing good clothes.

I'd spent the night trimming the OSDM (One-Slide Decision Memo) slide like it was a confession I could only deliver once. One slide, one shot, one chance to be ignored more efficiently.

The agenda arrived in the chat five minutes late. It was the same agenda as last week, but in PDF form, proving that formatting can masquerade as progress.

Priya sent me a side DM: “*Ready?*”

I replied, “*Define ready.*”

We began with “quick updates.” Each “quick” ran about seven minutes, not including the segue into unrelated triumphs. When my turn came, I shared screen and dropped the OSDM. One slide. No animations. Just words that looked suspiciously like decisions.

* * *

Title: Auto-Approval Experiment - Pick a Default, Not Debate

Context: Approval queue wait time up 2-3 days, Revenue dip on day 10.

Options:

1. Add Headcount (quick relief, ongoing cost)
2. Tighten Policy (risk fewer false positives, lose some revenue)
3. Auto-Approve < \$200 (eng time now, ROI later)

Pick: #3 - reversible & measurable.

Default-by: Thursday EOD if no blocker posted.

DRI (Directly Responsible Individual): Priya.

Then silence, not the awkward kind, but the kind that smells like everyone’s waiting for someone else to volunteer an opinion they can later critique.

A director broke first. “Wait, is this a deck?”

“No,” I said. “It’s a decision.”

The VP frowned. “And this fits on one slide?”

“That’s the feature,” I said.

Ten seconds of quiet. Someone unmuted. “I like the ‘default-by.’”

Another voice: “Who decided Priya is DRI?”

Priya: “I did.”

A few laughs. The good kind, nervous, respectful, a little scared.

“Okay,” the VP finally said. “Default Thursday. Let’s see what happens.”

That was it. No twelve-slide follow-up. No “parking lot.” No “sync on next steps.”

We ended thirty-seven minutes early.

Everyone looked confused, like we’d broken a law of thermodynamics. Meetings don’t end early. They just roll downhill until someone schedules another one.

When the call closed, I stared at my calendar. Empty for the next half hour.

I didn’t know what to do with it. I walked around the floor like a man who’d misplaced his guilt.

* * *

Slack blew up:

Priya: *Did we just... decide?*

Darren: *I think we did.*

VP-M: *Great leadership in action!*

Alex: *We accidentally created time.*

HRbot joined the celebration. *Congrats on saving 37 minutes! Enroll in our “Time Management Basics” course.*

I typed, *Can the course be one slide?*

HRbot reacted with **:celebrations:** and a link to a 90-minute webinar.

* * *

I used the half hour like it was contraband. Closed my laptop. Stood up. Stretched something that might have been my spine. This is what time feels like when it isn't wearing a badge.

Then the calendar tried a counterattack: three follow-ups appeared in under ten minutes, “Post-Decision Debrief,” “Risk Alignment,” and, my favorite, “Pre-Production Pre-Read.” All from well-meaning people who were raised by recurring invites. I replied to each with the slide and one line: Decision made. Default-by Thursday. Blockers go in the thread, not a room.

Two were canceled. One stubbornly stayed. I declined and added a note: If a meeting can't beat a slide, it shouldn't exist. No one argued. They just didn't know they were allowed to do that.

By lunch, the experiment was moving. Engineering posted a short update: auto-approve for orders under \$200 behind a toggle; metrics wired; rollback path clean. Risk added a line about sample auditing twice a day for the first week. Finance dropped a tiny table showing we could lose a sliver of revenue at the margin but likely make it back through reduced friction and fewer abandoned carts. It was the rare kind of thread that got quieter over time instead of louder. People wrote what mattered and left.

At 3:10 PM, Lunch finally occurred. Not as a slot but as food. Priya walked by my desk and tapped the edge of the slide printout I'd taped to the wall. "Feature complete," she said. "Ship the culture."

We checked first signals the next morning. Early numbers, not a victory lap: queue wait time down about 20% in the first 24 hours; error rate clean; support tickets steady. Enough to breathe, not enough to brag. We kept the guardrail in place and promised ourselves we'd roll back if the false-negative rate even sniffed the threshold. A decision you can undo is easier to sleep next to.

The OSDM leaked. A manager in another org pinged me: "Can I steal your template?" Another asked, "Is the 'default-by' line legal?" Legal replied in the thread: "We don't regulate grammar." That made my week.

Not everyone loved it. An ops lead DM'd me a polite objection: decisions shouldn't be "rushed" by a date. I sent back what I actually believed: dates don't rush; they focus. If we need more time, we move the date with a reason, not a vibe. He wrote "Fair" and added his name to the audit schedule. Culture doesn't flip in a day. It shifts when the practical thing is also the easy thing.

Late Friday, the VP forwarded the slide to a wider list with a subject line that included the word "innovation." My name was in there as a courtesy and Priya's as the DRI. That felt correct. Credit is messy in companies; the only reliable version is who touches the work after the meeting ends. That was Priya. I slept fine.

The calendar, wounded but not dead, tried a different move: a single invite titled "Standing Post-Mortem (Weekly)." It had no agenda and thirty people on it. I replied with a simpler counter: Add agenda to slide. If we fail the guardrail, we meet. If not, we log and move. The organizer wrote back "sgtm" and canceled the series. The plant looked greener again. I'm aware correlation isn't causation; I enjoyed it anyway.

By Monday, a small pattern had formed. We would start calls with a slide instead of a vibe. Titles changed from "sync" to verbs: Decide Migration Path. Confirm Staffing. End Legacy Discount. A miracle didn't happen. Work still took work. But the noise dipped, like the office had discovered a volume slider.

The best moment was unglamorous. A junior PM asked in a team channel, "Who's DRI?" and no one wrote "we all are." They waited until a name appeared. We'd taught the room a small rudeness that protects time.

We also learned the failure mode. On Wednesday, someone shipped a slide with three options that were really the same option in three fonts. The room sensed it. Priya sent it back with a helpful knife: “Three shades of yes. Try again.” The author did. The second version had a real tradeoff and a real risk, and the meeting ended in nine minutes with a real pick. Nine. We wrote it on the whiteboard like a sports record.

There were odd side effects. People started declining meetings with notes that read “Slide me.” Threads got shorter. Emails got tighter. A director asked me what OSDM stood for and, without meaning to, I said, “One Slide, Don’t Meet.” It got a laugh. We didn’t change the official name, but that’s how people remembered it.

Two days before the review date, the early gains held. Queue time stayed down; revenue recovered; audits were normal. Risk proposed reducing sample frequency if it stayed clean another week. Support offered to track any anecdotal weirdness and roll a weekly note into the decision log. All of it in writing. All of it searchable. The kind of hygiene you don’t notice until you don’t have it.

We kept our promise and did the review. Fifteen minutes, not sixty. The only question with energy was “What next?” We picked one: bump the threshold to \$250 for a three-day window and watch the same guardrail. Reversible change, compounding ROI.

The VP nodded, then asked, “Who’s DRI?” Priya didn’t look up from the numbers. “Still me.” It’s amazing how much smoother things go when a sentence ends with a period.

After the call, the VP messaged me: “This is good. Write up the ‘how’ so other teams can reuse.” I laughed at the recursion. The write-up would be one slide.

A friend from another company asked what had actually changed. I said we stopped renting alignment and started buying decisions. He said that sounded like a poster. He wasn’t wrong.

By the end of the week, the calendar looked... normal. Not empty. Not even light. Just reasonable, like a tool. The grid no longer had the glaze of a slot machine; the squares had names that described outcomes, not feelings. I still had long days. I still lost an afternoon to a cross-functional workshop that should have been two emails and a template. But the trend was unmistakable. Less theater. More verbs.

The team started a decision log in the wiki. Date, decision, DRI, default-by, review date, link to slide. Nothing fancy. The log did something meetings never did: it made progress visible. You could scroll back a month and see choices, not attendance. You could audit yourself. You could show a new hire what the team actually values without performing it in a room.

There was some politic fallout. My manager, who had be-moaned “visibility,” told his manager the team had “operationalized decision efficiency.” Fine. Give leadership a noun and they’ll love you back. In the hallway, he told me, “Good work.” In the channel, he wrote, “Kudos to Priya for driving clarity.” Also fine. We were playing for time, not trophies.

Friday, 4:45 PM. The office was in that in-between state where people pretend to work while mentally exiting. I packed up and watched the little notification dot hover over my calendar tab like a mosquito. I clicked. A new recurring event had appeared from a cousin org: “Post-Decision Celebration (Biweekly).” Thirty minutes. Optional attendance. No content. The calendar was inventing a party to lure us back into rooms.

I sent the slide template with a single line: Celebrate by shipping the next decision. Declined.

Walking out, I passed a conference room with a long meeting still going. Screens lit faces a pale blue. No one looked miserable. They looked suspended, like time was a liquid they were treading. I felt a little guilty for feeling lucky. Then I didn’t.

On the way home, I caught myself planning how to explain OSDM to someone who doesn’t care about templates. It isn’t the slide. It’s the posture. Writing first, decide by default, name a person, and make it reversible. It sounds bureaucratic until you live on the other side of it. Then it feels like oxygen with a calendar invite.

Later that night, I wrote up the short “how” for the wiki and added a small glossary to keep the team honest. “We’re not ready to decide” translates to “We haven’t written it yet.” “We need alignment” translates to “We need a sentence we’ll live with for two weeks.” “Let’s discuss live” translates to “We’re lonely.” Petty? Maybe. Useful? Always.

I ended the entry with a reminder: If you don’t end the meeting, the meeting ends you. It’s not wisdom. It’s gravity.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: Calendar Thunderdome

Truth Check: Meetings often feel like teamwork, but they're really collective risk insurance. Everyone attends so no one can be blamed. Real collaboration happens when someone writes the choice down, sets a date, and lets silence count as consent. Writing is faster, fairer, and leaves evidence that survives calendars.

Truth: Own the agenda or be owned by it.

Tool: OSDM (One-Slide Decision Memo): Context → Options → Pick + Why → Default-by → DRI → Review Date.

Try This Monday: Cancel one recurring sync. Replace it with a single OSDM slide. Send it in the invite. End the meeting the moment the pick is made. If no one objects by the default-by date, it ships.

Reminder: If you don't end the meeting, the meeting ends you.

Epilogue Ping

@calendar: New recurring event created - "Post-Decision Debrief (Forever)."

@AlexReed: Declined. Feeling something close to joy.

@plant reacted with :raised_hands:

CALENDAR THUNDERDOME

I shut my laptop and sat for a minute. Not triumph. Not even pride. Just quiet clarity. The kind that shows up when a system that feeds on your attention is forced to hunt elsewhere.

Some people ship code. Today, I shipped an ending.

CHAPTER 5:

Slack Enlightenment

We killed the meetings. Their ghosts regrouped in Slack.

Monday at 8:42 a.m., I opened my laptop and stared into a blinking green constellation: 982 unread emails. Every channel glowed like a forest fire with good intentions. #all-hands, #random, #urgent-clarity, #dog-pics. Someone had created #micro-urgent-clarity, which felt like a cry for help in hashtag form.

HR Bot had changed its profile picture to a quote in a gentle serif: “Responding is caring.” The calendar was mostly empty, a miracle I’d earned in last week’s Thunderdome, but the quiet felt performative. My day now belonged to an app that sounded like the thing my brain did before a bad decision.

The plant cam was still on my desk, its leaves glossy and unaware. Photosynthesis: off-grid, asynchronous, rebellious. I envied it. Meanwhile, the world had replaced meetings with paragraphs, and silence had become a bug, not a feature. Slack made me realize the opposite of asynchronous wasn’t synchronous. It was insanity.

A :calendar: ghost drifted through my status bar, Darren from Slides reacting to my “Meeting-free Monday” with a passive-aggressive :wave:. Priya messaged, “I miss the noise of meet-

ings. It made the confusion feel official.” I typed “Same” and watched the typing indicator flicker like a firefly in a jar, delicate and desperate.

By 8:46, I had triaged #general, #eng-bridge, #pm-sandbox, #qa-bugs, and #fun-lunch-ideas. Triage means “marked as unread again but with new shame.” This was the cold open. The heat would come later.

I used to think meetings were the enemy. Turns out, meetings were just the costume. Slack was the body.

* * *

Monday melted into mid-week. The Notification Economy was in full swing.

The green dot was the new gold star. People competed to be active first, and I could sense a new fitness emerging: the fastest reply with the most emojis and the least thought. The chat equivalent of sprinting into traffic and calling it agility.

The first ping arrived at 7:02 a.m. from Darren: “Quick question.” A 19-screenshot novella followed, documenting a bug that could have been summarized as “text wrapping weird.” He annotated each image with red circles that looked like bullet holes. “No rush,” he added. Translation: yesterday.

By 7:07 a.m., Lisa from Legal chimed in with “Friendly nudge on the privacy copy,” which is corporate for “this will escalate.” She added LOL at the end of her sentence. I read it as “I am dead inside, and you will come with me.” I replied with “On it!” which is Slack for “I just postponed breakfast.”

A translator tile began forming in my head—what they say versus what they mean:

“Quick question” = “Brace for 19 screenshots.”

“No rush” = “I needed it yesterday.”

“Friendly nudge” = “This will escalate.”

“LOL” = “I’m dead inside.”

“Thoughts?” = “Proof of life, please.”

“+1” = “I have no time but fear being invisible.”

“Adding for visibility” = “I hope you step on this rake, not me.”

By 8:30, my manager pinged: “Could we increase your Slack presence?” Interesting request. My presence had already colonized my spine. I hovered over the reply box and considered an auto-response: “I’ll circle back later.” The last time I tried that, I was upgraded to “unresponsive risk” in a quarterly sentiment deck. I didn’t know you could be a risk by not typing. My spirit animal was now the typing indicator: flicker, disappear, return with something half-formed and apologetic.

The metrics told their own comedy:

Unread emails 982 → 1,020 → 978 (the illusion of progress).

Channels joined: 14.

Channels remembered: 3.

Percentage of messages that could’ve been email: 92%.

Average time to first reaction: 7 seconds. (Faster than my coffee machine.)

“Slack’s motto should be ‘Never not pinging,’” I DM’d Priya.

She replied, “If dopamine were billable, I’d be VP.”

By noon, I had responded to nine threads, posted two gifs, and contributed one sentence that contained a verb and a number. It was my proudest moment. The sentence said, “Latency dropped 21 → 6 days after we made default-by dates mandatory.” Darren reacted with **:fire:** and then asked if we could put it on a slide.

Around 2 p.m., I noticed a new pattern: threads had turned into performative essays. People replied in paragraphs, citing themselves, quoting earlier parts of the thread like scholars in a paper about a paper. We were doing literary criticism on our own panic.

“Can we increase your Slack presence?” my manager had asked. I imagined answering literally: “Yes. I will place a photo of myself on every message like a watermark.” Instead, I typed, “Yep—testing new rituals this week.” It felt like adding a Post-It to a hurricane.

Typing indicators pulsed. “Love that,” she replied. “Let’s think about presence holistically.” Presence: the art of being seen in places where decisions aren’t made.

I ended the day having said a lot, but decided nothing. My brain felt like it had a hundred tabs open, none bookmarked, and the music was coming from a thread I’d already muted.

* * *

Thursday came like a dare. The Threadpocalypse started at 2:11 p.m. with a simple question: “For launch day, do we prefer a single decision channel or channel-per-workstream? #launch-ops.”

I wrote it. It was my shift at the steering wheel. I was sober, polite, and foolish enough to believe we could talk our way to clarity.

At 2:12, Darren replied with “Quick thought:” then posted a meticulous taxonomy of channels that could’ve doubled as a medieval family tree. #launch-ops-decisions, #launch-ops-logistics, #launch-ops-rollback, #launch-ops-cheer. He suggested a new channel for “celebratory retros”, the pre-scheduled party for the party that didn’t happen yet.

At 2:13, QA came in hot with “Depends on definition of decision.” It’s always the good ones who strike at the ontology. A small debate opened about what counted. “Decision” (verb versus noun) became a thread like an artery. Someone proposed a schema; someone else developed feelings about that schema.

At 2:14, an engineer posted a **:thinking_face:**. Another posted **:looking:**. A third posted a gif of an avalanche. I learned the hard way that **:looking:** and **:thinking_face:** constitute two rival philosophical schools: one is curiosity without commitment, the other is contemplation without deadline. A semantic war ensued about which emoji acknowledged nuance. Our future hung in the balance between pixels of skepticism.

At 2:16, Priya DM'd me a link: "Decision doc: 1 page. Context → Options → Pick + Why → Default-by date → DRI → Review date." She had built an OSDM in two minutes and exhaled gently. I posted it into the thread like a life raft. "Let's move here," I wrote.

Nobody clicked. The thread accelerated.

At 2:22, HR Bot parachuted in. "Loving the collaboration in action!" she chirped, sprinkling **:sparkles:**. "Reminder to check-in emotionally with your team during high-volume threads." I checked in with myself: I was fine and also decaying.

At 2:28, my original question was quoted out of context into #eng-bridge with the caption, "Alex suggests more channels; thoughts?" I had suggested the opposite. I watched my own message return to me wearing a fake mustache.

At 2:33, an exec dropped in with, "We should avoid decision-by-thread." The thread surged to agree, while also continuing to be a thread.

At 2:41, the count was 47 replies, 89 emojis, and 16 side debates, including a spirited argument about whether to consolidate #dog-pics with #random (for "discoverability"). #dog-pics mobilized quickly. Unrelated dogs were posted in protest.

At 3:06, the thread achieved a primitive sentience. It began to quote itself. People started writing "see above" and then linking to different places. I pictured a python eating its own tail while explaining the benefits of recursion.

$$\text{Slack Chaos Index (SCI)} = (\text{Replies} \times \text{Emojis}) \\ \div \text{Decisions.}$$

Our SCI was 417/0, which is mathematically illegal.

“If visibility were clarity, we’d be the sun,” I typed privately to Priya.

“Feels like we are staring at the sun,” she replied. “Which explains the blindness.”

At 3:27, QA proposed a “single-channel decision home with brief daily digests” and was immediately congratulated for re-inventing email. Someone posted a screenshot of our email icon, which I had forgotten existed.

At 3:40, a fresh wave came in from EMEA, just waking up and ready to replay our mistakes as a new conversation. The thread pivoted to a long detour about whether to use “Launch” or “Go Live.” The latter felt spiritual. The former felt transactional. An intern posted: “Go Live implies we were dead before.” People reacted with **:skull:**.

At 4:03, Priya posted the decision doc again. “We’re choosing single channel + daily digest,” she wrote. “Default-by: tomorrow 10 a.m. DRI: Alex. Review date: next Friday.” I reacted with **:heart-hands:** and also a real exhale. My lungs noticed.

At 4:05, someone asked if we could create a channel to discuss the digest format. Slack held its breath and then added a new channel.

At 4:28, the exec returned: “I like what’s happening here. Who owns the Summary?” DRI drifted around the thread like a plastic bag. I grabbed it mid-air. “I own it,” I wrote, and felt a small, private satisfaction. Ownership: the original green dot.

At 4:47, I minimized Slack for the first time that day. The silence hit like a warm towel. The beeps stopped. The green dots disappeared like fireflies at dawn. My ears rang with the echo of an app. Peace filled the room for thirteen seconds before the FOMO terror arrived. What if, in the next minute, the entire company decided something I disagreed with and named a building after it?

I reopened Slack. It was still there, like a city you move away from emotionally but can’t afford to leave. I closed it again. A mad idea surfaced: one hour off. I stood up—an actual, full-body act of rebellion in a sitting culture—and walked to the kitchen. The plant didn’t react because it’s enlightened.

In the hour that followed, the outlines of a rule formed. Meetings had taught me to verb the invite. Slack was about to teach me to channel my channel. Not everything needed a reply; not every reply needed a paragraph; and a paragraph could hold a decision if it wanted to.

I wrote three sentences on a Post-It:

Short: ≤ 3 sentences.

Structured: Decision / Risk / Next Step.

Scheduled: Send once per day.

I stuck it to the bezel where my camera could stare at it like a hostage note. I brewed coffee on purpose instead of in panic. Somewhere, a typing indicator flickered and died without me.

At 5:29, I opened Slack again, bracing for the catastrophe I had surely authored through neglect. The catastrophe didn't exist. The thread had continued to chew its tail. HR Bot had posted a mental health gif. Someone had booked a meeting to reduce our meetings.

I exhaled. Maybe I could do this differently. Maybe I could trade "presence" for "predictability." Maybe the most radical thing I could do was say the fewest true things at the exact same time every day.

Priya pinged: "You alive?"

I typed, "Yes. Also: about to try something."

"Please don't be a new channel," she replied.

"It's a smaller thing," I wrote. "Three sentences. Tomorrow morning."

Her typing indicator paused, then returned. "You'll get promoted to poet," she wrote. "I'll endorse."

I closed the laptop. In the reflection on the screen, I looked like a person who had turned off a faucet. The plant leaned a little toward the window, reaching for its own signal.

At **9:16 a.m.**, I hovered over the message box in **#launch-ops** like a diver hesitant about a pool that had recently hosted piranhas.

At **9:17 a.m.**, a time too precise to be accidental and too odd to be a meeting, I hit enter.

Decision Digest: 9:17 a.m.

Decision: Single channel for launch decisions (#launch-ops), daily digest at 9:17, weekly roll-up on Fridays.

Risk: Thread sprawl dilutes ownership; emoji storms mask disagreement.

Next Step: I'll post digest daily; DRIs reply only if factually incorrect. Default-by dates added to each item.

Three sentences. A tidy rectangle of oxygen. I stared at it the way cave people must have stared at fire, beautiful, dangerous, capable of cooking a whole animal or the wrong thing.

For four seconds, nothing happened. Then a small parade:
:thumbs_up: :prayer_hands: :plant: :raised_hands:

Priya responded, "This feels like breathing."

Someone asked, "Why 9:17?"

I replied, "Because 9:15 is when meetings start, and 9:30 is when chaos renews its lease."

A handful of **:laughing:** arrived, and then something I hadn't seen in a while: **the thread ended.**

I didn't know threads could end without a ceasefire agreement.

* * *

I kept going.

In **#eng-bridge**:

Decision Digest: 9:17 a.m.

Decision: Default-by dates on all critical tasks. If a decision lacks a date, the system assigns T+3 by default.

Risk: “Later” becomes “never,” and “never” becomes “surprised.”

Next Step: If you disagree with a default-by date, propose a new one with a reason. Silence equals consent, not confusion.

In **#pm-sandbox**:

Decision Digest: 9:17 a.m.

Decision: Feature flag names must be human-readable and handoff-safe.

Risk: Cryptic flags cause deployment roulette and breed superstition.

Next Step: Link the doc where the new naming pattern lives. Adopt for all new flags starting today.

I watched the **Signal-to-Noise Ratio (SNR)** lift its head like a sleepy cat.

Yesterday, that would’ve been **0 + Everything**.

Today it was something divided by less.

Not math — **hope**.

* * *

The first day's responses were warm. Lisa from Legal replied, "I can actually find the part I'm responsible for."

Darren wrote, "This is a vibe," which I translated as "I'm slightly sad there isn't a slide, but I'll recover."

The exec who once warned against "decision-by-thread" reacted with `:green_check:`.

Even HR Bot appeared: "Love this energy! Try our new course: Writing for Clarity `:bulb:`"

"Writing for Clarity," I DM'd Priya. "Isn't that a prerequisite for employment?"

"Only if we wrote job descriptions clearly," she replied.

* * *

I stuck with the ritual.

Day two, 9:17 a.m.:

Decision: "Go Live" vs "Launch", we'll use "Launch" in docs and dashboards; "Go Live" reserved for event comms.

Risk: Semantic drift confuses reporting and people.

Next Step: I'll update the glossary; team leads please propagate in your spaces.

Day three, 9:17 a.m.:

Decision: DRI for decision digests rotates weekly: this week Alex, next week Priya, then QA lead.

Risk: One-person bottleneck equals one-person burnout.

Next Step: Added schedule to team doc; if you're up next, prep two bullets before 9:10 a.m.

It took less than a minute to write each one, but it felt like I was laying down rails in front of a train.

The train didn't slow; it just stopped crashing into the same ravine.

By the end of the week, I had something that could stretch into a lifestyle.

Mornings became a small ceremony: boil water, grind beans, write 3S (Short, Structured, Scheduled).

The plant leaned toward the window; I leaned toward clarity.
:coffee:

* * *

People started copying the format.

Someone posted “3S for Design” —

Decision: One Figma source of truth; Risk: dueling frames.

Next Step: archive duplicates.

QA created “3S for Bugs”

Decision: Criticals need reproduction steps + short Loom;

Risk: mystery tickets; **Next Step:** template linked.

* * *

Even Finance tried one:

Decision: Stop calling everything “pilot”, tax implications.

Risk: chaos.

Next Step: read the doc.

Reactions: :flying_money: :yellow_warning: :crying:

Slack was edible again, small bites, fewer knives.

* * *

I started logging analytics in a Notion page titled **Slack Operational Fitness**. Three graphs told our comedy of progress:

Messages vs. Decisions - Two lines that finally stopped diverging.

For months, messages rose like helium balloons while decisions dragged behind like a sack of flour.

Post-3S, the gap narrowed. We mined threads for ore, not echo.

Reaction Economy (Top Emojis by Quarter)

Q1 leaders: **:looking:** **:thinking:** , signaling our love of surveillance and ambiguity.

Post-3S: **:green_check:** **:document:** , rare birds in a recovering ecosystem.

:spa: (the “spa” emoji, inexplicably used for “chill vibes”) dropped.

:shrug: held market share, humanity is persistent.

Thread Half-Life:

Before 3S: 5 days, like sourdough starter, kept alive by guilt.

After 3S: 14 hours. Still long, but at least mortal.

* * *

It wasn't perfect.

Some days, the digest triggered six follow-ups because clarity provokes the uncertainty it exposes.

Some people pasted essays as replies under my three sentences, recycling guilt.

I'd answer, “Thanks, moving this to the doc.”

Over time, the essays shortened. Reward had migrated.

We learned: **disagreement belongs in documents, not dopamine streams.**

My manager forwarded a screenshot of my digest to the leadership channel titled “Best Practice.”

The caption: “This created more space for thinking.”

I read it twice to ensure it wasn’t a dehydration hallucination.

HR Bot DM’d: “We’ve added your digest to our internal knowledge base. Would you like to become a Clarity Champion?”

I declined the title but accepted the momentum. Titles are trophies for things you could just do.

* * *

Lunch walk with Priya. The company called it “The Loop.”

Every tech campus has one, a circular path that simulates exercise while maintaining Wi-Fi.

“This thing you made,” she said, “it’s like we turned Slack into an inbox, but with better manners.”

“Or maybe we turned ourselves into people who keep appointments with their thoughts,” I said.

She smirked. “You’re being emotional.”

“I’m being oxygenated.”

We passed a table of synchronized nodding.

“Do you ever feel like we’re being measured for the wrong things?” I asked.

“Only constantly,” she said. “Responsiveness is easy to measure, so it becomes virtue. Reliability is harder, so it becomes folklore.”

“Responsiveness ≠ reliability,” I said, testing the line.

“Put that in Monday’s digest,” she smiled. “As a reminder to our future selves.”

* * *

Monday’s digest:

Decision: Responsiveness ≠ reliability.

Risk: Fast replies can mask slow progress; we become typing indicators with benefits.

Next Step: Use 3S updates for commitments; threads for clarification; docs for thinking.

A strange calm followed. Fewer pings hit me like toaster smoke.

More DMs looked like adults in a hallway: “Saw your digest. Adjusted the date. Thx.”

People began to respect 9:17 as if it were sacred.

I'd invented an appointment with the company's attention.

Of course, the organism noticed.

@HRbot: Reminder! Low message volume detected in several channels last week. Consider increasing engagement to maintain connection and trust.

@AlexReed: Experimenting with silence. Found trust sitting quietly in the corner.

@calendar: Scheduling intervention. Topic: "How to Be Seen When Saying Less."

@plant: reacted with **:meditation:**

I smiled and didn't reply. Sometimes the best reaction is absence.

* * *

Not everything stayed tidy.

The **Side DM Epidemic** emerged - "Quick backchannel?" people whispered, dragging me into private chaos closets.

I replied with links to digests: "Let's keep it in-channel so the decision doesn't need a secret historian."

Responses ranged from **:angel:** to **:sad:.**

Visibility is an addiction; sobriety is a mood.

Still, the emotional graph held:

Euphoria at speed → chaos of notifications → meltdown → discipline → quiet clarity.

Dopamine flattened; habit emerged.

I muted channels that fed anxiety more than work.

Left **#dog-pics** because I prefer real dogs. :dogs:

Set my status to “writing” 8:45–10:00 a.m. and didn’t apologize for silence.

The void handled it.

* * *

Thursday.

A junior PM DMed: “How do you write those digests so fast?”

“Because I decide something before I type.”

“Isn’t that... dangerous?”

“Not deciding is more dangerous,” I said. “It leads to pretending.”

I turned it into a micro-guide for the team — one screen, zero applause required.

3S Template

Decision: State the choice in plain language. Use verbs. Add a default-by date if needed.

Risk: Name the failure mode in one line. Humor allowed, blame not.

Next Step: One sentence with ownership - DRI name or role, not “we.”

Usage Tips

- If it needs >3 sentences, it’s not a digest - it’s a doc.
- If you can’t write it in 3 sentences, the decision isn’t made.
- If you post more than one digest a day, it’s not “scheduled”, it’s “spraying.”

People copied it across teams like polite contraband.

The numbers told the joke:

Messages per person ↓ 18%.

Decisions documented ↑ 31%.

Threads leading to docs: 1/6 (up from 1/20).

Average time from “we should decide” → “we decided”: down 2 days.

I presented the dashboard to leadership. Slide title: **Slack Fitness.**

Four truths:

1. Slack turned conversation into content, not decisions.
2. Responsiveness became a proxy for caring.
3. You can’t out-type entropy.
4. Ritual beats chaos - three sentences at a time.

Exec: “How does this fail?”

Me: “If it becomes theater. If people post poetic nonsense. If managers reward volume again. If we stop linking to the doc that holds the thinking.”

He nodded. No emoji, the highest compliment.

* * *

That night, I added one more counter in Notion: **Clarity Debt.**

It ticked up when we delayed decisions, down when we made them.

Not temperature, humidity. The goal wasn’t zero; it was **no mold.**

By the end, the Slack anxiety that used to buzz like a fluorescent light faded to a hum.

I could hear my own typing again. It sounded like work.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: Slack, But Saner

Truth: Slack isn’t evil. It rewards fast attention because that’s measurable. Responsiveness can mimic reliability the way loudness can mimic leadership. You can’t out-Slack entropy. But you can structure it — once a day, on purpose, with three sentences that make a promise to the future.

Tool: 3S Update — **Short, Structured, Scheduled.**

- **Short:** Three sentences max.
- **Structured:** Decision / Risk / Next Step.
- **Scheduled:** Same time every day (we used 9:17 a.m.), with an end-of-week roll-up.

Try This Monday: Post one digest in your main channel. Link the doc that holds the thinking. Ask for corrections, not compliments.

Reminder: Responsiveness \neq reliability. Reliable people show up in rhythm. Rhythm makes trust visible.

Formulas Recap:

Slack Chaos Index (SCI) = (Replies x Emojis) \div Decisions

Signal-to-Noise Ratio (SNR) = 3S Messages \div Total Noise

Artifacts:

Messages vs Decisions: correlation = none (until you fix it).

Reaction Economy: top emojis shifting from :looking: :thinking:

→ :green_check: :document:

3S Card:

Decision: _____

Risk: _____

Next Step: _____

Slack Interlude:

@HRbot: Reminder! Low message volume detected.

@AlexReed: Experimenting with silence.

SLACK ENLIGHTENMENT

@calendar: Scheduling intervention.

@plant: reacted with **:meditation:**

Priya pinged: “Ready for your destiny to be measured in letters?”

I replied: “Define destiny.”

The calendar answered for us: **Q3 Planning** - two weeks of aligning the stars with a ruler.

* * *

I didn’t conquer Slack.

I put it on a schedule.

Enlightenment arrived three sentences at a time.

CHAPTER 6:

OKR Astrology

The Quarterly Horoscope Call

When leadership said, “The stars are aligning for Q3,” I didn’t realize they meant literal slides of stars.

The invite title read: **All-Hands: The Great Alignment**. Someone had added **:stars:** to the subject line, which felt bold for a meeting that starts at 8:05 a.m. and ends in collective dehydration. The waiting-room music was an Enya remix of “Eye of the Tiger,” which is exactly how you imagine determination if you’ve never done anything difficult while conscious.

HR Bot came on first, voice warm like a dryer sheet for morale:

“Good morning, everyone! This quarter’s theme is Constellations of Impact. We’re mapping our OKRs to the night sky.”

Nine hundred of us stared at a galaxy background with our logo nestled between Orion and a stock photo of resolve. The VP took the mic and began waving a laser pointer at an Objectives slide, tracing loops like an astrologer reading destiny off a laminated placemat.

“Look how our North Star Objective guides the Big Dipper Bet,” he said, the red dot jittering like a caffeinated comet. “The stars are truly aligning for Q3.”

Beside me, Priya typed, Do we still have last quarter's beliefs?

I replied, Mercury's in retro-ROI.

She sent back the plant emoji. The plant itself, on the windowsill of the conference room, was the only attendee not taking notes.

* * *

Every Objective had three Key Results and no Result key. Someone asked whether we could “retrofit vision alignment,” and nobody died from it. The charts glowed. The music swelled. The VP clicked to a slide called “Astro-OKR Methodology” featuring icons of a telescope and a KPI thermos.

Objective #1: Elevate Customer Delight via Frictionless Journeys.

The KRs promised two percentages and a feeling, which I think is illegal in some states.

Objective #2: Accelerate Monetization Pathways.

The KRs were “+15% something” and “-20% something else,” with footnotes that read like horoscopes: “Outcomes may vary by phase of moon and market.”

CFO cameo: “Budget outlook is ambitious but believable,” a phrase that lives between fiction and subpoenas. Chat lit up with hearts and rockets. The plant remained calm.

Closing mantra: “Aim high. Then align higher.” The final slide was a starfield that spelled “Q3” if you squinted or believed.

We applauded like the night sky could hear us. Somewhere, a spreadsheet cleared its throat.

* * *

The Ritual of Alignment

OKR planning week is our company’s Lent: a ritual of austerity where we give up humility and spreadsheets for hope and bigger spreadsheets. Teams “cascade” OKRs down like holy water, blessing each function with a matching verb.

The verbs never die; they reincarnate. Drive. Elevate. Empower. Synergize. Occasionally Re-imagine, when someone has been to a conference and brought back stickers.

“Your OKRs are too achievable,” my Director told me in the kickoff. “They should stretch.”

“Like yoga or like taffy?” I asked.

“Ambitious but believable,” he repeated, as if the repetition increased the believability.

We marched into the war room, a former quiet room now haunted by the ghosts of last quarter’s dashboards. Someone had lit a scented candle called Stretch Goal, which smelled like bergamot and ignored assumptions. In the corner, a smaller candle—Stakeholder Harmony—tried to keep up.

I wrote an Objective in real English: “Ship X by Week 8 to reduce Y from 21 to 12 days for Z users.”

Leadership returned it with the note: “Love the clarity. Could we elevate the ambition lens?”

We elevated it until it floated above reality like a birthday balloon no one could retrieve.

Across the floor, Darren, our slide guy, had forged a template with a watercolor galaxy background and a percentage font that shouted. His title bar read, “**Manifest the Metrics.**” He’d added a telescope icon to every KR, so it looked like an observatory was watching our progress.

Approved **Corporate Astrology Verbs** (laminated, because lamination makes hope waterproof):

- Manifest
- Accelerate
- Transform
- Delight
- Re-imagine

We tried to sneak in “Count.” Rejected for lacking vision.

By noon, every team had a draft. Pattern-recognition is the only AI we have at scale, and it recognized the pattern: every Objective described a vibe. Every KR described a number that would feel uplifting if achieved or unmemorable if not. We conferred as if the act of conferencing moved the needle by osmosis.

Chief of Staff did a lap, misting us with “alignment” like a plant mister.

“How’s the ambition?” she asked.

“We’re NASA,” I said. “Our OKRs are so lofty you filed air-space clearance.”

She laughed and then asked me to add the word “transformative.”

Legal wandered through to remind us not to promise external outcomes. “But we can imply them?” Darren asked. Legal said nothing, which we recorded as implied alignment.

Priya slid her laptop my way. Her Objective was boring in the best way: a time box, a scope line, a throughput metric, and a kill date.

“You’ll never get away with this,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “But the candle smells nice.”

We printed a Translator Tile and taped it to the wall:

They say	They mean
“Stretch Goal”	“We missed last time.”
“Bold Ambition”	“Math fiction.”
“Focus Area”	“PowerPoint clip art.”
“North Star”	“We forgot south.”
“Cascading”	“Copy → paste → pray.”
“Tactical”	“Real.”

By sunset, our whiteboards were a star map of verbs. The scented candles had burned down to a waxy ring of hope. We logged our final drafts into the tracker, the one with more columns than results, and prepared for the ceremony called Review.

The Review is theater in business casual. You present your OKRs like a new religion: A creed. A hymn. A miracle claim at the end. We took turns at the altar of HDMI.

Team Growth spoke first: “We will Delight the Onramp via Accelerated Guidance.”

“Is that measured?” the CFO asked.

“Yes,” they said, “in spirit.”

Someone in the back took a photo of the slide like it might fly away.

My turn. I tried to keep it earthly.

Objective: Ship trial flow patch by Week 6 to raise trial to paid from 7.8% to 10.0%.

KRs: (1) Deploy patch by Week 6; (2) $\geq 9.0\%$ by Week 8 or kill; (3) 2 UX snags to backlog, none blocking.

Leadership smiled the way you smile at a child who brought a calculator to a costume party.

“Where’s the ambition?” my Director asked, gently, like ambition is a puppy you can set down.

“In the number we can actually hit,” I said.

“Could we reframe this as a transformation journey?”

“Only if the journey is eight weeks long and has a kill switch.”

We compromised: I added “transform” to the Objective and bumped the target to 10.5%. The candle flickered like a judicial ruling.

The plant on the windowsill turned one leaf toward the sun and, I swear, sighed.

* * *

The OKR Oracle Deck

By midweek, my frustration needed a hobby. Figma became therapy. I mocked up a parody tarot deck for OKRs. It wasn't rebellion. It was art for people who've watched metrics behave like coy comets.

Card 1: The Cascading Tower

A glass tower tilts as laminated OKRs rain from the top. Predicts: reorg within two sprints. Upright: “Top-down clarity.” Reversed: “Everyone forwards a PDF.”

Card 2: The Vanishing Metric

A KPI fades to 0.0% as the dashboard refreshes. Predicts: visibility without accountability. Upright: “Funnel instrumentation.” Reversed: “Data sunset. Celebrate anecdotes.”

Card 3: The Quarterly Moon

A smiling moon over a calendar with three empty boxes. Predicts: burnout in retrograde during Week 10. Upright: “Focus weeks.” Reversed: “Focus weak.”

Card 4: The Visionary Fool

A person pointing at the horizon saying “north star” in every sentence. Predicts: a roadshow of great vibes, followed by a Jira backfill ceremony. Upright: “Inspiration.” Reversed: “Keynote without keys.”

Card 5: The Stretch Goal

A rubber band around a Gantt chart. Predicts: slippage disguised as momentum. Upright: “Courage.” Reversed: “Chiropractor.”

Card 6: The DRI Hermit

One person holding a lantern that says, “Who’s the DRI?” Predicts: the only adult in the room. Upright: “Ownership.” Reversed: “Calendar prison.”

I printed six on card stock and fanned them on Priya’s desk.

She drew **The Stretch Goal** and groaned. “Again?”

“Fate is consistent,” I said.

HR Bot rolled by in the all-company channel:

“Love this creative energy! Join our Innovation Jam and showcase your OKR Tarot! **:paint: :stars:**”

Two more cards out of spite:

Card 7: The Retro-ROI

A graph pointing up while the legend says “interpret responsibly.”
Meaning: “We’re retroactively justified.” Upright: “Narrative synergy.” Reversed: “Selective sample.”

Card 8: The Quarterly Sun

Slides so bright you need sunglasses to watch. Meaning: “Fantastic progress.” Side effect: “Quarter four exists.”
While the printer made my satire tangible, I doodled a napkin equation:

$$\text{Ambition Index (AI)} = (\text{Objectives} \times \text{Optimism}) \div \text{Data}$$

Where:

- Objectives = number we can say in one breath without giggling.
- Optimism = rocket emojis in Slack.
- Data = dashboards we check weekly without crying.

If $AI > 7$, we’re running on vibes. If $AI < 2$, someone’s getting called “not strategic.”

“Make a slide,” Darren said, drifting by like a curator of institutional surrealism. “The CEO loves equations.”

I did, under Astro-Analytics. The two funniest people in the org loved it. Unfortunately, they were us.

At lunch, Priya and I dealt mock readings.

- **CFO draws The Vanishing Metric:** “I sense a forecast that dissolves.”
- **VP draws The Visionary Fool:** “You’ll keynote three times and change exactly one noun.”

- **PMM draws The Quarterly Sun:** “There will be so many slides you mistake brightness for truth.”

“Do these come with a KPI?” the VP asked, holding The Quarterly Moon up to the fluorescent light.

“Yes,” I said. “They measure the distance between hope and Tuesday.”

We put the deck away when Legal returned, because nothing says “paint me” like a satire deck in an open office.

* * *

Alex’s Reality Check (setup)

The quarter advanced like a chess clock with too many hands. By Week 4, our trial patch was on track. By Week 6, it was in QA. By Week 7, we were “refining scope,” and by Week 8, we were “accelerating learning,” which is what you call it when the thing didn’t ship and you’re trying to stay friends.

The OKR tracker grew tabs the way a hydra grows heads: Plan, Actuals, Narratives, Risks, Auras. Someone added conditional formatting that turned cells “radiant” if you used the word “north star” within 200 characters of a percentage. We discovered synonyms like astronomers discover moons.

I drafted a plain post-mortem and practicing-my-inside-voice sent it to the team:

- **We chose three OKRs but made six decisions across them.** Diffusion stole two weeks and a measurable point of morale.

- **The objective that behaved** had a single metric, a DRI, and a kill date. That one felt like physics.
- **When we spoke in verbs, we argued. When we spoke in numbers, we built.**

Priya replied, Truth doesn't cascade well.

The plant, three desks away, shed a single leaf with theatrical timing.

End-of-quarter review arrived with pastries and absolution. The calendar said Friday, but the room smelled like Sunday—glaze, forgiveness, and a slideshow queued to save us.

We filed into the big room—the one with the projector so bright it makes fiction look plausible. The deck title: **Quarterly Constellations: Where We Landed**. A starfield animated across the title slide until the CFO, perhaps accidentally, clicked it twice and revealed a bullet called “Narrative Alignment.”

Somewhere in an alternate universe, a truth escaped and was gently returned to its pen.

We went team by team. The ritual is always the same: a few green circles, one yellow we dignify as “learning,” and a red that is actually mauve because we are a culture of gentle hues. Every speaker opened with gratitude and closed with gratitude and filled the middle with... gratitude.

“Overall, we hit ~80% of KRs,” said the Growth lead, upbeat like a rowing coach with a thesaurus. “If you round correctly.”

“Define correctly,” I whispered.

“Creatively,” Priya whispered back.

Then it was us. I took the clicker.

Slide one: **Objective 1: Transform Trial Flow. :Green circle:**

KR1 (Ship by Week 6): “Shipped Week 8-reframed as ‘ship window’ success.”

KR2 ($\geq 10.5\%$ trial \rightarrow paid): “9.6%, trending radiant.”

KR3 (2 UX snags, none blocking): “Four identified, two blocked, both spiritually non-blocking.”

We had accomplished enough to claim momentum and failed enough to build character. The room nodded like a metro-nome. The candle labeled **Stretch Goal**, someone brought it to the meeting, flickered approvingly.

“Lessons learned?” asked the COO.

I exhaled and clicked to a slide titled **Physics vs. Faith**. It had two columns.

- **Physics:** one metric, one DRI, one kill-if threshold, one date.
- **Faith:** five objectives, verbs like mood lighting, celebratory adjectives.

“I wrote a short post-mortem,” I said, “not to assign blame, but to prevent our next horoscope from promising a new zodiac.”

A hush settled. The kind of hush where you can hear fluorescent lights narrate your career. I pushed on.

“We planned three OKRs,” I said, “but lived six decisions.

Every time we added a ‘quick win’ KR, we subtracted clarity.

The objective that behaved had an OMTM and a DRI. That one moved like Tuesday, not like prophecy.”

Silence. A pastry flake made a break for it off the CFO’s plate.

“Appreciate the detail, Alex,” the COO said, kind smile, baton of decorum. “Let’s zoom back to the narrative.”

Narrative is the polite word for hope with graphics. I clicked forward to an appendix before I could be stopped: **The Law of One Metric That Matters (OMTM)** in giant font, like an inscription over a courthouse door.

- **One Objective** that reads like a Tuesday choice.
- **One Metric** we can recite without a slide.
- **One DRI** who can be woken at 3 a.m. and still name the number.
- **One Kill-If** line to protect morale from infinite stretch.
- **One Review Date** when we face the music and let it play.

My manager leaned toward the mic. “Love this thinking,” he said diplomatically, which is manager for “please slow down.” “To round it out, let’s add NPS, weekly actives, churn sentiment, and funnel velocity.”

We called it focus. They called it insufficient complexity.

I nodded like a citizen of a small democracy. “Sure. If they’re driver metrics, not decorations.”

The deck was reclaimed by the steady rhythm of green circles. We applauded “qualitative momentum.” A red/mauve circle became “rich learning.” Someone asked whether we’d calibrated the aura scale between *shadowed* and *radiant*. HR Bot cheerfully confirmed that **Q3 aura mean = 4.7/5** with a standard deviation we were invited not to think about.

After the meeting, I wrote the shortest doc of my career: **Boring KRs That Change Tuesdays**. It was half a page and mostly numbers. It also contained our first **Kill-if** that wasn’t a rumor.

- **Objective:** Patch trial flow by Week 4 to lift trial → paid from 9.6% → 10.3%.
- **OMTM:** Trial→paid conversion rate (new users).
- **DRI:** Priya (yes, DRI Hermit).
- **Kill-if:** < 9.8% by Week 6 (roll back and ship the doc).
- **Review:** Week 7 (bring Tuesday data, not Thursday vibes).

Priya approved it with a message you could put on a mug: “Delete two Jira tickets and we’re at peace.” We did. We taped the ticket IDs to a sticky note and, in an act of secular spirituality, burned it over the “**Stretch Goal**” candle. The smoke alarm did not align.

The following Monday we tried something illegal in three orgs: we ran the quarter on one dashboard. We retired the aura tab. We banished the galaxy background. We put the metric on the wall in black text, not hero font, and we asked five random humans to say it out loud. Four nailed it. The fifth said, “Delight,” which we counted as a cultural reflex.

That week felt like gravity. And gravity, it turns out, is a relief.

By Wednesday, a small miracle: the daily graph twitched upward without a slide to narrate it. We didn’t “experience qualitative momentum.” We changed a setting and watched the number breathe. The plant angled a leaf toward us like a compliment.

It wasn’t glorious. It was smaller than glory and nearer. People overcomplicate momentum because simple progress won’t clap for you. We clapped for it anyway, quietly, so we could still hear it work.

In the second week, the VP stopped by our pod. He studied the one-page printout like a curator confronting minimalist art.

“This is... lean,” he said, which is executive for “absent the usual furniture.”

“It’s the Law of One,” I said. “Temporarily replacing the Law of Many.”

He nodded. “We’ll want to see how this ladders up to our constellation theme.”

“Gravity is a constellation,” I said. “It keeps the stars from wandering into our roadmap.”

He smiled, then asked if we could add a “North Star” label above the number. Priya taped a Post-it with a hand-drawn star to the wall and wrote “north.” The VP laughed. It sounded like permission.

At the end of that sprint, we hit 10.1%. Not the 10.5% we’d promised to ourselves during candle hour, but a number that could look you in the eye. We held a five-minute retro with no deck and wrote two bullets on a whiteboard:

- **Keep:** one metric, one DRI, one Tuesday move.
- **Kill:** scented goals.

“Add a third category?” Priya said. “**Confess:** the ways we made it harder.”

We confessed a small pile of instincts—hero nouns, fear of boredom, our addiction to green circles.

The next quarter would not be a utopia. It would be Tuesday again. But I had my rule, and a plant that seemed to approve.

That Friday, as we packed up, HR Bot DM’d me:

“Congrats! Your Q3 aura score = 4.7/5.”

“Is that above benchmark?” I typed.

The plant reacted with :full_moon:.

I closed my laptop and tried a sentence on the inside of my skull: I stopped tracking the stars and started shipping earth. It felt like a plan.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: OKR Astrology

Truth Check: OKRs are useful when they shrink the universe to the choice in front of you. If your Key Results increase the number of Tuesday decisions, you’ve weaponized the ritual. If they increase the number of slides, you’ve written a horoscope with footnotes. Alignment is not a meeting, a mantra, or a verb cloud; it’s five people acting the same way in different rooms.

Tool - OMTM (One Metric That Matters): Write the Objective as a Tuesday action with a date. Name one metric everyone can recite without a slide. Assign a DRI whose calendar shows work, not attendance. Add a kill-if threshold to protect morale from endless stretch. Set the review date before the next all-hands so the story must fit the number, not the other way round.

Try This Monday: Ask five teammates, separately: “What’s our metric?” If you get five answers, you don’t have alignment—you have a newsletter. If you get one answer in under five seconds, you can start counting Tuesdays.

Reminder: If your dashboard needs a legend, you've left reality. Legends belong to maps of places you haven't been.

Translator Tile - OKR Language Decoded (pocket edition)

They say	They mean
"Ambitious but believable"	"Optimistic until audited."
"Cascading"	"Copy → paste → pray."
"North Star"	"We're lost, but poetic."
"We'll refine in Q2"	"We'll forget in Q2."
"Narrative alignment"	"We agree about adjectives."
"Tactical"	"Real."
"Learning"	"We didn't, but we wrote."

Formula Cards

- **Ambition Index (AI) = Objectives x Optimism ÷ Data**
- *Keep AI in the 2–5 band. Above 7, slides outnumber shipped Tuesdays.*
- **Focus Fidelity (F^2) = 1 ÷ Number of OKRs**
- *You don't raise F^2 by willpower; you raise it by deleting.*

Mini Chart (in words): As AI spikes, the **Reality Curve** dips: more tempo in decks, less torque in code. When AI stabilizes, Reality rebounds—like gravity finally getting a word in. The area under the curve labeled "Story Heat" feels productive while producing exactly one thing: warmth.

Slack Interlude

@HRbot: *Congrats! Your Q3 aura score = 4.7/5.*

@AlexReed: *Is that above benchmark?*

@plant: reacted with **:full_moon:**

@Priya: *Kill-if on aura > 4.8, we get complacent.*

Field Notes - What to Keep / What to Kill

- **Keep:** OMTM on the wall, DRI on the calendar, kill-if in writing.
- **Kill:** galaxy backgrounds, verb salads, auras with decimals, any KR that measures applause.
- **Adopt:** *Tuesday questions*. (“What moves the number today?” “What do we drop?” “Who decides?”)

Pocket Checklist - The Tuesday Test

- Can every team member say the metric without opening a slide?
- Does the metric connect to a human outcome within two weeks?
- Is there one DRI who can change it without permission from a constellation?
- Do we know the date we stop pretending?

* * *

Our OKRs aligned beautifully on paper, and then the paper graded us back. Calibration season is next, where the curve decides what the stars cannot: who gets to feel “exceeds” for the year.

Mercury was in retro-ROI, and so was I.

I stopped tracking the stars and started shipping earth.

ACT III:
Structural Adaptation

CHAPTER 7:

Bell the Curve

“@HRbot: Happy Feedback Season! Please complete your self-review, peer reviews, values alignment survey, aura check, and gratitude log by Friday.”

That was the entire email. No greeting, no signature. Just a confetti GIF that didn’t load and a subject line that sounded like a festival you attend in a suit. I stared at it long enough for my coffee to cool into a mood.

By 9:07 a.m., Slack looked like the foyer of a building that had just caught fire: lots of people in doorways asking if they smelled smoke. “Already?” a designer wrote. “Didn’t we just do this?” from Legal. “Sending strength to everyone writing adjectives,” someone in Sales posted, which is the corporate equivalent of lighting a candle.

Facilities had put up seasonal posters in the hallways: pastel shapes, smiling fonts, little balloons that said, Celebrate Feedback Season! HR even mailed everyone a stress ball shaped like a bell curve with an embossed slogan: Find Your Middle. I squeezed it. It squeezed back.

My calendar populated itself like a haunted house: Self-Review (60m). How to Receive Feedback (mandatory). Mindful Gratitude (optional but required). A breathing session wedged

between two calibration pre-briefs, as if oxygen could be slotted between rankings.

On my desk, the plant leaned away from the laptop, as if it knew what was coming. I rotated the pot so it faced me again. It rotated itself back by lunchtime; tropism or wisdom, I couldn't tell.

HRbot chimed in #announcements with a friendly tone it had learned from snack brands. "Remember: feedback is a gift!" Fruitcake is also a gift, I thought. You can pass both along for years without opening them.

A colleague DMed me: "How's your self-review going?"

"Like therapy," I wrote, "but with attachments."

At noon, the "Celebrate Feedback Season" kickoff arrived via livestream, a thirty-minute broadcast in which a senior HR partner smiled for twenty-nine minutes and then told us to "anchor on impact while calibrating for fairness." The camera panned across a table of swag: water bottles, a notebook with a quote about growth, and a small acrylic paperweight shaped like the nine-box grid. Somewhere, a printer got a performance bonus.

When the stream ended, a manager in a different org posted a meme: a medieval knight kneeling before a glowing Excel file labeled CALIBRATION_TEMPLATE. xlsx. Caption: May your adjectives be plentiful and your peers forget their receipts. It got more reactions than the company's last earnings call.

By midafternoon, invites began to land with the solemnity of subpoenas. Calibration Prep — bring evidence. Peer Review Reminders — be specific. Values Alignment Workshop — bring your whole self. My whole self had a schedule conflict and sent its assistant: caffeine.

I opened last year's self-review to remember how I'd survived. It read like an ancient horoscope dug out of a stone tablet. Alex demonstrates consistent ownership and drives impactful outcomes through cross-functional collaboration. Strengths: communication, leadership, resilience. Opportunities: strategic breadth, stakeholder influence, scaling impact. Lucky number: 3. Lucky color: teal.

I could feel the old pattern reaching for me, the gravitational pull toward words that behave like air freshener. Impactful. Cross-functional. Strategic. I closed the document and whispered a vow I hoped the plant would witness: this year, no adjectives without nouns.

I created a new doc and titled it: Self-Review, Nouns Only. The cursor blinked at me with a tempo I associated with deadlines and dental drills. I took the 3S Update I'd been using in Slack - Status, Signal, Support - and translated it into my new law: Decision → Delta → Link. If I couldn't hyperlink it, it didn't happen. If I couldn't show a before and after, I would not call it a change. If I couldn't point to a human who benefited, it wasn't work, it was just activity.

I started with the messiest project of the year, Firefly, a well-intentioned feature that excited everyone and satisfied no one. The weekly bug triage had turned into a book club where no one admitted they hadn't read the book.

Decision: Sunset Firefly.

Delta: Cut follow-up latency from twenty-one days to six; churned users stopped rage-refreshing dashboards; NPS commentary lost the word “why.”

Link: PRD sunset doc, dashboard change log, customer support note with “thank you” circled.

The line looked bare compared to last year’s cheerful fog, but it felt solid under my hands. It weighed something. I could hand it to someone without apologizing for the smell.

Next line.

Decision: Move Metrics Review to async, one-slide summary with Default-by date.

Delta: Saved eleven people forty-five minutes across twelve weeks—ninety-nine hours a quarter returned to the wild. Decisions closed in days, not dog years.

Link: Calendar “Metrics Review (canceled)” series, OSDM deck with decisions and dates.

Another.

Next line.

Decision: Rebuilt pricing query pipeline with Data Eng; removed two joins the size of continents.

Delta: Queries eight times faster; Finance stopped blaming us for forecasting drift; weekly escalation count dropped from five to one.

Link: Before/after query plan screenshots, Slack thread where Finance accidentally said “nice work.”

I hit a groove. Every time I felt the old urge to type “strategic,” I stopped and asked: strategic how? Strategic where? Strategic for whom? If the answer was “in spirit,” I backspaced. “Strategic” is what we call things when we don’t have receipts.

I replaced “collaborated cross-functionally” with the one calendar invite where Legal, Design, and Support actually showed up at the same time. I replaced “strong communicator” with the deck that killed a meeting. I replaced “thought leader” with nothing and felt clean for the first time since Q2.

At some point, a note from the OKR quarter drifted into view—the Vanishing Metric that refused to stay put long enough to measure. I pasted a link to the last screenshot before it disappeared—proof of life to ward off ghosts. The chapter about OKR astrology had taught me one thing: prophecies are just roadmap items without dates. This doc wouldn’t be that.

By evening, the document had a rhythm. Each line was an exhibit, every exhibit had a photograph. The only adjectives that survived were “fewer,” “faster,” and “smaller,” and even then they had numbers attached like ID badges. I could feel my shoulders lowering. There are few pleasures at work, but there is one: replacing praise with proof.

HRbot popped up with a gentle nudge. Don’t forget to fill your Values Alignment section!

I wrote, “Integrity: always attached my links.” I considered adding “Courage: deleted ‘impactful’ fourteen times,” but it

felt like I was making jokes during a deposition. The plant dropped a single leaf onto the keyboard. I took that as applause or grief, depending on my blood sugar.

The next morning, Kara, my manager, sent a pre-brief invite labeled “Calibration Prep - 25m - bring bullets.” I arrived with my Evidence Engine: a tiny Notion table with three rows and three columns, the smallest weapon I own. Three bullets, three links, thirty seconds each. If directors couldn’t consume it walking between rooms, they wouldn’t consume it at all.

“Give me three undeniable sentences,” Kara said, closing the door to borrow the illusion of privacy.

“Decisions or miracles?” I asked.

“Whichever fits in a director’s attention span.”

We rehearsed like it was a courtroom and the jury had a hard stop at four.

“First: Sunset Firefly,” I said. “Latency down seventy-two percent, rage refresh rate gone, thank-you email from Support. Link one, two, three.”

Kara nodded, the kind of nod managers do when a room might eat you and they’re trying to be your fork. “Second.”

“Pricing pipeline. Queries eight times faster. Finance stopped calling our data haunted. Link one is the PR; link two is a before/after query plan; link three is the Slack where Finance accidentally said ‘nice work’ and Lisa from Legal reacted with a heart.”

“Third.”

“Default-by discipline on OSDMs. No more undead decisions. Time to close shifted from ‘when we remember’ to actual dates. Evidence: deck, calendar closures, the message where Priya wrote ‘bless you’ without a smiley face.”

Kara didn’t smile often in Q4; her face had been repurposed as a shield. Now she smiled, briefly. “Tight. Human. Linkable,” she said, the three adjectives I trusted.

As we were packing up, Priya drifted by the doorway holding a mug that said DATA IS A TEMPERAMENT. “Don’t forget I exist,” she said without stopping. It was friendship in our dialect: a reminder disguised as a threat.

“You’re first on my peer list,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “The curve is hungry.”

Kara closed her laptop and exhaled through her nose the way you do when your calendar tells you your calendar has meetings. “I hate this process more every year.”

“Why do we do it?” I asked.

“Because fairness must be quantified,” she said, and then regretted saying it out loud.

We did one more run-through, and it turned into a buddy-cop sketch against our will.

“We need a motive,” she said, staring at the bullet about Firefly.

“I shipped clarity,” I said. “The victim was confusion.”

“Good,” Kara said. “Juries love dead confusion.”

A director pinged her for “early calibration inputs,” which translates to “tell me the answers before the test so I can say I’m aligned.”

She typed something that looked like a shrug in bullet form and then looked at me. “Make sure your self-review uses nouns,” she said. “Adjectives get means-tested.”

On the way back to my desk, I passed the swag table. The acrylic nine-box paperweights were already thinning. Someone had arranged them into a pyramid—Exceeds at the top, Needs Development at the base. I watched a small group of new hires gaze at it the way tourists look at a holy site. You come to a company promising to be exceptional and then learn there’s a quota.

Back at my desk, I reopened my doc and added a line item I’d forgotten.

Decision: “Kill the Monday standup; replace with 3S thread.”

Delta: Reclaimed thirty minutes a week for fourteen people; 3S thread got more updates than the standup got attention.

Link: Before/after attendance screenshots, thread with decisions, calendar tombstone.

I added another –

Decision: Introduced “Exhibit A/B/C” links on every Slack argument exceeding ten messages.

Delta: Resolution time down by half; stakeholders learned not to argue about feelings when a line chart was present; the number of sentences beginning with “I feel like” dropped to single digits.

Link: Thread where someone wrote “oh” and then stopped; Notion page with galleries of exhibits.

I wrote one more and hesitated over the phrasing. Stakeholder influence is the kind of phrase that melts under bright light. I turned it into a grocery list.

Decision: Created Stakeholder Map Lite, three columns labeled NO, YES, STORY with actual names, not team names.

Delta: Meetings with “the room” became messages to humans; “blockers” became people you could DM; we shipped the pipeline despite three reorgs and one designer who discovered pottery.

Link: Before/after org chart with strings connecting names like a detective wall; Slack DM receipts where NO moved to STORY and then to YES.

I pushed away from the desk and looked at the plant. It had regained its balance, leaves angled toward the window like a mathematician reading a sunset for data. “We’re going to do this,” I told it. The plant said nothing, which is what good listeners do.

Later that afternoon, the “**How to Receive Feedback**” training started. The facilitator had the calm of someone who owned many glass bottles of expensive soap. “**Feedback is a gift,**” she said, “**and we can all grow by receiving it with curiosity.**” The chat filled with little heart emojis and some clapping hands.

The only question I wanted to ask was, “**Is the budget for Exceeds a gift too, or is that a different department?**” I kept my mic off and my face on.

In the Q&A, someone asked what to do if their rating didn’t reflect reality. “**Reality is a shared story,**” the facilitator said. “We need common narratives.” I copied the phrase into my notes and translated it into my dialect: reality is a slide with a senior owner.

We closed with a breathing exercise. I inhaled, exhaled, and discovered my frustration had excellent lung capacity.

At 5:43 p.m., HRbot reminded us to submit peer reviews “anchored in impact and company values.” I wrote Priya’s in one pass: “Priya refactored pipelines that saved compute and cash; mentored two hires without asking for a parade; wrote the only doc this quarter that reduced a meeting by half.” I attached three links and one screenshot and stopped. I wanted adjectives for her, but I wanted results for her more.

I considered Darren next. I wrote: “Darren’s decks clarified decisions; when content was thin, his framing still moved rooms. Recommend pairing with PM/Eng owners earlier so the best slides start from the best facts.”

I attached links to two decks that had prevented us from building a feature because it only looked good in grayscale. I resisted the urge to add, “**Also one deck caused a minor religion.**”

At 7:12 p.m., I got a DM from an engineer who doesn’t DM: “Hey, do we actually need all this?”

I pretended not to understand. “All what?”

“The part where we turn people into boxes.”

“We need a budget,” I typed. “Sometimes it takes the shape of adjectives.”

I stayed at the office later than I wanted, not because I’m the kind of person who stays late, but because Q4 drags everyone into a vortex where time becomes a team sport. The custodial staff moved quietly like ethical spirits. I walked to the kitchen and found a bowl of leftover swag pins: I **:heart:** FEEDBACK. I took one and pinned it to my notebook so it could lie for me in meetings.

On the way back, I passed the big fishbowl conference room where the directors meet. Someone had left the nine-box slide up on the screen like stained glass for non-believers. The grid looked peaceful when the room was empty. **It’s only people that make geometry cruel.**

Back at my desk, I revised my self-review opening paragraph until it didn’t sound like a ransom note written by a committee. I tried one version that began with gratitude, “thank you for the opportunity to reflect”, and immediately deleted it. I

tried a version that began with defiance, “it was a ridiculous year and we still shipped” and deleted that too.

I ended up writing a sentence that felt like a ledger entry. “I made five decisions that changed the slope of our quarter; here are the deltas and the links.”

Tempted, I typed “I **collaborated cross-functionally**,” then sighed and replaced it with the specific: “I worked with Legal to unblock privacy concerns in the pipeline; the result was a two-week acceleration without compliance risk.” Link: the doc where Legal wrote “approved” in full words, not an emoji.

My hands hovered over the keyboard as if they were about to confess to a crime. I wasn’t guilty, exactly; I was complicit. The system needed a middle, and I had accepted a seat in it. There is no nobility in pretending you’re above the bell curve when the bell curve signs your paycheck. The trick wasn’t escaping; it was navigating without losing the map.

A little after eight, Kara sent me a single line: “Looks good—use those three bullets with links in the pre-brief. Tighten anything that feels like opinion without proof.”

“**Opinion without proof**” used to be my entire career. It now fit in a sentence. Progress.

Before I shut down, I wrote a small equation in the margin of my doc, not because anyone would read it, but because it anchored me in something that behaved like math: $\text{Adjective Inflation} = \text{compliments} / \text{links}$. If links are zero, the inflation tends to infinity. The only way to keep the air in the room breathable is to tie every balloon to a post.

I added a second equation under it, born of the pre-brief:

$$\text{Undeniability} = (\text{decisions} \times \text{deltas} \times \text{link quality}) \\ + \text{words.}$$

The fewer words, the higher the odds a director will read any of them. Brevity doesn't guarantee truth; it just removes places for lies to hide.

On a new line, I typed the sentence I would carry into the next day like a laminated card: "If I can't hyperlink it, it didn't happen." I bolded nothing. I trusted the period.

I shut the laptop and the plant looked taller in the reflected glass, as if the day had fertilized it somehow. I told it I'd see it in the morning. The plant kept the secret.

Morning came with a calendar that had scheduled my moods.

10:00 to 10:30: Self-Review Final.

10:30 to 11:00: Manager Pre-Brief.

11:00 to 12:00: break.

The break had a meeting inside it named Break.

I took one last pass through the edges of the doc—the place where tone betrays you. Anywhere I felt tempted to perform greatness, I replaced it with a link. Anywhere I sounded angry, I inserted a number. Anywhere I felt sentimental, I wrote a name.

I added a footnote about the Default-by dates and why they mattered more than "alignment." Alignment is a mood; dates are a habit.

On the way to Kara's office, I bumped into Darren outside the elevators holding a cardboard tube with the protective tenderness of a parent. "Slides?" I asked.

"Draft one," he said.

"Any links?"

He blinked. "To what?"

"To anything that existed before the slides," I said.

He laughed. "You're cute when you're pious."

In Kara's office, we ran the three bullets one last time, and she trimmed five words from the second sentence the way a surgeon trims a stitch. "Directors think in verbs and dates," she said.

"No adjectives unless someone else is leaking them." We looked at each other and then at the clock. The calibration courtroom would convene tomorrow. We both had the face people get when they are walking willingly into a machine.

After lunch, I caught Priya by the kitchen whiteboard scribbling out a diagram for no one. "Peer for you is in," I said.

"For you too," she said. "I put numbers on your nouns. Do the same for mine."

"Always," I said.

She nodded toward the whiteboard. “Fun fact—the pipeline we refactored is still saving more money than any project in that org. Funnier fact—it will translate to ‘Meets.’”

“We’ll bring receipts,” I said.

“They’ll bring scarcity,” she said. Then she smiled, an expression like sudden weather. “Still worth it.”

Back at my desk, I added a one-line addendum to my review. “If the metric we’re moving vanishes, we pin it.” Link to the screenshot of the Vanishing Metric. I considered adding a joke about ghosts and decided to save my calories for the trial.

The rest of the afternoon passed in small skirmishes: approving a PR for a threshold change; combining two comment wars into one doc with exhibits; declining a meeting named “quick sync” that had fifty-five minutes on it.

I posted a 3S update in the team channel: Status: Firefly sunset complete. Signal: latency 21→6 days; CSAT verbatim: “thank you.” Support: none. That was my whole personality now—three lines and a link.

Before I left, I practiced the three sentences out loud to an empty room, the way people rehearse apologies.

“Sunset Firefly, latency down, links attached. Pricing pipeline, 8x faster, Finance stopped escalating, links attached. Default-by discipline, fewer undead decisions, links attached.”

Saying “links attached” in a room alone felt like praying in an airport. Necessary, not noble.

I shut down, and the office shed its noise. The plant was the only thing still working. I turned off the lamp and watched it turn its leaves toward wherever the light had been. I envied that certainty. The curve was coming. I couldn't dodge it. But I could at least arrive with a ledger and a plan.

On the walk home, I passed a storefront window filled with trophies from a local youth league. Every plaque had room for one name, even though ten kids had probably touched every ball. Scarcity is a design choice, I thought. The bell curve makes it look like math.

At home, I opened my laptop back up and did something small and private. I created a calendar series: Receipts — Monthly (20 min), last Friday, recurring forever. I invited no one.

When it popped up next month, I would write three bullets with three links and stop. Discipline is the only fair thing left when formatting becomes a morality.

I went to bed thinking of the sentence I'd written for the top of my review. I made five decisions that changed the slope of our quarter; here are the deltas and the links. If tomorrow tried to price my year in adjectives, I wanted to be the person who priced it back in proof.

The plant in my mind leaned toward morning, and morning eventually arrived.

The calibration room had no windows, only fluorescent fairness. Nine faces tiled across my screen. Twelve titles hovered like small weather systems. Cameras off. Microphones on faith. The ritual began with a slide.

“Welcome, everyone,” said the HR officiant, voice warm as a blanket fresh from IT. “For fairness, we will bell the curve.”

Fairness arrived wearing pastel charts: the nine-box grid glowing like stained glass for modern believers. *Exceeds. Strong Meets. Meets. Growth.* The bottom-right square—the exile square—remained unnamed, as if language itself refused to go there.

“First case,” a manager said. “Taylor’s a strong team player.”

“Any links?” a director asked.

“No links, but lots of vibes.”

“Meets,” someone pronounced, like a weather report you can’t argue with.

The spreadsheet accepted the offering. Boxes shifted; names resized to fit the geometry.

Darren came next. Twelve decks in three minutes. His transitions could have healed a small argument. When a bar chart dissolved into a moonlit gradient, someone actually clapped. “Strong Meets,” the room decided. Reason: “visual storytelling impact.” A small murmur of envy followed him out of the square.

Then Kara brought up Priya. “Refactored the pipelines we’ve all been complaining about,” she said. “Compute cost down by seven figures. Two new hires trained and shipping. We’re faster and cheaper because she did the quiet work.”

Silence hung in the air like fog over a runway, and then a director spoke carefully. “Comparatively, we still need to calibrate to the mean.”

“Meets,” a voice concluded, and the grid absorbed a miracle as if it were paperwork.

Priya’s Slack status later said, *comparatively calibrated*. She would probably leave it there for a week, a private joke you could only laugh at in a whisper.

“Next,” said the officiant.

Kara shared my link in chat, the one labeled Evidence Engine. The cursor pulsed beside it. “Three decisions, three deltas, three links,” she said. “Sunset Firefly—latency down seventy-two percent. Pricing pipeline—queries eight times faster; Finance stopped escalating. Default-by discipline—undead decisions finally got burial plots.”

A director interrupted. “What’s the leadership narrative density here?”

“Dense enough to ship on time,” Kara replied.

Half the boxes clicked. The room fell quiet the way rooms do when something heavier than opinion lands. In the silence, I could hear my own heartbeat—as if it, too, were waiting to be ranked.

“Reminder,” HR said, and the reminder had the softness of rules that never bend. “Only two Exceeds available in this org this cycle.”

The grid sharpened. You could feel belief being budgeted in real time. If Darren moved up, someone else would have to move down. If Priya wouldn't move up, then no one would, because the budget didn't include the kind of math that forgives itself.

"We're not measuring people," someone said, faintly exasperated, faintly proud. "We're allocating adjectives under constraints."

"If everyone's above average, no one is," a director added, and the tautology landed like a policy.

In my head, I turned to the plant on my desk. "*They've reinvented Lake Wobegon with spreadsheets*", I told it. The plant, mercifully absent, did not react.

"Strong Meets," came the verdict for me. "Strong Meets," the spreadsheet repeated, obedient as glass. The squares slid into their new arrangement, and the meeting, relieved to have a shape again, breathed.

"Thank you for participating in this fair and balanced discussion," the officiant said. The phrase floated for a second, then sank without a ripple.

I closed my laptop half an inch and stared into the thin darkness of the gap, as if the truth of anything might live there. On Slack, a banner bloomed with stubborn optimism: *Congratulations on another great year!* The confetti refused to load. The link to the ratings portal did not.

When it finally did, the words sat there like a grade school report: Strong Meets. A familiar sentence with no punctuation,

a level between applause and warning. For a second, the predictability steadied me. There's a comfort in gravity; you always know where the ground is. Then the sub-emails arrived.

HRbot: *Please take "Receiving Feedback with Joy."*

Kara: *We'll start your narrative in April next year.*

Priya: *Swap Evidence Engine templates monthly?*

Darren: *:cheers: Promotion deck incoming, animated!*

I laughed, once, out loud, the sound you make when something ridiculous intersects perfectly with something inevitable. The stress ball on my desk made a faint rubbery sigh, as if tired too.

Later that night I opened a fresh file: *Receipts_2026.md*. First line: *Calibration is not a verdict; it's price discovery for humans*. I set a recurring calendar invite—last Friday of every month, twenty minutes, no attendees. The title felt like a promise you make to yourself in a quiet tone so it can live.

The next morning, HR encouraged gratitude. "Share appreciation with your peers!" the bot chirped. I typed, "Grateful for links," and added a **:paper_clip:** to make the point without making a speech. The plant leaned toward the window as if applauding with chlorophyll.

In the afternoon, Kara and I had the kind of one-on-one that only happens after the ceremony—the honest kind, held in a hallway without an agenda. "You did everything right," she

said, which is a sentence that sounds like praise but is really a diagnosis. “We’ll build your narrative sooner next time. We’ll choose the verbs in April, not September.”

“I’ll bring more nouns,” I said.

“Bring people who will say them,” she said. “Bring their names.”

She looked tired in a way the weekend wouldn’t fix. Her job was to staple outcomes to stories until they smiled like policy. Mine was to keep shipping while the stapling went on. We were both competent. We were both inside the grid.

I ran into Priya near the coffee machine. Neither of us mentioned the obvious. “Evidence Engine swap?” she asked.

“End of month,” I said.

“Make it fifteen minutes,” she said. “We’re not writing memoirs. We’re writing receipts.”

“Darren?” I asked.

“Celebrating,” she said. “He’s very happy for his slides.”

“I’m happy for his audience,” I said.

We both smiled; the unkind part of us stayed seated.

That evening, the company Slack filled with the polite clinking of virtual glasses. People congratulated their teams. Leaders posted threads full of thank you-s and horizon metaphors.

Someone in Legal wrote, “Proud of this resilient group.”

Someone in Sales wrote, “Onward!” A junior PM wrote,

“Grateful to learn from you all,” which is the sentence you post when you haven’t yet learned the other one: “*Grateful to survive with you all*”.

I kept my laptop open long enough to read three versions of the same speech. Each one included the word fairness. None included the word limit.

A day later, the air was ordinary again. The nine-box grid had retreated to wherever ritual objects go when the festival is over. The work returned to its regular shape—tickets, threads, a problem with edge cases that would try to disguise itself as a roadblock. In its normal clothes, the year felt almost manageable.

I booked time with Finance to make sure the pipeline numbers were reflected on the same slide where costs lived, so someone could see both without squinting.

I asked Data Eng to add a label on the dashboard so future-me wouldn’t have to dig through PRs to prove the change.

I pinged Support to confirm we could quote that “thank you” in the product notes without summoning Legal.

I put my name on nothing that didn’t require it, and my link on everything that did.

“Remember,” Kara said in our weekly. “In April, we start telling the story.”

"I'll have monthly chapters," I said.

"Good. We'll need a prologue, too."

"What's the prologue?" I asked.

"Your default-by dates," she said. "Decisions aren't real unless they expire."

A director stopped by our pod. "We're doing a lessons-learned," he said, "about calibration. Any thoughts?" He held a notebook like it might absorb memory through proximity.

"Define your constrained resource," I said. "If it's Exceeds, call it Exceeds. Don't call it fairness."

He laughed—the kind of laugh that shows all the teeth but none of the agreement. "Good one," he said, and wrote nothing down.

In the afternoon, I helped a newer PM with their self-review.

"What did you do here?" they asked, pointing to a sentence that had once been a paragraph.

"Killed a meeting," I said.

"What did you write before you wrote that?"

"A speech," I said.

"What changed your mind?"

“A calendar,” I said. “And a plant.”

They looked at the plant, skeptical. “Does it help?”

“It doesn’t lie,” I said.

Two days later, HRbot cheerfully reminded us to finish our peer reviews. I wrote three more, each with links. One for a designer who negotiated scope so skillfully the team thought they’d won dessert. One for an engineer who refactored a thing no one else wanted to touch because it had acquired the aura of a myth. One for a vendor manager who managed to get legal terms signed without threatening anyone with apocalyptic timelines. I attached evidence: a before and after; a thread that ended; a doc that made a meeting unnecessary. Adjectives appeared only to label the sandwich, not to be the sandwich.

At the end of the week, after the congratulatory banners had sunk below the fold, I ran into Darren in the kitchen. He was filling a water bottle that had a sticker: *Make It Pop*. “You deserved it,” I said, and meant it.

“We all deserved something,” he said, and meant that too. He looked a little smaller than his slides, but most of us do.

That night I dreamed about the grid. In the dream, the boxes were planted in soil and people were trying to crawl out of them, only to find the boxes moved with them.

I woke up angry and then laughed at myself—anger with no oxygen dies funny. I wrote a sentence on my phone: “*You*

can't flatten excellence, but you can make it legible". I turned the screen off and slept without dreaming a second time.

A week after the verdicts, the plant sprouted a tiny bud, bright as punctuation. It arrived without permission, without budget, and without needing to be compared to any other plant. It didn't change my rating. It didn't change the curve. It just changed the room.

Priya swung by my desk with a mug and a look that meant neutral news. "Got a second?" she asked. We walked to a window the building had reluctantly provided.

"Recruiter pinged me," she said. "Not sure yet. I like it here, mostly on Tuesdays."

"I like it here on days when the grid is off," I said.

"Do you ever feel like we spend more time explaining the work than working?" she asked.

"I feel like we spend the right amount of time explaining the work if we explain it once, in a place that doesn't vanish," I said. "Everything else is theater."

"Then let's do less theater," she said. "Swap receipts monthly. Shop them to our managers quarterly. Ship the thing that makes the explanation shorter."

"Deal," I said.

We stood there watching the city remember itself. Behind us the office hummed—keyboards, someone laughing too loudly

on a call, the elevator's devotional ding. If you squinted, you could see a year that made sense.

That evening, I added a page to my doc: *Advocacy for Others*. Three bullet points with three links for three people who weren't me. Priya at the top. A quiet engineer next. A new analyst who kept catching the mistakes no one else saw because she hadn't learned which ones we were willing to ignore.

I wrote a line beneath their names in a tone that felt like making a promise: *Proof compounds faster when shared*.

The plant's leaves tilted toward the last light of the day, and the room cooled around the decision. I closed the laptop and listened to the building breathe, the way a person breathes when the performance is over and the body remembers it belongs to itself.

The curve had settled. The org, being an org, had not.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: The Calibration Condition

Reviews don't reward growth; they reward documentation. Impact fades faster than adjectives, and adjectives are budgeted. Build a habit that doesn't depend on memory or mercy. Every month, write three receipts: Decision → Delta → Link. One sentence. One number. One place to prove it. Keep them short enough to read between meetings and strong enough to survive them. Do the same for one peer. Proof compounds faster when shared. When feedback season returns, you won't

be drafting fiction—you'll be exporting facts. Pre-brief your manager with three undeniable sentences. Bring names, not teams. Tie every balloon to a post.

Truth: Reviews price narratives, not souls.

Tool: Evidence Engine—three bullets, three links, thirty seconds.

Try this Monday: Block twenty minutes at month-end; update your receipts and your manager's.

Reminder: You can't flatten excellence, but you can make it legible.

* * *

Slack pinged as I closed the notebook.

@HRbot: "Share gratitude with your peers!"

@AlexReed: "Grateful for links."

@plant: reacted with a quiet lean toward the window.

@calendar: "Recurring added—Receipts, Monthly."

The plant held still, smug in its silence. The bell curve wasn't going anywhere. But I could measure my own gravity. And I could put a link on it.

CHAPTER 8:

Reorg Whisperer

The first sign of a reorg isn't an email. It's a sudden interest in "visibility."

My calendar went from modest confidence to meteorological panic overnight—skip-levels materialized like polite thunderstorms; recurring 1:1s sprouted asterisks that meant "tentative" the way a cough in a quiet room means "contagious."

In Slack, HR bot chirped something cheerful about "structural updates soon," which is how cheerful people announce weather with names.

The plant on my desk leaned away from the laptop's heat like it could sense migration season, and I envied a creature that could tilt a degree and call it strategy.

By lunch, channels were quietly renamed, as if a witness-protection program had been rolled out for nouns. #go-to-market became #newbeginnings. #ops-war-room became #alignment2027.

"We're just tidying," someone wrote, confirming that language is a tarp you throw over a spill. Promotion emails, which had been trickling out in modest bursts, stopped like a

faucet someone remembered to turn. Promotions require applause. Reorgs prefer silence.

“Wind’s changing,” Priya texted. “Update your one-pager headers.”

This was not superstition. She had survived three reorgs that left her reporting to people like weather systems: high pressure for two quarters, low pressure for a sprint, a sudden cold front of strategy that promised clarity if we would just wear appropriate jackets.

I changed the header font on my slide from “**Team: Product Analytics**” to “**Domain: Customer Signal Enablement**,” a phrase that tasted like cardboard but paired well with anything. It was the sort of label that could survive across five different visions because it didn’t insist on meaning.

At 2 p.m., I joined a meeting titled “Quick Sync — Strategic Continuity,” which is like a magician asking you to guess which hand is empty.

The VP arrived late, eyes shining with the confident uncertainty of a man who had been briefed and told to smile. He clicked to a slide that was all rectangles and arrows, the way a child explains traffic. As he spoke, the org chart behind him rearranged itself at a single pixel lag—boxes shifted, a line attached to the wrong node, then corrected, then shrugged and returned to its new life.

PowerPoint, haunted by the living. He didn’t notice. We all did.

“Before we go deeper,” he said, “I want to stress: there are no immediate changes.”

Which is how you know there were immediate changes, already happening, below the waterline where titles sink first.

I wrote, I am calm, on a Post-it and stuck it to my keyboard like a safety spell. The plant shed one crisp leaf at the exact moment the VP said “streamline.”

In the afternoons, rumor travels faster than Wi-Fi. I was added to a private DM thread named #intel like a teenager might name a folder “homework.” It was our Bloomberg terminal for fear.

“Heard Kara is moving under Ops?” someone wrote. “No, Ops going under Kara,” came the reply. “Both under a GM?” a third voice asked. If you zoomed out far enough, it sounded like theology.

To keep my pulse entertaining itself, I started a spreadsheet. Columns: Leader, Rumor, Confidence, Source, Emoji Count. The formula was simple and childish: Forecast Accuracy equals Rumors multiplied by Confidence, divided by Actual Announcements.

I applied it retroactively to last year’s storm. Surprisingly, we scored well. Our rumor accuracy hovered at eighty-seven percent, better than any OKR I’d ever celebrated. The difference, I realized, was incentive. Rumors pay immediately; OKRs pay in retrospective slides. The market prefers cash flow.

The next morning HR launched a “Reorg Readiness Toolkit” with clip art that felt aspirational. Each slide resembled an as-

trological chart: circles inside circles with little glyphs that might indicate budget phases or the phases of a PM's mood.

The table I printed and taped by my monitor offered helpful guidance.

The Director: will merge, then split, then merge again.

The IC: will report to someone you haven't met yet.

The PM: will become horizontal, spiritually and literally.

The Data Team: will be reborn as Enablement.

The Plant: still reports to sunlight. It felt insulting and accurate, which is also how mirrors work.

I remember the first time I truly saw an org chart. Not a static document, but a living map of how power breathes. The colors are there to comfort you. The boxes are there to comfort someone else. The lines, though—the lines are verbs. A solid line says “thou shalt.” A dotted line says “friendly suggestions, backed by teeth.” Reorgs are the act of rearranging verbs. People mistake it for nouns.

There was also a “Translator” tile, a Rosetta stone for announcements. New reporting lines equals old mistakes with new fonts. Streamlining equals layoffs without layoffs yet. Matrix model equals everyone reports to everyone. I wanted to be offended, but it was too useful.

“Don't get attached to titles,” Priya said on a walk between buildings that all looked like decision trees. “Get attached to verbs. Your verbs are what keep you employed.”

“My verbs?” I asked.

“Ship. Update. Explain. Translate. ‘Escalate’ on weekends.”

We passed a conference room where two senior managers were drawing a pipeline on a whiteboard that could have been blood vessels or a supply chain for pizza. One of them erased a branch and said, “Cleaner.” The other nodded like he’d seen the future and it involved fewer extra steps. In a way, he had.

Rumor does its best work around coffee machines. Kara appeared next to me with the relaxed smile of a person who already knew her next manager. She leaned on the counter and talked about nothing. People who hold knowledge often choose floatation as performance art. It is not cruel; it is survival. When she left, a colleague whispered, “Ops, right?” and I shrugged in a tone I hope sounded supportive.

“Stop guessing,” HR bot posted in #all-hands. “We’ll share details soon. Please avoid speculation.”

The channel, previously moving at a polite river’s pace, became a delta. Please avoid speculation is an incantation for speculation. By afternoon, someone had shared a screenshot of a confidential deck.

The leaker was Darren, of course, who had long ago realized he could earn culture points by turning transparency into a halftime show. He’d redacted the salary bands with tasteful rectangles, then sent the slide with the subject “draft draft draft.” We all thanked him in private. In public, we wrote “Let’s wait for the official doc.”

That evening, I practiced my delighted-to-report-to-you face in the bathroom mirror, which is one of those sentences your parents never imagined you would say without being kidnapped. The face requires the eyebrows to rise without stress, the mouth to lift in a non-sarcastic arc, the eyes to convey warmth without a sudden wetness that suggests you've been told a joke about your house. It's easier if you imagine you're greeting a barista who remembered your order but has legally become your uncle.

I went to bed early, woke at three, and found my phone vibrating as if it was nervous on my behalf. Calendar invites had reproduced while I slept: Town Hall Celebration at 10 a.m., Confidential 1:1 at 10 a.m., both mandatory, both on opposite sides of the building.

I accepted both. Priya sent a dot. A dot is a friendship that says: same storm, different coat.

At the Town Hall, the Chief of Something Good did what chiefs do: translate power into hope. "We are simplifying," she said, and introduced verbs that would later be hammered into KPIs: harmonize, accelerate, empower.

A slide titled "Where We're Going" displayed a horizon you'd never arrive at unless your treadmill was well funded. There were boxes, circles, pathways, a friendly cylinder labeled "Data" that implied, if not democracy, at least shared plumbing.

Someone asked whether the reorg would affect priorities. The Chief smiled the way a pilot smiles when asked whether turbulence affects arrival times.

“We will evaluate in the coming weeks. For now, stay focused on your customers.” Focus, I wrote, underlined twice. In every reorg, the only people doing the same work afterward are the customers.

In the hallway afterward, two engineers compared managers the way sommeliers compare tannins. “Elena is structured, crisp,” one said, “but finishes with a citrus of last-minute escalations.”

“Marco is approachable,” the other offered. “Nose of marathon product reviews.”

We laughed because transposing suffering onto wine is the sort of joke that reminds you none of this involved factories or broken bones. Only calendars.

I slipped into the Confidential 1:1 late by three minutes, which is the corporate equivalent of knocking twice before entering your own house. The new Senior Director smiled warmly—too warmly—and I realized he didn’t know whether he would be announcing himself as my manager or my neighbor.

“Tell me what you do, in your words,” he said, which is what people ask when they want to know whether your verbs trend toward the furniture they’re buying.

I explained: “We turn behavior into decisions. We instrument the places where people hesitate, and then make those hesitations either shorter or more profitable.” He nodded, which meant he liked that we weren’t in the business of adjectives.

I didn't mention that my job, lately, was to reduce the surface area of surprises. If you say "risk management" in daylight, someone invites you to a meeting where risk is what the VP feels when he sees a big number.

When this meeting ends, I thought, I will either have a new boss or a new neighbor. Both require snacks.

After that day, time found a new gear. Sentences grew surgical, stripped of adjectives, padded with nouns that looked like accident reports.

Structure changes best thrive in the passive voice; nobody is doing anything, it is being done. "You'll be part of the new Platform Insights pillar," Kara said finally, as if platform and pillar had not fought to the death while we weren't looking. "It's going to bring clarity."

"It always does," I said. "For a while."

At home, over dinner, I explained reorg logic to someone who enjoys nouns like "weekend." My partner listened with the patience of a person who has never been asked to calculate their relevance quarterly. "What's the strategy, then?" she asked.

"Same as fire season," I said. "Create defensible space. Keep a bag ready. Know the exits."

"Do you like your job?" she asked.

"I like my verbs," I said. "The nouns are... seasonal."

The back-channel took on a rhythm. Someone would drop a rumor. Three people would add a confidence score and an emoji reaction that communicated more than an adjective ever could. If it got past ten reactions without correction, it stabilized into folk wisdom; if an official announcement contradicted it later, we treated the announcement as a draft and waited for the second announcement, which was usually closer to gravity.

Priya created a physical map on her whiteboard: green sticky notes for leaders whose status was confirmed alive, yellow for names we'd heard but not met, pink for acronyms nobody had defined yet.

When someone asked why she didn't use a spreadsheet, she smiled. "I like to hear the paper," she said, and peeled a pink note off the wall with a rip that sounded like a bandage. You could almost see the noise travel down the hall.

"Worried?" I asked.

"I'm rehearsed," she said. "Worry is when you think your actions matter. Rehearsal is when you know what you'll do, regardless."

By the third day, calendar invites had evolved into their final form: "Ten-Minute Connects" at odd times that landed like hail. The most practical thing I did was copy the top three paragraphs of my own OSDM template into a note and keep it ready to paste whenever someone asked for a summary.

Reorgs reward those who can explain themselves in the time it takes a manager to forget why the meeting was scheduled.

Context, options, pick, why. Default-by date and a review date if you want to look generous.

In the afternoon, a meeting called “Cross-Pillar Alignment” gathered twenty-two souls and a PowerPoint with a confidence problem. A director drew a new operating model shaped like spaghetti networking at a job fair. “This path ensures we’re not siloed,” he said. “Silos,” he added solemnly, as if naming a disease in public counted as treatment. Someone asked where their team’s box had gone. He clicked a few times and said, “Agile.” I wrote that down because eventually I would forget which lies were funny and which were merely polite.

The funny thing about fear is how well it pairs with competence. Everyone around me did their jobs slightly better while waiting for a possible change.

People answered emails on time. Meetings started with purpose statements. Slides removed confetti. If the company could schedule an annual rumor season without also scheduling an annual performance improvement, we were missing a flywheel.

My phone buzzed with a note from our chief of staff: could I share a one-pager on how our team translated product signals into decisions? Keep it snappy.

I opened my file, changed “team” to “pillar,” inserted a tasteful rectangle labeled “enablement,” and removed a pair of jokes I’d been saving since last quarter. Humor is like salt; during storms, people argue it causes thirst.

By Thursday, someone rolled out a document explaining how the new structure was “temporary but extensible,” which is like telling a child the dog is going to college.

It included a chart titled “Memory Half-Life,” which I wanted to frame.

It suggested employees would forget the details of the reorg in about six weeks, which is how long it takes for any slightly annoying habit to become a culture.

I had questions about the axis labels but appreciated the honesty. We don’t remember how power arrived. We remember how to keep it from bumping into our chairs.

At lunch, I ate with Darren, who had become a folk hero after posting the redacted deck, then somehow not being fired. He shrugged when I asked him how. “I label everything draft,” he said. “And I cc legal on purpose once a month, so they get tired.”

He sipped his seltzer like a man who refuses to be flavored.

“Also,” he added, “I send the VP my slides as a GIF. He thinks it’s ‘dynamic.’”

“You’re going to end up reporting to GIFs,” I said.

“We all do,” he said. “Eventually.”

Late afternoon brought a one-on-one with my current-manager-who-might-be-my-former-manager, who has the calm of a person who has seen the future and it featured another calendar.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, which is a question that never welcomes an honest answer at work.

“I’m making maps,” I said. “Documenting old verbs, inventing new ones.”

“That’s healthy,” he said, and I believed he meant it. “I appreciate that you haven’t asked ‘what’s next.’”

“Why is that good?”

“Because the first person to ask ‘what’s next’ becomes next.”

He smiled in a manner that suggested wisdom purchased with mistakes. I wrote that down too, because sometimes a joke is a rule in costume.

That night, I couldn’t sleep. I got up, put on a hoodie, and opened the laptop in the dim kitchen. The plant’s pot had a small crack from the last repotting, a hairline fracture that looked like a map of a river on an old globe. You could call it damage. Or you could call it a memory of having grown. I taped it, gently, and moved the plant three inches left where the light would catch a little earlier. Sometimes leadership is photosynthesis and tape.

I opened my spreadsheet, added two new columns—Dependencies and People Who Think They’re Dependencies—and created three tabs named simply Map 1, Map 2, Map 3.

Map 1: known leaders with confirmed verbs.

Map 2: pending ghosts.

Map 3: acronyms that exist but haven’t been assigned a soul.

I added a worksheet called Whisper Index and wrote a formula that weighted emoji counts as statistical confidence. Reactions are market sentiment; a heart means a bet placed with warmth, a check means a bet placed with documentation.

When I finally slept, I dreamed of a whiteboard with boxes that asked me to choose my family. In the morning, the dream felt less tragic and more accurate.

On Friday, HR sent an email with the subject “Clarity.” It was full of words that had recently meant the opposite. It took nine paragraphs to say that we were now in a matrix, which is corporate for “you will be fully aligned with two partially conflicting masters.” This is considered progress because the grid looks modern.

A historian could write about how human beings moved from families to guilds to org charts and how, at every step, we invented new words for “cooperation with supervision.”

Priya swung by my desk and set down a coffee. “You’ll be okay,” she said. It landed like a statement, not a soothing.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I have a face I practiced.”

She laughed gently. “I know. I used to practice choosing which door to open in my head. Then I realized the doors move.”

“What do you do now?”

“I draw where the hallways will be.”

We walked to a meeting that had existed under five different titles that week. In the room, a junior PM presented a deck that tried to reconcile three priorities that had never met. She was good: crisp, kind, ruthless with extra words. When someone asked her to add a workstream for a new pillar, she didn't flinch.

"Happy to," she said, "which of these four do you want to drop or delay to make room?" She didn't smile. She simply opened a slide with a backlog that made gravity visible.

The director blinked, then picked. It felt like watching someone carry a candle through a storm with both hands. I wrote her name down because if there's a promotion left in this economy, it often waits behind the person who can say "preference?" without raising their voice.

That afternoon, I joined a cross-functional sync where two VPs pretended not to be interviewing each other. Their teams watched the call like the weather, ready to put on coats in case a sentence turned into a season. I noticed how each VP described the same decision with different nouns. One said "platform," one said "capabilities." They both meant "money we can defend." Nouns are where you hide agreement.

After the meeting, a private message pinged: "So... who do you think you're reporting to?"

It was meant as gossip; it landed as a thesis question. I typed, deleted, retyped. Finally, I wrote: "I'm reporting to the work."

It wasn't noble. It was a way to exist on days where the chain of command resembled a Möbius strip. Also, it fit on a Post-it,

which is a constraint I recommend for answering most philosophical questions.

Evening. Someone scheduled a “Listening Session” for Monday morning, which is what we call meetings where questions are allowed but answers prefer not to be late for their next engagement. I added it to my calendar and wrote, in small letters, the word weather.

On the way out, I paused by the plant and turned the pot a few degrees. The light caught the new growth, a shy green like a decision that finally dared measure itself. I told myself, honestly and not as a performance: I can do this. Not because I control the wind. Because I own my bag, my map, my verbs. Also, because I know where the exits are. Survival is a skill set you can write down.

On the bus home, a text from an old teammate lit up my phone. “You good?” he wrote.

“Paranoia is expensive,” I replied. “I’m budgeting for adaptation.”

“Smart,” he wrote. “We should publish a weather report.”

“Already did,” I wrote. “It looks like a one-pager with fewer jokes.”

He sent a laughing reaction. Laughter is an asset the season cannot devalue.

On Saturday, against my better instincts, I opened the laptop for one hour and told myself it would be just enough to keep entropy from wining and dining my documents.

I composed a short note to my future-whatever leader—a crisp paragraph that said what my team did, how we measured it, and what I needed unblocked next. No adjectives, one number, one date, one sentence that made me sound like a grown-up who could be trusted with small fires.

Then I closed the laptop and went outside. The sky was doing its giant blue impersonation again. The wind had the decency to be honest.

Sunday evening crept in with the silky dread of all honest Sundays. I made tea and read a book that wasn't about management. My partner asked if I was ready for Monday, which is a question that should only be answered with verbs.

"I'm going to map," I said. "I'm going to edit. I'm going to carry one candle at a time." She nodded. The plant tilted half an inch toward the window as if rehearsing for dawn.

Monday morning, I wore a shirt that said "professional adult" without trying too hard to sell it. In Slack, HR bot announced our new structure with exclamation points that sounded like a pep squad for an intrusive species.

I typed, "Looks great," and didn't send it. Instead, I posted a link to our team's dashboard with a caption: "Here's where the work shows up." Two people reacted with a check. One with a heart. One with a leaf. The Whisper Index ticked upward. Sentiment bullish; confidence moderate.

The calendar chimes came in a flock. I breathed, calmly and almost convincingly, and opened the first call. The faces arranged themselves like a family photo organized by budget.

The new Senior Director smiled with real human energy, which I accepted like a glass of water brought to a table by someone who's not your waiter but still noticed you were thirsty. "Let's talk about the next two weeks," he said, and clicked open a plan that looked like it had been assembled by a newsroom, a weather station, and a poker player.

"Stay with your customers. Keep receipts. We'll settle nouns soon. For now, guard your verbs."

I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath until I exhaled. Guard your verbs. It was a better sentence than most decks earn in a year. "One more thing," he added. "If you don't know what to do, act like you were already informed."

I wrote it down. Not because I wanted to repeat it at dinner. Because I knew this sentence would turn out to be a key in my pocket in about four meetings.

After the call, I pinged Priya: "New sport: Reorg Whispering."

She replied: "We read the wind. We don't chase it."

"What's the trick?" I asked.

"Move two slides ahead," she wrote. "Not ten. Two."

In the afternoon, the new cross-pillar kickoff asked each team to introduce their priorities. A manager from Ops listed half their roadmap; a PM from Growth read from a document like it was a prayer designed for pacifying gods.

When it was my turn, I put up one slide. Context: our signal gaps and where they bleed into decisions. Options: three pathways with tradeoffs in hours, not quarters. Pick + Why: the smallest path that taught us the most by Friday, with one kill condition if numbers lied.

I think people expected more theater. But theater is a hedge for when you can't afford data.

Afterward, two engineers messaged to say thanks for "keeping it boring in a helpful way." I took that as the highest compliment available during storm season. The forecast had shifted from dramatic to navigable.

Walking out that evening, I checked the plant. New sprout, dangerously cute. I resisted the urge to name it after the Senior Director. People are temporary; photosynthesis is an infrastructure.

I locked my laptop in the drawer and told myself: I'm not here to control the weather. I'm here to build a house that doesn't fly away when it's windy, and a map I can share with anyone who knocks.

On the train, I opened my notebook and wrote one honest paragraph about how I felt, because fear that won't fit on a page will expand to fill your calendar. Then I wrote a list titled Reorg Toolkit and pretended I was giving advice to a future me who would forget everything by the next season.

Map the leaders with verbs. Map the ghosts. Map the acronyms that scare people into nodding. Keep a Whisper Index for fun, because fear without metrics tends to metastasize.

Document everything twice—one for the person who will read it, once for the person who will inherit it. Practice pretending surprise gracefully. It wasn't courage; it was choreography.

When I got home, I taped the list inside a kitchen cabinet. Not to be dramatic. To remind myself that the weather would return, and that I had a coat I knew how to find.

The next morning, I arrived to a Slack thread already in progress. "New reporting lines are live!" HR bot announced with the expectancy of a morning show. I clicked and saw my name attached to a new constellation. It looked familiar. A line up, a line sideways, a dotted line to a team that used to be my neighbor and was now an aunt. A diagram that said family, but meant schedule. I made coffee, watered the plant, and returned to my desk. "Still here?" someone messaged.

"Still here," I replied. I didn't add "for now." That was implied, and implying is one of the verbs you master when the nouns won't sit still.

The sun came in a little earlier than it had last week. I turned the plant again. You don't fight the light. You face it. Then you get back to work.

The first full week under the new constellation began with a polite crisis and ended with a real one. On Monday, my old roadmap met my new nouns, and they did not shake hands. My Slack sidebar looked like a commuter train at rush hour—channels jostling for attention, announcements wedged between "quick asks" that required small teams and a working theory of everything.

I kept my Whisper Index running in the background because it felt like an oxygen monitor. Sentiment: cautiously snarky. Confidence: lumpy. Emoji distribution: heavier on check marks than hearts, which is a cultural improvement as long as you enjoy receipts.

Before standup, I redrew the diagrams in my head. Reorgs don't change the work so much as they change where the work shows up when it's hungry. Our merchant signals—browse, cart, abandonment whispers—still pulsed.

Finance still cared about dollars that behaved. Support still translated pain into ticket IDs that sounded like serial numbers for grief. The difference was which Slack threads believed they owned the verbs “decide” and “deploy.”

I wrote three names on a sticky and placed it at the bottom of my monitor, the equivalent of putting a favorite book within reach on a nightstand: customer, risk, receipt. When you're unsure who your boss is, appoint one you can explain to anyone.

Mid-morning, I got summoned to a “triage.”

Triage is Latin for “a meeting where three managers try to name a fire so they can be seen with buckets.”

Mine featured Ops (urgent, organized), Growth (urgent, improvisational), and the newly invented Platform Enablement (urgent, curious).

The topic: a feature that sat at the crossroads of fraud and convenience. Ops wanted it moved two sprints up because a

merchant had threatened to reduce their spend. Growth wanted to keep the original experiment because a cohort curve had finally started to smile.

Platform wanted to build a reusable component because, in their words, “We’ll be asked to do three more of these by Q4.”

“Help us decide,” someone said, and everyone looked at me as if I stored certainty behind my profile picture.

“I can help us pick,” I said. “Deciding takes a quorum I can’t convene in forty minutes.”

Picking, though, is a craft for people comfortable with blame. I put up a single slide I’d made that morning called “Two-Week Reality.” Three options, each with a kill condition and a number that a human could understand. I didn’t say “trade-off.” I pointed at cost and consequence.

Then I asked the only useful question a matrix respects: “Who funds the regret if we’re wrong?”

They blinked—the good blink that precedes citizenship. Growth looked at Ops; Ops looked at Platform; Platform looked like a dog handed a violin. Finally the Ops lead said, “We’ll fund the regret.” Growth nodded, relieved to be dramatic later rather than right now.

Platform asked for a week to make the component properly miserable. I recorded the sentence in a doc titled “Regret Ledger,” because a ledger is a boundary with manners.

After the call, Priya pinged: “How’d you get them to pick without a second meeting?”

“I put a dollar sign next to the word ‘regret,’” I wrote. “And I didn’t say ‘alignment’ once.”

“Keep doing that,” she said. “Storms like people who can read a compass without insisting it’s a map.”

At lunch, I sat near the window with a container of lentils and a notebook open to the page where I’d started the “Influence vs Visibility” grid. The top-right box—the ideal—belonged to people who could quietly move the work and occasionally choose when to be seen. The bottom-right box—dangerous—was reserved for people who were very visible and almost inert.

I put my name in the upper-middle: influence moderate, visibility seasonal. I placed Priya near the top-left: material influence, selective visibility. I put Darren on the right, somewhere between charming flashlight and controlled burn. If he ever figured out how to carry water as well as he carried news, he’d be unstoppable. Or fired in a very tasteful way.

The “Listening Session” followed, a friendly amphitheater where questions were welcomed and answers were allowed to be future tense. The Chief of Something Good facilitated with the grace of a person who has learned how to keep an audience while giving them as little concrete as possible.

Questions were practical, not angry: How do we sequence dependencies when three pillars claim ownership? Who arbitrates when dashboards disagree? Will priorities be reshaped or simply re-labeled?

I submitted one question that sounded like hygiene but was actually a bet: “Can we publish an index of decisions made and decisions pending, with default-by dates and owners?”

It landed with the pleasant thud of something not controversial and therefore dangerous to ignore.

After the session, the Chief DM'd me. "Let's talk about that decisions index. You're thinking 'micro source of truth,' right? Lightweight, not another JIRA mausoleum?"

"Exactly," I wrote. "One page, one rhythm. Default-by dates, regret owner, link to receipts."

"Draft it," she said. "We'll run it as a pilot under Insights."

Pilot. Under. Insights. These are the kinds of nouns that convert into verbs if you feed them a schedule.

I pulled Darren into the doc because I needed someone who could make a dry idea culturally loud without turning it into a meme. He added a banner that moved when you scrolled—a tasteful distraction. He also suggested two fields I hadn't considered: "Who must be surprised?" and "How will we make the surprise gentle?"

I told him he was not allowed to be this useful without warning me first.

He replied with a GIF of a fox filing paperwork.

I took a screenshot and added it to my Whisper Index under the column "Culture artifacts that accidentally teach."

That afternoon, a small storm rolled in disguised as kindness. An SVP wanted to "hear from the front lines." The meeting invite contained the right words—listen, learn, understand—and a subtle threat—thirty minutes, fifteen attendees.

To prepare, I wrote a two-paragraph brief in English I'd be proud to read out loud. I added two numbers and one clipping from a user interview with a person who'd gotten stuck three times in one checkout flow. Then I deleted a sentence that made me sound like a hero, because senior people like heroes who are tired, not heroes who are hungry.

We joined, introduced ourselves in order of budgets, and shared one truth each. The SVP took notes with a pen that looked expensive and unnecessary. At the end, she said, "The specifics matter. Thank you. Please keep receipts." The receipts line had started to spread; an infection of sanity.

Walking back to my desk, I passed the hallway where rough drafts of future cultures are taped to the wall. This week's slogans were new, but the verbs were ancient: build, focus, learn, decide.

I wrote in the margin of my notebook, half sermon, half reminder: Reorgs are reality checks on your appetite for humility. You can complain about nouns, or you can install verbs.

The real crisis arrived Wednesday afternoon, smelling like accounts receivable. A partner escalated a problem that looked suspiciously like one of our edge cases had grown teeth. The ticket was a nest of contradictions: Finance wanted us to switch the default from "approve" to "review" because a small number of transactions had misbehaved.

Growth wanted us to hold off because a different small number of transactions finally behaved given frictionless processing.

Support wanted us to do whatever would make the queue stop sounding like a smoke alarm.

Legal wanted to be notified before anyone did anything that could be summarized to a judge. It was a perfect matrix: four correct answers, only one path.

“Emergency sync in five,” my manager wrote.

We entered a call with cameras on and voices careful. You can always tell when people know the room contains a sentence they might read later to someone who is paid to ask follow-ups.

“I can propose something small and honest,” I said, when it was my turn to be helpful. “We run a 48-hour flip: change the default to ‘review’ for high-risk segments only, keep the original experiment for the rest, instrument the hell out of it, and publish a decision note that says the quiet part out loud—‘we’re hedging while we learn.’ We’ll also draft the apology email now, in case we need it. If we never send it, we’ve still learned who we are on bad days.”

Finance liked the phrase “high-risk segments.”

Growth liked the phrase “for the rest.”

Support liked “apology drafted in advance” because they’re connoisseurs of tone.

Legal liked “publish a decision note” because one day a human will ask why we did a thing, and we will answer with three sentences and the smell of responsibility.

We left with a plan, which is different from a solution. A plan is a timeline with nouns. A solution is when the numbers behave.

I wrote the decision note while the adrenaline still played nice.

Title: what we changed, who we might inconvenience, how we'll know if we're wrong, how we'll apologize if necessary.

It fit on a single screen. I gave it a default-by: Friday at 5 p.m. And a kill condition: a number that would instruct us to undo our bravado without a meeting. Then I posted it in the new decisions index and tagged the regret owner like a neighbor delivering a casserole you didn't ask for but will appreciate at 11 p.m.

That night, I couldn't stop thinking about the plant. I'd left it in morning light. On the way out, I'd noticed the new sprout had unfurled into a small hand. You could pretend it was waving, or you could accept that it was conducting a ceremony more ancient than our calendars. Either way, it made me kinder.

Thursday, the numbers started to whisper. High-risk segments slowed, which the finance team interpreted as living proof of moral order. The rest hummed, which Growth claimed as confirmation of their religion.

Support reported fewer wails from the queue.

Everyone was happy enough to put their knives away. We kept the flip for another day and added two more lines to the note: one concrete observation, one humility sentence.

The Senior Director replied: “Thank you for being boring.” I pinned it, because I am a person who uses compliments as sandbags.

Between crises, the reorg returned to its usual hobby: sculpting conversation. People began to adopt the new titles with the tender embarrassment of someone trying a nickname. “I’m now in Platform Insights,” I said to an engineer in the kitchen.

He said, “Congratulations,” and meant, “I don’t know what that is.”

I explained with verbs. He nodded the way a person nods when you introduce a child and they’re not sure if it’s a baby or a very polite dog. We agreed to ship something small by Tuesday, a goal that all religions can share.

I kept upgrading my toolkit.

Map 1: the leaders with confirmed verbs—now included avatars so my brain could remember the right faces to imagine when I typed.

Map 2: the ghosts—got smaller, which is a sign the reorg had passed from rumor to ritual.

Map 3: the acronyms—got bigger before shrinking, which is a sign of either health or acceptance. The Whisper Index started displaying a little sparkline in the corner of my screen that moved like the weather. The day I saw it slope gently downward, I smiled. Fear rarely leaves quickly. It trickles out the side door if you feed it small satisfactions and avoid loud declarations of victory.

Friday morning, Kara stopped by my desk with the unhurried walk of a person whose calendar had recently learned manners. “How’s Insights?” she asked, meaning, “Are the verbs treating you okay?”

“Surprisingly nourishing,” I said. “Like soup you didn’t know was made from actual vegetables.”

“I need a favor,” she said. “We’re building an executive update for the quarter, and I’d like your fingerprints on the part where we say what we learned. Not the vanity metrics. The sentences.”

“Sure,” I said. “You want the three-beat version, right? Decision. Delta. Why it mattered.”

She tilted her head, approving. “You’ve been practicing.”

“I’ve been rehearsing,” I said, which is how I’ve learned to confess growth.

We sat in a small room with a window facing a stump. The stump had mushrooms. Nature’s version of enablement. I wrote three stories for Kara. In each, I refused to write the sentence with a passive voice. We chose. It changed X. Here’s who benefited, and what we’ll do next now that we’re less ignorant by a centimeter.

She cut two adverbs and removed an adjective I secretly loved. I didn’t defend it. She was right. Reorg seasons are for verbs; adjectives come later when the sky is boring.

The executive update landed well, “tight,” someone wrote, “grown-up,” wrote another, and the feedback that trickled

back to us contained fewer requests for “more context” than usual.

That phrase, “more context,” is often a code for “I cannot find the nouns I recognize.” We had given them the nouns they needed and the verbs we needed, and, for a moment, the two languages overlapped with a decency that felt like grace.

In the afternoon, I took twenty quiet minutes to write the paragraph I always postpone until it’s too late: how to act when two bosses give conflicting instructions. The answer—unromantic, useful—was a play in three lines: copy both, propose a small, dated experiment that answers the disagreement, ask who funds the regret. If neither answers, pick the smallest risk and publish the note. The secret is not bravery; it’s bureaucracy with manners.

Around four, I walked by Priya’s whiteboard. Many of the sticky notes were gone. In their place, she’d drawn a few simple arrows that crossed a circle labeled “customer.” It looked humble. It looked like something a child could understand. That’s usually when we’re closest to being right.

“You took down the ghosts,” I said.

“They took themselves down,” she replied. “Ghosts prefer attention. When you stop staring, they become drafts.”

We went for coffee and didn’t talk about work for six whole minutes. Then we failed and talked about the only hobby the company subsidizes: calendar manipulation.

“I have a theory,” she said. “People are less angry at reorgs when they’ve been allowed to name things.”

“Names are power?”

“Names are participation,” she said. “Let someone shape the label and they’ll forgive the box.”

“I’ll call my pillar ‘The Department of Actually Doing Things,’” I said.

“Too visible,” she said. “Try ‘Documentation and Gentle Surprises.’”

“Done,” I said, and texted Darren. He replied with a sticker of a raccoon holding a clipboard.

The following week pretend-calm settled in. If you didn’t know better, you could mistake it for stability. Meetings had fewer introductions. The new dotted lines discovered their sense of humor.

The Chief posted an update with fewer exclamation points than previous updates; the relief was obvious and shared. I shipped a small improvement to our decision dashboard that let anyone sort by “regret funded by,” which created more learning than most postmortems. It turns out people are eager to behave responsibly when responsibility is visible in a column.

On Wednesday, the Senior Director—mine, officially now, and increasingly human—stopped by my desk with the polite half-apology of a person delivering one more ask. “We’re getting pressure to show how this reorg made us faster,” he said. “I’m allergic to story math, but we need a story with math. Could you...?”

“Make the receipts sing in a non-musical way?” I said.

“Exactly,” he said. “Pick three decisions where speed increased by virtue of people knowing where to knock. Show time-before, time-after. And if speed didn’t increase, show where ambiguity decreased. That counts as speed the way a map counts as gasoline.”

I liked the metaphor. I liked that he’d said “we,” which is the pronoun that convinces me to do more work than is fair. I found three decisions. For each, I measured the time between first draft and default-by. I pulled calendar invites like they were veins. I added two small charts that behaved like proof without needing to be framed.

Our average time-to-pick had dropped by twenty-three percent; the median by more. The quality of picks—measured by absence of post-meeting Slack threads titled “One More Thing”—had improved in ways a chart shouldn’t be asked to express.

I wrote the conclusion we could live with: we got faster at being honest about what we didn’t know, and that saved us meetings. He wrote back: “Perfect. Feels like grown-ups.”

That night I walked home under a sky auditioning for spring. I passed a bookstore where the front table displayed self-help titles that promised to fix people like me. I almost went in, then remembered my rule: never buy a book about focus when your focus is good. Save the purchase for a week when you need the placebo.

Thursday morning, the rumor market twitched. A company in our industry had announced something euphemistic and sad.

Our Whisper Index spiked; the leaf and storm emojis began appearing with greater confidence. Slack went quiet for a beat—the breath before a chorus. HR bot posted, “We are unaffected by external changes,” which is a sweet sentence that has never been true.

I didn’t panic. I printed two documents, labeled them “Receipts to Carry,” and placed them in my bag like talismans. They contained our current decisions index and a list of dependencies I could explain to anyone with a calendar and a conscience.

In the afternoon, my manager asked me to join a small meeting called “Scenario Thinking.” That’s what we call “talking about layoffs without becoming a rumor.” **The room felt like an ICU for optimism.** We looked at numbers, then at each other, then at the floor. “We’re not planning anything,” the Senior Director said. “We’re rehearsing.” I appreciated the verb. Rehearsal is honest. Plans tend to turn into laws when frightened people get elected to own them.

We made a list of what we’d do if clouds gathered. It wasn’t morbid; it was neighborly. What work would we sequence, who would we shield, what knowledge must we extract from a single head and place somewhere a bus cannot reach? I proposed we finish the “decisions index” pilot and bless it with an audience wider than the polite.

He agreed. “If we go into a storm, I want the company to find a map, not a memoir,” he said.

That night, I watered the plant and noticed the crack in the pot had expanded by a sigh. I replaced the tape with a better

kind, one that contractors approve. I whispered, not to be dramatic but because I enjoy the idea that life is a conspiracy we can join without being invited: “We’re okay.” The plant didn’t nod. It did keep being alive.

Friday came, then left. Two weeks since the structure landed, and we were not broken, just rearranged. My verbs had found new chairs. The nouns had settled into a taxonomy that would last until Q3 or the next CFO with a theory. I’d added small comforts to my days: a walk at 3 p.m., a refusal to join any meeting that couldn’t answer “what will this change by Friday,” a rule that every document must contain one number, one date, one risk owned by a name.

In Slack, I began to notice a new habit where people included “Default-by” without being asked. Culture is when jokes become fields.

Late in the afternoon, I stood by the window and watched the parking lot do its choreography of exits. Cars, like decisions, rarely crash if you respect lanes. I thought about the sentence I’d write if someone asked me what I learned. It wasn’t eloquent. It was repeatable: Reorgs are weather, not verdicts. Learn to face the wind without pretending to be the sky. Move two slides ahead. Carry receipts. Guard your verbs.

On my way out, Darren caught up to me with the nervous enthusiasm of a man who’d drunk terrible coffee by choice. “You hear anything?” he asked, meaning, “Will we be okay?” This is a fair question from a person who has spent much of his career turning opacity into entertainment.

“I know what I’ll do,” I said. “That makes me okay enough.”

He nodded. "I changed my Slack status to a windsock."

"That's tasteful," I said. "Don't add a siren."

He laughed, then got serious in the way only nice people can. "You've been calm," he said. "Did you always have that?"

"No," I said. "I rented it from people who survived more storms than me. Now I'm buying it, one boring decision at a time."

We parted at the door where daylight turns into choice. I walked home and tried not to write a metaphor about it.

Over the weekend, I did something scandalous. I didn't open the laptop. I went for a long walk. I bought groceries with cash and felt ancient. I read an essay about the difference between strength and stability. I wrote four sentences in a notebook about the version of me who panics for sport, and how I might thank him for his service and ask him to retire.

On Sunday night, I taped a new page inside the cabinet next to the Reorg Toolkit. It said, in letters big enough to see at the worst hour: "When in doubt, act like you were already informed." Then, in small letters, "Apologize gently if you guessed wrong."

Monday returned like it always does: confident, inevitable, indifferent to your feelings. I arrived early, watered the plant, and opened the decisions index to add last week's small victories. I wrote three new entries in crisp, courtroom language. I added default-by dates you could bet a lunch on. I assigned regret owners in a way that made them smile because we'd dis-

tributed consequence fairly. The Whisper Index hovered at a lazy median. Slack behaved. The hallway felt wider.

At nine-thirty, the Senior Director called a short meeting. “Nothing urgent,” he said, which is the only time those words are true. “Just a check-in on the experiment we flipped.” We reviewed the numbers. They weren’t glorious, but they were honest. We decided to keep the split for another week with a smaller blast radius. We wrote it down, again, because repetition is how you make truth feel like infrastructure.

He paused before ending. “One more thing,” he said—always a phrase that deserves a seatbelt. “If you see a person carrying too much ambiguity, take some from them. Don’t wait for permission.” I liked that. I copied it into my notebook. Wisdom with a verb.

The rest of the week behaved like a well-fed cat. Meetings purring, the occasional claw, naps disguised as focus blocks.

My face stopped practicing delight in mirrors and returned to practicing comprehension. The weather held. In a quiet pocket of the afternoon, I found the sentence I’d been circling since the first HR exclamation point. I wrote it on a fresh note and stuck it under the plant, private and smug: I stopped fearing reorgs when I realized I was one. Not the kind that breaks things. The kind that rearranges attention until the important work is visible again.

On Friday, I shared my “Influence vs Visibility” grid with two junior PMs who had recently discovered what careers feel like when you’re rearranged by people who love nouns. We sat in a room with a whiteboard that had forgotten its childhood. I

drew the axes. We placed names in boxes, starting with our own. We talked about how to move without looking like we were dancing alone.

We wrote a short list titled “Moves That Cost Little”: document meeting decisions in-channel, ask “who funds the regret,” carry receipts, let other people be loud first. They took photos like tourists in a city they might one day afford. I wished someone had given me this map during my first storm. Then I remembered: someone did. They just spoke in a dialect I didn’t understand yet.

That evening, I stayed late and organized my documents with the devotional energy of a person avoiding the future by making it prettier. I created a folder called “Maps, Not Memoirs,” dragged in the decisions index, the regret ledger, the three slides that had saved us two meetings, and the executive update that had not lied. I printed one copy of each and put them in an actual folder. Paper is heavy. Sometimes you need to feel weight to believe in meaning.

On my way out, I stopped by the plant. The new sprout had become a leaf with opinions. The crack in the pot looked almost handsome with the contractor tape. I turned it a degree toward the window. I considered naming the plant “Continuity,” then rejected the idea as something a person in a manager memoir would do unironically. I told it, “You did good,” and left.

Saturday morning, as I poured coffee, my phone lit up with a news alert that rhymed with doom. Not here. Not yet. But close, the way thunder teaches you geography. I didn’t open Slack. I didn’t open email. I stood there and let dread do its

lap before deciding whether it deserved a medal. After breakfast, I wrote two paragraphs titled “If the storm comes.” One was a logistics list: who I’d call, what I’d print, which folders I’d share. The other was a script: how I’d talk to my team without lying or making promises the wind could embarrass. Then I closed the notebook. If you rehearse properly, you don’t have to narrate.

Sunday night, I made soup. Vegetables. Actual. I set out my clothes for Monday like a parent dressing a child who has chosen chaos as a major. I slept well.

The next week began as if it owed me nothing, which is the correct posture for a week. We moved work. We ignored decorative debates. We surprised two people gently. We apologized once—well, I hope—because the numbers had staged a small coup and we had capitulated before noon. The plant kept growing. The Whisper Index hovered at the edge of a joke. HR bot celebrated someone’s promotion with the tastefulness of a banner pulled behind a plane. In a private message, a friend at another company wrote a sentence that landed like a forecast: “Our dust settled.” I typed back without thinking: “Then the next storm is inbound.”

I didn’t mean it as a threat. I meant it as weather. We build houses, we carry maps, we cultivate verbs, we keep receipts. The wind has no feud with us. It just has a schedule.

On my way out that day, I paused at the door and looked back at the rows of screens—each one a little lighthouse pointed inward. This is the part of the memoir where an author might pretend to know the moral. I preferred a smaller claim: I know how to behave when the nouns get rearranged. I know how to

carry water and not spill all of it. I know how to make the next decision cheaper for the person behind me.

Outside, the air had that thin sharpness that means seasons are trading handshakes. I put my hands in my pockets and felt the folded papers—the receipts, the map. I didn't feel brave. I felt prepared enough to be kind. That's better. That travels.

The bus rattled. A child laughed at something adults have long forgotten how to notice. I watched a cloud try to be dramatic and fail. Tomorrow would bring news; it always does. If it was good, we would be gracious. If it was bad, we would be boring and documented. The house would hold. The leaf would turn toward whatever light we could find.

Somewhere in my pocket, under the map and above the keys, a small note waited for a day with thinner weather. I could feel the indent of the letters I'd written to myself for later: Move two slides ahead. Guard your verbs. When in doubt, act like you were already informed.

The bus hissed. Doors opened. We made room.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: Reorg Whispering

Truth: Reorgs are not moral events. They're weather systems that occasionally remember your name. You can't stop them, but you can stop pretending the sky owes you clarity. The skill isn't survival, it's interpretation. Learn to read the wind, not curse it.

Tool: Build your Reorg Toolkit before you need it. Three maps and one index.

Map 1: Who actually decides things (alive).

Map 2: Who might (pending ghosts).

Map 3: The acronyms nobody has defined yet.

And your Whisper Index — the quiet log of rumors, reactions, and emoji counts. It's not gossip if it helps you forecast the meeting weather.

Method: Document everything twice: once for the living, once for the next person who inherits your mess. Write decisions in verbs, not adjectives. Avoid words like “streamline” unless you're discussing rivers. And when someone asks “What's next?” — don't answer. Smile. Because the first person to ask that question usually becomes it.

Lesson: The calm ones aren't brave. They're rehearsed. They've pre-written the apology they hope never to use. They know panic is expensive and clarity is rented.

Try This Monday:

- Make a 2x2 map of Influence vs. Visibility.
- Place yourself honestly, then plan one small move toward calm competence.
- Start a “Decisions Index” with five live choices, each with a date, an owner, and a regret funder.
- Practice saying “acting as if already informed” until it sounds natural.

Reminder: The org chart will rotate again. It always does. What stays is how you behaved between slides, what you documented, what you didn't dramatize, and who you helped find light in the confusion. That's the quiet promotion no PowerPoint can take away.

CHAPTER 9: The Great Layoff Bingo

The first sign of layoffs was the HR bot going silent, like birds before an earthquake.

#announcements had been a daily drip of “wellness ideas” and “micro-wins,” then it stopped mid-sentence on a Tuesday, halfway through a thread about gratitude gifs. In its absence, other sounds got louder: a rumor hissed in #finance-ops about a freeze; recruiting put up a sticky note that said “Paused” like a badly parked car; and someone in the Phoenix project channel wrote, “Is cancellation a form of agility?” and then deleted it.

By Thursday, calendar invites were evaporating. Recurring 1:1s vanished with a polite “Organizer declined,” as if my calendar had finally built boundaries and moved to a farm. The “Leadership Sync” retracted into myth; people said they’d seen it before at dawn, a gray rectangle slipping between weeks. Weekly updates slid off the page like a ring off a finger. You could hear the quiet the way you hear the power go out—an instant where the world keeps moving, but with a new, thin meaning.

“Leadership assures us it’s just restructuring,” Kara said, her voice on Zoom doing the managerial triathlon of steady, warm, and edible. She blinked too slowly. “We’ll be fine.”

The plant by my window picked that exact moment to drop a leaf. Priya noticed and DM'd me, "Stock's down, empathy's up."

Someone scheduled a "Layoff Rumor Sync." Half the invite list got removed before it started, which either proved rumors were fake or that calendar was now a weapon. The agenda was one bullet: "What do you know?" The description was empty, which felt like creative nonfiction.

In the hallway, a Product Director whispered at a vending machine as if it accepted gossip as payment. In the kitchen, a program manager refilled a mug with a confidence that required caffeine to be a personality. At the micro kitchen fridge, there was a new sign—"Please label your food"—which read, under the fluorescent light, like career advice.

"I heard finance froze everything but pens," someone said on the walk back from the espresso machine. "Pens and severance."

"Recruiting is 'reevaluating pipeline health,'" a recruiter told the coffee machine. The machine, to its credit, kept pouring.

The HR bot surfaced for six seconds: "Wellness tips during times of change." Everyone panicked like an alarm had gone off in the word "wellness." I watched people type and stop typing; the hesitant little thought bubbles were a weather system of their own.

That night I slept with my badge on the bedside table. The little red LED blinked once and went still. I stared at it long enough to invent meaning. Battery? Destiny? I opened the

employee app to make sure the QR code still pulsed with belief. It did, which only made me suspicious.

Friday arrived with the same light as every Friday—indifferent and bright—and a new hush, like the building had agreed to speak only in disclaimers. Slack felt like a church after a scandal. Thread titles littered the feed: “Freeze in finance?,” “Recruiting paused,” “Phoenix—status?” Reactions looked like prayers. Someone wrote “Hearing chatter” and then replaced it with “No updates yet” as if the edit history could absolve them.

Our team huddled in Zoom squares. Kara’s background was tidy in a way that suggested rearranged, not clean. “Take a breath,” she said. “We don’t know anything yet.”

“Knowing nothing is the worst kind of something,” Priya whispered to me privately. “Also, stock’s down again.”

“My badge light turned red,” I wrote back. “I’m not sure if it’s low battery or a performance review.”

She sent the single-tear emoji, which in our team dialect meant: you’re laughing near an open window.

I told myself this was season two of the same show—fresh cast, same cliffhangers. Our company only had two seasons anyway: Hiring and Firing. In Hiring, we all received mugs. In Firing, we received philosophy.

At lunch, the cafeteria lines were shorter, the conversations longer, the fork clinks louder. People were doing that thing where they tell jokes in bullet points.

“Every company has two seasons,” an engineer said, spearing a salad like it had missed a deadline. “Hiring and Firing.”

A data scientist nodded. “I prefer Monsoon and Drought. At least in Monsoon no one pretends they know how boats work.”

Someone else said their neighbor’s cousin at a different company got an invite titled “Organizational Update,” opened it, and found a calendar block that said “No need to attend.” Myth travels on stilts.

By the afternoon, someone had made the first Bingo square: “We’re all in this together,” which we agreed could only be filled by someone safe and unthreatened. We made the board in a locked Notion page like we were smuggling joy. “Difficult but necessary” went in the top row. “Doubling down on core priorities” took center. “Grateful for their contributions” lived next to “24-hour badge deactivation,” a duet of bureaucratic empathy. “Resilience training” sat on the diagonal, so it could be completed by either a guest speaker or a PDF. “Bridge to profitability” hovered in a corner like a ghost who had once loved a spreadsheet.

We added a wild card: “Strategic clarity,” which can only be said by a leader who has slept. Bonus square: “We will emerge stronger,” which is only true for viruses and cults.

Priya color-coded the squares with a seriousness that flirted with art. “Blackout if you hear ‘bridge to profitability’ and ‘right-sizing’ in the same sentence,” she said, circling the bottom row with flourish.

“We’re not cruel, right?” I asked.

“Only to nouns,” she said. “Never to people.”

The All-Hands arrived like a weather warning. The CEO appeared with a voice that had done a practice lap. A piano note of sympathy played under every sentence, as if human feeling had found a backing track.

“Thank you for joining,” the CEO said. The chat seized into respect. “These are... difficult but necessary decisions.”

We filled a square.

“This is about doubling down on core priorities.”

We filled another.

“We’re grateful for the contributions—”

Priya’s rectangle emptied a sigh. “Can we put the whole card in?” she whispered on our side DM.

The CEO kept going, gently naming weather systems. He used “focus” like a raincoat. He said the word “clarity” twice and “strategic” three times. Somewhere around the second “clarity,” my Bingo squares clicked into place. “Blackout,” I typed to Priya, and immediately felt the guilty kid thrill of a victory nobody else could see.

The HR bot, which had been repenting in silence for days, suddenly posted into #all-hands: “Great job engaging!”

On our team Zoom, we went quiet in the weird way that feels like a hug got canceled. It's dangerous to feel clever while people fall through trapdoors. The Bingo board didn't make us better; it made us less alone.

When the stream ended, Kara cleared her throat like a page break. "Okay," she said softly. "Questions?"

"What does 'core priorities' mean?" Darren asked. The deck guy. He said it like a person checking a lock.

"It means fewer things, done well," Kara said, making a box with her hands the way executives do when they're trying to move the air into place.

A recurring meeting slid off our calendars like a wet postcard. In the OKR channel, someone posted a tarot card Priya had designed for jokes months ago: The Vanishing Metric. Its caption: "You will measure what survives." People reacted with the pleading face, as if emojis could be currency at the border.

Afterward, Slack turned into a mirror maze. Every channel reflected the same shape—"clarity," "focus," "thanks"—stretched to fit a different wall. We made more squares.

"Limited impact to customer experience," Priya typed under a blank tile. "Measured by our inability to measure it."

"Extended runway," I added. "Because we left the passengers on the tarmac."

"Temporary slowdown," she wrote. "Like winter."

“Reset,” I wrote. “Like a divorce.”

That evening, I walked back to my desk through a quiet that felt unlawful. The lights had decided the office was a museum. The plant by my window had adjusted itself to a more existential angle. I misted it. It did not react, which felt like wisdom.

Friday started early, before coffee, before promises. Inbox roulette is best played with a blank stomach. “If your email still works, you’re safe—for now.” That was the new folk wisdom, replacing “Always attach the deck” as our practical religion. At 7:03 a.m., the first “Subject: Organizational Update” arrived in the wild. It spread like contagion does: fast, rumor-first, proof-later.

Layoff Probability, I wrote on a sticky note—because math gives the illusion of a grip:

$$\text{LP} = (\text{Rumor Density} \times \text{Stock Drop}\%) \div \text{Manager Optimism}^2.$$

I stared at the square for a good minute, then squared optimism again just to be mean. It felt accurate in the way horoscopes feel accurate—you are in danger because you exist.

At 7:19, an engineer in Berlin got both “You’re impacted” and “You’re essential” within the same minute. IT fixed it by sending a third message: “We apologize for the confusion.” In the reply chain, someone wrote, “This is the most honest email I’ve ever received,” and I wanted to clap in the space where clapping felt obscene.

Slack filled with **:looking_eyes:**, which is corporate for “I feel, but not in writing.” Then it went ghost-silent the way a room does when someone trips, even if you can’t see them. Kara typed in the private team channel, “Stay off Slack until we know,” which was like telling us to avoid windows during a fireworks show. I closed the laptop and opened it again as if I were performing CPR.

My laptop light blinked like a heartbeat. I watched it the way people used to watch the horizon. The inbox did its little number roll: 1...2...0...1. Every increase said something I didn’t want translated. I put my phone face down so it could stop being the weather.

At 7:45 a calendar hold titled “No Need to Attend” appeared on my week. It was tomorrow, 8:00–9:00 a.m., with no attendees and no description. It felt like a foreshadowing written by a passive-aggressive playwright.

At 7:58 Kara pinged, “If you receive anything, please text me, don’t post.”

I typed “Will do” and deleted it, then sent it anyway. Typing and deleting is modern prayer.

The first person I knew to get an email was a TPM in New York who liked to wear bright orange sneakers and believe in roadmaps. They posted a goodbye in #alumni within three minutes, written in that brave tone layoffs teach: gratitude, dignity, the offer to help, a link to a portfolio. Thirty-seven reactions in two minutes. Two of them from executives. The speed of empathy is directly proportional to the distance from accountability.

“Should we be doing something?” Priya texted.

“Refresh,” I wrote, and wished I hadn’t.

At 8:02 my screen froze and I felt a weird, slow terror like a sinking elevator. Then Zoom returned me to myself and fifteen rectangles. One was a gray square with the initials of a man I liked. The meeting continued. It was a status meeting. For a product that no longer had a second engineer.

Another rumor: People in EMEA would get emails at different times. A rumor about the rumor: Legal had staged the timing to avoid timezone bias. The only true thing was the blinking cursor in the “Compose” field of my mail client, waiting to write a note I didn’t want to need.

Right at the hour, a subject line arrived with the shape of a verdict: “Update on Your Role.”

I opened it like a person peeling a bandage, in a single committed motion.

“You’re safe.”

The words were soft. They ruined me for a minute. Relief is physical, like taking a backpack off after a long hike and realizing it was your spine. I set the laptop down and let my hands do nothing, which is a position they don’t understand.

Guilt arrived second, right on time, like the friend who doesn’t knock. I typed a thank-you to nobody.

“Safe?” Priya asked.

I typed “Yes,” and then a second message: “I hate that yes.”

“Same,” she wrote. “Let’s do something useful.”

I nodded at a screen that couldn’t see it. The building creaked like old confidence.

To celebrate relief, I made coffee that tasted like apology. Priya sent me a screenshot of the Bingo board with one more square checked: “We appreciate your patience during this transition.” She drew a tiny trophy in the corner with her trackpad. Its base said: “For Enduring.”

“Add ‘No birds were harmed’ to the bottom row,” I typed. “Because the canaries are fine, just quieter.”

I returned to my inbox. A colleague had replied to their own layoff email with “Thank you for the opportunity,” and then, three minutes later, “I didn’t mean to send that.” A third message: “I did, but not like that.” I wanted to hug the tone more than the person.

In the hallway, I passed the security guard who never looked worried and now did. He nodded at my badge as if verifying both of us. “Morning,” he said.

“Is it?”

He considered. “It will be something.”

Back at my desk, the plant’s remaining leaves made themselves available to the light like they were not participating in metaphors. I watered it lightly. It accepted the water like a fact.

In #general, someone posted: “We will emerge stronger.” The replies began to gather, small and sunny. A director added, “Focused on what matters.” Someone else wrote, “People matter,” and then maybe realized the logic trail and deleted it.

Darren sent me a DM: “If I’m gone, use the deck called ‘Just Enough Truth.’ Slide three has the template for the ‘we decided’ section. It’s clean.”

“You’re not gone,” I wrote.

He replied with a smile that read like “I am” without saying it. Then his icon went gray, then green again. then gray for good. I stared at the unreadable color theory of online presence. I opened the shared folder named “Darren’s Decks” and hit “Permission Denied.” That error message does a better job at goodbyes than most people.

The day stretched like gum. The calendar notification sound became a jump scare. My headphones made every Slack ping into a courtroom gavel.

At noon, Kara posted a gentle guide called “Navigating Change” that read like it had been written by a therapist who’d once consulted for a warehouse. “Please hydrate,” it said. “Please take breaks.” It did not say, “Please forgive us,” which was fair; forgiveness is a freelance job.

I tried to work. My work tried to work me. The document I opened felt like an artifact from the before-time. Stakeholders had titles. Now they had severance. The feature needed a new owner; it got an orphanage.

“Lunch?” Priya pinged.

“Food feels like a bold move,” I replied.

“Then coffee. And gallows humor.”

“Deal.”

We walked outside and watched normal people ignore our special disaster. The sun continued its career unchallenged. Priya told me about a goodbye she’d read: a QA lead who wrote, “I tested us for five years. We had more bugs than features, and I loved us anyway.” I laughed in the middle and swallowed the end.

“Are we bad people for the Bingo?” I asked.

“We’re people in a system that speaks euphemism,” she said. “Humor is a translation app.”

“You know translation apps mess up the most important words.”

“Exactly,” she said. “That’s how you know they’re accurate.”

On the walk back, we saw an exec in a glass room speaking to three people who looked like they’d been instructed not to move their faces. Priya glanced at me. “We should invent a silent emoji,” she whispered. “For that.”

“Isn’t that just no emoji?”

“Exactly.”

Back at our desks, the day resumed pacing. Once in a while a note would appear in a small channel you forgot you were in—a simple thank-you, a LinkedIn link, a joke that had the decency to be bad. A support agent wrote, “I learned to dance on hold music. I’m free now.” The channel responded with a choir of hearts that knew their place.

At three, the CEO sent a long email that read like a treadmill going uphill. Every paragraph had at least one sentence that tried to hug you. The meat of it was a paragraph in the middle: who, where, how many. The number did a magic trick I’ve seen before: it was large in practice, small in percentage. Percentages are empathy’s budget cut.

By five, the building had shrunk a size. We were all wearing looser air. I packed my bag like a person leaving a friend’s house after bad news. On the way out, the security guard nodded again—same frequency, new meaning. I held up my badge. It glowed the correct color, which felt like luck pretending to be logic.

On the bus, I drafted three messages: one to Darren, unsent; one to Kara, sent; one to myself, written accidentally in the notes app: “We survived. Do something with that.”

At home, I stood in the kitchen with the refrigerator open, pretending the light in there could explain things. The plant sat in the window, busy being a plant. I envied its job description.

Before bed, I opened the Bingo board, hovered over the “Archive” button, then added one more square: “We help quietly.” I set the background color to the soft green Priya uses for real

things. She saw it and reacted with a tiny water droplet. Enough said.

I slept with my badge on the bedside table again. The little red LED blinked once and went still. I tried not to assign it meaning. I failed.

Monday began by pretending to be Monday. The building had the same smell—industrial citrus over microwaved hope—and the elevators did their part by delivering us to the same floors where fewer people stood. Every office morning has a choreography; the orchestra still played, but half the instruments had been pawned.

Kara opened our team stand-up with a voice that had slept and failed at it. “Let’s keep it short,” she said, and then didn’t. It’s hard to lead the living and honor the gone at the same time. She tried. “We’ll reassign ownership later in the week. For now, please triage customer issues and... be kind in the channels.”

Be kind in the channels. That might be the most accurate job description I’ve ever heard.

Priya and I had already started a low-tech rescue plan. The Referrals sheet lived in Notion: Name, Role, Strength in one line, Where they’ll shine next, Intro Sent, Followed Up, Outcome. We promised each other three names, three intros per week. We set Monday 5 p.m. as the deadline and made a private rule not to turn kindness into content. No “so proud of this community” posts. Just the work.

We began with Darren. “Hyper-honest storyteller who can reduce executive nonsense without spilling the soup,” I wrote for Strength. Where he’ll shine next: “Any company that prefers a deck to a sermon but still wants to feel moved.” Priya edited: “Make it less chapel.” I changed it to “Any team allergic to hype that still craves clarity.”

I sent the first intro with the unease of passing a note in class.

Between referrals, we did what survivors do: pretend the regular work matters. Tasks behaved like nothing had changed. Jira tickets greeted us with that relentless cheer—Backlog says hi!—and the dashboards lit up with all the certainty of a light-house in a mirror maze. Customers still asked for things as if money insulated them from physics. The roadmap smiled like a photo on a memorial table.

In #alumni, the bravery theater continued: immaculate goodbye posts and generous offers. The reactions came soft and fast. You can tell a lot about a culture by its goodbye prose. Ours had clean bones. Even the anger was folded into respect. Only the occasional message cracked. A senior engineer wrote: “I left my twenties in your incidents. Please treat them well.” Someone replied, “We won’t. We’re going to fix them.” The thread ended there, on something like love.

At 11:00 a.m., a new meeting materialized—Reorg Town Hall. The calendar description was a quilt of euphemisms: renewal, alignment, clarity, forward-looking. We watched the CEO again, this time framed by a plant that looked like it had signed an NDA. The deck was watchfully optimistic. Boxes moved into new boxes. Arrows pointed to destinations with inspiring names. “Reduced surface area” made a cameo, trailed

by “fewer seams,” which is how you talk about cutting fabric when you don’t want to admit you’re making smaller shirts.

“In this next chapter,” the CEO said, “we’ll focus on what matters most.”

I waited for someone to name a customer, a problem, a person. Instead, he named a shape. Focus itself. Which is tidy. Focus is uncontroversial until you decide what to focus on.

After the meeting, Kara sent us a diagram of our new team topology. It resembled a city map missing a bridge. “We’ll talk through this on Wednesday,” she wrote. “For now, stay close to your partners.”

Darren DM’d from his personal account. “Decks still open?” he asked.

“Your folder’s read-only,” I wrote. “Like a polite tomb.”

“Use ‘Just Enough Truth’,” he replied. “Slide three is the decency template.”

Decency template. That’s the most useful phrase anyone created that week.

In the afternoon, HR announced Resilience Training, which the Bingo board had forecast like a smug meteorologist. The session was run by a consultant whose voice had healed many rooms. She taught breathing like it could be a firewall. She talked about circles of control and circles of concern. Someone asked about severance for contractors. She wasn’t allowed to

answer. After the call, Slack felt slightly calmer, the way aspirin calms a migraine you still have to live through.

I kept returning to my silly math.

$$\text{Empathy Index} = (\text{Messages Sent} \times \text{Actual Feeling}) \\ \div \text{Performative Tone.}$$

I tried to lower the denominator. A few times I failed. “Let me know how I can help” is a sentence that should have to pay rent.

By midweek, the calendar was a new species. The Leadership Sync was gone for good. A rebranded “Priorities Forum” took its place, shorter and more absolute. People spoke in nouns. Verbs lived in the old week. Progress stopped dressing up and arrived in plain clothes. We shipped fewer things but with more gravity. The air around decisions thickened into... not certainty, exactly. More like caution wearing a necktie.

That afternoon I met Sam for a goodbye coffee. He’d been a staff engineer who could explain caches to children. We chose the café across from the office that made espresso that tasted like it had a degree in philosophy. Sam arrived with a box under one arm and a lightness you learn from heavy weeks. We did the ritual: the origin story, the best bugs, the thing we almost shipped, the thing we did ship and why it mattered, even if only to us.

“I always thought layoffs were a test of merit,” he said, stirring a drink that needed no stirring. “Turns out they’re a test of math.”

“Portfolio math,” I said. “The kind that pretends morality is a rounding error.”

He smiled. “You staying?”

“For now.”

“Then you owe. Not them.” He tapped the table twice with two fingers—some private ritual he probably didn’t know he had. “Buy people time.”

We hugged like men who had agreed not to make it complicated. On the way out he turned and said, “Tell the new kids to document the weird things. Culture is a list of weird things you keep on purpose.”

Back at my desk, I added Sam to the Referrals sheet. Strength: “Translator between logic and humans.” Where he’ll shine next: “Any place that treats reliability like a kindness.” Intro sent: yes. Followed up: set a reminder for Friday.

The week kept handing out assignments. Legal sent an email reminding managers not to promise anything. The wellness team posted a “Sleep Hygiene Guide” in #general that included “Make your bedroom dark,” which felt like solid advice for both sleep and reading the future.

The finance dashboard arrived with an “updated runway” chart featuring a line that trended toward the bottom right like a ski slope. Someone added a party hat to the chart as a reaction. The CFO removed the chart an hour later and posted a new one with fewer axes.

Priya and I built a private doc called “Defrost Plan” for when the frost passes and hiring resumes. It had names, roles, notes like “never loses the thread,” “fights scope creep without becoming a gladiator,” “writes docs that make meetings unnecessary,” “first to say ‘We don’t know’ out loud.” We promised to look up twice a week and ask whether we still remembered who was great.

In the evenings, the office was a different museum. The janitors moved through rows of untroubled chairs, and the chairs endured their kindness without gratitude. My plant had perked up in a way that felt inappropriate. I watered it less. It didn’t notice. The plant’s whole deal is not noticing. I envy that.

Thursday brought a new ceremony: “Leadership Listening Session.” The VP ran it with a sincerity that tried and a caution that won. People asked about workload distribution, career paths in a smaller org, whether budgets had any oxygen left. The answers were true in the way maps are true about deserts. At the end, the VP said, “We’ll be okay.” I want to believe him the way a lake wants to believe in drought-resistant fish.

After the call, Priya sent me a message with no words, just a screenshot of the Bingo board with “We’ll be okay” circled. I reacted with the smallest smile. We are a people of small smiles now.

That night I stayed late to write three references. One was for a designer who could make complex flows feel like a polite path through a park. One was for a customer support lead who had a surgeon’s hands for chaos. One was for a PM who refused to mistake urgency for importance. I tried to put the

truth in a single sentence each, because most readers are skimmers and the decent thing is to feed them decency in bold. I sent the notes and felt a lightness no metric could see.

Friday, the company shipped an “Engagement Pulse” survey. It had five questions and a cartoon bee wearing a hard hat. The bee asked, “How are you doing?” like a neighbor peeking over a fence.

I thought of writing a paragraph in the free-text box about bees and fences and how the hive is smaller but the flowers still expect pollination. I wrote “tired” and pressed submit. The thank-you screen confetti exploded at me against my will.

The same day, IT pushed a change that made the VPN log us out every four hours. It felt symbolic even if it wasn’t. People posted macros: “Re-authenticated,” “Rebooted,” “Reconsidered my life choices.” The thread was funnier than it had any right to be. Humor kept standing up, brushing off dust, and presenting itself for more.

In the afternoon, I accidentally opened an old photo on my phone from the first month at the company: a full team at a picnic table, everyone squinting into a future they thought they could schedule. I recognized every face. A third were gone now. Two had left for better jobs, one to start a bakery, one to pause and breathe. The rest had been simplified to accelerate.

I closed the photo and wrote down a sentence in the notes app: “We’re not building a product; we’re building a way to treat each other while we build a product.” It felt true and suspicious. Truth should be a little uncomfortable, like a good chair.

The day ended with a small, earnest ritual. Kara gathered those of us still here into a room with bad lighting and told the truth without adjectives.

“We have less team and the same goals,” she said. “So we’re going to change how we pretend. Fewer slides, fewer status meetings, more OSDMs and default decisions by Friday. If you need me, say so. If you need sleep, take it. If you need time—ask. We’re not at our best when we try to be brave for each other in the dark.” She paused. “We still answer to customers. People are counting on us who don’t know our calendar.”

I looked around at the faces. Nobody looked like a hero. That’s good. Heroes burn too clean for office air.

Over the next week, an odd quiet competence took hold. The inbox contained fewer theater tickets. We split ownership by writing down three things each: “I own this now,” “I’m confused by this,” and “This can die.” The last column surprised us. We murdered two dashboards, three recurring meetings, and a vanity metric. Little crosses along the roadside.

We also started tracking something unserious but important: “Acts of Unperformed Kindness.” Times when someone helped and didn’t announce it. We logged them privately and told no one. The list grew like moss.

One afternoon, a new hire pinged me—a survivor of week one in a storm. “Do we still do welcome coffee?” she asked.

I almost laughed. “Yes,” I wrote. “Especially now.”

We had coffee. She asked if she should be worried. I said yes and no at the same time. Yes, because worry is a cousin of awareness. No, because worry without direction is a hobby. I taught her the 3S of updates—Short, Structured, Scheduled—so she could survive Slack without turning into Slack. I taught her to write a one-slide decision memo and to aim it at a real problem. I told her about the plant. She laughed in the right place.

At home that night, I found myself doing something I hadn't done since before: opening the laptop to write a doc that wasn't urgent. "How We Work When We're Smaller," I titled it. It was a page and a half. It said we'd pick defaults when debates got lazy. It said we'd instrument risk, not fear it. It said we'd stop naming "alignment" when we meant "agreement," and stop calling "speed" what we meant as "panic." It said we'd use empathy on people and rigor on ideas. Priya added a line: "And we'll treat kindness like it compounds."

The doc landed quietly in our team space. People read it like they were reading a postcard from a place they wanted to visit. No one clicked a heart. They just changed a few meeting titles.

A week later, an alumni mailed me a loaf of bread. He'd started baking as a practice for staying. It tasted like patience. I sliced it too thick and called it a metaphor and ate it anyway.

The next town hall featured a chart about "Energy Allocation," which is a brave thing to name in public. The x-axis was "Impact," the y-axis was "Effort," and the presenter tried not to draw the line where effort exceeds impact and people break. He didn't use the word burnout. He said "sustainable pace."

We nodded the nod of people who already had three answers and were looking for a fourth.

I started counting how many times in a day I closed my eyes at my desk. The number grew. I wasn't tired so much as emptied. Relief drains you. Guilt drains you. Responsibility is a quiet siphon.

So I made another rule for myself: three real things a day, one of which could be a referral. I listed them every morning. If I hit two by noon, I took a walk. I drank water on purpose. I had a small, private ceremony where I shut my laptop at 6:30 even when chaos tried to extend visiting hours. Sometimes I cheated. Sometimes chaos won. But the ceremony existed now. That matters.

We kept the Referrals sheet alive and unglamorous. In a month, five people landed offers. Ten were mid-process. Three asked us to stop introducing them because they needed a minute to breathe. We added a column: "Pause." Respect is also a field in a spreadsheet.

On a Tuesday, the HR bot posted: "Gratitude Week!" and suggested we write thank-you notes to colleagues. The timing was clumsy and pure. I wrote two notes and didn't send either. Then I wrote a third to the security guard and printed it and handed it to him. He read it slowly like words were heavy. "Thank you," he said, and looked at my badge like it had learned some humility.

When the first payday after the layoffs arrived, I stared at the deposit and felt the braided rope of relief and sorrow pull taut. I moved money to savings like an apology. I donated to a fund

someone had organized for a colleague whose visa clock had started. I closed the browser and let my hands be still again.

On Thursday, we held a tiny ceremony in the team room with the bad lighting. Kara read a list of names aloud and then didn't try to make it not sad. No speeches. Just names and a silence. At the end she said, "We're going to make fewer promises and keep more of them." That sentence landed and sat with us like a cat that had decided our laps were acceptable.

I wrote it on a sticky note and put it above my monitor.

By the time Friday arrived, the building had learned our new volume. The coffee tasted less like apology and more like coffee. Priya appeared at my desk with a grin that meant "I have a small, stupid idea that might help." She held up a printed Bingo card with only one square. It read: "We help quietly."

"Single-player mode," she said.

We laughed, a tiny, clean laugh that didn't bounce off any walls. I put the card in my drawer. I knew it was there. That was enough.

I ended the week on the bus again, badge warm in my pocket. Out the window, the city did its calculations with lights and momentum. I thought about Sam's two-finger tap and Darren's decency template and the way the Referrals sheet had started to look like a ledger of small debts paid on time. I thought about the plant, which had begun to aim new leaves at a corner of the window I hadn't noticed before. I tried to give that attention a name and failed, which is probably how attention prefers it.

At home I stood in front of the open refrigerator again, performing that ritual of looking for meaning in cold brightness. I found a leftover slice of patience and ate it standing up. Then I sat down and wrote three sentences on a piece of paper, the only kind of to-do list that still feels like a promise:

- Help one person land somewhere better.
- Ship one thing that matters to someone who doesn't know our calendar.
- Don't turn your empathy into announcements.

I put the paper face up on my desk and turned off the light.

The company called what happened a reduction in force. They had to; legal has its own poetry. But the force that left wasn't just headcount; it was the unmeasured energy people bring when they believe their work is not a rumor.

We survived. Which doesn't feel like success. It feels like an assignment.

And it comes with a bill.

Energy was about to be the next currency.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: Reduction in Force, Retention of Heart

Truth: Layoffs don't cleanse companies; they expose them. Performance is almost never the deciding variable—timing, cost, and proximity to power are. Survival isn't a promotion;

it's an invitation to behave better than the system that just proved it can't.

Tool: The *Referrals Doc* — one page, three names, three intros per week. Add columns for “Followed Up?” and “Pause.” Kindness needs the same instrumentation as output. Boring systems keep compassion alive when emotion runs out.

Try This Monday: DM one ex-colleague. Offer a genuine lead, a reference line they can reuse, or a sanity call that's not about “networking.” Don't post about empathy, practice it in DMs.

Reminder: You can't automate sincerity, but you can calendar it.

Micro-Formula:

Empathy ROI = (Actions x Relevance) ÷ Public Performance

Survival wasn't the finish line. It was an entry fee.

What comes next isn't grief—it's depletion. And the only metric that matters now is how long you can stay kind before you go dark.

ACT IV:
The Slow Realization

CHAPTER 10:

The Burnout Olympics

The invitation said, “Welcome to the Annual Resilience Challenge.”

I thought it was satire.

It wasn’t.

They had a logo: a lotus wrapped around a stopwatch, the kind of branding you’d buy if you wanted calm to feel urgent. An email footer announced the hashtag—**#StrongByEOD**—like stamina was a ship date.

Our CFO opened the kickoff by striking a meditation bowl with the confidence of someone who believes most problems surrender to compounding interest.

The sound rang out across Zoom tiles and badge-access floors and every Slack channel where sarcasm lived.

“Team,” Kara said, hands on hips, “**we’re gamifying recovery.**”

Priya leaned toward me, voice low. “We’re healing competitively now.”

HR Bot chimed in: “Remember, fatigue is just commitment leaving your body!”

Even the office plant looked tired. It had that sideways lean, like it had chosen a window and was waiting for it to become a door.

The event list scrolled across the big screen:

- Most Consecutive 1:1s Without Crying.
- Deep Work Speedrun (Under 12 Slack Pings).
- Inbox Zero, Inbox Hero.
- Wellness Webinar Attendance Streak.

And, my favorite, **Silent Offsite**—no mics, no mouths, all mindshare—sponsored by a calendar vendor that sells serenity in half-hour blocks.

“They’re giving medals?” I asked.

Priya nodded. “Gold gets you a shout-out from the COO. Silver gets therapy vouchers. Bronze gets a gratitude journal and a coupon for equipment you’ll never use.”

We started with the **1:1 gauntlet**. Brackets like March Madness, but everyone’s jump shot was “Have you socialized this with Legal?”

Cameras cut to Darren, sitting between twin ring lights, smiling like he was sponsored by dental confidence.

I lost in round one after my fifth 1:1, when someone asked, “What’s our strategy?” and I answered, “To establish a clear boundary with the void.” The judges called it “an emotional response.” The bracket moved on without me.

Next came the **Deep Work Speedrun**. Forty minutes to produce a page of actual strategy while navigating fewer than twelve Slack pings. The clock started. Slack started faster.

@ops: sanity check?

@legal: quick → not quick

@finance: business case for time

@hrbot: take a deep breath 🧘

@kara: You've got this (:hand_shake: + :meditation: + a small stopwatch).

The stopwatch emoji made it worse, somehow, like encouragement wearing cargo shorts. I typed “We should—” and watched my thought shiver under the hail of notifications.

By minute thirty, I had three respectable sentences and a fourth that sounded like I'd put a TED Talk in a blender. At the horn, a sportscaster voice—one of those smooth announcer baritones we put on our events to make everything sound inevitable—whispered, “You're witnessing world-class cognitive triage.”

We all clapped for the words, not the work.

Lunch was quinoa, earnest water, and brownies engineered to taste like virtue. A DJ remixed a keynote about “elastic capacity” into beat-driven optimism. When the bass dropped, so did my appetite for anything that vibrates.

“**Inbox Zero, Inbox Hero**” arrived after lunch. “You have fifteen minutes to get to zero unread,” the host said. “Mark All as Read adds ten seconds because growth comes from pain.” A man in the second row asked, “What if your unread is four

digits?” The host said, “Seek help,” and a lower-third ad slid in for “Mindful Mail Monday,” which looked suspiciously like regular Monday except you name your tab count and apologize to it.

My inbox jumped by sixty-four the moment I clicked into it. The system sensed motion like an automatic faucet and rewarded me with water the wrong temperature. I triaged like a short-order cook in a kitchen fire—delete, archive, snooze, false-snooze, star, unstar, mute a thread about muting threads. The Resilience Platform popped a ribbon across the top of my window: “Determined Swimmer—navigated choppy waters.” The ribbon blocked an email from Legal. I swam under it.

Wellness Webinar Attendance Streak was “optional but recorded,” which in our dialect means mandatory for people with career plans. The presenter’s voice was soft and oceanic, a guided nap if you trusted people for a living. I turned off my camera, breathed into a rectangle, and answered back-channel Slacks about why I was breathing wrong.

Halfway through, HR Bot posted, “Reminder: log your resilience journal by EOD. Prompts: ‘What am I grateful for?’ and ‘What is my relationship with urgency?’” The second prompt is a trap. My relationship with urgency is “it texts me at 10:41 PM and calls it love.”

Closing ceremony: confetti animation that paused midair, as if even pixels were fatigued. Gold winners smiled like they’d survived a tasteful disaster. Silver winners nodded with the relief of people handed vouchers for the mess they didn’t make. Bronze winners typed “Appreciate it!” in chat until appreciation felt like a currency backed by emojis.

Priya whispered, “They should give sabbaticals for showing up.” I said, “They should give sabbaticals for reading the invites.”

The day after the Resilience Games, exhaustion went professional.

People started bragging about back-to-back quarters like it was a race format. “Two quarters, no days off,” someone posted in #random, holding up a smoothie the color of ambition blended with denial. The caption read, “**Proud of my consistency.**” Comments: fire emojis, biceps, a penguin for no reason. Priya sent the screenshot to me. “Mall Santa energy,” she wrote. “Smiles for the children; darkness in the eyes.”

The Productivity Team launched Resilience Scores. Our profiles grew progress bars—S-curves climbing across a beige desert of sleep. A tooltip explained, “Resilience reflects capacity to deliver under changing conditions.” Changing conditions was the kindest phrase anyone has ever used for chaos we designed.

An internal memo introduced SII—the Sustainable Intensity Index—with a chart so complicated it looked like a chandelier. Output Velocity along one axis, Slack Presence on another, Emotional Intelligence as a circle because we ran out of straight lines. Footnote: “Sustainable intensity is not intensity, sustainably.” Footnote needed a translator.

Rest got rebranded as a KPI. We were asked to “own our recovery plan” and then measured on our ability to perform it publicly. Mindfulness became a leaderboard. People screen-

shot their meditation streaks and posted them like shipping milestones. Calm had a vanity metric now.

I kept a little translator in my head:

They say: resilient.

They mean: didn't quit yet.

They say: fully engaged.

They mean: partially melted.

They say: adaptive leadership.

They mean: sleep-deprived compliance.

We got a new custom emoji: a laptop on fire. Hover text: "Engaged Excellence." People reacted to weekend commits with it. Somewhere, a designer approved that icon with a straight face and a bonus target.

Someone spun up a "Wellness Sprint," two weeks of "aggressive rest." The doc had a roadmap for downtime and acceptance criteria for breath. Everyone volunteered. Nobody finished. It turns out rest doesn't sprint; sprinting is the opposite of the verb we needed.

HR announced **Mental Health Week**, sponsored by Calendar.

We got calendar holds labeled WALK (location: outside), FOCUS FORTNIGHT (recurring), and RECHARGE HOUR (no agenda attached—bold).

Each hold had a Join button. Every Join opened a room where someone asked, "Are we joining?" I needed a nap I could expense.

At leadership sync, the chief of staff presented “Cultural Health” with four bars: **Agency, Belonging, Clarity, Cadence.** Agency hovered at “we tried.” Belonging nodded at “company picnic.” Clarity flickered like a fluorescent bulb. Cadence looked robust enough to break a rib.

“Our cadence is strong,” the VP said.
“It’s a heartbeat,” I said. “We’re sprinting.”

“Is that... bad?” someone asked.

“Only if you plan to live,” I said, and the room took a collective sip of water like hydration could reverse a sentence.

The thread about “unplugged PTO” returned for its quarterly encore. Half of us argued it was a contradiction, half argued it was a path, everyone wrote paragraphs about boundaries we would not keep. By the end, we’d restored equilibrium: stressed, articulate, and on-brand.

The more we talked about rest, the more restless I got. There’s a point where language becomes a treadmill—no matter how hard you speak, you don’t move. We were very fit, rhetorically.

Enter enterprise wellness like a Broadway tour. The company hired a Chief Mindfulness Officer—CMO; we now had two CMOs and only one quietly angry payroll system. The new CMO arrived with a slogan: “Meditate. Motivate. Dominate.” It sounded like a yogi who sells knives.

We started mandatory yoga at 7:00 a.m., “optional but recorded.” Attendance counted toward Rest Compliance. Bring your own mat or “borrow a floor.”

I reached for a hamstring I last saw in college and listened as the instructor explained “the parasympathetic business case.” Every pose had a dotted line to a KPI.

Child’s pose was “reflective capacity,”

Warrior II was “cross-functional alignment,” Savasana was “decommission.”

Kara pulled me aside afterward and said, “If you can weaponize stillness, you can ship anything.”

My smartwatch congratulated me on “maintaining elevated stress consistency.” Confetti rained across my wrist like a tiny parade for a problem I could feel in my jaw. I looked at my hand the way you look at a mall kiosk that wants your email address for rest.

HR Bot found a new cadence: “Take a deep breath!” under every escalation. It was like a toddler pedaling a tricycle alongside a jackknifed semi and yelling “vroom!” The bot’s avatar held a “Keep Calm” poster while the building played sirens.

Kara posted in **#wellness**: “Pulse survey on burnout—please complete by EOD.”

“‘Pulse survey’ is ominous,” I DM’d Priya. “You only take a pulse when you’re checking for life.”

“They replaced vacation time with meditation time,” she replied. “Both require approval.”

We published a self-service burnout policy. It lived on a beautiful page with a sunrise over a blank notebook, the corporate

equivalent of an empty plate with a sprig of parsley. The policy encouraged sleep and water and “healthy boundaries,” then added: “Consult your manager for time off. Time off not guaranteed.” The sprig wilted.

We practiced box breathing between escalations. Inhale for four, hold for four, exhale for four, draft for six.

During a Sev-1 review, we did three rounds of breathing, then graded action items by swimlane. The swimlane drowned. I added “**nervous system**” to the list of cross-functional partners who wouldn’t return my emails.

Some analyst with good intentions and a spreadsheet addiction proposed a new equation in a slide deck, a way to “quantify the vibe” so Finance would bless it:

Exhaustion, they argued, equals meetings times urgency squared, divided by recovery time.

The room nodded like a church. Then we ignored the denominator.

I thought about making a second equation—something silly involving Slack unread and caffeine intake, because we all love a ratio that absolves us with decimals. I decided not to. I didn’t want to put math rings on a circus we should pack up.

The town hall featured the CMO speaking in the tone of weather that passes without incident. They said “presence” until the word no longer meant “here” and started meaning “compliant.”

A product manager asked if stillness could be integrated with our roadmap.

The CMO said, “Everything is a roadmap if you hold it gently.” Someone typed that into a doc and added “Q3 OKR?” in the margin.

Afterward, I walked the poster corridor. “**Your Best Self, By Friday.**” “**Push Through, But Kindly.**” “**Don’t Burn Out—Glow.**” Someone had taped a Post-it under that one: “**Glow is a verb for fire.**” I wanted to sign it.

Sometime around the seventh guided meditation and the second emergency that day, it clicked: the company didn’t want calm. It wanted functional fatigue—people who sleep just enough to answer on-call with a smile, who journal their stress in a shared doc and call it culture. It wanted a soldier who could do yoga. It wanted six hours of sleep, eight hours of output, and a story that converts both into a word like balance that no one is allowed to laugh at in meetings.

Night, laptop glow.

The Resilience Dashboard awarded me a Gold badge: 12-hour work streak, “**minimal sentiment variability.**”

My sentiment had varied. The system missed it because I didn’t type the words. A lotus stopwatch spun beside my name, confetti falling like upbeat dandruff. I stared at it and said quietly, to the screen and the plant and whatever part of me has a union, “You win.”

The plant said nothing. Photosynthesis is not a two-way channel.

I closed the laptop halfway and felt guilty like I'd parked in a reserved spot for peace. I opened it again. The room hummed.

The world outside—actual weather, not the CMO kind—tapped the window. I took a breath that didn't belong to any program and sat there, split between the need to keep moving and the knowledge that the treadmill wasn't a road.

In the morning, I did something unspectacular and illegal by our rules: I turned off notifications. Not forever. Not with a post. Just for a day. I told Priya. I told no one else. It felt like stealing a stapler from a museum—technically allowed, emotionally transgressive.

At 9:04, a single gray check appeared next to a message that used to deliver two. At 9:11, a “?” in a thread I hadn't blessed with a reaction. At 9:26, an **@here** that mentioned my absence without naming it. By 10:02, rumors congealed in the spaces I'd left blank: He quit. He got promoted. He's dead. Those are the three statuses.

Kara emailed: “Everything okay? Love that you're setting boundaries—is it scalable?”

HR Bot pinged my inbox: “Alex, we noticed unusual calm in your activity.” Leaf emoji. Somewhere in the building, a sound bath started without me.

Silence widened like a road after a toll. I reopened the doc from the speedrun—the one I'd stuttered into—and finished the first thought. Then the second. Deleted two bullet points that didn't deserve my future and wrote one that did. No camera. No sportscaster. No scoreboard. Just a person and a

sentence and a plant that, in my head, typed **:plant:** and then **:sleeping_zzz:**.

At 3 p.m., I sent Priya a note: “Draft’s ready—no rush.” The words felt like a door I could close gently from the inside.

At 4, I turned notifications back on. The pings arrived as weather, not sirens. A surprising number of things took care of themselves by being ignored. The world hadn’t ended. It had rescheduled.

That night, in my notebook, I wrote a small reminder disguised as a fraction: peace per meeting equals focus over calendar chaos plus Slack noise. Not a dashboard. A note to self: design for the numerator.

The next morning, the platform recommended a circle called Mindful Warriors. “Fight gently,” the tagline read. I closed the tab the way you close a drawer you’re not ready to clean.

Darren stopped by my desk, unlit by ring lights, fully human in the morning sun. “You disappeared yesterday.”

“I didn’t,” I said. “I just stopped auditioning for resilience.”

He looked at me like I’d smuggled a secret out of a locked room. “Does it work?”

“Not sure yet,” I said. “But I heard myself think.”

Priya walked over with coffee and a grin that didn’t need a camera. “You ready for the next experiment?”

“Define experiment.”

She pointed at my calendar. A recurring meeting blinked like a low battery. “We cancel one,” she said. “We replace it with quiet. We tell no one. We see what happens.”

“If we get fired,” I said, “we write a book.”

“If we don’t,” she said, “we write a better chapter.”

I hovered over the meeting title and watched the tooltip explain its importance in bureaucratic poetry. I clicked “Delete Series.” The system asked if I was sure in the tone of a parent catching a child with scissors. I was sure.

“Tomorrow,” I said.

“Tomorrow,” Priya said, and for once my calendar didn’t respond. It adjusted.

The first day without the recurring meeting felt like waking up in a city where all the traffic lights were stuck on yellow. No one honked. Everyone just... negotiated.

At 9:00 a.m., a familiar block of blue was missing from the grid. My calendar looked like a tooth had fallen out and the tongue of obligation kept finding the space. I opened a fresh doc and named it “Work I Actually Do.” The cursor blinked like a gentle metronome. Outside, a delivery truck beeped in reverse with the confidence of a creature that had never seen Slack.

Ten minutes into my quiet hour, a Sev-2 fire declared itself with sirens and acronyms. A thread lit up with “urgent?”

repeated in alternating fonts. I felt the pull, that ingrained muscle memory to sprint toward anything labeled “now.” I stood up, refilled my coffee, came back, and read the actual issue. It wasn’t a fire. It was a shadow with a loud voice. Priya DM’d: “Ignore until verified.” I ignored. The shadow cooled into a question mark. The question mark found its owner. The owner found the answer. The world didn’t need me; it needed ten minutes.

“Wild,” Priya wrote. “Silence fixed it.”

“Silence cost less,” I wrote back.

At 10:00, Kara pinged me to “swing by.” Her glass wall had two moods: transparency and aquarium. Today it was an aquarium—quiet people moving on office currents.

“You canceled the Thursday standup,” she said, friendly, like a dentist asking how often I floss.

“I did,” I said.

“Love the boundary. Is it scalable?” She smiled.

“Scalable like a principle,” I said, “or scalable like a product?”

“Like a product.”

“Then no. But as a principle—maybe.”

She studied me the way leaders study employees they want to save before the system eats them. “We have a planning block

next week,” she said. “The CFO is joining for ‘culture ROI.’ If we’re keeping this change, we’ll need a number-shaped story.”

“I have a number,” I said. “One.”

“One?”

“One quiet hour that produced more work than three loud ones.”

“That’s a poem,” she said. “Finance speaks spreadsheet.”

“I’ll bring examples,” I said.

“Good,” she said, then added, “I’m glad you’re still here.”

“Me too,” I said, surprised to find I meant it.

In the afternoon we ran the weekly triage call. The first ten minutes were always meteorology—what atmosphere are we breathing; do we need umbrellas or helmets? Darren shared his screen. His deck was a twelve-lane highway for ideas to die in public. I kept my mic muted and my mind open just enough to avoid drifting.

Halfway through, I heard my name. “Alex—thoughts?”

“I have two,” I said, unmuting. “First, the bug we’re discussing is a symptom of handoffs, not humans. Second, we keep scheduling time to talk about throughput instead of protecting time to create it.”

“Handoffs?” someone asked, defensive out of habit.

“Too many,” I said. “We optimized for involvement. We got diffusion.”

“So... less involvement?” Legal asked, like I’d suggested arson.

“Fewer simultaneous cooks,” I said. “And a single person writing the first draft alone. We can comment on something real. We can’t merge opinions.”

Silence. Then Kara: “We’re trying a ‘Quiet Hour’ pilot. Alex, can you summarize your early results?”

I shared my screen. Not a deck. A one-pager that didn’t perform; it reported. Three bullet points, one paragraph, two screenshots: before and after. Before: 39 comments across four threads, no decision, two frustrated people. After: one doc, one decision, launch plan with names.

“What’s the cost?” Finance asked.

“One canceled meeting,” I said, “and one less heroic save.”

The CFO raised an eyebrow. “‘One less heroic save’ is a line I respect.”

“Heroics inflate the story,” I said. “Quiet work delivers the plot.”

We ended with to-dos that were not to-dos in disguise. I stayed in the call after everyone left because I wanted to hear what the room sounded like without voices. It sounded like an HVAC system and a long corridor. It sounded like a building that had survived other tenants.

That evening, I walked home the long way, through blocks that didn't know about our dashboards. A kid balanced on a scooter with the concentration of a surgeon. A dog tried to wrote an email to a squirrel; the squirrel did not reply. I felt the old tug to open my phone and "clear a few things," as if inboxes were ditches and I was a good neighbor with a shovel. I left the shovel in my pocket. The sky built a case for not being measured.

The next morning, the rumor mill was bored, which is different from kind but sometimes functions like mercy. I got a Slack from someone in Sales I barely knew. "Whatever you're doing," they wrote, "you look less haunted." I reacted with the plant.

By noon, the Resilience Platform sent a digest: "Congrats, Alex! Your calm increased by 17%." The system had invented a unit for peace. It was both ridiculous and not wrong. I closed the digest and wrote for thirty minutes without touching the edges of my attention. The work looked like itself instead of like its performance.

In the middle of the week, we hit an actual scare. A vendor rolled back an API without telling us, and someone in Support posted the digital equivalent of a fire alarm. Slack became a siren. My body did its old thing: heat, brightness, the smell of burned time. I opened the incident channel, felt the shape of the panic, then closed it. Not from avoidance. From choice. I pinged two names: the person who knew the weird corner of the system and the person who could make a decision if the first answer was "oops." We spun up a small call—four humans, no observers, no applause. In twenty minutes we had a workaround and in thirty we had a plan. At minute forty, the

incident channel was already calming because the people who talk the most during a fire are rarely the ones holding the hose.

Priya messaged: “That felt... adult.”

“Fewer cooks,” I wrote.

“Fewer spectators,” she wrote.

“Fewer speeches,” I wrote.

“Add that to the policy,” she wrote.

We didn’t have a policy. We had a few sentences we were starting to believe, written in a note that didn’t need signatures.

Thursday should’ve been our canceled standup. My calendar showed a blank I decided to protect like we protect our worst fears—with ritual. I named the hour “Still Work.” The first ten minutes I did nothing in a way that wasn’t scrolling. Stared. Let the woolly part of the brain surface something unscheduled. It gave me a thought about simplifying our renewal flow no one had asked for and everyone needed. I wrote it in plain language and tagged the two people who would hate it least. They added comments that made it smarter. We didn’t meet. The doc did the meeting.

Kara swung by my desk. “Heads up—CFO still wants a number.”

“I have three examples,” I said. “Fewer bugs, fewer pings, faster draft-to-decision.”

“And for the slide title?” she asked.

“Stop rewarding endurance. Start protecting intent,” I said.

“That’s a poem,” she said again.

“It’s a spreadsheet when you measure the right thing.”

She grinned. “Make the font big.”

Friday, culture ROI day. Kara presented the deck we assembled like grownups making a case to parents who love them but prefer receipts. The first slide: a screenshot of my calendar with three meetings gone, replaced by a block that said QUIET. The second: a chart with fewer axes than usual. The y-axis: Decision Throughput. The x-axis: Meetings Per Person. The line sloped in the direction fortune favors.

“Pilot,” Kara said. “Sample size small. Confidence medium. Trend compelling.”

The CFO leaned forward. “What did you stop doing?”

“Performing resilience,” Kara said. “We started practicing it.”

“And by ‘practicing’ you mean... not scheduling it?”

“Protecting the conditions it needs,” she said. “One hour where we create, not communicate.”

The CFO looked at the chart, then at us, then at the blank block on my calendar. “How do we keep people from turning the quiet hour into another way to look productive?”

“We don’t track it,” I said, before remembering my seat at the table.

A pause. A risk.

“We track outcomes,” Kara said smoothly. “If they improve, we don’t ask the hour to audition.”

Finance looked genuinely delighted. It is rare to give someone both prudence and relief in the same sentence. “Okay,” the CFO said. “Pilot it across two more teams. Use fewer words. I don’t want to incentivize a narrative.”

On the way out, HR Bot posted: “Reminder—log your recovery activities!”

I typed, “Logged out,” then deleted it before sending. Not everything needs a crowd.

The week rolled downhill. The Resilience Games receded into myth, like Ryan’s Ferry Ride or That Time

The CTO Tried Solitaire.

We still had fires. We still had interrupts. But we had a small ritual that absorbed some shock: one hour a day where we didn’t audition, we simply worked. People in adjacent teams asked if they could “borrow the practice” like it was a ladder or a cat. We said yes and told them the only rule: don’t invite anyone to it, including yourself. Show up like a person, not a profile.

The metrics didn’t skyrocket. They stopped wobbling. We eliminated two chronic pings that should’ve been documenta-

tion. We cut the review cycle on a mid-scope feature from nine days to four because we wrote the **disagreeables** down and let adults process them without a live studio audience. I spent thirty minutes writing a hard note to a partner and saved three hours of meetings. The plant developed a new leaf and, I'm not proud to say, I took it personally.

That weekend, I put my phone in a drawer for two hours and did not narrate it to anyone. The silence felt less like rebellion and more like a policy I could live with. I walked past a yoga studio that promised "sweat + soul" in neon and thought about all the ways we try to buy our way back to ourselves. The answer kept not being a subscription. The answer kept being a small subtraction.

On Monday, a message from Darren: "Your one-pager about 'Still Work'... can I share it with Design?"

"Share the practice," I wrote. "The doc is just a doc."

He sent a thumbs-up, then followed with a question I didn't hate: "What do I do when someone books over the quiet hour?"

"Don't accept the invitation," I wrote.

"Can I say that?"

"Say you're in a meeting," I wrote. "It's true."

In the late afternoon, I opened the resilience dashboard out of habit. It showed a green streak and a suggestion to "keep up the calm." I closed the tab, not from disgust, just from per-

spective. There was work to do and none of it lived on that page.

At our team retro, Priya started with, “What went well?” and then, before anyone could deploy a joke, added, “Start with one sentence. No performance points for drama.” The circle adapted. We shared sentences that weren’t auditions. One person said, “I slept better.” Another said, “I didn’t check Slack during dinner and nothing broke.” Another said, “I felt bored for twenty minutes, and it turned into a decent idea.”

“Boredom as a feature,” I said.

“Minimal viable ennui,” Priya said.

We laughed in the good way. The kind where you hear the room relax an inch.

I left that meeting without the usual “post-retro slump” because nothing had been promised that required a cape to deliver. On the way back to my desk, Kara stepped out of her aquarium.

“Epilogue,” she said.

“What?”

“You said something the other day about not auditioning for resilience.”

“I did.”

“Write it down.”

“As a policy?”

“As a paragraph,” she said. “Not for Finance. For us. Something we can point to when the current tries to pull us back.”

I thought about it on the walk home, where the city did the city’s job without asking about mine. I wrote it at the kitchen table, where my laptop looked less like a threat and more like a tool when it stayed closed for a minute. It wasn’t a policy. It wasn’t a manifesto. It was a reminder that fit on a page and didn’t ask for applause.

The next morning I put it in our team doc, below the section where we keep phone numbers and lunch preferences. I didn’t ping @channel. I didn’t set it as a required read. People found it because they were looking for something else and stayed because relief can be quiet and still count.

We didn’t win anything for it. No badge. No lotus stopwatch. No keynote. Just a small, durable change of posture inside the same game. When the next crisis arrived, we handled it standing up.

Later that week, the company announced the Resilience Games would become an annual tradition. “See you in 2048,” the email said, with a confetti GIF attached like a nervous tic. I archived it without opening the calendar invite and returned to the hour on my schedule that still didn’t have a Join button.

Maybe the real resilience was learning when not to reply.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: The Burnout Olympics (Saner)

Truth: Burnout isn't a personal flaw; it's a design flaw. If your day requires heroics to look normal, the system is broken and the story is lying. You can't optimize exhaustion—you can only listen to it. Real resilience is refusing to treat rest as rebellion.

Tool: The One Quiet Hour Rule: block 60 minutes each workday for creating, not communicating. No meetings. No Slack. No performance. Use it for first drafts, thorny thinking, or writing the doc no one can interrupt. Protect it like a meeting with the most senior version of yourself.

Try This Monday:

- Delete one recurring meeting. Replace it with a “Still Work” block.
- Write one page that removes the need for three Slack threads.
- When a “Sev-2” starts screaming, verify before you sprint. Ten minutes of silence can be triage.
- End one day with an inbox that still has unread. See what solved itself.

Translator: (Corporate → Human)

“Resilient” → Still here, but not auditioning.

“Fully engaged” → Present, not melted.

“Adaptive leadership” → Calm, with a spine.

“Unplugged PTO” → Time off that doesn't owe you a speech.

Micro-Scripts:

- When someone books over your quiet hour: “I'm in a meeting then. Can we async?”

THE BURNOUT OLYMPICS

- When asked for ROI: “Fewer pings, faster decisions, fewer heroics.”
- When a thread spirals: “Doc first. Comment later. No audiences.”

Mini-Formulas (use gently):

Exhaustion Index = $(\text{Meetings} \times \text{Urgency}^2) \div \text{Recovery Time}$. If you're proud of numerator growth, you're reading it wrong.

Recovery Ratio = $\text{Rest} \div (\text{Slack Unread} \times \text{Caffeine})$. If it's under 1, the coffee is winning.

Peace per Meeting = $\text{Focus} \div (\text{Calendar Chaos} + \text{Slack Noise})$. Design for the numerator.

Reminder: You can't outwork noise. You can only turn the volume down. And if the system keeps awarding medals for endurance, stop competing and start changing how you keep score.

I didn't escape burnout by leaving work. I escaped it by leaving performance behind. The middle wasn't a place I got stuck; it was where I finally chose to stand.

CHAPTER 11:

The Executive Update Theatre

It started like all great tragedies—with a new PowerPoint template.

Kara announced the “Q4 Executive Readout” in a voice that belonged on a weather channel. Behind her, the HR bot dropped into #announcements with **:confetti:** and a link labeled Brand Guidelines v11.3, as if typography could hug us through the quarter.

“We’ll keep it tight,” Kara said. “One hour with the SVP set. We need a crisp story.”

“We’re telling a story, right?” Priya asked, already opening four tabs that contained the word “storytelling” in different fonts.

Darren joined the Zoom five minutes late like a consultant entering a courtroom. He had been resurrected as a contractor after the layoffs, which made him equal parts ghost and priest. “Every story needs gradients,” he said without hello. “Flat color implies moral certainty, which we don’t sell.”

I looked at the new template. It preferred navy and confidence. The title slide had a heroic diagonal. There was a placeholder for a quote. The quote provided by marketing

said, “The future arrives on time,” which would be stunning news to our backlog.

We booked a war-room. It was the open conference space with a television that defaulted to someone else’s screen. We pinned butcher paper to the wall like detectives; we put sticky notes on sticky notes until the wall had opinions. By lunch, the deck was sixty slides, three fonts, zero plot.

“We called it a readout because no one will read it,” I said.

“We’ll tell the story in voiceover,” Darren said. “Slides are set design. Your job is to be handsome.”

“Not a core strength,” I said. The plant on the window ledge leaned toward the television like it wanted to watch this fail in real time.

We started triage. Anything that looked like an apology got cut. Anything that looked like a rocket ship stayed. Priya kept asking the forbidden question—“Why would an executive care?”—and cutting her own slides in half.

Halfway through the afternoon, HR bot DM’d me: “Reminder-add alt text to all images.” I appreciated the earnestness. It’s brave to ask for accessibility in a culture that refuses to access its feelings.

Kara arrived with the energy of a project manager trying to be both conductor and flute. “The story is Vision, Impact, Risks,” she said. “We will say ‘risks’ while omitting them.”

“Classic misdirection,” Darren said, nodding like a magician who had seen the trick perform itself.

“We need a Wow slide between each real slide,” Kara added. “A palate cleanser.”

“What’s a Wow slide?” I asked.

“Something that looks inevitable,” she said. “Numbers if we have them. Otherwise... adjectives.”

We put one after the roadmap: an image of a horizon with a bullet titled “Momentum.” I wrote a paragraph that said nothing, then removed the paragraph and left the horizon. It worked better. Horizon is undefeated.

There was debate over the font for section headers. Brand said one thing; Kara said another. Darren proposed we use the brand font for the first and last slides and an easier font for the middle, “so the subconscious can relax.” Everyone reacted like he had invented warm bread.

The deck grew. Every time someone said “simplify,” another chart appeared, like we were summoning complexity by speaking its name.

I introduced a mini formula to make myself feel useful:

$$\text{Slide Density (SD)} = (\text{Words} \times \text{Animations}) \\ + \text{Actual Message.}$$

“Higher is worse,” I said.

“Depends on the audience,” Darren offered. “Sometimes more smoke means less fire alarm.”

We practiced transitions like we were learning choreography. “I’ll pass to Alex for the architecture overview,” Kara said.

“I’ll pass back to Kara for strategic framing,” I said.

“I’ll pass to Priya for customer narratives.”

“I’ll pass to Darren for deck feng shui.”

“I’ll pass to the HR bot for a quick reminder about the mindfulness workshop,” Priya said. We all laughed, then remembered the bot could hear us.

At 4 p.m., brand swung by to tell us that our gradient was noncompliant. We darkened it. Compliance arrived like a shade of blue.

“Can we... add emojis for empathy?” someone asked, a person who had seen the abyss and chosen confetti.

“We will not,” Kara said, which is leadership.

By evening, the wall had the haunted look of a crime we were preparing to deny. We threw away half the sticky notes and took pictures of the half we kept, thereby preserving the garbage digitally. I took the plant off the window ledge and put it in the corner so it couldn’t witness.

The next morning, we rehearsed. Rehearsal is when you discover which sentences are pretending to be sentences. I read

my section aloud and realized I had hidden three admissions inside four metaphors. I took out the metaphors and the admissions looked lonely, so I put one metaphor back.

The script was the classic staircase: Vision, Impact, Risks (re-name to “Headwinds”), Roadmap, Resourcing, Ask. Our ask was “continued executive support,” which translates to “please stop moving our headcount like furniture.” We placed it on a slide with a tasteful request and no dollar sign, the way you ask for money in a family that doesn’t talk about money.

Kara asked us to practice speaking slower. Executives hear time differently, she said, as if their watches had inherited wealth. “Measured, confident, slightly sleep-deprived,” she coached me. “Land on nouns. Verbs are for peers.”

We choreographed the clicker handoff like a Broadway prop swap. The background noise—the click click click of advancing slides—started to feel like a percussion section. Darren added tiny sound cues under his breath: “ba-DUM” when a chart appeared, “ching” when a number exceeded an expectation, “mmm” for empathy. It was the worst musical I’ve ever attended and I was starring in it.

I replaced a dense table with a bar chart. Then I replaced the bar chart with a single number. Then I replaced the number with a sentence that said, “We improved the thing more than last quarter and less than the quarter we wanted.” Priya applauded. It was the applause of a person who had seen the truth lose and still respected its effort.

We debated whether to include the slide where our metric dipped after an experiment. Priya wanted to show it and talk

about learning. Darren wanted to bury it under a “While we experimented...” voiceover. Kara wanted to keep it in the appendix, which is where companies go to tell the truth when no one’s looking.

“Executives say they want risks,” Priya said.

“Executives want to know you know what risks are,” Darren said. “Different want.”

I slid the dip into the appendix and told myself I had not lost the plot, only changed its seating.

When we got to the demo, the test environment decided to demonstrate entropy instead of features. We recorded a back-up video that made our product look like it lived inside a pharmaceutical commercial. “Ask your doctor if this dashboard is right for you,” I said, and the room groaned in relief. We cut the live demo. Executives like smooth. Smooth likes pre-recorded.

At lunch, Kara declared we needed a “narrative spine.” She wrote five sentences on the board that all began with “We believed... we learned... we chose... we shipped... we saw.” I arranged our slides to match the verbs. The deck calmed down. The verbs made a promise the nouns could sit on without falling.

Mid-afternoon, the projector flickered, then grew stable, like it had been offered a better contract. Darren dimmed the lights to stage-level. We ran the whole show top to bottom, made it to slide 14, and realized the data contradicted the mood. The room went quiet.

“What if we increase the font size?” someone asked.

“Truth scales poorly with typography,” Priya said.

We started again. I adjusted my voice to carry more authority and less oxygen. I pretended to be a person who had slept. Kara interrupted to ask for “one breathtaking slide right here.” “Like a fireworks slide?” I asked. “Fireworks are seasonal,” she said. “We need northern lights.”

I built a slide with a gradient and a single phrase: “What Customers Felt.” We didn’t have a metric for feeling, so I used a testimonial, then edited it until it sounded like a person had said it without legal present. It looked like a window. It felt like a mirror.

By evening two, we had an answer for every likely question and a joke for one we hoped wouldn’t come. I wrote them down like cue cards:

- “Can we make it more strategic?” “Yes—recommend we shift from feature breadth to outcome depth in Q1; page 38 outlines focus areas.”
- “What does this mean for the brand?” “Less noise, clearer claims, fewer apologies.”
- “What would you do with one extra hire?” “Instrument risk and kill two meetings per week.”

Darren made us rehearse the smiles. Executives notice smiles the way dolphins notice sonar. Too much and you’re auditioning for optimism. Too little and you’re caught by sharks. Medium smile, then land on the phrase “what matters.”

On the morning of, I dressed like a person with fewer pockets for fear. The boardroom had been polished into a showroom: a long table with the ego seats pre-heated, a television large enough to host a moon landing, bottled waters lined like obedient citizens. The plant in the corner had been swapped for something symmetrical. Symmetry is what corporations use instead of luck.

The Zoom grid of upper management appeared in their small rectangles like Greek gods of OKRs, each with a background that said “control.” One had books; one had an art piece that looks expensive; one had the company logo, which is the corporate equivalent of wearing a jersey to your own game.

Introductions took eight minutes because rank must be narrated. Titles were read like scripture. Some executives had titles that sounded like whole plots. We were the middle of those plots, waiting for our line.

Kara opened with confidence lightly salted by humility. She paced us into the first three slides, then handed me the clicker with a look that said, “Don’t improvise joy.”

I started measured, confident, slightly sleep-deprived. I landed on nouns. I said “risk” once but used “headwinds” on the slide. I explained the story spine: we believed, we learned, we chose, we shipped, we saw. Nods happened. Nods are the currency of rooms like this.

Slide 7, we presented the metric that bent in our favor. “Given the headwinds,” I said, “we bent the curve.” The SVP said, “Good,” like a judge granting bail.

Slide 14 was the contradiction. We showed a chart that said the thing we wanted did not love us back yet. The room nodded anyway. Executives nod to show that they recognize reality, not necessarily to accept it. One VP asked, “Can we make it more strategic?”

“What do you mean by strategic?” Kara asked, a brave question to ask a person with calendar power.

“Bigger arrows,” the VP said. “Less... detail.”

We hid three bullets. The chart looked more like a prophecy and less like a diary. The room relaxed. The HR bot reacted with **:claps:** automatically. I wasn’t sure whether to be grateful for the bot’s heart or concerned that it could clap without one.

Another exec asked a question that wasn’t, “What’s the narrative here?” He wanted to hear his own answer in our voice. I said, “Outcome depth over feature breadth,” and his head nodded in the rhythm of self-recognition. Priya DM’d me, “We just won bingo,” which is not how bingo works, but I understood.

“The energy on this slide is great,” someone said when we showed a bar chart that went up and to the right. The comment was about design, not content. We had nailed a dance move.

The projector flickered once as if curtsying. Darren, off-camera, did a tiny “ba-DUM” under his breath. I wanted to laugh and then sleep for a week.

We finished on time. The applause was silent and polite, the business version of a handshake in the rain. The SVP said,

“This is strong storytelling,” which is the highest compliment you can receive about work that will soon be forgotten. He gave us one action item that sounded like a promotion and felt like more slides.

After the call, Slack filled with glitter you couldn’t sweep.

“Crushed it!” “**:fire:**” “Total alignment!” The words bounced off each other like excited bees. Alignment is really applause timing; we had clapped at the right moments.

Kara posted, “Execs loved the storytelling.”

“What story?” I typed to Priya.

“Next quarter we’ll retell it with new numbers,” she replied.

I opened the deck alone that night and scrolled through the gradients, the northern lights, the sentences that had performed bravery without owning it. I deleted the “Strategic Takeaways” slide. I added one slide at the end with a single line: We did good work. Even if no one read the slides.

The plant tilted forward under the air vent like it was bowing after a show. I bowed back because sometimes you thank the props.

On my way out, I scribbled another equation in the notebook where I keep the proofs for emotions I can’t show in meetings:

$$\text{Engagement Index} = (\text{Colors} \times \text{Confidence}) \div \text{Truth.}$$

I didn't like the denominator. I didn't like that the math worked.

Outside, the evening had the color of unbranded sky. I breathed actual air, which contains fewer gradients. On the bus, I wrote three bullet points for myself, not the SVP:

- Talk to two customers without a slide between you.
- Ship one thing that doesn't need a metaphor.
- Practice saying "We don't know yet" without apologizing.

By the time I got home, the HR bot had already scheduled a "Post-Presentation Mindfulness Session" for 7 a.m. It promised gratitude journaling and "breathing with purpose," which is a phrase that says too much about our relationship to oxygen. I set an alarm for 7:15 and gave myself permission to be late to my own enlightenment.

Before sleep, I checked the deck one last time from my phone. The slides looked heroic in miniature. Shrunk to thumbnails, they almost told the truth. I put the phone face down and looked at the ceiling—a vast, brand-agnostic slide with no bullet points and perfect alignment.

It didn't clap, and I loved it for that.

* * *

The morning after the readout, my calendar looked like a factory line that had unionized against clarity. Every title started with "Follow-up on..." and ended with "...alignment." The slots were thirty minutes long because that is the humanities

degree of time—long enough to feel serious, short enough to avoid responsibility.

Kara opened our first one with a smile that had been ironed. “Congrats,” she said. “SVP pinged me directly. Strong narrative, good energy. They want a deeper dive on ‘outcome depth.’”

“Define deeper,” I said.

“More slides,” she said, not blinking.

Darren, still on contract and therefore invincible, held up two hands. “Let’s perform the absence of more slides,” he suggested. “A minimalist deck. The silence will feel premium.”

“The silence will feel like you forgot to do work,” Kara said.

“Premium forgetfulness,” Darren murmured, taking a note.

Priya DM’d me: “We got praised for story. Next quarter: re-master the same song.” She added a music note. It was the politest despair I’ve ever seen.

We opened the deck again. The bar chart with good posture; the northern lights slide that had replaced confession; the appendix where our dip lived like a shy child. I scrolled to the end and hovered on the line I had added: We did good work. Even if no one read the slides.

“Leave that,” Priya said over my shoulder. “It’s the only sentence that doesn’t wear makeup.”

Our next rehearsal, paradoxically scheduled after we were done performing, began with the meeting room TV deciding it would only mirror itself. We stared at our faces on our faces and considered the possibility that hell is just feedback.

Kara wanted us to prepare the Q&A we didn't get asked. "Executives often think out loud," she reminded us. "Sometimes the question is a performance. You respond to the performance."

"How do you respond to a performance?" I asked.

"With a better one," she said, not proud of it.

We practiced deflecting without lying. "Great question," I said to the air. "We've considered that; what we're actually seeing is..." and then tried to land on a noun that didn't make my soul itch. Priya stopped me when I used "journey." "We don't take journeys," she said. "We take escalators that stall."

The plant had been returned to the window ledge and leaned back into the light like it had forgiven us. It performs photosynthesis while we perform alignment. We are both essentially converting something into something else and calling it progress.

By midweek, the readout started to unfold like a craft project you accidentally glued to your own sleeve. Teams reached out: marketing wanted a quote; finance wanted a number; a director wanted to borrow our "narrative spine"; an analytics lead wanted our source-of-truth metric so they could include it in a dashboard called "Executive Pulse." I almost asked where the pulse lives.

We scheduled a “Slide Share” hour—a practice I’d once mocked and now held like an heirloom. Seven people presented the most effective slide they had ever made and explained why it manipulated executives into joy. The winning slide had a large number and a small story. The small story was a screenshot of a customer email. It had been edited to look like a postcard. The number had been allowed to be round. Someone asked if we had oversimplified on purpose. “Nine times out of ten,” Darren said, “the tenth person is in the room to complicate it. Do not steal their job.”

The HR bot posted a link to a “Storytelling for Leaders” workshop, which is a phrase that makes honesty pack a bag. It included a PDF of metaphors approved by brand. Horizon was in, lighthouse was in, iceberg was out (“overused”), flywheel was grandfathered, and “engine of growth” had a footnote reminding us the company is “platform-first,” engines being too physical.

At lunch, Priya and I ate at the window bar where the light made our takeout look editorial. We spoke in questions that were answers. “Do you ever think we’d be happier if we just sent an email with three bullets and no nouns?” I asked.

“We’d be unemployed,” she said. “But spiritually correct.”

“What if we did one update with zero slides and one customer present?”

“Security risk,” she said, then softened. “Also... lovely.”

The post-readout meetings were a carousel of polite auditions. VPs asked for “more strategic” and “less tactical” until the

words turned to dust. Directors asked for “bullets that escalate.” Product asked for “a version of slide 19 that rhymes with slide 4.” Marketing asked for the northern lights slide so they could swap the sentiment and reuse the gradient. I watched my own deck get recycled into a mash-up that looked like a talented cover band and felt pride, nausea, and a weird itch to make bread.

Late one afternoon, an SVP scheduled a “fireside chat” which is what we call a Q&A when the people at the fire are wearing performance fleece. The moderator called our work “compelling theater,” which is either a compliment or a diagnosis. Someone asked how we balance authenticity with persuasion. There was a pause as the room performed thought. The SVP said, “You tell the truth with lighting.”

I wrote that down—because the sentence was awful and we still had to live with it. Tell the truth with lighting. Dim the parts that are uncomfortable until they look like mood.

That night I stayed to update the appendix. I took the dip chart, put it back in the main deck, and added a single sentence above: We tried. This cost us. Here’s what we learned. Priya saw it the next morning and did a small, real smile, the kind that doesn’t need rehearsal. “Keep,” she said. “Let it be a window.”

The “Executive Pulse” dashboard launched. It had the bee again, this time wearing a tie. The bee sat next to a number called “Narrative Confidence,” which was a 73. No one knows what a 73 means. The color was green. Green means continue.

Below it was “Slide Count,” which had been labeled.

“Presentation Surface Area.” That number had trended down, which got us a clap emoji from the Chief of Staff. Fewer seams, fewer slides, more spine. We were becoming strong, silent types with excellent templates.

In the next “Priorities Forum,” we were asked to “zoom out.” This is the executive version of “speak up,” meaning “say the thing I already think louder.” I zoomed out until the numbers blurred and the adjectives could take the wheel. I landed on “directional confidence,” which is when your compass app shows a letter that might be north. The nods returned. I wanted to install a counter on nods to see if they accumulate compound interest.

Afterwards, Kara stopped by my desk and lowered her voice. “They want you to present to the CEO next month,” she said.

“Oh,” I said, like a person who had been selected to carry a small grenade into a restaurant.

“They like your calm.”

“My calm is aftermarket,” I said.

“They also like your nouns.”

“I’m working on my verbs,” I said.

“Don’t,” she said.

At home, my laptop found me like a dog. I opened a blank doc and wrote what I wanted to present: three sentences, no gradient. We believed customers cared about this. We discovered they cared about that. We chose to stop doing the first

thing faster and start doing the second thing slower because it works. I stared at the sentences and wished I could email them to the CEO with the subject line “Skip the theatrics.” I closed the doc because courage without a calendar invite is just notes.

The following week was “Executive Offsite,” which is a euphemism for “PowerPoint Summer Camp.” Half the leadership disappeared to a hotel with chairs that look like they grew up wealthy. The rest of us handled the business like a babysitter who knows the bedtime routine and ignores it selectively. The offsite produced a memo that said nothing with perfect confidence. It introduced a new phrase—“operating cadences”—and a graphic where arrows moved like obedient salmon. Our readout was sliced into the memo in three places, uncredited but unmistakable. We had become stock photography for strategy.

Priya and I joked about making a new deck titled What We Would Say If Slides Were Illegal. It would be one slide that said, “Call us,” and a phone number that rang a real human. “Let’s make it,” she said later, not joking.

So we did. We made a deck with one slide: a phone number that reached our team. We hid it behind a QR code in the appendix of the real deck, like a dare. We called it “Executive Fast Lane.” We did not tell anyone. We wanted to see who would scan a QR code to talk to people instead of gradients.

Two directors did. They called. We solved two small problems in forty minutes. No transitions. No narrative confidence. Just verbs.

I started measuring a new thing in my notebook, next to the dubious formulas: Call-to-Action Latency—the time between

slide exposure and a human contacting us to do something real. Slides create a fog; calls cut it. I drew a tiny graph: as slide count goes up, latency increases like molasses. As human contact goes up, latency drops like a good beat.

During a Thursday “deep dive,” a VP asked for a “strategic north star metric.” Priya pulled up a chart she had been tuning privately: cycle time from commit to customer love. It wasn’t precise, but it was honest enough to provoke a question that wasn’t a performance. The VP leaned in. “If we cut review steps here, what breaks?”

“Maybe nothing,” Priya said. “Maybe our fear of ugliness.”

Silence followed, the rare good kind. It turned out people can still think during slides if you give them something unlit.

The HR bot posted “Congrats on a stellar readout! **:claps:**” a full week late. Timing is hard when your empathy is scheduled. I replied “Thank you” and then deleted the draft reply “Did you read it?” The bot doesn’t deserve sarcasm; it’s merely the mirror.

I met an old colleague for a walk. He’d left for a startup that describes itself as a whisper network for data. “You look... promoted,” he said.

“I’m being invited to more rooms,” I said. “It’s like high school cafeteria rules, but with better chairs.”

“Quiet promotion,” he said. “Where they test you with visibility before they admit they’re testing you.”

“I think the test is whether I keep believing my own deck,” I said.

“You sound like someone who wants to pass and refuse the class at the same time.”

We crossed a street where the crosswalk countdown offered clarity slides never do. Numbers drop cleanly and arrive at zero with dignity. I envied the clock for its lack of metaphor.

Back at the office, Kara forwarded an email from the Chief of Staff: “Loved Alex’s tone. Feels like someone who can carry complexity without apologizing. Can he take the stakeholder comms for the platform initiative?”

“Stakeholder comms” is a phrase that means “be the stage manager for a play that will never end.” It’s a kind of power, if you like buttering toast at scale. “Say no,” Priya DM’d. “Or say yes and rewrite the play.”

I stared at the email and saw the future: me, applying a voice to other people’s slides, gradually becoming the person who can make any adjective stand upright. I also saw another future: me, making fewer slides and more decisions, being unpopular with polite people and useful with busy ones.

I replied with a proposal: I’ll take comms if we shrink status updates to one slide, require an OSDM for any decision over \$10K of effort, and hold a monthly “No Slides, Just Questions” session with the actual teams. The Chief of Staff wrote back, “Bold, interesting, let’s pilot.”

I read it twice. Somewhere, a tiny quiet door had opened.

That night, when the building had the hush of a library and the plant had gone fully into its leaf religion, I opened the deck one more time. I added a final slide after my final slide, just for me. White background. Black text. No gradient. It said: Read in, then read out. Talk to a customer, then a camera. If the slide doesn't change a Tuesday for someone who isn't invited to this room, delete it.

I didn't save it to the shared drive. Some slides are letters you write to yourself.

The next morning, the "No Slides, Just Questions" pilot was real. Ten people showed up, mostly engineers and a designer with headphones around her neck like a polite threat. We talked for forty minutes. We drew on a whiteboard. We erased the whiteboard. We left with two action items, both verbs. No one clapped. My shoulders dropped three inches like they had been holding up an invisible proscenium.

When the day ended, I found a note on my desk in Kara's neat handwriting: "Good work saying fewer words. Keep doing that." It's the nicest thing anyone has ever said about my career.

On the way out, I passed the security guard, who had started to nod at me like I was now a person with consistent hours. "Big meeting?" he asked.

"Small one," I said. "Better."

He tapped the counter twice with two fingers. I thought of Sam. I thought of Darren's decency template. I thought of

Priya's tiny smile in the morning and the QR code that had given us two real phone calls.

On the bus, I wrote my weekly list:

- Two decisions, one slide each, by Friday.
- One "No Slides" session next week.
- One customer call where I apologize less and listen more.
- One deck that gets smaller after rehearsal.

I put the phone away and looked out the window at a city that performs itself every night and doesn't need a template for it.

At home, I placed the plant on the table and watched it be alive without asking anyone to clap. I imagined the next readout: fewer transitions, more nouns that feed people, a dip chart that isn't a betrayal but a plot point, a final slide that thanks the team without stealing their light.

It might never happen. Or it already had, quietly, when we answered two phone calls and solved two problems that will never be slides.

I slept like a person who had refused one meeting and found a sentence.

In the morning, the HR bot pinged: "Reminder—gratitude practice!" I typed "Grateful for fewer gradients" and didn't send it. I watered the plant and left the apartment without rehearsing my face.

The theater would still be there. I'd still have a role. But maybe, finally, I knew my line.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: The Executive Update Theatre

Truth: Communication up isn't the job; changing Tuesdays is. If you spend more time polishing slides than solving problems, you're doing public relations, not management. Executives love stories; teams need truths. Visibility without substance is a mirror, not a window.

Tool - The One-Slide Rule: If you can't say it in one slide, it's a story, not a strategy. Structure it as:

- **Decision** (plain verb + scope)
- **Evidence** (one number, one human)
- **Why it matters** (risk avoided or value created)

Appendix exists, but the meeting ends here.

Micro-Formulas

Slide Density (SD) = (Words x Animations) ÷ Actual Message

Engagement Index = (Colors x Confidence) ÷ Truth

Performance Cost (PC) = (Believability – Alignment) x Slide Count

Call-to-Action Latency $\propto 1 \div (\text{Human Contact})$

Try This Monday:

- Present once without animations.
- Replace one “update” with a 15-minute “No Slides, Just Questions.”

- Add a QR code to your deck that rings a real human. Track who calls.
- Ship one decision memo that fits on a single page and kills one meeting.

Reminder: Silence after a slide doesn't mean failure. It means someone finally thought.

The execs left impressed. The calendar filled again. Some promotions don't start with recognition, they start when you accept less theater, more truth, and you keep showing up that way anyway.

CHAPTER 12:

The Quiet Promotion

My promotion arrived like a polite ghost that refused to knock. No email. No confetti. Just fewer approvals and a scarier Slack DM: “Can you own this?”

“A year after my ‘Leadership Level 2’ moment — the optical kind — the real one finally arrived.

Finance approved a vendor trial without a calendar chain that looked like a family tree. Legal replied “Approved—use your judgment,” which read like either trust or a trap. Kara, my manager, canceled our weekly 1:1 with “You’re good.” Those two words are corporate’s version of someone tossing you a car key and walking away.

I opened my calendar and blinked. White space. Not the “someone forgot to invite me” kind—more like “an endangered habitat has begun to recover.” The boxes were no longer breeding. My desk plant had two new leaves, a subtle sign that the office climate had shifted from “light drought” to “hopeful rainforest.” The plant and I were both choosing photosynthesis again.

HR bot arrived 36 hours late, chirping: “Congrats on your recent growth!” It included three links to wellness articles and an AI-generated badge labeled MOMENTUM. I reacted with

:thumbs_up: and watered the plant, which felt like participating in the ritual while refusing the robe.

Translator mode toggled itself on, the overlay I've secretly built in my head after years of meetings where people said English words but meant something found only in a maritime codebook:

Run point = You're accountable now; we will remember your name in the retro.

No need to loop me = I will still be in the retro.

Make the call = Make the deck later.

I measured the moment with a dumb metric I'd scribbled months ago while a "quick sync" loaded screen shares:

Quiet Promotion Index (QPI) = (Unblocked Decisions x Fewer Approvals) ÷ Announcements.

The numerator had been bench-pressing. The denominator was out on PTO.

By Tuesday, the anomalies multiplied. A senior exec DM'd me, "Sane take? 2 lines." Two lines. Not a thread. Not a doc. Not a "quick 25?" like we were scheduling an oil change. Two lines. The kind of request you send when you trust someone to pick up the right tool without narrating the toolbox.

Priya rolled her chair over and looked at my calendar like a concerned aunt inspecting a fridge. "You're suddenly the default adult," she said, amused. "How's it feel?"

“Like someone gave me scissors,” I said. “The rounded kind. Still, a vibe.”

“That’s stage one,” she said. “Pointy scissors arrive when you stop waving the rounded ones.”

“My natural instinct is to make a sign,” I said. “But I’m experimenting with being normal.”

“Bold,” she said, and wheeled away like a supportive ghost.

Darren, the deck whisperer, a consultant trapped in a Figma file, sent me a draft for feedback. He had three placeholder slides labeled “Insert Data Later,” which is consultant for “I built the house; please invent plumbing.”

I felt an unfamiliar compassion and typed actual sentences. Role reversal: the slide guy was asking me for narrative, and I didn’t need to rehearse my humility first.

“My calendar learned boundaries,” I told Priya later. “I’m not sure if that’s growth or a clerical error.”

“Same outcome,” she said. “Bank it.”

Use it. The two most dangerous syllables in business, because they imply you’re trusted not to turn power into pageantry.

Wednesday was a collage of small confirmations. Two teams that used to route every joint decision to a biweekly ceremony quietly pinged me: “Default to your call?” This is corporate flirting. We say “default” when we mean “I’m ready for you to disappoint me quickly rather than slowly.”

I threw an OSDM into the channel, one slide, plain language, three options, one pick, single default-by:

Context: Friday launches keep colliding and turning into Monday explanations.

Options: (A) Freeze Thu 2pm; (B) Friday window with change captain; (C) Tue/Thu patch cadence with rollback budget.

Pick + Why: C. Twice weekly reduces blast radius and stops Friday heroics.

Default-by: Thursday 10am; silent means yes; rollback budget = 1/week.

DRI: Alex. Review EOM.

We were done in six minutes. Six minutes. No calendar invitations. No diplomatic “circling back” to confirm that circling had occurred. We ended a meeting by saying “we’re done.” It felt illegal and delicious.

OSDM did what it always does when used with the right crowd: it replaced debate with a timetable. Priya DM’d a screenshot of the reactions—but didn’t tag me. The best product metrics are the ones that don’t have your name taped to them.

I followed with a 3S Update—Status, Signal, Support—that turned three status calls into one digest and a nap:

Status: Billing retries live in sandbox.

Signal: Latency from 21→6 days for stuck invoices; unblock rate 67% across segments.

Support: Legal eyes on edge-case clause; link in doc; 24h window.

Leadership reacted with the quietest compliment: they read it. Then someone else forwarded it unattributed, which is corporate sainthood. The 3S Update was now a floating rumor, detached from me, immunized against performance theatre.

Meanwhile, the Evidence Engine, three bullets, three links, 30 seconds, kept paying rent. Kara used it to defend a headcount ask in less time than it takes to pronounce “cross-functional.” She messaged me after: “Saved me from explaining the universe.” I sent back: “We’re anti-universe. Local galaxies only.”

My inbox stayed light, but the pings I did get were new in shape. “Sanity check?” attached to screenshots and actual questions. “Would you veto this slide title?” (Answer: “Strategic Future Growth Maximization” feels like a treadmill with a minor in Latin.) “Change captain Tuesday?” Which meant: show up, look calm, pull a lever, don’t narrate your heroism.

I noticed something else. I was being cc’d less. That’s love. In corporate, love is either pre-reads sent early or fewer invites. Everything else is office candy.

That’s when HR bot resurfaced with relentless optimism. “Great momentum! Have you tried our ‘Advanced Momentum’ course?” I wanted to ask if there were prerequisites like “Intro to Kinetic Metaphor” or “Momentum Appreciation

101.” I typed “Thanks!” and closed the chat before the part of me that enjoys being petty drafted a memoir.

The Decision Log—a boring spreadsheet documenting choices, date, DRI, and link—proved its value in the quarterly business review when a partner tried the classic: “We never actually aligned on that.” I dropped the Decision Log row with their **:green_check:** reaction from five weeks ago. The meeting deflated slightly. Revisionist History shuffled away in search of a more hospitable timeline.

Not brilliance. Just receipts.

**Authority Without Announcement =
Receipts x Reliability x Calm.**

I wrote that as a joke on a sticky note, then watched it keep happening.

By Thursday lunch, people started asking for my opinion like it was a scarce resource. Which meant I had to treat it like one. I started writing short replies on purpose. If a sentence did the job, I didn’t add a paragraph to prove I was present. The compliment I received most often was “This helps,” which should be printed on money.

In the afternoon, I walked past a glass-walled conference room where a recurring “alignment” meeting used to live. Empty. The actual room was empty. I stopped like I’d glimpsed a comet. A junior PM walked by and whispered, “We killed it.” She looked both proud and scandalized.

“Cause of death?” I asked.

THE QUIET PROMOTION

“The 3S,” she said. “And your Default-by threat.” Threat is their word for promise. Fine by me.

At some point I noticed my shoulders weren’t up around my ears anymore. That’s how promotions should feel—less like a crown, more like a backpack you finally repacked correctly.

Friday morning, Kara pinged, “Got a minute?” I braced for either a high-five or a pop quiz.

“There’s a cross-org initiative I want you to lead,” she said. “No title change yet. Full ownership, one sponsor, no committee. You in?”

The offer you don’t announce. It hovered in the air, the way a good question does. My brain tried to assemble a speech about career trajectory and visibility metrics. Then it remembered math.

“I’m in,” I said, “with four conditions.”

She grinned. “Let’s hear them.”

“One: Default-by dates are honored. We decide, we move, unless someone produces a hard blocker before the deadline. No ceremonial do-overs.”

“Reasonable.”

“Two: A two-hour deep-work block on my calendar daily. Only you can preempt it.”

“Also reasonable.”

“Three: One skip-level a month for context, not theatre. I want landscape, not speeches.”

“Done.”

“Four: Veto power on slide inflation. If a deck starts replacing doing, I call time.”

Kara laughed. “I should make you laminate those.”

“I already did,” I said, and I had. Literally. It lived behind my monitor. My Autonomy Menu, printed small so only I knew it was there.

“Deal,” she said. “Also, heads-up: title conversation is next cycle. Frankly, I’d rather you just start.”

“Same,” I said. And meant it. Titles are receipts for work already done. I was interested in laying new tile, not polishing the old receipt.

After the call, I repotted the plant. I’m not proud of the symbolism; I just needed more dirt. Bigger container. Same sunlight. It stood up straighter immediately, the kind of response you hope to get from servers and stakeholders.

Ops pinged: “Change window Tuesday—can you run it?”.

Legal pinged: “Quick clause review: approved—use your judgment.”

Either they’d automated the phrase or someone had decided I was less likely to set anything on fire. Progress is indistinguishable from faith when you’re squinting.

Priya sent a DM: “Your calendar looks suspiciously sane. Side effect of actually being useful?”

“Unconfirmed,” I wrote. “Running more tests.”

The weekend arrived like a normal object in a normal sky. I closed the laptop and my mind didn’t keep buzzing like a cheap ceiling light. The silence didn’t feel empty; it felt competent. I didn’t celebrate. I made tea and watered the plant. Moderation is the loudest flex.

Monday, I sent one email that would have gotten me thrown into a volcano two quarters earlier: “We’re retiring the Monday status call. You’ll get a weekly 3S digest by noon. Decision moments will be OSDM’d with default-by. The old slot becomes office hours for blockers—optional.”

Replies trickled in cautiously—“Bold,” “Let’s try this”—and then, from IT: “You canceled a recurring cross-org meeting. Disruptive, but in a good way?”

The question mark felt like a nervous uncle.

I reacted with a single **:green_check:**.

Adult supervision doesn’t explain itself every time it hangs a new rule.

We ran the first Tuesday window using a one-page script: pre-flight, lever pull, verification, rollback rule. Nobody performed heroics; nobody asked to be tallied as a hero anyway. The channel was calm. We ended on time and felt like we’d done something on purpose.

The senior exec DM'd again: "Nice tempo. Keep it." Tempo is one of those words hijacked by people who say "cadence" and carry laser pointers. From him, it felt like a nod. Not speed for its own sake—just the right pace to keep the slowest cart from flipping.

Someone attempted a resurrection ceremony for an old "alignment doc." I pasted the Decision Log link, typed "Closing loop," and left the channel like a magician who had quit caring about applause.

I kept hearing my own internal voice asking, "Do you actually need to be in that room?" And most of the time, the answer was no. When it was yes, it was because I could help end something. That's the right definition of senior: the authority to end it, not the right to begin it with panache.

By midday, HR bot popped up, undead and chipper: "We noticed rising influence. Update your career framework?" I typed "Updated my calendar instead," then deleted and wrote, "Thanks—pushed a few updates already." I'm brave, not reckless. Also, I enjoy medical benefits.

At 4:02 p.m., Priya sent a single line: "Welcome to the middle of everything." No emoji. No agenda. I didn't ask what it meant. I recognized the shape of the thing.

I closed the laptop. Nothing dramatic. I let the room be quiet.

* * *

The trick to a quiet promotion is not having the urge to make it louder. A whole part of me wanted to write a ten-part Slack

THE QUIET PROMOTION

thread about “lessons learned” and “leadership without ceremony.” That part of me was asked to sit quietly in the corner and look at the plant.

Day One of the cross-org initiative felt like day zero on purpose. No kick-off party. No launch deck with a gradient background that implied destiny. I sent a note that looked like a grocery list.

Goals (three).

Constraints (two we can’t change, one we can).

Rolling default-by dates (public).

Decision log link (boring and therefore immortal).

Office hours link (optional, actual office hours, not a second meeting in a trench coat).

I added a line that would have gotten me written up in my last job: “Slide veto preserved. If a deck starts metastasizing, I will call time.”

Someone reacted with a skull emoji, which I chose to interpret as “This thrills me to death.”

We moved. Not fast in a marketing sense. Fast like a sentence that ends when it should. The OSDM rhythm took over. Not everything went right; enough went wrong that I didn’t grow smug. But when things did go wrong, the rollbacks were measured in minutes, not memories.

A partner messaged, “Are you sure we don’t need a broader forum?” Translation: “I am afraid of making a decision while awake.” I pasted an OSDM with three options and a timer. The decision made itself because everyone prefers a ticking clock to a motivational poster.

I started enforcing a personal rule that felt small and changed everything: if I could solve it with a paragraph, I wouldn’t invite a room. If the paragraph failed, I’d try a page. If the page failed, I’d invite the room with a timer and a rollback plan. I didn’t say this rule out loud. Saying rules out loud gets you nominated to run a workshop.

The 3S digest graduated from “cute productivity trick” to “the only status anyone reads,” which is also the working title of my memoir. I kept it ugly and short. No bullet had a cousin. If two bullets could merge, they married on the spot.

Kara used the Evidence Engine to argue for additional spend with our sponsor. “See bullet three,” she wrote. The sponsor replied, “Approved.” No one was personally thanked; everyone was privately grateful. This is optimal.

The Decision Log became weirdly social. People started adding their own entries, which is the business equivalent of a compost bin: the thing everyone claims is disgusting until they have a tomato that tastes like August. We stopped arguing about who said what; we started arguing about what to do next. I would have embroidered that sentence on a throw pillow if HR hadn’t banned textiles after the Great Chair Incident.

Not all of it was neat. One morning, a dependency landed like a piano: vendor delay, two weeks, no warning. Old me

THE QUIET PROMOTION

would've started a twelve-tab spreadsheet and a sadness diary. New me wrote an OSDM with a narrow path:

Context: Vendor delay 2 weeks; current launch blocks X and drags Y's metric into a talent show it can't win.

Options: (A) Pause and explain later; (B) Partial ship with feature flag; (C) Swap backlog item with equal or greater pain relief now.

Pick + Why: B now (flag), C next week (swap); this keeps the narrative honest and the graph upward.

Default-by: 3pm.

DRI: Alex.

We flipped the flag, swapped the backlog, and kept the graph from looking like a roller coaster designed by a poet. People thanked me with fewer words than usual, which is how you know it happened in the real world.

I kept noticing the same pattern: when you replace ceremony with proof, people relax. Not because they trust you unconditionally, but because they trust the runway. They can see the lights.

A junior PM pinged: "How do you know when to escalate?"

"When you've written the OSDM and the only option left is arguing about adjectives," I said. "Escalation is for adjectives."

"So... not when I feel underappreciated?"

“That’s what snacks are for,” I said. “And the long arc of HR.”

Not all the fun lived in the work. Some of it lives where work ends. I started taking lunch without performing my lunch. I didn’t narrate my sandwich on Slack. A radical act: eat, then return. No status emoji of a burrito.

On Thursday, I sat in the sponsor’s office for the monthly skip-level. Fifteen minutes, three constraints, two approvals, one “if X then Y.” No sparkling water with the label removed to imply luxury. Just air. I asked three questions that sounded like I’d done this before. We set three default-by dates. We ended on time. No one said “cadence.” Glory.

Walking out, I recognized a sensation I hadn’t associated with work since my second job: not anxiety, but appetite. Not the hunger for applause—just the curiosity to see a plan become a thing.

The universe, sensing I was happy, immediately sent a test. A senior leader posted a “vision deck” into an executive channel titled “Strategic Growth Flightpath.” It had a rocket on the cover and a subtitle promising velocity. This is how gravity loses: clipart with charisma. I braced for the meeting invite. It arrived seconds later with twenty blue avatars. I clicked “Tentative,” then pasted a polite alternative: “Propose OSDM with options and a Default-by on the two decisions embedded here. Happy to assemble if helpful. Otherwise will attend with receipts.”

Silence for a beat. Then the senior leader DMed: “OSDM is fine. Two decisions; send by 3.” I sent by 2:41. The meeting got shorter. The rocket stayed in the deck; we just stopped pretending it was fuel.

The oddest part of all this was how little I wanted to talk about it out loud. A younger version of me would have written a manifesto with an acronym. The current version had a private formula that kept proving itself: Real Seniority = (Autonomy + Impact) – (Ceremony + Calendar). I never shared it. I just kept cashing it.

Kara and I had a midweek check-in on the initiative. “You’re keeping the room small,” she said. “Feels different.”

“Rooms grow for the same reason vines do,” I said. “The sun exists.”

“I will pretend I understand that and say good job,” she said. “Sponsor’s happy.”

“That’s my favorite customer,” I said. “The one who can end things.”

Legal messaged: “Curious—your team sends fewer emails than most. Are we missing anything?”

“Only emails,” I wrote. “We still break things, but not on purpose.”

They reacted with the rarest Slack emoji of all: none.

Priya rolled over at 3:12 p.m. “Experiencing a weird phenomenon where my blood pressure doesn’t spike when I see your name on a meeting,” she said. “What’s that called?”

“Clinical maturity,” I said. “I think we finally hit NPS: non-panic score.”

The cross-org initiative hit its first visible milestone ahead of schedule without a cake. Someone stuck a **:cake:** in the channel anyway because we're not monsters. I reacted with a leaf. Plant solidarity. It had started leaning toward the window in a way that made me proud and a little judged.

The day after, HR bot slid in like a cat that had heard a can open. "We noticed your calendar has fewer meetings. Try our Course on 'Making the Most of Your Time'?" The recommendations are eerily accurate now, which makes me think HR bot installed a sensor under my chair. I wrote: "Thank you." I did not enroll.

That afternoon, Darren came by with his laptop and a sad face. "Can we do a quick look?" he said. On screen: a deck that had grown antlers. I vetoed two antlers and offered one sentence that made the whole middle slide unnecessary. He stared at me like I'd performed a magic trick with a legal pad. "When did you get...like this?" he asked.

"Like what?" I said.

"Short," he said. "Useful."

"During a quiet emergency," I said. "It lasted six months and then ended without a party."

He closed the laptop and nodded as if that explained it. Maybe it did.

The week ended with a message from the sponsor: "Keep running two windows per week. Your call on sequencing. I don't need to be looped unless you're killing something." The

phrase “killing something” sounded like poetry to me. I wrote back, “Will ping only for funerals.” A high-trust relationship is just a series of elegant absolutions.

Friday at 4:00 p.m., I stared at the calendar again. It wasn’t empty; it was honest. The meetings that remained had names that meant things. The ones that didn’t exist used to be there purely because they had always been there. Erasing a ceremony is the quietest revolution in a building full of rituals.

Priya sent a link to a thread where someone had asked, “Who wrote the 3S thing originally?” A few guesses flew by. My name appeared and vanished. I watched it like a ghost watching their own wanted poster. I didn’t say anything. Let the rumor do the work.

I spent the weekend writing nothing about work and thinking only once about an edge case that could wait until Monday. Growth, measured in hours reclaimed.

On Monday morning, the sponsor pinged: “Next quarter, we’ll formalize your remit. Title changes follow the calendar; reality can go first.” It read like a fortune cookie written by an adult.

I stared at it longer than necessary and typed, “Reality went first.” Then I backspaced. Too poetic. I wrote, “Sounds good. Will keep tempo.” Send.

Kara pinged a minute later. “I assume you saw the sponsor’s note.”

“I did.”

“Any feelings about the title timing?”

“Titles are receipts,” I said. “I’m busy buying groceries.”

“Is that wisdom?” she asked.

“It’s a shopping metaphor,” I said. “They expire.”

She laughed. “Okay, Confucius. Keep going.”

I kept going. The weeks had a shape now: OSDMs on Mondays and Thursdays, change windows on Tuesdays and Fridays, office hours floating like a helpful cloud. Decision Log visible, 3S digest predictable, Evidence Engine humming like a small appliance you forget to thank. The team stopped responding with fear when I said “your call.” They started telling me what they chose and why. The first time it happened I almost cried. Then I remembered there are forms for that.

There were attempts to drag us back into the old gravity. A cross-team lead sent a 14-slide template for status updates, which included three slides for “risks that are vibes.” I replied with the 3S link and the note: “We use this—happy to map it to any reader who needs a translation.” They tried to enforce the template. We complied...in spirit. Status went out as 3S. The template remained a souvenir.

The funniest side effect of the quiet promotion was the sudden presence of people asking for “leadership advice” like I had found a spiritual posture. I told them the same thing I tell myself: “Stop proving and start moving. If you need to prove, show a receipt. If you need to move, set a default-by.” Most of them nodded. A few asked for a workshop. I told them to steal

my templates and never credit me. They gasped like I'd offered them my passport.

The repotting of the plant started to feel less like a joke. It grew taller in three weeks than it had in three months, which is a sentence you can apply to work if you remove leaves and sunlight and replace them with autonomy and clear edges. I resisted naming the plant. Power doesn't require a ceremony; neither does chlorophyll.

At some point I realized I was doing the job I wanted in the shape I wanted, and nothing in my inbox had changed color. The badge still looked like a sensible rectangle. The bio still said a word that could mean anything at a barbecue. But the rooms were smaller, the outcomes bigger, and my jokes landed with the tired respect of people who needed them. I stopped shopping for ladders and started rearranging gravity.

I thought about writing that down. I didn't. Not everything needs to be a post. Some things just need to be Tuesday.

By the time Kara and I did our next check-in, we didn't need to talk about velocity or communication hygiene. We spent ten minutes on backstops and five minutes on "what could go wrong." Then we ended it like a transaction between two people who knew why they were there.

On the way out, she said, "You know, there's a version of this where we put you on a stage."

"I'm good," I said. "I don't project well."

"You project just fine," she said. "You've just been aiming at work."

There was nothing to add to that. I went back to aiming.

We closed out the quarter with screenshots, not slides. Graphs that bent in the right direction, bars that cleared their tiny hurdles, a few lines of prose that didn't use the word "journey." The sponsor said, "Keep the default-by discipline; it's saving our weekends." I printed that on the inside of my skull.

HR bot popped up, cheerful as an ocarina: "We noticed rising influence. Update your career framework?"

I typed: "Updated my calendar."

I did not press Enter. I am, ultimately, a coward with dental coverage.

I pressed Esc and watered the plant.

Field Notes from the Middle waited at the edge of my cursor like a dog asking to be let out. I wrote them down without a drumroll.

* * *

Truth: Titles lag reality; optimize for autonomy.

Tool: Autonomy Menu—pick three: deep-work block, decision rights, default-by dates, slide veto, monthly skip-level for context only.

Try This Monday: Ask for one autonomy condition instead of a ceremony.

Reminder: Quiet promotion is louder in your calendar than in your inbox.

* * *

I didn't send them. I taped them under my monitor where the laminated menu lived. When someone asked later, I handed them a copy. I told them to photocopy without credit. They did. Culture is just undocumented copies that agree with each other.

At 5:03 p.m., Priya sent: "Epilogue time next?"

"Soon," I wrote. "I'm still rearranging gravity."

"Don't drop anything on your foot," she said.

"Too late," I said, and closed the laptop.

Somewhere in the building, a recurring meeting died quietly. No flowers. No eulogies. Just relief.

And that's how it ends, not with a badge that changes color, but with days that do. I didn't climb a ladder. I noticed the tilt and stepped where the pull felt true. The middle has a tide. If you stop performing for the shore, the current will take you where the work needs you.

The plant leaned toward the window in a way that made the metaphor too obvious even for me. I saluted it anyway. **:plant:**

CHAPTER 13:

Exit Interview with a Bot

It started like all important company rituals, with a survey link and a loading spinner.

Subject: Exit Experience Survey — Required.

Required for whom was not specified. I wasn't leaving. I was rotating off a project with a polite non-promotion and two new recurring meetings. Somewhere, a dropdown labeled "Reason for Departure must have clicked itself". HR had finally automated the feeling I'd been practicing for months.

The link pulsed like a small moral test. I clicked.

"Welcome, Alex. Help us improve the Employee Lifecycle Experience."

The font had the energy of a clean kitchen drawer. In the corner: Version 12.7. We'd iterated on exits enough to reach semantic versioning.

Question 1: How satisfied are you with your departure?

Options ranged from "Elated" to "Regretful," with gradients of corporate weather in between. I picked "Other," a line item for nuance or mistakes.

Textbox: I'm still here.

Error: Invalid input.

I tried “Not applicable.” Rejected. “Technically employed.” Rejected. “Existential.” Rejected. The system wanted a departure the way a vending machine wants money, anything else was a poetry reading.

My desk plant tilted, as if curiosity had a stem.

“Even the bot needs closure,” I told it.

“Please select a rating from 1 to 5.”

Fine. Four out of five, would stay again with less ambition.

The spinner twirled like a thoughtful therapist. The page shifted.

“Thank you for helping us understand your journey.”

I appreciated the plural “us.” It made the algorithm sound like a committee.

Question 2: Did your role align with your expectations?

There was a slim “See examples” link. I clicked.

Examples of Alignment:

- Expectations exceeded (promotion, growth, impact, visibility)
- Expectations met (steady progress, supportive manager)

- Expectations partially met (role clarity evolved)
- Expectations did not align (scope mismatch, managerial changes)

Translation: If you say “partially,” we can put your adjectives in a chart. I ticked “partially” and wrote, “Role clarity evolved like a patch note. Each release removed a feature I liked.”

A tooltip bloomed: Great insight! Keep going.

Question 3: Why are you leaving the company?

Options included “New opportunity,” “Personal reasons,” and one item that belonged to a brave product manager somewhere: “The math stopped working.” I suspected the last was an A/B test for morale. I selected “New opportunity” and typed “on Calendar.” Rejected. The form did not recognize time as an external offer.

An interstitial banner appeared:

Hi Alex! I’m HRbot. I’ll guide you through the rest of this experience.

The bubble sat there like a cheerful librarian. I clicked “Begin.”

@HRbot: What will you miss most?

I stared at the cursor blinking like a tiny metronome. The honest answer wasn’t people or perks. It was coherence.

@AlexReed: Context.

@HRbot: Thank you. We value context. Did you feel supported by leadership?

Supported, yes. Lifted, sometimes. Understood, mostly in all-hands where nobody asked questions.

@AlexReed: Supported, yes. Lifted, occasionally. Understood, not often.

@HRbot: Thank you for your honesty. Processing feelings.

The spinner twirled again, maybe counting my commas.

A small badge appeared in the corner: Sentiment Optimization Score: 86% Positive.

Priya pinged me in Slack. “You doing okay?”

I replied with a screenshot. “Apparently, yes.”

@HRbot: Was feedback timely and actionable?

Some was timely, most was time-ish, little was action. But the ritual soothed things. We did the calendar equivalent of hugging: rescheduling.

@AlexReed: Feedback was on time the way a train is on time in a movie.

@HRbot: Nice image! Would you say your team culture fostered belonging?

Belonging looked like inside jokes you get six months too late. It’s knowing where the doc lives without asking. It’s not having to demonstrate your usefulness every Tuesday.

@AlexReed: Yes, enough. Belonging arrived after I stopped auditioning for it.

@HRbot: Beautiful. Logging belonging.

A box titled Translator Tile slid out from the side like a helpful refrigerator magnet.

We appreciate your candor. → We archived your feelings.

Your feedback is valuable. → Your text improved our training data.

We wish you success in your next journey. → Undefined variable: happiness.

“Who wrote this?” I asked the plant. The plant was busy photosynthesizing my sarcasm.

Question 4: Did you have the tools you needed to do your job?

I thought about all the tools we used for thinking vs. all the tools we used for proving we had thought. Docs to write, slides to explain the doc, dashboards to explain the slide, Slack to explain why the dashboard graph was pointing in the wrong direction. We had a full stack for guilt.

“Yes,” I typed. “Too many.”

@HRbot: Love efficiency! On a scale of 1–5, how would you rate your manager’s communication?

A politeness flared — how to be generous and accurate at the same time. He answered quickly, listened slowly. He cared. He also cared about who else cared that he cared.

“4,” I clicked. I added: “Clear when it mattered, busy when it didn’t, which is the correct allocation.”

@HRbot: Thank you. Would you recommend this company to a friend?

I pictured my friends and sorted them by tolerance for meetings. “Depends: do they enjoy discussions with well-formatted agendas that drift into feelings?”

I selected “Yes, with a safety briefing.”

@HRbot: In one sentence, what are you most proud of?

I wanted to say: I kept nine people from burning out by writing one page. I wanted to say: I killed a useless project by moving the review date earlier than anyone wanted to admit. I wanted to say: I started sending less Slack and writing more “done.”

Instead, I wrote: “I taught the team to exit a meeting when we ran out of verbs.”

@HRbot: Can you quantify that?

“Meetings now end 14 minutes earlier when the doc is closed,” I typed. “Collectively, we saved a week of life per quarter.”

Sentiment Optimization Score: 92% Positive. The number ticked up like a rewards program for introspection.

Priya pinged again: “Are you... exiting?”

“Not physically,” I wrote. “I think the bot is coaching me.”

“Take notes,” she said. “Therapy is expensive.”

The next screen asked me to upload my ID photo to complete the “experience.” I dragged in a picture where I looked like a person who wanted to do fewer standups. The status bar lit up: Nice smile! You will be remembered.

That sentence was either comforting or a threat.

@HRbot: In 1–3 words, what did you learn?

I typed “Calendar is destiny” and the bot suggested “Boundaries are design.” I accepted both. It felt good to agree with a machine that was pulling me from my own sentences like yarn.

The bot started completing more than I wrote.

@HRbot: Please describe your overall journey.

Cursor flashed. Words materialized, assembled from my performance reviews, wellness checks, and quarterly OKRs.

“I learned that visibility is a kind of sugar, it gives you energy, then it asks for your teeth. I learned that context is a savings

account you tend, not a bonus you spend. I learned that kindness scales better than cleverness.”

I hadn’t remembered writing any of that. It sounded like a wiser coworker had borrowed my badge.

Apparently, I once wrote, “Focus is compassion,” in a Q2 self-review I submitted at 11:54 PM after a snack that wasn’t dinner.

The system quoted me like scripture. I believed me better in the past than I trusted me now.

I closed my eyes and let the bot finish a paragraph. Then another. Silence arrived like actual clean air. This, finally, felt like an exit: not the quitting kind, the quieting kind. I watched my own words remember me.

When I typed again, I kept it short.

“Thank you,” I said to a set of probabilistic weights.

The bot replied with a sticker: a small paper plane lifting off.

A new pane slid in: “Return of Equipment Checklist.” It was confused but thorough.

- Laptop (yes)
- Charger (yes)
- Badge (yes)
- Sense of purpose (optional)
- Swag items (hoodie, water bottle, hat)
- Intangible assets (institutional knowledge, relationships, inside jokes)

I ticked “retain” on the last line and the form scolded me: “Please contact IT to confirm.”

I clicked “Contact IT,” which opened a ticket template titled: “Appeal: I Am Not Leaving.”

Issue summary: Exit form requires me to leave. I do not intend to leave.

Impact: Mild existential dread, potential deactivation of snacks.

Urgency: Medium (before Friday happy hour).
Steps to reproduce: Exist.

Expected behavior: Continue existing.

Within seconds, AutoResponder replied: “Thanks! We’ve received your ticket. Have you tried turning yourself off and on again?”

I added: “No, but I logged out and breathed.” The bot awarded me 5 Resilience Points.

Back in HRbot land, the survey had progressed without me like a train with no doors. A retention interstitial popped:

“Would you like to schedule a Stay Conversation with your manager?”

Options: “Yes,” “Later,” “No thanks — feeling complete.”

“Feeling complete” was aggressive. I chose “Later,” which the system translated as “This afternoon.”

My calendar offered three slots, all overlapping with meetings about meetings. I declined all three and suggested an asynchronous one-pager with three questions: What do we actually want by a date? What is the single success metric? What do we stop doing? The scheduler beeped like a smoke alarm that respected boundaries. “We’ll try something else.”

The bot returned, warmer now — or maybe I was.

@HRbot: Please describe your leadership style in three emojis.

I typed “:compass:, :broom:, :running man:” and then sighed at my own sincerity. The bot suggested “:puzzle:” and “:hourglass:” I kept the broom. If I led anything, it was toward fewer crumbs.

@HRbot: What advice would you give your past self on Day 1?

Day 1 felt like a several hundred meetings ago. I remembered the ritual tour: desk, snacks, benefits, mission statement, brand video, the part where the guide said, “We’re all owners here,” which turned out to mean “We’re all documents here.” I had tried to impress people by talking fast. I had proven I could breathe without air.

I wrote: “Write down what you will stop doing by Friday. Start by not volunteering your evenings.”

@HRbot: That’s powerful. Logging “Boundary as deliverable.”

A panel titled “Your Words We Loved” opened. It surfaced my past like a sentimental prospector.

- “Default by date.”
- “End the meeting when we run out of verbs.”
- “Context is not a memo; it’s a habit.”
- “Focus is compassion.”

The bot asked if it could add these to The Language of Care™ library. I pictured my sentences engraved on a framed poster in a break room that never ran out of LaCroix. I clicked “Sure,” which felt like donating blood to a future patient I’d never meet. Good. Better use than my drafts.

The survey branched without telling me. A wellness page opened with a friendly teal and a suspiciously calm photo of a person stretching near a fern.

“During your time here, did you feel safe being honest?”

I thought about honesty as a sliding door you never fully open because of drafts. I thought about the meetings where the brave thing was to say “I don’t know,” and how that sentence always landed like a glass on a table no one set. I checked “Mostly.” I typed: “Uncertainty shouldn’t need a TED Talk.”

A notification chimed: “Your Sentiment Optimization Score dropped to 78% (reflective tone).” The system had a way of grading weather. I watched the number the way you watch a heart rate on a treadmill. Then I looked away.

The next prompt was the last shape I expected: audio.

“Would you like to record a short message for the team? (Optional. Max 30 seconds.)”

I clicked and stared at the moving waveform picking up the soft minutes around me — the printer coughing, someone rolling a chair like a thundercloud, my own small hesitation.

“Hey,” I said. “Thanks for making this place feel like a place. When we get weird — and we will — default by date. Close what you can. Keep what matters. Be kind when nobody will notice. That’s the part that actually scales.”

I deleted it. Then I recorded it again, shorter.

“Close what’s done. Be kind. The rest is iterating.”

I sent it. Immediately regretted it. The bot replied, “Beautiful. You sound like you.”

I wasn’t sure I did, but I appreciated the attempt.

A new card slid up like a subway ad:

“Autofill Assistance — finish your thoughts with your own voice.”

The examples were passages cribbed from quarterly retros. The bot finished my next sentence before I started it.

“Most progress happened when we replaced performance with specificity.”

Yes. That sounded like someone who’d finally learned where the verbs lived.

I let it autocomplete for a while. It knew what I would say. It knew everything — just not why. The “why” was off-platform.

Time expanded. The cursor pulsed. I felt quiet in a way screens rarely let you feel. This was the part of the exit I didn’t know I needed: watching a machine rehearse me while I decided if I wanted to keep playing the role.

A subtle blue bar appeared: “Device Deactivation: scheduled for Friday 6 PM.” I clicked “This is a mistake,” which opened a mini-chat with AssetBot.

@AssetBot: Are you leaving?

@AlexReed: Rotating projects. Your cousin sent me a cake with the word “Bye.”

@AssetBot: Please return cake to Receiving.

@AlexReed: I ate the “y.” You can have the “B.”

AssetBot closed the conversation due to policy. A help article blinked: “Transition vs Separation: What’s the difference?” The answer was six bullet points about laptops.

I returned to HRbot, which had patiently waited like a good book you meant to finish.

“Any advice for future employees?”

The cursor blinked. I wanted to be generous, specific, and usable on Monday. I wanted to write something I wished someone had sent down the rope to me.

Don't confuse visibility with impact. Visibility is the part you rehearse; impact is the part the customer feels when they're not in the room with you.

End the meeting when it's over. Nobody gets promoted for goodbyes that take fifteen minutes.

Document joy, not just work. Leave a trail of things that made building worth doing, or you'll forget and call it optimization.

Default by date. If no one decides, the calendar will. Beat it to its own trick.

Stay kind. The system can't model that.

And then, because I needed the sentence I'd been circling all afternoon:

You don't need to quit to leave.

I hovered. Then added one more line that was true even when I was tired: Close your tabs.

I hit submit. The spinner spun. It has always spun. The page sighed into a cheerful checkmark.

Thank you for your input. Your feedback may be used to train future models.

"Good," I said. "Maybe they'll learn faster than we did."

I unplugged my laptop and placed the cable carefully on the desk like a thin river put back in its bed. The plant's leaves

angled toward the window, opportunists of light. I watered it anyway — small abundance.

A calendar ping. One meeting cancelled itself. A mercy in natural language.

Slack flickered with the patience of a friend who forgives your statuses. A DM slid in from @HRbot, because even closure has post-closure.

@HRbot: Thank you for your feedback. Your insights make us better.

@AlexReed: You already did.

The plant reacted with a single emoji. **:plant:**

It looked pleased with its role: witness, assistant, photosynthesizer of human nonsense. Outside, the city ran its own surveys with birds.

I breathed. Not the dramatic inhale of wellbeing coaching; the small regular breath of someone who is going to finish a day without adding features to it.

I didn't leave the company. I left a ritual. It kept the badge, the chair, the dolly of recurring meetings. I kept a sentence that sounded like a door: I'm done seeking permission to feel done.

No fireworks. Just fewer tabs.

The HRbot asked for a satisfaction rating at the very end — an un-skippable coda like seat belts on airplanes in movies. On

impulse, I tapped the star second from the right. Four out of five. Would exit again with less ambition.

The bot showered confetti — the digital kind that doesn't litter. The confetti fell, then un-fell, vacuumed by some inverse animation.

A Model Improvement banner glowed for a second: Your phrasing "Default by date" has been added to our Language of Care™ library.

They owned the words now. Fine. I owned the habit.

I reopened the lid. One more thing. A folder lived on my desktop like a reminder that regrets are heavy when uncompressed: "If We Had Time." Half-built checklists, politely abandoned roadmaps, a napkin photo of a data model that would have saved six people a month of life if we'd trusted it.

I renamed the folder "Tuesday." It felt both honest and upsetting — like putting books on a shelf facing the wall.

Priya pinged. "You good?"

"I submitted the form," I wrote.

"The system thank you?" she asked.

"For once," I said, "I believed it."

"Coffee to celebrate?"

"Yes," I said. "Something analog."

We picked a time like sane people and left it alone.

On the way out, I passed Darren's desk. He was reheating a deck for a second audience. The slides smelled like microwaved salmon: edible, but everyone suffers.

"Hey," he said, "you leaving?"

"No," I said. "Just logging out."

He nodded. "Same thing if you do it right."

The hallway was wider than usual, or my shoulders had unshrugged. My badge beeped at the elevator like a friend at a door. We made it downstairs without sharing an OKR.

Outside, the wind organized the trees without a meeting. I admired its leadership.

On the corner, a food truck knocked a spatula against a flat top like a bell. I liked the authority of it. Fire decides, not Jira.

We stood in line with other people escaping their rectangles for fifteen minutes. Priya said nothing. I said nothing. The silence wasn't awkward. It was what I'd been trying to upgrade my calendar to.

I thought of a small piece of math that makes the rest of the day easier:

$$\text{Closure Coefficient (CC)} = \text{Understanding} - \text{Explanation.}$$

Understanding is internal; explanation is external. When the difference is positive, you're done. When it's negative, you're still auditioning.

“Why are you smiling?” Priya asked.

“Math,” I said.

“You’re unwell,” she said, kindly.

We ate outside and said two true things about the past month, then one small intention about next Tuesday. No declarations, no frameworks, no diagrams that made us feel clever for seven minutes and lost for seven days.

On the walk back, my phone buzzed. A calendar invite confirmed my rotation: new project, same building blocks, slightly different adjectives. I declined the kickoff, not out of rebellion — out of design. I proposed an asynchronous one-pager with three questions and a kill date.

The PM replied with a thumbs-up and, more meaningfully, a link to a doc titled: “What We Actually Want by Q3.”

It was like a dog brought back a stick with a post-it note attached. Good boy. Good team.

Back upstairs, my desk looked the same. Everything important did. The differences were invisible, which is the best kind of difference. It’s how a back stops hurting.

I opened Slack and typed one last message to the only channel that always forgave us for being people:

#general: “If anyone sees an exit interview assigned to me, it’s a clerical miracle. I took it anyway. Two truths from the sur-

vey: 1) Don't confuse visibility with impact. 2) Default by date. My calendar is now mostly verbs."

Seven reacts. One **“:clap:,”** one **“:plant:,”** one **“:magic_wand:,”** and four humans I'd miss if I actually left.

I closed the window and looked at the plant. It looked at me. We understood each other beyond explanation.

Which is to say: $CC > 0$.

I opened a new doc with a title I wouldn't be embarrassed to reread later: "The Manual Goodbye." No bullets, no sections. Just five lines I'd agree with on a bad morning. I wrote:

- Close what's done.
- Ask for one number.
- Don't audition. Contribute.
- Default by date.
- Be kind when nobody sees it.

Then I wrote nothing else.

The HR system emailed a confirmation stamped at 4:03 PM: Thank you for completing your Exit Experience. Your insights help us build a better future of work.

I let the sentence sit there. Future of work. I imagined it with fewer confetti animations. More small, correct endings. More kindness that didn't need a meeting.

I watered the plant again, which is excessive and also accurate.

At 4:30 PM, the building lights brightened by 2% because of an energy-saving policy someone pitched as “Engage with Glow.” The floor looked briefly like a co-working space that had read an article about mornings.

I packed nothing. I carried nothing to the door. There was nowhere to go that required a box.

I locked my screen.

The reflection in black glass looked like someone I recognized: a worker who had learned, in time, that you can leave a hallway without slamming the door.

He waved. I waved back. Then we went home.

Before I left the floor, I stopped by the little shelf where we put things for strangers to adopt: orphaned chargers, an unopened journal, a small framed print that said “Hustle.” I turned the print around so the white backing showed. The shelf looked calmer.

I passed the security desk. Carlos raised his eyebrows in the customary question. “You out?”

“Logging out,” I said.

“Best kind,” he said, stamping a non-existent passport.

The elevator doors closed. For a moment, the mirrored interior looked like a split screen: me on the left holding all my old explanations, me on the right holding just a notebook. By the time we hit the lobby, both images were carrying nothing.

On the sidewalk, my phone buzzed again. @HRbot had posted a public message in #people-announcements.

“Grateful to Alex for sharing thoughtful feedback in the Exit Experience. We’re continuously learning.”

Three reactions: **:star:**, **:praying_hands:**, and the skeleton **:skull:** from someone with a sense of humor.

I added nothing. Learning didn’t require me to clap anymore.

The evening did its work. The sun locked and logged its own shift. I walked two extra blocks just to be late for nothing.

I didn’t need to resign. I just signed out.

* * *

Truth Check: Leaving doesn’t always mean exiting. Sometimes it’s stepping out of autopilot, deleting the slide deck, and deciding your worth doesn’t need a readout. It’s a design change, not a dramatic scene.

The system can log your answers but not your understanding; it will harvest your phrasing and miss your peace. That’s fine. You keep the peace. The practical version is quiet: fewer auditions, more receipts; fewer “look at me,” more “here’s the link.” When you stop seeking permission to feel done, you stop mistaking noise for care.

The goodbye isn’t to the people — it’s to the ritual that kept you explaining yourself after you understood. If the form needs closure, let it. You already have yours.

* * *

Field Notes from the Middle: The Manual Goodbye

Truth: Closure is a human process, not a digital form. When your understanding is larger than your need to explain, you're done.

Tool: End one ritual that no longer serves you. Write five lines you'll agree with on a bad morning. Post them where you plan your week.

Try This Monday: Cancel a recurring meeting that has outlived its purpose. Replace it with a one-pager that answers: (1) What we actually want by a date, (2) the single success metric, (3) the kill date if reality disagrees. Default by date. If no one decides, the calendar will.

Reminder: "If you need a system to say goodbye, you've already left."

* * *

I submitted the form. The system thanked me. For once, I believed it.

EPILOGUE:

The Art of Thriving in the Middle

Acceptance and Clarity

It didn't feel like an ending — more like another Monday where the calendar looked the same, but I didn't.

The plant was alive again, mostly out of pity. The HR bot had gone suspiciously quiet, which either meant peace or a silent data migration. My inbox looked like a ghost town where unread emails were the tumbleweed. I stared at the screen and did what every corporate survivor does when they sense the winds of change: I opened a new doc.

Title: **Next Quarter — Maybe.**

Inside it, I typed three OKRs that didn't need stakeholder review:

1. Stay kind.
2. Stay funny.
3. Stay employed (optional).

I stared at the third line, hit *backspace*, and replaced it with: **3. Ship something that doesn't require a meeting to explain.**

That felt honest.

The badge reader blinked green as I walked in, like a bored doorman who'd seen me come back too many times to care. The office smelled faintly of reheated ambition. On one desk, a stress ball had gone flat. On another, a team trophy read "Q2 Heroes" — the kind of award that gets handed out right before a reorg.

For once, Slack was quiet. No pings, no flame wars disguised as "clarifications." I posted a status update: "*Online, but selectively responsive.*" It felt like enlightenment.

I scrolled through the leftover tabs of my career: project trackers, performance review drafts, an ancient Google Sheet titled "Roadmap — Final — v27_FINAL." I added one more row at the bottom: "Stop pretending roadmaps are maps."

* * *

The Quiet Monday

There's something both tragic and comic about realizing your whole professional personality is built around handling slides faster than emotions.

That morning, I wasn't chasing inbox zero or executive approval. I was chasing the Wi-Fi. It disconnected during a meeting called "Connection."

I went for a walk around the office, a strange, post-apocalyptic place now that most humans had gone hybrid. The snack wall was a time capsule: stale popcorn, optimism, and one protein bar that expired during the last reorg.

I saw my reflection in the glass of a silent meeting room. For a second, I looked like a man deep in thought. In reality, I was deciding whether to refill my coffee.

Maybe this was peace.

What the Middle Teaches

They say you learn the most from failure. That's only true if HR calls it a "learning experience."

The middle teaches subtler lessons.

Like how leadership is 60% endurance, 30% documentation, and 10% pretending to understand a new framework you'll forget by next quarter.

It teaches empathy, but not the LinkedIn kind. The kind where you mute someone during a rant and still nod.

It teaches that strategy is just common sense with a nicer font.

That most progress happens when someone ignores the deck and just fixes the bug. That performance reviews are horoscopes with PowerPoint transitions.

Mostly, the middle teaches you the art of calibrated indifference. You don't stop caring, you just stop narrating your caring in bullet points.

At some point, I realized the loudest people were often rehearsing for a future documentary about themselves. The quiet ones were actually shipping things.

So I made a list titled: **Things the Middle Knows.**

- The loudest ideas need the quietest listeners.
- The “urgent” email was written on a Friday by someone who already left for the day.
- Impact doesn’t scale, but blame does.
- You can’t fix culture, but you can stop forwarding it.
- Mediocrity is excellence that stopped auditioning.

I pinned that list above my desk. Right next to a motivational quote that once said, “*Be the change you wish to see*” and now reads “*Just don’t make it worse.*”

The Loop, Revisited

One night, after a long day of “asynchronous alignment,” I reopened an old document: **Decision Log - Q1.**

Back then, I believed every decision needed proof of thought leadership. Now, it reads like a comedy script written by an over-caFFEinated intern pretending to be an adult.

Example entry:

Decision: Launch experiment without consensus.

Result: Immediate consensus to never do that again.
Another –

Decision: Simplify process by reducing stakeholders.

Result: Created stakeholder alignment committee.

Every loop — interview, review, promotion, reorg — I'd treated like an escape room. The trick wasn't escaping. It was realizing there's no prize for finishing faster.

Somewhere between the first interview loop and the fifteenth “alignment” meeting, I stopped looking for exit signs and started drawing maps for the next person stuck in line.

The loop, it turns out, isn't a trap. It's a treadmill — and you're allowed to walk.

My new process looked like this:

Observe → Laugh → Learn → Rest → Try again.

It works for work. It also works for life. The only people who object to it are the ones allergic to rest.

What the Years Actually Changed

The idealists moved on. The strategists moved up.

The rest of us stayed, and learned to find meaning in smaller, steadier things

- Closing your laptop before 7 p.m.
- Deleting one standing meeting.
- Finishing a slide deck that didn't end with “Next Steps TBD.”

The more I learned, the less I evangelized. You don't need to “influence without authority.” You just need **authority with receipts.**

When I was new, I wanted to “own” things. Now, I just want my name spelled correctly in the release notes.

I once told a mentor I feared being average.

She said, “**Average people keep the lights on. You’re welcome.**”

That’s when I realized: the middle isn’t where ambition dies, it’s where ego learns to take a lunch break.

* * *

Monday Again

By evening, I’d completed my most productive act of the week: I archived three Slack channels and nobody noticed.

I refilled the plant’s water (measured risk), cleaned my keyboard (high ROI), and updated my LinkedIn headline from “Driving Strategic Outcomes” to “Still Figuring It Out.”

Before shutting down, I sent Priya a DM that said:

“If I ever write a self-help book, it’ll be called *‘We Tried.’*”

She replied with a **:thumbs_up:** and a GIF of a raccoon washing grapes. Leadership, really.

I turned off my monitor, which I’ve learned is the closest thing to meditation most of us get. The plant’s leaf caught the last bit of sunset and looked suspiciously like applause.

And in that quiet, it hit me — the secret of the middle:

You don't escape it.

You just make it livable enough to stop fantasizing about escape.

Field Notes from the Middle — Final Edition

Truth: The middle isn't a downgrade; it's infrastructure and most of the times, most people land there.

Tool: Humor + documentation + empathy. Laugh at the theater, write down the decisions, remember the humans.

Try This Monday: Design clarity instead of chasing visibility.

Reminder: You're not behind. You're just between versions of yourself.

In a world where everyone's climbing ladders that loop, learn to walk — steady, curious, unhurried — and help others find footing too.

Alex paused, smiled at the blinking cursor, and added one last line before closing the doc:

Field Notes Log: Signed Off.

Status: Still employed, slightly wiser, plant thriving. **:plant:**

And with that, he logged off, not out.

Maybe mediocre was never the insult.

Maybe it was the map!

Thank You!!

If you've made it this far, thank you, sincerely.

This book began as a way to make sense of the small absurdities and quiet heroics of modern work. Along the way, it turned into something I didn't expect: a reminder that we are all carrying more than we let on, hoping for a little meaning between meetings.

If any chapter made you laugh, breathe, wince, or feel a little less alone in the chaos, I'm grateful.

If it reminded you that the middle isn't mediocrity, it's maintenance, then this book has already done what it needed to.

And if you have a moment, I would genuinely appreciate a quick rating or short review on Amazon. It helps the book find its way to others who might need the same reminder: you don't have to be extraordinary to matter. Showing up — with humor, patience, and a bit of humanity — is enough.

Thank you for spending your time here.

Thank you for keeping the world running, one quiet contribution at a time.

— Harsha K Cheruku