

# Mission Built

Lessons from the Barbell and  
the Boardroom



by Mike Nichols

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the Barbell and  
the Boardroom

# Mike Nichols

Author of *Mission Built*

Veteran. Builder. Coach. User-Obsessed.

Mike Nichols has spent his life at the intersection of discipline and service—from military intelligence to software leadership to strength coaching. Across every domain, one truth has held: real progress starts when you care deeply about the person you're building for. The user isn't a persona or a number—they're the mission.

*Mission Built* is an open-source philosophy forged through reps in the gym and lessons from the field. It's for anyone who believes progress isn't pretty, leadership is earned, and showing up with purpose changes everything.

Follow along at [missionbuilt.io](https://missionbuilt.io)

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# Prologue - Built for More

Before the titles. Before the roadmap, the metrics, or the barbell plates neatly stacked on a rack. There was the mission.

I've worn uniforms and hoodies, sat in war rooms and boardrooms. I've served with soldiers and shipped with engineers. And the one thing that always stood out — the one thing that always worked — was giving a damn. About the work. About the people. About the outcome.

This book isn't a memoir. It's not a manual. It's a field guide for anyone trying to build something that lasts — whether that's a body, a product, a company, or a life with integrity.

You won't find shortcuts here. Just reps. Principles. Stories from the weight room and the war room — forged in pressure, refined in reflection.

Because real strength doesn't come from just lifting the weight. It comes from knowing *why* you're lifting it. Now, let's get to work.

- Mike

# 1

## Mission Before Metrics

### The Mission Is the Magnet

**B**efore I ever built products, I served in the U.S. Army as an Airborne intelligence sergeant. That experience — of working in service of something larger than myself, of making decisions under pressure with lives on the line — shaped everything that came after. I learned early that **mission comes first**. Not ego. Not recognition. Mission.

That mindset followed me from the military to cybersecurity, and into leadership roles where the stakes changed but the values stayed the same. Whether it was securing critical systems, helping build Elastic Security, or coaching in the gym, the goal has always been the same: **real strength is lifting others**.

One of the proudest chapters of my product career was building Endgame. We entered a brutally competitive market — going head-to-head with massive players like missionbuilt.io

McAfee and CrowdStrike — and carved out real ground. Not because we had more money or brand recognition, but because we had something harder to copy: **a clear mission.** Protect high-value targets from nation-state level attacks. That focus, and the small, fierce team who rallied behind it, made all the difference.

At the heart of it was Nate Fick, a Marine officer turned tech CEO, and later the U.S. Ambassador for Cyberspace and Digital Policy. He led with conviction, clarity, and a deep respect for the mission. In all-hands meetings, Nate would remind us that we were an "elevator asset company" — that if the building burned down, the most important assets could still fit in the elevator. It wasn't the code or the tools. It was the people — the ones who understood the user's mission and had the passion to serve it.

That idea stuck with me. Nate's example reinforced what I learned in uniform: **The success is the user's success. Your mission is their mission.**

**Metrics are the outcome of making your user successful.** Yes, we need to measure them. But they are the *result* of serving the mission — not the *reason* for it.

There's a moment in every product meeting when the question slides in like it always does:

**"How will we measure success?"**

It's a good question — just not always a good *first* question.

In lifting, it's the same story. People chase PRs every week like the number on the barbell is the whole point. Add five pounds. Hit record. Post the clip. Repeat.

But metrics without mission? That's just noise. Pressure with no direction. Goals with no guts.

*"The weight on the bar isn't the goal — it's the evidence of progress, not the destination."*

We've all seen what happens when this mindset takes over. It's not a failure of talent — it's a failure of alignment. *Cyberpunk 2077* didn't initially flop because the devs didn't care — far from it. The development team poured years into building something ambitious. But the pressure to hit a holiday launch window — a decision made at the executive level — overrode the mission of delivering a complete, polished experience. The result was a rocky release, millions in refunds, a reputational hit, and a stock crash.

To their credit, the team stuck with it. Years later, after patches and a reimagined DLC, the game has earned back much of the trust it lost — a testament to what happens when talented people are finally given the space to do the work right.

And we've seen what it looks like to protect the mission — even when it means stepping back. Simone Biles did exactly that in front of the entire world at the 2021 Olympics. Under unimaginable pressure, she chose long-term purpose over short-term performance. She knew something was off, and she honored that instinct.

*"I have to focus on my mental health... if you don't, then you're not going to enjoy your score and you're not gonna succeed as much as you want to."*

*- Simone Biles*

Her move wasn't retreat — it was leadership. And in time, she returned to competition stronger, on her terms, and more respected than ever. A different kind of comeback — one powered by mission, not metrics.

Success isn't about hitting every metric. It's about refusing to lose yourself trying.

## **More Than Just Good Intentions**

Mission-driven isn't a poster in the break room or a bullet in a pitch deck. It's how you move — how you decide, how you show up when it's hard.

In a world that celebrates velocity, mission is quiet. But that doesn't make it weak. Mission gives you *clarity*

*when things get blurry and stamina when things get hard.*

Take Patagonia. They once ran a campaign telling customers *not* to buy their jacket unless they truly needed it. Why? Because their values mattered more than their quarterly revenue.

Or SpaceX — aiming at goals that span decades, not quarters. It's not about idolizing companies. It's about recognizing what real mission-alignment looks like when the stakes are high and the timelines are long.

And it pays off. Research shows that people who believe in the purpose behind their work stay longer, burn out less, and deliver more.

## **When Metrics Eclipse Meaning**

Let's be clear: metrics matter. But only when they serve the mission — not when they *become* it.

Here's where teams lose the plot:

- They ship fast instead of shipping right.
- They chase signups instead of learning why users leave.
- They brag about launches and ignore long-term usage.

When dates drive development, teams start cutting corners. Feedback loops close. Energy fades. You build momentum toward a number — not toward value.

In the gym, this is ego lifting. In product, it's just as risky. It looks like burned-out engineers, brittle systems, and growth that collapses the second you stop pushing it uphill.

## The Fulfillment Flywheel (Powered by Purpose)

There's a better model. One that's as relevant in combat as it is in code — or in the squat rack.

It's called the **OODA Loop**: Observe, Orient, Decide, Act. Developed for fighter pilots. Adopted by startups. Powered by clarity.

But here's the catch — without a clear mission, the whole loop spins out.

OODA Stage	With Mission-Driven Focus	Without It
Observe	You know what matters to watch	You collect everything, drowning in noise
Orient	Purpose helps filter & frame inputs	Metrics get over-prioritized, lose big picture

OODA Stage	With Mission-Driven Focus	Without It
Decide	Mission becomes a north star for action	Risk of chasing vanity wins or short-term gains
Act	Execution has energy and resolve	Actions may be misaligned or half-hearted

In lifting, it's trusting the plan instead of maxing out because you feel good that day. In product, it's waiting to ship because your users aren't ready — even if your OKRs are.

***Mission turns chaos into clarity. It makes every rep count. Every release matter. Every decision directional.***

### **This is the real flywheel of fulfillment:**

Mission fuels clarity.

Clarity powers resilience.

Resilience drives real progress.

And real progress reinforces the mission.

That's the through-line. That's what keeps us going.

### **Metrics follow. But the mission leads.**

# The Drift

At first, the metric is a mirror — it reflects the mission. Clean, focused, and true.

But over time, something shifts. Quietly. Gradually. The mirror warps. And without noticing, we begin steering toward the reflection instead of the road.

## This is the Drift.

It doesn't announce itself. It rarely arrives with bad intent. It begins with a goal:

- Launch the feature by Q4.
- Hit 405 on deadlift.
- Increase MAUs by 20%.

Reasonable. Measurable. Actionable. These are the numbers we hold up as evidence that we're making progress — and for a while, they are.

But then: the goal becomes the game.

In product, we've seen it time and time again. Shipping becomes more important than solving. Teams crunch to meet a date set quarters ago, long after the user problem has evolved. Metrics chase headlines. Investors

want news. Executives want motion. The dashboard glows green while user trust fades red.

Think of Boeing. In the race to beat Airbus, they needed the 737 Max on runways — fast. Shareholder pressure mounted. Deadlines became immovable. On paper, the metrics looked great: deliveries met, costs controlled. But beneath the numbers, safety systems were skipped, warnings dismissed.

Two crashes. Hundreds of lives lost. The drift wasn't just technical — it was cultural. Speed overtook scrutiny. The metric overtook the mission.

In strength, the signs are physical — and brutal. Hafthor Björnsson, one of the strongest men in history, returned to powerlifting after two years of boxing. He set his sights on breaking the raw total world record. Big lifts were stacking fast. But recovery lagged behind. He felt the warning signs — tightness, fatigue — but kept pushing.

*I wasn't recovering fully between sessions... not listening to my body, which is silly.*

Then came the snap. Attempting a 556-pound bench press, his pec tore clean off the bone.

The drift had found him too: progress misaligned with process, recovery sacrificed to reach a number that no

longer served the mission. The result was pain, delay, and a lesson carved in scar tissue.

The damage isn't just physical. It's psychological. Because when we treat metrics as the mission, missing them feels like failure. And so we hide the truth, inflate success, or worst of all — stop trying.

The Drift corrodes not through force, but through **inversion**. It flips process into performance. It turns care into compliance.

And it burns people out.

I've worked with brilliant people who could have built anything — but they left, not because they failed, but because the system stopped valuing *why* they showed up in the first place. When we reduce contribution to a dashboard, we forget the soul behind the keyboard.

This isn't just anecdotal. Research shows that mission-driven employees are significantly more loyal.

A LinkedIn survey found that employees motivated by mission were **54% more likely to stay** with their company for five or more years.

Another study revealed that companies engaging employees in purpose-driven programs saw a **52% lower turnover** among newer employees.

So what's the antidote?

It's not to ignore metrics. It's to anchor them. To use them as signal, not steering.

To build systems that reinforce *why* we do the work, not just how fast we do it.

Because the real goal is not a launch date or a deadlift.

The real goal is built through the reps, not measured by them.

## Repetition with Intention

You don't get strong by lifting heavy once.

You get strong by showing up again. And again. And again.

But if you do the same thing forever, you don't get stronger — you get stuck.

That's the tension of progress: it demands ritual, but it punishes repetition without variation.

Whether in the gym or in product, growth comes through iteration — small, deliberate cycles of effort. You log your training. You tweak your form. You try a new tempo. In software, you ship. You measure. You talk to the user.

You try again. The process isn't glamorous — but it's generative.

## Rituals compound. Rules confine.

A rule says "do this."

A ritual says "do this because it matters."

One is brittle. The other bends with you.

Agile, for example, isn't magic. It's just a set of rituals.

Daily standups, retros, demos, sprints — all meant to create rhythm and reflection. But rituals only work when they're **anchored in meaning and adapted to context**. If your team treats retros like checkbox theater, then you're not iterating — you're just looping. And if your standup sounds like "I did stuff, I'll do stuff, no blockers," you've got a ritual without reason.

The same failure shows up in the gym. People find a powerlifting program online and follow it to the letter, even when it doesn't fit their recovery, their age, their job, their life. They wonder why they plateau — or get hurt. It's because they forgot the principle beneath the plan.

That's where most systems fail: not because the framework is flawed, but because the **user is forgotten**. They're treated like an input to a method, instead of the reason for its existence.

Let's be honest: there's no shortage of books telling you how to do things.

And yes — here we are, writing another one.

But this isn't a blueprint. It's a **philosophy**.

The implementation is on you.

What works for one team, one lifter, one body, won't work for another. That's not failure — that's reality.

**Stefi Cohen** didn't become a record-breaking lifter by blindly following a single powerlifting template. Her training evolved through experimentation: strength phases, hypertrophy cycles, hybrid athletic blocks. She didn't just lift heavy — she studied her feedback, varied her stimuli, and rewrote her rituals to fit her mission.

*Progress didn't come from rigidity. It came from rhythm and reinvention.*

In product, that same spirit of experimentation lives in hack weeks — short, sacred breaks from routine where teams can stretch in new directions.

**Atlassian, Spotify, and Elastic** have all embraced this. At Elastic, hack weeks became a celebrated ritual — not just for innovation, but for joy. Engineers got to break free from roadmap gravity and chase ideas that didn't need to justify themselves in Jira. Some of Elastic Security's most creative features — including internal

workflow improvements, experimental visualizations, and early prototypes of user-requested tooling — were born not in sprint planning, but in that carved-out chaos.

*Sometimes, the best way to realign with the mission is to deliberately step outside it.*

Rituals work when they're shaped by the user, not imposed on them.

They're tools — not commandments.

And when they're working, you feel it: not just in output, but in outlook. A team that trusts its rituals doesn't need micromanagement. A lifter that trusts their program doesn't need motivation hacks. The rhythm carries you. The meaning sustains you.

But rituals aren't static.

They must flex to your fatigue. They must bend to your bandwidth. They must evolve — not just to avoid boredom, but to stay honest with the mission.

*Same input, same outcome. If the goal has changed, so must the reps.*

That's what separates the lifter who grows from the one who stalls.

That's what separates the product team that adapts from the one that burns out.

Because if the mission is the magnet —**rituals are the rails.**

They don't tell you where to go.

They keep you from sliding off the path while you find it.

Rituals give you direction.

But progress? That comes from the work itself — the grind, the reps, the effort no one applauds.

# 2

## Built Through Reps

### The Myth of Overnight Success

We've all heard the stories. The product that "took off overnight." The lifter who casually pulls four plates like they've always been able to. The founder in a garage who changes the world with a single keynote.

It's tempting to believe that mastery happens like that — in a flash.

But that's not really how it works.

Take the iPhone. The 2007 reveal made it feel like it dropped from the sky fully formed. But behind that moment were years of trial and error. Touchscreens that didn't quite work. Software that crashed mid-demo. A mountain of prototypes that never saw the light of day. The final product wasn't a stroke of brilliance — it was the result of relentless iteration.

Same with Instagram. What looked like an overnight success was actually the second version of a too-close-to-Foursquare check-in app called Burbn. The team just kept listening, trimming, trying again. One update at a time.

And that big deadlift on your feed? Probably not magic. More likely: a hundred quiet sessions, some of them rough. A lot of small choices to show up, tweak form, trust the program.

We love the idea of sparks — fast wins, big leaps, sudden breakthroughs. But progress usually doesn't feel like that.

Most of the time, it feels a lot more like repetition.

The engineer fixing the same piece of code — again. The founder rewriting their pitch for the fifth time. The lifter doing the same warm-up cues every session, no matter the weight.

It's not flashy. But it adds up.

That's part of what makes the first few months — or the first year — so exhilarating. In the gym, you make gains almost every week. In a startup, your product evolves daily. Everything feels fast, and the feedback is loud.

But then you hit the plateau.

The easy wins dry up. Strength doesn't come as quickly. Users get harder to surprise. Suddenly, it's not about chasing sparks anymore — it's about showing up and pushing through.

This is where the real work begins.

In lifting, that means grinding through the middle — not maxing out, but mastering the basics under load. In product, it's navigating the shift from scrappy innovation to enterprise-grade reliability. Less fanfare, more focus.

That's the part people don't always talk about — and the part that actually defines mastery.

It's not just about adding more weight or shipping more features.

It's about learning to *hone your form*.

In lifting, that might mean dialing in your brace, fixing a subtle shift in your squat, or finally feeling your lats engage in a deadlift.

In product, it's refining an initiative until it truly solves the right problem — not just adds to the roadmap.

You start to realize: Reps aren't just about volume. They're about attention.

That's what makes progress sustainable.

And that's what *Mission Built* is really about — **building better products, one rep at a time.**

# Repetition Is Not Redundancy

In Section 1, we looked at the myth of overnight success — how real strength, in the gym or in product, is built through showing up again and again. But not all reps are created equal. The real magic isn't just in the repetition — it's in how you use it.

Not all reps count the same.

Anyone who's coasted through a gym session, just moving weight, knows the difference. One set burns time. Another builds awareness, precision, and strength — even if the numbers don't change.

The same is true in product.

Repetition isn't redundant when it's intentional. When it's used to test assumptions, refine interfaces, tune performance, or build something just a little closer to what users actually need. That's the kind of rep that moves things forward.

But repetition alone isn't enough — **variation is what makes repetition transformative.**

As Dr. Mike Israetel, co-founder of Renaissance Periodization, teaches:

*"Training works best when structured into intentional blocks that emphasize different goals. In hypertrophy-focused blocks, lifters increase volume over time — guided by principles like Minimum Effective Volume (MEV), Maximum Adaptive Volume (MAV), and Maximum Recoverable Volume (MRV). This structured overload builds muscle while preserving recovery, setting the stage for later strength expression. The concept isn't just about working hard — it's about working smart, within clear, adaptive boundaries."*

Source: <https://drmikeisraetel.com/dr-mike-israetel-mv-mev-mav-mrv-explained/>

In training, we use blocks for different goals: hypertrophy to build muscle, strength to build expression, and deloads to recover and grow. We manipulate movement, load, and tempo to avoid stagnation. A paused bench press, a deficit deadlift, or chains added to a bar — each variation targets a different adaptation, even if the base movement stays the same.

Product is no different.

You might run a block of sprints to achieve a specific outcome — refining onboarding, improving performance, or tackling tech debt. Then shift into a new block with a new goal. Like training, it takes enough intentionality to complete a cycle, maybe one, two, or three sprints, before varying the focus. Progress comes not from flailing in every direction, but from **focused variation over time.**

And just like strength doesn't grow without tension, product insight doesn't grow without diverse input.

You can't just loop with your own team forever. Sometimes you have to stretch — to talk to sales, to customers, to analysts, to skeptics. Even when it's uncomfortable. Especially when it is.

This is where The Medici Group gets it right: innovation happens when diverse perspectives collide.

As Frans Johansson puts it in The Medici Effect:

*"When you step into an intersection of fields, disciplines, or cultures, you can combine existing concepts into a large number of extraordinary new ideas."*

In the gym, that might mean lifting with people stronger or different than you. In product, it means bringing in

voices from outside your echo chamber — support calls, sales objections, the person who almost churned.

Reps alone build endurance.

**Smart variation builds power.**

This is how you break through the plateau — not by abandoning the reps, but by evolving them.

## When the Spark Fades

The first reps are easy — not physically, but emotionally. You're fired up. Everything's new. Progress is loud and obvious.

But what happens after the rush?

In lifting, it's the long middle. The early PRs stop coming. Your form stalls. You show up, grind through the same sets, and wonder if you're actually moving forward. You're not always chasing your one-rep max. And you shouldn't be. Strength isn't built by living at your limit — it's built in the space between peaks, when you train with intention and recover with discipline.

In product, it's the same. You can't always be doing the flashy, innovative thing. Sometimes the most important work is foundational — fixing backend debt, improving

accessibility, tightening up performance. The kind of work that creates capacity for brilliance later.

And for many, this is where the wheels come off.

Because motivation — that spark — is unreliable. It's not designed for the long haul. And it doesn't care about your goals.

That's why systems matter more than sparks.

Systems are how you keep showing up when the dopamine dies down. Morning routines. Logbooks. Standups. Progress reviews. They don't need to be rigid. But they do need to be real. Reps don't get done by accident.

You don't need hype — you need structure.

In training, that structure might be a coach, a program, a calendar alert that says “get under the bar.” In product, it might be a rhythm of sprint planning, async demos, or check-ins with customers. Externalized accountability is often the only thing that keeps momentum moving.

James Clear — author of the bestselling book *Atomic Habits*, known for his work on behavior change and habit formation — wrote:

**"You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."**

The work still has to be done. But when your environment supports your actions, it gets done more often.

And here's the quiet truth:

The people who make the biggest progress aren't usually the most intense — they're the most consistent.

They build when no one's watching.

They train when it's not fun.

They keep caring — even when the spark is gone.

But what if you need to *find* the spark again?

One of the fastest ways to reignite your drive is to reconnect with the people you're building for. Talk to your users — especially the ones who aren't shouting. You might think the work you're doing isn't flashy, but somewhere out there, someone is craving exactly what you're building.

Stability. Accessibility. Visibility. These aren't buzzwords — they're lifelines for users with real problems. Find them. Listen to them. Let them lift you up.

Because nothing recharges momentum like hearing someone say: “*This made my day better.*”

And that brings us to the next section: the power of the quiet reps — the multiplier of boring work.

## The Multiplier of Boring Work

There’s a kind of work that doesn’t make headlines. No one posts their warm-up sets. No one celebrates shaving 100ms off load time.

But that’s the work that wins.

For every PR pulled in competition, there are hundreds of days of grinding behind it — submaximal sets, long pauses, light reps, mental resets. The same is true in product. Every effortless-looking release rests on a foundation of something much deeper: months of planning, iteration, bug-fixing, and late-night Slack threads.

In lifting, it’s the mobility work you do alone at 6 a.m. The back-off sets you don’t skip. The deload week you take seriously. It doesn’t look impressive — but it makes everything else possible.

In product, it's building out role-based access controls — not because it's exciting, but because your biggest customers expect it. It's mapping audit logs across services so your platform isn't a compliance risk anymore. It's the 10th conversation with a user about the same rough edge in the UX. These aren't "big bets," but they're the reason your big bets land.

That's what boring work does: it compounds.

Each rep you don't skip, each ticket you don't shortcut, each problem you refine instead of avoid — it stacks. Quietly. Relentlessly. And over time, it becomes your edge.

You don't need to go viral. You need to be trusted.

And trust is built in the boring work.

The warm-up that prevents injury.  
The small fix that prevents churn.  
The five-second improvement that gives a user five minutes back.

This is what separates the strong from the strong enough.

It's not what you do once.  
It's what you do without applause.

You do it for the growth. For the discipline. For the user whose day you quietly made better. Not for the accolades.

That's what separates long-term success from short-term effort — not glory, but the passion to do the work for its own sake. The features and the gains? They're just symptoms. What matters is the mission that fuels them.

That's why I'm so passionate about product management — and about lifting. Because the best PMs and the best lifters don't just show up for themselves. They show up for the team, for the user, for their own growth — not in a selfish way, but in a way that elevates everything and everyone around them.

And if you've made it this far — through the reps, the plateaus, the quiet work — you already know:

***This isn't just about shipping or lifting.***

It's about becoming the kind of person, or the kind of team, that keeps showing up.

That's the real win. And that's where we end this chapter — not at the peak, but at the foundation.

# The Work Becomes the Win

At some point, the reps stop being something you *have* to do. They just become something you *do*.

You stop chasing motivation and start trusting momentum.

You stop asking when it gets easy and start asking how to keep showing up.

And that's the shift — not just in the gym or in your sprint board, but in your mindset. You lift because you care.

You build because it matters. Because you love it.

It's not about PRs or product launches. It's about what they represent: The hours you logged. The patterns you learned. The people you helped.

That's what it means to be *mission built*.

You're not doing it for the spotlight.

You're doing it because you've seen the power of the process — and you're not walking away from it.

Progress doesn't shout — it stacks.

One quiet rep at a time.

# 3

## Rituals Over Rules

### The Ritual Is the Rail

Rituals keep us on track — not by forcing us forward, but by guiding our momentum. Like rails under a train, they don't power the engine, but they make sure we're headed in the right direction. They keep drift from becoming derailment.

In the gym, rituals aren't written on the whiteboard, but everyone knows them. The way you chalk your hands before a heavy lift. The nod from your training partner. The slap on the back before a max attempt. These moments don't make you stronger by themselves — but they signal that it's time to lock in. They tune your mind and body to the work ahead.

In product, rituals shape how we build — and why. A startup might begin with a single weekly sync, focused on shipping a differentiated capability that makes a mark on the market. That urgency, that clarity of purpose, fuels early momentum. But as the company grows, the

rituals evolve. Roadmap reviews become more structured. Standups get tighter. You start shipping the “boring” features — the ones that don’t win awards, but win hearts. Role-based access control. Data retention workflows. RBAC and audit logging won’t make the cover of TechCrunch, but they’re what your biggest customers need to trust you.

These shifts aren’t a loss of agility — they’re a deepening of commitment. The rituals grow because the mission does.

The difference between a rule and a ritual is intention. Rules are imposed. Rituals are earned. A rule says “follow this or else.” A ritual says “this is how we move with purpose.” When teams stop questioning *why* they follow a process, it calcifies into dogma. But when the process stays tied to the mission, it adapts. It grows. It stays human.

Elite lifters know this instinctively. Even as their programming changes — higher volume, lower intensity, or a shift from competition prep to recovery — their rituals stay intact. The warmup flow, the music choice, the way they approach the bar. These things evolve, but they never disappear. They guide the body into readiness. They keep the lifter connected to something deeper than the day’s numbers.

And that's the point.

You don't need more rules. You need rails that carry you toward the mission — and flex with the turns ahead.

Because if the mission is the magnet, the ritual is the rail — not to restrict your path, but to keep you from drifting when the pressure builds.

## Listen to Your Signals

Rituals only work if you're paying attention.

You can't run the same program forever. Not in the gym. Not in product. Not in life. Progress demands feedback. And feedback starts with listening.

Lifters learn this early. You might show up ready to deadlift heavy — but your grip feels off, your back's tight, your CNS just isn't firing.

(**CNS:** Central Nervous System — the part of your body responsible for strength output, coordination, and neural drive. If it's fatigued, you'll feel it, even if your muscles are technically rested.)

That's not failure. That's information. A smart lifter doesn't abandon the workout — they adjust. They keep the ritual, shift the intensity. Maybe you pause at 70%,

maybe you pivot to accessories. Listening doesn't make you weaker. It keeps you in the game longer.

In product teams, the same truth holds: rituals without awareness become liabilities.

You can run the ceremonies — sprint planning, retros, standups — but if you're ignoring signals from your team or your users, you're performing process theater.

Burnout doesn't show up in Jira. Disengagement doesn't flash red in a dashboard. You feel it in the delay before someone unmutes. In the tension after a roadmap shift. In the quiet attrition of both teammates and customers.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the game industry's long-standing reliance on **crunch time**. Late-stage death marches, where teams work 60-, 70-, 80-hour weeks to hit a ship date. Executives cite passion. Teams call it what it is: avoidable. The rituals of "just one more sprint," of all-hands war rooms, of praise for pulling all-nighters — they're treated as signs of commitment, when they're actually signals of failure.

Failure to listen. To plan. To build sustainable systems.

Failure to treat the team as human — not just headcount.

This is where product management has a second, often overlooked role.

Yes, product is the voice of the user inside the development team — but product is also the shield of the team *against* the wrong voices from above. A good PM doesn't just absorb pressure from the top and pass it down. A good PM pushes back. Uses data to say no to date-driven development. Advocates for pacing, not panic. Protects the team's ability to think, breathe, and build well — even when the deadline is loud.

***Because our goal isn't to meet an investor's timeline or an executive's forecast.  
It's to build the best product to solve our user's mission.***

And the only way to do that — sustainably, meaningfully, and well — is to listen.

To your body.

To your team.

To your users.

To the mission.

## **Change the Pattern, Not the Practice**

When things stop working, you don't abandon the ritual — you adapt it.

Progress isn't a straight line. It's a cycle of push, plateau, pivot. And when you hit that plateau — when the usual ritual no longer delivers results — it's not a sign to quit. It's a sign to evolve.

In the gym, this happens all the time. You run a successful squat cycle, adding five pounds a week like clockwork. But then you stall. Your knees cave, your speed slows, and the bar starts winning. The answer isn't to scrap the movement. It's to change the pattern. Maybe you shift to pause squats, change your stance, or drop the volume to focus on recovery. The ritual — showing up and squatting — stays. The shape of it changes.

The same holds true in product.

The standup that once helped your team sync becomes a box-checking chore. The planning meeting that used to set priorities now spirals into status updates. That doesn't mean you stop planning. It means you shift how you plan. You move from live check-ins to async threads. You replace calendar fatigue with focused, flexible rituals that match your team's needs — and their current phase of growth.

Rituals that don't evolve become rules. And rules, as we've seen, break people.

This is especially true in globally distributed teams. At Elastic, our workforce spans time zones and continents. We had to learn — early — that rituals built for co-located teams don't translate. Sync meetings at 10 a.m. in California are 7 p.m. in Berlin, and 2:30 a.m. in Sydney. So we changed the pattern.

We moved toward asynchronous rhythms:

- Key decisions live in documents, not meetings.
- Slack threads replace sidebars.
- Recorded meetings include transcripts and tagged callouts.
- Big calls are followed by quiet time — space for global teammates to reflect, respond, and contribute.

We didn't stop collaborating. We just restructured how and when collaboration happens. The ritual of cross-team communication stayed. Its shape changed. And it made space for more voices, not fewer.

What matters isn't how you do it.

What matters is that you keep showing up with purpose.

The gym teaches you this without words.  
You hit a wall. You adjust. You don't abandon the work —  
you change the pattern.

Because in the end, progress comes from consistent  
effort, not perfect conditions.

That's the lesson: rituals serve the mission. When they  
stop serving, reshape them.

Don't confuse rigidity for discipline.

Don't let the form matter more than the function.

(And please — don't treat your favorite product  
management book like doctrine. Those frameworks  
weren't written for your team. Your mission was.)

Rituals aren't constraints — they're commitments. But  
only if we let them evolve. The strongest systems, the  
longest-lasting teams, the most resilient lifters — all  
share this in common: they don't cling to routine for  
routine's sake. They adapt. With intention. With  
feedback. With mission in mind.

# 4

## Feedback Is A Superpower

### Cues, Not Critiques

My mentor Nate Fick used to talk about the power of **laser focus**. Not just attention — precision. That phrase gets thrown around a lot, but he meant it in the truest sense.

Laser focus isn't about doing one thing. It's about doing the **right** thing — the move that creates the most impact. The shift that makes everything else click into place.

I saw that principle in action during my early days at Endgame.

When I joined, we had four different products — all in different markets, serving different users. Built with a small team. Sold with an even smaller one. The problem wasn't that the ideas were bad. They weren't. In fact, each had real potential.

But potential doesn't scale without focus.

Nate made a tough call. He chose to end-of-life three of the products — even though they were generating short-term revenue — and put every ounce of our talent behind a single one.

It was a risk. But it paid off.

We built a best-in-class endpoint protection product in one of the most competitive markets in cybersecurity. Not because we chased everything. But because we aligned everything to a singular mission.

That's what laser focus looks like in the real world. And feedback should work the same way.

When you're under pressure — under the bar, under deadline — you don't need a list of everything that's off. You need one cue. One phrase that slices through the noise and sticks when it counts.

## **Point the Flashlight**

Like in baseball.

Coaches used to flood hitters with advice mid-swing. "Keep your hands back." "Level the bat." "Don't bail out." All technically true. None actually helpful in the moment.

Then came this:

Picture the knob of the bat as a flashlight. In the "flashlight position," you're aiming that light beam right at the catcher's face. This cue helps you set the correct bat angle — slightly upward, with the knob directed toward the target. It's called the flashlight position because you're holding and pointing the bat the same way you'd shine a flashlight in someone's eyes.

“*Flashlight!*”

It's weird. It's vivid. And it works.

The batter stops overthinking and starts moving with intention. The hips rotate. The swing tightens. Power follows.

That's the magic of laser-focused feedback — not more, just clearer.

## Two Words That Changed the Lift

The same thing happens under the bar.

Stefi Cohen is one of the most accomplished powerlifters on the planet. But even the best get stuck. During a heavy squat cycle, she was losing depth and collapsing forward — the kind of breakdown that could invite a checklist of mechanical critiques.

Her coach didn't do that. He gave her one cue:

**"Knees out."**

Two words.

Her glutes fired. Her hips opened. Her position locked in. No overcorrection. No overthinking. Just a precise adjustment that reconnected the movement.

That's what real feedback does. It doesn't flood you with everything that's wrong.

*It's a spotlight, not a floodlight — aimed at what matters most, right now.*

## From Backlog to Breakthrough

Similarly, in product development, we're inundated with feedback.

Users, developers, sales teams, executives — everyone has ideas, and most of them are shared with genuine excitement. Everyone wants the product to be better.

But without focus, we risk becoming a jack of all trades and a master of none. Chasing every suggestion means delivering none of them well.

The best product teams don't just collect feedback — they hone it. They find the thread, the theme, the one insight that can generate the most impact with the least investment.

Because here's the truth:

In software, we can build almost anything — given infinite time and budget.

But for some reason, executive teams rarely offer those.

So it takes real leadership to sift through the noise, spot what matters most, and act.

Take an example from Dropbox.

Dropbox had a problem most product teams would recognize. Users were signing up... but not sticking around. Specifically, they were dropping off before installing the desktop client — the core part of the experience that made Dropbox more than just another web app.

The team started spinning on solutions. Maybe the onboarding flow needed to be redesigned. Maybe they needed more education, more nudges, more screens. The backlog of ideas kept growing.

Then a PM said something simple:

**“You’re treating the CTA like a destination, not a trigger.”**

That one line cut through the noise.

They changed the button copy from “Next” to “Install Dropbox.”

They added a subtle animation to guide the user forward.

That was it.

And conversion went up.

No massive rebuild. No big campaign. Just a focused shift — one that made it crystal clear what the user needed to do next.

It wasn’t about the volume of feedback. It was about knowing which piece would actually move the needle.

***That’s product leadership: listening broadly, then acting precisely.***

## **The Flashlight, Not the Floodlight**

The same principle applies across every domain — lifting, sport, software.

You don't have infinite time to build a product.  
You don't have infinite weights to lift and sculpt the perfect physique.  
You can't act on every idea, every error, every impulse.

So you focus.

Whether you're adjusting your squat, refining your swing, or unblocking a user journey — the best feedback doesn't overwhelm. It illuminates.

Not a floodlight that blinds.

Not a laser that burns.

**Just a flashlight, steady and clear, aimed at what matters most right now.**

That's how progress happens. Not with noise — with precision.

**One cue, one rep at a time.**

## Make Feedback a Ritual

Feedback isn't something you give once a quarter. It's not a Slack comment or a surprise at review time. It's a rhythm. A rep.

If cues are the spark, rituals are the circuit — they keep the current flowing. The strongest teams and the strongest lifters don't just react to feedback when it shows up. They **build it in**. They expect it. They practice it. They normalize it.

In lifting, you log your sets. You reflect on what moved well, what felt off, what needs attention tomorrow. Feedback isn't an event — it's a ritual. Same goes for product.

And if you're a product manager, here's the simple truth:

 *If you're not talking to users, you are failing at your job.*

Not falling behind. Not missing a step.

**Failing.**

User feedback isn't a bonus. It's not a "nice to have." It's the core ritual of the role. If you're not making regular space to listen — directly, personally — then you're flying blind.

You're not a scrum master.

You're not a backlog babysitter.

You are the voice of the user.

And here's what that really means: the user is not a secondary part of your job. They're not a "requirement" that emerges after the product is scoped. They are not a symptom of your development process.

*The user — and their mission — is **why** you have a job.*

That's the point of all of this.

The research, the roadmaps, the revenue — all of it is an outcome of solving the user's problem. Not the other way around.

Too many teams fall into the trap of building for elegance, or scale, or conversion — and forget to ask the most important question: **Does this move the mission forward?**

That's your job as a PM.

To hold that line.

To make feedback a ritual — not just to improve the product, but to stay anchored to the reason it exists.

Because metrics can drift. Roadmaps can get noisy. But the mission stays clear — if you keep listening.

## Slack: Feedback as the Product

Slack didn't start out as a product idea. It started as an internal tool. The team at Tiny Speck built it for themselves while working on a multiplayer game called *Glitch*.

The game didn't succeed. But the internal chat tool did — because the team had built it by listening to their own pain.

They weren't running customer interviews or user panels. They were simply using the tool every day — and treating their own experience as data. The engineers, designers, writers, and founders were all giving and receiving feedback constantly. What was slow? What was confusing? What needed to work better?

The users were *them*. The feedback was *constant*. And the ritual was built into the way they worked.

They didn't treat those observations as complaints. They treated them as cues — small signals that, over time, shaped something far more useful than they had originally intended.

So when *Glitch* shut down, the pivot to Slack wasn't a Hail Mary. It was a progression. The team had already spent years listening to what they needed most — and building it.

*Ritualized feedback didn't just improve the product. It revealed the product they should have been building all along.*

Slack didn't become Slack by guessing what users wanted.

It became Slack by listening to internal signals — consistently, honestly, and early.

## **Elastic: Customer Zero and Design Partner Rituals**

We've seen the same thing at Elastic.

Our internal information security team — “customer zero” — is often the first to use upcoming Elastic Security features. They’re not a test group. They’re real users with real problems. When something’s unclear, slow, or missing, they tell us — early and often. And because they sit just a few channels away, we can respond quickly and refine before anything reaches broader release.

It’s not just internal, either. Some of our most pivotal feedback comes from design partners — external users who’ve volunteered to be on the front lines with us. They opt into early access, knowing the feature might be raw, knowing it might break — because they care about

shaping something real. Something that works not just in a demo, but in a live environment.

These aren't one-offs.

They're not spontaneous bursts of goodwill.

They're planned rituals — structured partnerships built into how we deliver great products.

Embedded loops that make the product stronger long before it ever reaches general availability.

Ritualized feedback isn't about checking a box.

It's about building alongside the people who **share the mission**.

## Relationship-Level Listening

Collecting feedback is the easy part.

Like in any relationship, getting someone to tell you what's on their mind is just the start.

What really matters is what you do next.

Do you listen? Do you actually hear them?  
Or do you nod, say "totally," and go back to your plan?

It's the same in product. And in training.

You can run all the standups, retros, interviews, and training logs you want — but if you’re not listening with intent, you’re just gathering noise. You’re not growing.

Feedback is only useful if it lands.

And that means learning how to listen — not just politely, but purposefully.

## Listening Is a Lift

You’ve built the ritual. You’re getting the feedback. Now comes the hard part: listening.

Not passively. Not performatively. But actually listening — in a way that helps you grow.

And here’s the first thing to understand:

*Being user-obsessed doesn’t mean the user is always right.*

Sometimes users give you feedback in the form of a solution.

*“Add a new button.”*

*“Change this flow.”*

*“Make it more like what Company X does.”*

If you chase those suggestions blindly, you're not listening — you're outsourcing product design.

The real job of a product manager is to listen deeper.  
To get past the request and find the root.  
Don't treat the feedback as the answer — treat it as a clue.

Your job is to uncover the real problem.

One thing I'm adamant about with my PMs:  
We don't hand our engineers a solution.  
We bring them a problem worth solving.

That means doing the work. Talking to users. Studying how others have handled it. Mapping the friction. Listening for what's unsaid.

We work with brilliant, creative engineers. Our job isn't to steal the "how."  
It's to own the "why."  
And collaborate on the "how" — together.

Because feedback isn't always clear. It's not always clean.

It can be noisy, misdirected, emotional, subtle, or even wrong.

And when you're under pressure — in the middle of a hard training cycle or a high-stakes product push — it's

easy to hear what you want to hear.  
Or to hear nothing at all.

Listening is a skill. One that separates people who just collect feedback from those who actually **use** it.

It's like lifting: you might record every set and log every number, but if you don't know what the soreness is telling you — if you don't know when to push and when to pause — you're not getting better. You're just getting tired.

Sometimes, the most accurate feedback in a training session isn't in the weight or the timer — it's in how the set **felt**.

*How many reps did you leave in the tank?*

*What was your rate of perceived exertion?*

RIR and RPE are qualitative cues — and they only work if the lifter is honest.

Just like product feedback only works if the team is actually listening.

## **When the Data Lies — or We Lie to Ourselves**

Take **Fitbit**.

When they rolled out sleep scores, users were thrilled. Finally, a single number to tell you how well you slept. But the feedback loop backfired. People started optimizing for the score — going to bed earlier, waking up later — and still feeling exhausted.

Why?

Because the metric didn't tell the whole story. It rewarded quantity, not quality. It missed the impact of stress, caffeine, or real rest. And instead of helping people understand their bodies, it created sleep anxiety — people chasing a number instead of listening to what their bodies were actually telling them.

*That's the risk with metrics-as-truth: you end up listening to the wrong signal, just because it's the one that's easy to measure.*

And the same thing happens at scale.

Take **Target Canada**.

When Target expanded into Canada, the surface signals looked great: strong brand awareness, excited customers, big opening-week foot traffic. But underneath, stores were suffering. Inventory systems were broken. Shelves were empty. Pricing was

inconsistent. And operational feedback from store teams was ignored or deprioritized.

Leadership focused on the shiny signals — the PR, the launch buzz, the optimism — and missed the messy truths on the ground. They listened to the brand metrics and headlines, not the store managers and logistics teams waving red flags.

Within two years, the entire operation collapsed — costing billions and ending in a full retreat.

*When you only listen to what makes you feel good, you stop seeing what's real.  
And in product — or business — that kind of selective hearing is deadly.*

## **Real Strength Isn't in the Signal — It's in the Interpretation**

Feedback isn't rare. It's everywhere.

What's rare is someone strong enough to hear it clearly — and humble enough to act on what it really means.

In lifting, that means paying attention to more than numbers.

In product, it means resisting the urge to react — and learning to respond.

You don't need more metrics.  
You need better listening.  
Listening that filters noise.  
That finds the root.  
That says: "*I hear you. Let's fix the real thing.*"

That's what strong teams do.

That's what strong lifters do.

And that's what we do when we care more about truth than comfort.

## Strong Feedback, Strong Foundations

We should strive for feedback that's constructive — not combative.

I've learned this over the course of my career.  
As a passionate product leader, I've had to walk a line:  
How do you bring intensity without intimidation?  
How do you make sure your excitement doesn't land as insult?

It's not always easy. Passion can blur the edges.  
And in fast-moving teams, feedback can come fast and hot — even when it's meant to help.

But here's what I've come to believe:

*When feedback is anchored in empathy and structured around the mission, it becomes a lift — not a weight.*  
*It pushes people forward instead of pinning them down.*

These lessons apply well beyond product, and well beyond management.

They show up in how we coach our teammates, how we parent, how we partner, how we grow.

If something matters enough to say out loud, then it matters enough to deliver with care.

Because what you say is only part of it.

How it lands — that's what makes it real.

## **Strong Feedback Is Often Micro**

We tend to think feedback has to be a big moment. A review. A reset. A speech.

But most of the feedback that actually changes people — and changes outcomes — is **micro**.

One cue, one adjustment, one rep at a time.

That's how coaching works on the platform.

That's how great PMs guide a team.

That's how trust is built — and how performance gets better.

In the gym, the best feedback is short and specific:

*"Brace before the pull."*

*"You're losing tension at the bottom."*

You don't wait until after the meet to say it — you say it in the warm-up room, in the moment, when it counts.

In product, it's the same.

*"This feature's drifting from the core user need — let's tighten it."*

*"That's a great insight — let's surface that earlier in the deck."*

Micro feedback avoids defensiveness. It's less likely to be taken personally.

It's just the next rep, done better.

## **Share Early, Improve Always**

Too many teams wait too long.

They polish. They perfect. They fear showing something unfinished.

But by the time the feedback comes, the team is too attached — or too far gone — to adapt.

The best teams share early.

*That's the Medici principle: seek feedback while ideas are still flexible — not fixed.*

*Let people shape the work before it's locked in.*

You can see this principle in action at **Figma**.

From the start, Figma built real-time collaboration into their product — not as a feature, but as a philosophy. Designers could share mockups midstream, collect comments in context, and adjust in the flow.

No long feedback loops. No over-polished reveals. Just open collaboration, one comment at a time.

At **Elastic**, we embraced that same mindset — first in design, then across product teams.

Figma became a shared space for early feedback: PMs sketch rough flows, designers wire up concepts, and teams review together *before* a line of code is written. Mock reviews aren't a gate. They're a ritual.

And like everything else, we've evolved it.

Now we're layering in AI tools like Lovable to explore more ideas faster — iterating on copy, visuals, and layouts in minutes, not weeks. It's not about replacing creative work.

It's about accelerating how quickly we *get to the good ideas* — and how early we can gather feedback that makes those ideas stronger.

And feedback doesn't always need to come through conversation.

Just look at **Duolingo**, one of the most successful learning platforms in the world — and proudly Pittsburgh-built.

They've designed *feedback* directly into the product experience.

From streak celebrations to in-app corrections, every interaction is a tiny nudge:

“*You’re close.*”

“*Try again.*”

“*You’re on track.*”

There's no giant review. No sit-down critique.

Just micro feedback, in real time, helping users improve without ever slowing them down.

*The earlier you share, the better the outcome.  
The smaller the feedback, the bigger the impact  
— if it comes at the right time.*

## **Strong Feedback Builds Strong People**

Strong feedback doesn't come from shouting.  
It comes from someone who's *done the work*.  
Someone who's built themselves up — not just to be heard, but to be helpful.

The best coaches don't bark orders.  
They observe, they care, and they offer what helps — when it helps.

In product, the same rule applies.

You don't build trust by waiting until things break.

You build it one cue at a time. One adjustment. One shared win.

*Feedback that fuels — not frustrates.  
That builds — not breaks.*

Even in our personal lives, the principle holds.  
A daily affirmation. A kind word. A check-in after a hard day.

These are all acts of feedback — they tell someone how they're doing, and that you're still with them.

That's how we get stronger. As partners. As teammates. As leaders.

Not through silence. Not through softness.

When it's anchored in empathy and aimed at the mission, feedback stops being friction — and becomes fuel.

# 5

## Progress Isn't Pretty

### Mastery Is Repetition with Feedback

Malcolm Gladwell's now-famous "10,000 Hour Rule," popularized in *Outliers*, offers a compelling headline: if you do something for 10,000 hours, you'll become world-class. But what's often forgotten — and what Gladwell himself has acknowledged — is that the number only matters *if those hours are deliberate, structured, and improving*. Not just any reps. The *right* reps.

You see it clearly in cybersecurity.

Penetration tests are our version of reps under pressure — simulated real-world attacks run across teams, infrastructure, and products. We don't go easy. We don't telegraph the punch. Sometimes, we don't even tell the blue team it's happening. Why? Because defenders don't get warning in the real world. If we want to build muscle memory, we need to simulate the actual weight.

That's what "perfect practice" really means — not pristine, flawless action, but high-quality, high-context repetition. As athletes say: *Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes improvements.*

It's a mindset that transcends domains. In lifting. In product. In leadership.

## The Lifting Lens: Periodization and Progression

Walk into any well-run gym and you won't just see random workouts scribbled on a whiteboard. You'll see *programs*. 5/3/1. Texas Method. Juggernaut. Conjugate. Each offers structure, progression, and intentional overload. They're built on periodization — the principle that you can't (and shouldn't) go hard in the same way every day. Instead, you cycle through intensities, movements, and recovery phases. It's not sexy. But it works.

Few have embodied this more successfully than Chad Wesley Smith, founder of Juggernaut Training Systems. A former world-class powerlifter and coach, Smith built JTS into a globally respected platform by emphasizing not just heavy lifting, but smart lifting — rooted in data, long-term programming, and adaptive feedback. As he puts it:

*“Motivation gets you started. Discipline keeps you going. Feedback tells you where to go next.”*

— Chad Wesley Smith, founder of Juggernaut Training Systems

I use the JuggernautAI app myself — not because it's flashy, but because it delivers structure. It takes in feedback on how I move, how I recover, how I progress — and adjusts the plan accordingly. Every session has a purpose. It's a coach in your pocket, and a powerful reminder that great outcomes come from smart, consistent reps.

And here's the truth lifters learn the hard way: showing up and doing *something* beats waiting for the perfect plan. A light session with focused movement and intention will outperform a skipped workout every time. Small improvements, made consistently, create compounding strength.

## **The Product Mirror: Disciplined Iteration at Elastic**

When Elastic Security shipped its initial security analytics and SIEM product in 2019, it wasn't a complete answer to the market. It was a start — informed by users, opinionated in structure, and designed to evolve. What made it successful wasn't just the launch. It was the loop: weekly user feedback, signal from real-world

deployments, and disciplined iteration sprints that followed a clear roadmap.

Each product cycle wasn't a shot in the dark. It was a planned lift — part of a broader program of growth. Features like detection rules, case management, and timeline didn't just "appear." They were reps, refined under load. We looked at how users engaged, what didn't click, what needed retraining. We built telemetry into the stack — not to track vanity, but to see where improvement was possible.

## **Reps With a Purpose**

Whether you're logging lifts or logging bugs, the idea is the same: feedback closes the loop. Reps without it just reinforce habits — good or bad. Reps with it? That's where you find progress.

Athletes track tempo, range, and fatigue. Product teams track usage, drop-off, and latency. Neither discipline rewards brute force for long. But both reward those who show up, take notes, and return better.

In the gym, a lifter might swap from high-bar squats to pause squats to address sticking points. In product, a team might switch to dogfooding an unfinished feature to catch friction early. In both, the rep is the mechanism. The lesson comes from how you interpret it.

# The Grind That Grows

The reps that change you aren't the glamorous ones.

They're not the PR attempts. Not the launch keynotes. Not the LinkedIn flexes. The reps that build real strength — in the gym and in the product — are the ones nobody sees. The early morning warmups. The late-night bug fixes. The process of showing up, adjusting, refining, repeating.

This is *the grind*. And it's where the gains are made.

## In the Gym: Warmups, Not Max Outs

You can spot the novices in any weight room: they go straight for the heaviest lift they can manage. They max out on deadlifts, post it on Instagram, then disappear for weeks.

The ones who stick? They warm up. They move methodically. They hit moderate numbers with perfect form. They log their progress. And they show up again tomorrow.

Warming up isn't a sign of weakness. It's the mark of a seasoned lifter. It's protection. Preparation. And part of

the process. As *Chad Wesley Smith* and countless coaches remind us — progress is built on consistency, not bravado.

## In Product: Quiet Wins That Matter

Product teams can fall into the same trap. We celebrate the big splashy features, but the real loyalty comes from the quiet wins — the “minor” UX updates that shave 10 clicks off a daily workflow. The improved loading time. The default that finally makes sense.

We saw this first-hand at Endgame. Yes, we differentiated on high-end protections like in-memory attack prevention. But the reason our champions stayed engaged wasn’t just the cool stuff — it was the continuous improvement in how they used the product. With each release, we delivered smoother experiences and more intuitive workflows. It added up.

The same holds true at Elastic Security. We spent over a year deeply focused on the alert triage experience. We met with analysts. We compiled hundreds of hours of feedback. We made sure everything they needed — context, actionability, next steps — was right at their fingertips. That wasn’t a flashy launch. It was *grinding*. And it paid off.

*Not every enhancement gets a press release. But the users notice — and often celebrate — the small, thoughtful changes more than the big ones.*

## What the Grind Teaches

The grind teaches humility. Discipline. Attention to detail. It teaches you to care about the user who files enhancement tickets, not just the buyer who signs the deal. It teaches you to find progress in the seemingly minor.

In product, it's tackling the long list of enhancement requests. In lifting, it's refining your bar path or ankle mobility. Both require you to step away from the spotlight — and into the discipline of reps.

## The Myth of Motivation

The myth is that motivation carries you. The truth? Motivation gets you started. But it won't carry you through the hard sets, the long roadmap, the friction.

What will? Mission. Ritual. Feedback. Community.

We said it in Chapter 1: *their success is your success.* Their mission is your mission. And everything that improves their ability to achieve it — no matter how small — is critical.

The best product managers and lifters don't chase the end state. They chase the process. They *fall in love* with it. And that's where mastery begins.

## Look Back to See the Gains

Progress is sneaky. When you're in it every day, it's hard to see.

In lifting, that's why we take progress pictures — not for vanity, but for truth. I've had times where I felt stuck, only to look at side-by-side photos and realize I was growing all along.

Same in product.

One of the best presentations I gave at Endgame was a demo showing the same workflow over multiple years. Each version looked small on its own. But side-by-side? It was night and day. Better design. Better defaults. Better detection. That's the power of consistent improvement.

# Change the Phase, Not the Process

Anyone who's followed a good lifting program knows the feeling: what used to work, stops working. You stall. Plateau. Feel stuck.

The worst response? Panic and start over.

The best? Adjust the phase. Keep the process.

In powerlifting, this is where *periodization* becomes personal. You might deload. Shift focus to speed or hypertrophy. Swap bars or change stance. But you don't throw away your structure — you modify it with purpose.

The same is true in product development. You don't abandon the mission when progress slows. You evolve your strategy. You change the shape of the work.

## Product Example: Scaling for What's Next

Early in Endgame's life, we took an almost nine-month pause on new features to rearchitect the platform for long-term scale and performance. It was a scary bet, and there were plenty of sleepless nights wondering if it was the right call.

But when we brought the new build to a major deployment — and saw the blue team “win” their live training exercise for the first time — we knew it had paid off. Their expertise made it happen. But our new platform and agent helped enable it.

Sometimes, changing the phase means sacrificing momentum now to build leverage for later. That takes guts. But it’s part of the process.

## **Lifters Adjust, Too**

Smart lifters know when to change gears. That might mean trying a new program — like shifting from 5/3/1 to Juggernaut. Or letting an AI-based plan like JuggernautAI retune based on fatigue and bar speed. Sometimes it means getting a personal coach, or joining a lifter forum to troubleshoot sticking points.

What matters is sticking to the discipline. You’re still logging reps. Still progressing with intention. The ritual stays — the phase shifts.

## **Set a Goal to Stay Moving**

During COVID, lifting alone in my garage, motivation came from an unexpected place: signing up for a powerlifting meet. I wasn’t planning to set records. But having a date on the calendar gave me focus.

That meet — and the ones that followed — taught me something else: competition isn't about beating others. It's about beating the weight. And the community is there to help you do just that. Even your “opponents” cheer you on.

The same lesson applies in product.

When you're feeling stuck, *talk to your users. Talk to your peers.* They'll remind you why you're doing it. And they'll help you find the next rep.

*Even when you change the phase — the load, the format, the plan — your mission stays. Your ritual stays. The growth continues.*

## Growth That Holds

There's a difference between strength that shows up... and strength that holds up.

That difference comes from experience. From failure. From learning the hard way.

We saw it earlier in the story of *Hafthor Björnsson* — the world's strongest man who tore his pec pushing beyond safe limits. He later called it his “biggest mistake” and rebuilt with a smarter plan. The same pattern shows up

again and again in high-level lifting. Even *Stefi Cohen*, one of the most decorated lifters of her generation, has shifted focus toward long-term health, adjusting how she trains, eats, and recovers — not out of fear, but out of wisdom.

These lessons apply everywhere high performance matters.

## **Product Example: Build Fast, Learn Faster**

At **Endgame**, we learned a critical lesson well before the world-shaking CrowdStrike outage of 2024. We had shipped a powerful capability: the ability to update our machine learning-based malware prevention engine out of cycle from the main product release. It meant our users got faster protection. They didn't have to wait for a full product upgrade.

It was the right feature — but it had an unintended consequence.

During Black Friday at one of our retail customers, an update disrupted point-of-sale systems. Nothing catastrophic. But enough to make an impact.

We fixed it fast. We added guardrails. We changed our rollout process. And we never made the same mistake again. More importantly, we kept the feature — and

improved how it worked *for the user*, at their scale, in their implementation.

We learned that the best product capabilities don't just "work." They hold up.

They account for real-world usage, edge cases, and the 80/20 rule — that 80% of issues will come from 20% of scenarios. And we built resilience into the system because of it.

## The Product Takeaway

Your best ideas may cause friction if they're not paired with empathy.

It's not enough to be right. You need to be reliable.

And the only way to get there is through **reps that test the system**, expose the edges, and give you time to learn and evolve. This is how mature products — and mature lifters — endure.

# You're Just Getting Warmed Up

The reps don't stop here.

New chapters are already in the works — deeper lessons from the gym, the product trenches, and the quiet moments in between.

More training logs are coming soon.

Check for updates:

[missionbuilt.io](https://missionbuilt.io)

Follow along for sneak peeks and reflections:

[bsky.app/profile/missionbuilt.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/missionbuilt.bsky.social)

# Further Reading

## Log 1 - Mission Before Metrics

Case Study: Metrics Over Mission

**One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer**

[One Bullet Away - Wikipedia](#)

Memoir by Nathaniel Fick chronicling his journey from Dartmouth student to Recon Marine officer, revealing the tension between military ideals and battlefield reality.

**Cyberpunk 2077 Launch & CD Projekt Red**

[Forbes – CD Projekt Red Stock Drops After Buggy, Messy ‘Cyberpunk 2077’ Launch](#)

A case study in date-driven shipping that sacrificed long-term trust for short-term metrics.

**What Really Brought Down the Boeing 737 Max?**

[New York Times – What Really Brought Down the Boeing 737 Max](#)

How engineering culture and metric pressures at Boeing overtook the company's safety-driven mission — with catastrophic results.

Individual Drift: Strength and Misalignment

**Hafthor Björnsson on Pec Injury**

[Essentially Sports – Hafthor Björnsson Pec Tear Confession](#)

A personal reflection on chasing numbers too hard — and paying the price with injury.

## **Hafthor Björnsson Injury Coverage**

AS.com – Game of Thrones Star Hafthor Björnsson

Suffers Nasty Injury

*News coverage reinforcing the story's cautionary angle.*

Mission-Aligned Decision-Making

## **Simone Biles & Mental Health**

People Magazine – Everything Simone Biles Has Said

About Mental Health

An athlete choosing alignment over achievement — and sparking a global conversation.

Purpose-Driven Brand Behavior

## **Don't Buy This Jacket – Patagonia**

Patagonia – Don't Buy This Jacket

Iconic ad campaign where brand values overrode short-term sales incentives.

Research: Purpose & Retention

## **The Business Case for Purpose**

Harvard Business Review – The Business Case for

Purpose

Purpose-driven companies see higher retention, satisfaction, and performance.

## **Purpose at Work – Imperative & NYU Study (2016)**

Imperative – Workforce Purpose Index

54% of purpose-driven employees are more likely to stay 5+ years.

## **Purpose: Shifting from Why to How**

McKinsey – Purpose: Shifting from Why to How

A roadmap for operationalizing purpose across the org.

## **Improving Employee Retention**

[Guidehouse – Improving Employee Retention](#)

Research-based strategies for retention, highlighting mission alignment and culture.

## **Benevity Talent Retention Study**

[Benevity – Talent Retention Study](#)

Mission-driven workers are significantly more likely to stay long-term.

Rituals, Adaptation & Innovation

## **Stefi Cohen's Hybrid Methodology**

[Hybrid Performance Method – Stefi Cohen Training](#)

An elite athlete's fusion of structure and adaptation in strength programming.

## **Agile Retrospectives**

[Agile Alliance – Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great](#)

A guide to turning recurring team reviews into meaningful improvement rituals.

## **Atlassian ShipIt (Hack Week)**

[Atlassian – ShipIt Days](#)

A structured ritual encouraging innovation through autonomy and creativity.

## **Spotify Hack Culture**

[Spotify Scaling Agile – Whitepaper](#)

How Spotify built agility and creativity into team rituals — not rigid processes.

Strategic Framing

## **John Boyd's OODA Loop**

[Wikipedia – OODA Loop](#)

Military strategy model focused on Observation,

Orientation, Decision, and Action. Useful for product and performance under uncertainty.

# Log 2 - Built Through Reps

The Hidden Grind Behind Success

## No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram

[Wikipedia – No Filter](#)

A detailed, behind-the-scenes look at Instagram's transformation from Burbn to a cultural phenomenon.

## How Steve Jobs Faked His Way Through Unveiling the iPhone

[NY Magazine – iPhone Launch Story](#)

The legendary 2007 keynote was held together with last-minute fixes — a reminder that polish often hides process.

## Instagram: Early History and Pivot from Burbn

[Wikipedia – Instagram History](#)

A short overview of Instagram's shift from a check-in app to a global visual platform.

Lifting Progress & Plateaus

## Overcoming Strength Training Plateaus

[Ironmaster – Plateau Guide](#)

Why strength stalls, how to adjust volume, intensity, and variation to keep progressing.

## MV, MEV, MAV, MRV Explained

[Dr. Mike Israetel – Renaissance Periodization](#)

A breakdown of effective training volume concepts,

including minimums, maximums, and overreaching thresholds.

Systems, Habits, and Iteration

### **Atomic Habits**

[James Clear – AtomicHabits.com](#)

A guide to building systems that support long-term growth: “You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.”

### **The Compound Effect**

[Darren Hardy – Official Site](#)

Details how small actions done consistently lead to exponential outcomes — a key insight for boring but high-leverage work.

### **Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance**

[Angela Duckworth – Grit Book](#)

Explores how consistency beats intensity, and why sticking with it matters more than raw talent.

### **The Medici Effect**

[Phos Creative – Overview](#)

On finding creative inspiration in unlikely intersections — a key idea for hybrid thinkers and builders.

Product Development and Iterative Progress

### **Failing Fast: Why It's Essential for Entrepreneurs**

[Harvard Business School Online](#)

A reminder that iteration is how we learn — not a sign of failure, but of refinement.

### **Basecamp's Shape Up Method**

[Basecamp – Shape Up](#)

An approach to product work that values thoughtful

iteration, foundational improvements, and meaningful user feedback.

## **Talking to Humans**

[Giff Constable – Free Book](#)

A practical guide to rediscovering momentum by connecting directly with your users — and learning what really matters.

## **Is High Quality Software Worth the Cost?**

[Martin Fowler – Quality Article](#)

Argues that invisible work like refactoring and testing pays off in speed and stability — a product parallel to mobility work and back-off sets in lifting.

# **Log 3 - Rituals Over Rules**

Powerlifting Rituals & Adaptive Training

## **Chalk Up: Rituals That Prepare the Mind and Body**

[EliteFTS – Pre-Workout Ritual Instructions](#)

Explores how pre-lift rituals like chalking hands and visualization prepare athletes mentally and physically.

## **Stefi Cohen's Hybrid Training Philosophy**

[Hybrid Performance Method – Isolation vs. Compound](#)

Discusses balancing compound and isolation movements, emphasizing adaptability in training.

## **Autoregulation in Strength Training**

[BarBend – Can Autoregulation Help Every Strength Athlete?](#)

Details how lifters adjust training intensity based on daily readiness, promoting flexibility within structured programs.

## **CNS Fatigue: Symptoms and Recovery Strategies**

### Stronger by Science – Q&A

Addresses central nervous system fatigue and strategies for recovery, highlighting the importance of listening to one's body.

## Product Rituals, Burnout & Team Evolution

### **What Is a Stand-Up Meeting?**

#### Atlassian – Guide to Stand-Ups

Provides guidance on conducting effective stand-up meetings to maintain team alignment.

### **Leadership @ Elastic: Distributed for the Better**

#### Elastic Blog – Kevin Kluge on Remote Culture

Discusses Elastic's approach to distributed work and maintaining engineering culture.

### **How to Collaborate Effectively If Your Team Is Remote**

#### Harvard Business Review – Remote Collaboration

Evidence-based strategies for improving communication and trust across distributed teams — reinforcing the importance of intentional, adaptive rituals in asynchronous environments.

### **Shape Up: Ship Work That Matters**

#### Basecamp – Shape Up

Introduces a methodology that emphasizes flexible work cycles over rigid sprints.

### **Understanding Developer Burnout**

#### DevSkiller – Developer Burnout Guide

Breaks down the causes, symptoms, and strategies for preventing developer burnout — with a focus on workload balance, autonomy, and the importance of adaptive team rituals.

## Organizational Culture & Ritual Evolution

### **The Hidden Power of Workplace Rituals**

[Harvard Business Review – Rituals in the Workplace](#)

Explores how intentional rituals in the workplace can strengthen psychological safety, enhance purpose, and boost performance.

## Crunch Time & Anti-Patterns in Product Culture

### **Crunch Culture: How Game Development Becomes Toxic**

[RIT Reporter – Crunch Culture](#)

Investigates the detrimental effects of excessive overtime in the gaming industry, highlighting how passion-driven projects can lead to burnout and decreased quality.

### **Red Dead Redemption 2 and Rockstar's Overtime Problem**

[WIRED – Crunch Culture at Rockstar](#)

WIRED explores how extended overtime, driven by passion and pressure, can lead to long-term burnout and erode product quality.

## Product Managers as Advocates & Shields

### **How Product Leaders Can Learn to Say No**

[Bringing the Donuts – The Discipline of No](#)

Ken Norton, former Google PM and GV partner, explains how strong product leaders protect focus by saying “no,” even when pressured by executives.

# Log 4 - Feedback Is A Superpower

## Coaching & Training Models

### **Stefi Cohen's Coaching Evolution**

<https://www.hybridperformancemethod.com/blog/are-isolation-movements-better-for-muscle-growth>

Explores Stefi Cohen's evolving approach to training, blending isolation and compound movements, and emphasizing adaptability—a model of feedback-driven progression.

### **Motor Learning and Coaching Cues**

<https://www.drivelinebaseball.com/2017/02/coaching-hitting-mechanics-part-2-application/>

Outlines effective coaching cues in baseball, including directional visual prompts like “turn the flashlight,” to support motor learning through immediate feedback.

### **RPE and RIR in Strength Training**

<https://www.strongerbyscience.com/reps-in-reserve/>

Explains how subjective measures like Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE) and Reps in Reserve (RIR) can support athlete self-assessment and adaptive programming.

## Product Feedback & Strategy

### **Slack's Origins and Internal Tool Pivot**

<https://www.wired.com/2014/08/the-most-fascinating-profile-youll-ever-read-about-a-guy-and-his-boring-startup>

Details how Slack emerged from an internal tool built during game development and refined through continuous team feedback.

### **Slack's Product Philosophy**

<https://review.firstround.com/from-0-to-1b-slacks-founder-shares-their-epic-launch-strategy>

Reveals how early internal use and tight feedback loops shaped Slack's design, long before public launch.

### **Product Managers Must Talk to Users**

<https://www.svpq.com/discovery-feedback>

Marty Cagan explains why user conversations are not optional for PMs, and how intentional feedback is essential to product leadership.

### **Elastic's Acquisition of Endgame**

<https://techcrunch.com/2019/10/15/elastic-adds-endpoint-security-to-its-expanding-toolset/>

Provides context on Elastic's acquisition of Endgame and its feedback-driven product refinement through internal usage and partner design cycles.

### **Duolingo's Onboarding and Retention Strategies**

<https://www.redfast.com/news/how-duolingo-modern-onboarding-drives-user-retention>

Highlights how Duolingo's personalized UX and micro-feedback systems helped increase user retention.

### **Duolingo's Feedback-Driven UX**

<https://blog.duolingo.com/duologues-design-conversations/>

Details how Duolingo designs micro-interactions to offer encouragement and real-time corrections.

### **Lovable AI and Creative Iteration**

<https://lovable.dev/blog/uotthohack-umar-app->

## development

Showcases how Lovable's AI tooling supports creative feedback loops in rapid prototyping and design refinement.

## **Figma's Culture of Real-Time Feedback**

<https://www.figma.com/blog/inside-figma-building-a-more-collaborative-design-process/>

Describes Figma's approach to low-friction, high-frequency design feedback through built-in tools.

## Misused Metrics & Feedback Failure

### **Fitbit Sleep Score Anxiety**

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/02/14/sleep-wellness-employer-oura/>

Explores how a well-intentioned feedback feature from Fitbit led to user anxiety and obsessive tracking.

### **Target Canada Collapse**

<https://canadianbusiness.com/ideas/the-last-days-of-target-canada/>

Examines how Target's failed expansion ignored key operational feedback and misread its own metrics.

### **The Problem with Listening to Metrics**

<https://hbr.org/2022/07/a-better-way-to-put-your-data-to-work>

Analyzes how over-reliance on flawed or misinterpreted data leads to poor decisions and distorted strategy.

## Innovation & Creative Feedback

## **The Medici Effect**

<https://www.fransjohansson.com/books>

Frans Johansson's framework for intersectional innovation, emphasizing the power of early, diverse feedback.

# **Log 5 - Progress Isn't Pretty**

Case Studies & Product Examples

## **Juggernaut Training Systems (JTS)**

<https://www.jtsstrength.com>

Founded by Chad Wesley Smith, JTS emphasizes structured training, periodization, and adaptive feedback.

## **JuggernautAI App**

<https://www.juggernautai.app>

An intelligent lifting coach that adapts programming based on lifter input, fatigue, and performance.

## **Endgame Security Platform**

<https://www.elastic.co/about/press/elastic-completes-the-acquisition-of-endgame-a-leader-in-endpoint-protection>

Elastic acquired Endgame in 2019; product evolution included scale-focused rearchitecture and user-centric iteration.

## **Elastic SIEM Launch Blog**

<https://www.elastic.co/blog/introducing-elastic-siem>

Elastic's 2019 announcement of their SIEM solution marks the beginning of iterative product improvement.

## Individual Stories

### **Hafthor Björnsson on Pec Injury**

[https://www.menshealth.com/fitness/a63973647/  
hafthor-bjornsson-elephant-bar-deadlift-record-  
attempt/](https://www.menshealth.com/fitness/a63973647/hafthor-bjornsson-elephant-bar-deadlift-record-attempt/)

*Björnsson reflects on his injury and emphasizes the importance of smarter, safer training.*

### **Stefi Cohen's Hybrid Method**

<https://www.hybridperformancemethod.com/about>

Dr. Stefi Cohen champions hybrid training for power, physique, and longevity.

## Philosophy & Models

### **Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-Hour Rule**

[https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/20/late-  
bloomers-malcolm-gladwell](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/20/late-bloomers-malcolm-gladwell)

Gladwell introduces the concept that achieving mastery in a field often requires approximately 10,000 hours of deliberate practice, emphasizing the role of sustained effort over innate talent.

### **Perfect Practice Concept**

[https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/kluge/  
201202/will-10000-hours-practice-make-you-expert-  
anything](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/kluge/201202/will-10000-hours-practice-make-you-expert-anything)

*Reinforces that “perfect practice” — not rote repetition — is essential for improvement.*

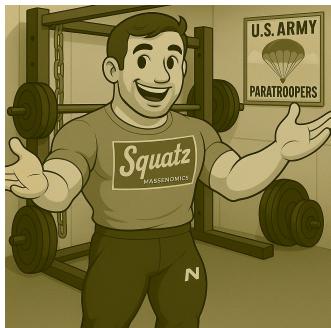
## Industry Events

### **CrowdStrike Global Outage (2024)**

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/sep/24/crowdstrike-outage-microsoft-apology>

Details the real-world impact of a flawed update, validating the importance of safeguards in product delivery pipelines.

# About the Author



Mike Nichols builds products and lifts heavy things — both in service of something bigger than himself.

He began his journey as an Airborne intelligence sergeant in the U.S. Army, where he learned the value of discipline, clarity under pressure, and showing up for the team. Those lessons carried into civilian life, where he spent over two decades in cybersecurity — from analyst to product leader — helping teams ship tools that protect people and infrastructure around the world.

But this book isn't about titles or timelines. It's about the patterns that repeat across every meaningful pursuit: showing up when it's hard, lifting others when you can, and staying true to the mission even when no one's watching.

Mike trains in a garage gym, leads a product team, raises incredible kids, and does his best to live what he writes — imperfectly, but with intention.

You can find him at [missionbuilt.io](https://missionbuilt.io), where this work continues, one rep at a time.

# Acknowledgments

This book — like any mission worth building — wasn't accomplished alone.

To the *Mission Built* community: your reps, your rituals, and your resilience inspired every chapter. Whether you're building strength under the bar or building trust in a product, your dedication is proof that craft still matters.

To the teams at Endgame, Elastic, and every engineer, designer, PM, user, and customer who ever cared enough to raise a hand, file a bug, or challenge the roadmap — thank you. You made me better.

To my fellow veterans: your service and sacrifice are the blueprint for what it means to show up with integrity. This book is a tribute to the discipline we carry forward.

To my kids: you remind me that strength isn't just power — it's presence, patience, and persistence. I hope you see yourselves in these pages one day and know that everything I build, I build with you in mind.

To my beyond: thank you for seeing me — not just in the spotlight, but in the shadows. For standing beside me in the chaos and the quiet. You are the home I never have to return from, because you are with me in every rep, every word, every breath of this mission.

And to those quietly doing the hard work every day — refining their process, lifting others, staying true to the mission — you're already part of this story.

Stay strong. Stay focused. Stay built for more.

— Mike

# Embracing the Tools That Accelerate the Work

This book was written by a human — with the help of machines, mentors, and mission-driven design.

Many of the ideas and reflections in *Mission Built* were forged through years of reps in the gym, in product rooms, and in life. But bringing those lessons to the page — and into your hands — was made possible with support from a few remarkable tools:

- **OpenAI's ChatGPT** helped organize thoughts, iterate on structure, and edit raw field notes into something more readable, while preserving voice and intent.
- **Sora** was used to generate visual representations of the book's themes — from garage gyms to home offices — bringing energy and imagination to the creative process.
- **Lovable** inspired much of the visual language and layout structure, especially in how early decks and storyboards translated the mission into motion.

Every word, story, and metaphor came from real reps and real reflection. But just like good gear and strong teammates, these tools helped bring it all together with more clarity and care.

The ideas are mine. The execution was supported.

— Mike