

**WELCOME
TO
WORK**

WELCOME TO WORK

58 Unwritten Rules for Winning at Work

KEVIN GOSA & BRYAN HORVATH

OCTANT⁸
PRESS

Welcome To Work

Copyright © 2026 by Kevin Gosa and Bryan Horvath.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

OCTANT8 Press

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

Design by Vika Scripps

Edited by LA Chandlar | Chandlar Creative

(All em dashes used on purpose by humans.)

ISBN: 978-1-972183-03-8

FOR
LAURA, LINUS, AND KASPER
&
LAURIE, JACK, AND LOGAN

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
SECTION I: THE GREAT TRANSITION	7
<u>Chapter 1 – School Didn’t Really Prep You For Work</u>	<u>8</u>
Rule 1: You’re not the customer anymore.	10
Rule 2: Knowledge isn’t enough.	11
Rule 3: School habits won’t cut it.	13
Rule 4: Clarity is the exception, not the rule.	16
Rule 5: Adaptation is required.	19
<u>Chapter 2 – Working Without a Net, a Syllabus, or a Nap</u>	<u>22</u>
Rule 6: There are no more semesters, just year-round work.	23
Rule 7: You don’t own your “work” time anymore.	26
Rule 8: Build your own breaks, or you won’t get one.	29
Rule 9: Success at work isn’t graded, it’s interpreted.	30
Rule 10: There will be no syllabus. Ever again.	33
SECTION II: UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF	41
<u>Chapter 3 – Putting Your Best Foot Forward</u>	<u>42</u>
Rule 11: Courtesy isn’t optional.	44
Rule 12: Be a thermostat, not a thermometer.	47
Rule 13: Competence is your baseline.	49
Rule 14: Execution on small things matters.	54
<u>Chapter 4 – Mirrors Are Great Tools</u>	<u>60</u>
Rule 15: Know your strengths, own your blind spots.	62
Rule 16: Admitting mistakes quickly builds trust over time.	64
Rule 17: Reflection is a skill.	68
Rule 18: Those who grow fastest admit they need to.	71
<u>Chapter 5 – The Perpetual Learner</u>	<u>76</u>
Rule 19: Learn to learn on your own.	78
Rule 20: Curiosity is a competitive advantage.	80
Rule 21: You know a lot. But not everything.	83
Rule 22: Learning how to work is its own full curriculum.	84

SECTION III: WORKING WITH OTHERS	95
<u>Chapter 6 – Work Is One Big Group Project (SORRY)</u>	<u>96</u>
Rule 23: Nobody succeeds alone.	98
Rule 24: Cross-functional fluency is a career superpower.	101
Rule 25: Office politics aren't totally pure evil.	103
Rule 26: Being connected is as important as being competent.	105
<u>Chapter 7 – Managing Up Without Selling Out</u>	<u>110</u>
Rule 27: A boss isn't a teacher.	112
Rule 28: Being right isn't enough.	115
Rule 29: Managing up is a skill worth mastering.	118
Rule 30: Your relationship with your manager matters, a lot.	122
Rule 31: A new boss means a new playbook.	125
<u>Chapter 8 – Is It Tough Love or Just Toxic?</u>	<u>130</u>
Rule 32: Tough feedback helps you grow but abuse just breaks you.	132
Rule 33: High standards are healthy. Double standards are toxic.	136
Rule 34: Sometimes the strongest move is knowing when to leave.	139
Rule 35: Resilience is essential.	143
SECTION IV: PROFESSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS	149
<u>Chapter 9 – Sustainable Excellence</u>	<u>150</u>
Rule 36: Work is a marathon.	152
Rule 37: Find your pace.	154
Rule 38: Burnout doesn't make you a hero.	156
<u>Chapter 10 – The Resilience Requirement</u>	<u>162</u>
Rule 39: Every career has storms.	164
Rule 40: Feedback isn't failure.	167
Rule 41: Emotional regulation isn't soft.	170
Rule 42: You'll bounce back faster when you don't try to alone.	173
<u>Chapter 11 – Beyond Busy Work</u>	<u>178</u>
Rule 43: Be an owner, not a renter.	180
Rule 44: Effort matters, but value gets rewarded.	181
Rule 45: Do the work, and know why it matters.	184
Rule 46: If no one knows the value you created, it doesn't count.	187

Chapter 12 – The Power of Purpose	194
Rule 47: The pros always start with why.	196
Rule 48: Even the boring stuff matters.	199
SECTION V: Work-Life Integration	207
Chapter 13 – Be Your Own Best Advocate	208
Rule 49: Everyone is struggling.	210
Rule 50: Advocate for yourself and advocate for others too.	214
Rule 51: Taking time off is a professional strategy.	215
Chapter 14 – Be More Than What You Do	220
Rule 52: Work can be meaningful, but it can't be everything.	221
Rule 53: Holistic life goals aren't a luxury.	224
Rule 54: Relationships need as much care as resumes.	225
Rule 55: Have a hobby.	226
Rule 56: Don't forget to actually live your life.	229
Chapter 15 – Mentorship Matters	234
Rule 57: You can't figure out everything alone.	236
Rule 58: No growth pains, no professional gains.	240
EPILOGUE – The Reality of Working in the World That Is	247
A SPECIAL INVITATION	253
APPENDIX – Workplace Readiness Self-Assessment	255
FOR FURTHER READING	265
BIBLIOGRAPHY	271
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	276

INTRODUCTION

Whether it's this year, next year, five years ago, or five years from now, you'll hear those words that you've been working so hard to hear for so long...

"You're HIRED!" (Well, no one really says that anymore. But that's what you'll hear in your mind.)

And it feels so good to finally get that news. To know that you have a job, a paycheck, and promising career ahead. But, now what?

Well, what awaits is the vast, seemingly unending, and often bewildering landscape of professional life. It's an adventure with few straight lines, plenty of highs, for sure some lows, and lots of WTF. And it hasn't gotten any easier in recent years. It seems to be even more replete with volatility, confusion, hidden rules, and real consequences for your life.

The structured world of academia, with its syllabi, regular feedback, and defined endpoints, is behind you. But how can you know if you're ready for what's next?

It's daunting. And the truth is you may be largely unprepared for it. Not because you're not intelligent and gifted. But because it's hard to be ready

to experience something you've never experienced. The process is not too dissimilar from learning to swim. Study techniques and watch all the videos you want, but until you're actually in the water trying your best to not drown by flailing your arms and legs about, you don't really know what it takes. Readiness, in this case, isn't learned. Readiness can only be achieved by doing. So in some sense, no one leaves college truly ready to work.

That's why we wrote this book. For 15 years we have been working with individuals and teams across every sector and generation in the workforce and have witnessed innumerable newer professionals (and to be fair many seasoned ones as well) stumbling over the same challenges. We found ourselves helping people figure out how to deal with the same roadblocks and blind spots over and over again, and we realized this near universal experience suggests there's something missing in our preparatory journey toward work life. There are lessons that need to be learned, but perhaps they don't have to be learned the hard way.

The transition from education to employment is not merely about trading classrooms for cubicles or replacing professors with managers. It's a fundamental reorientation in how you're evaluated, how you relate to others, how you manage your time, and even how you understand your own worth and identity.

We're not saying this book is a miracle cure for work trouble. But with a long career ahead, the more prepared you are to address the new world you're in and learn the new rules of the road, the smoother your shift from student to professional can be.

The rules for succeeding have changed, and you never got a memo (or DM).

- In school, focused assignments lead to predictable deadlines and result in objective grades.
- At work, broad expectations are combined with shifting priorities and topped with subjective success.

- In school, the syllabus tells you exactly what to do.
- At work, you're supposed to "take initiative" (whatever that means).
- In school, individual achievement wins.
- At work, you've got to make the company successful while still achieving on your own and looking good for your boss... but not too good.

Until now that is.

Universities excel at knowledge transfer. But they're remarkably silent about:

- Why the office superstar isn't always the smartest person in the room
- How to advocate for yourself without becoming "that person"
- When being helpful actually hurts your career
- Why perfect work can be worse than good-enough work
- How to survive toxic environments without becoming toxic yourself
- The art of being seen (it's not bragging if you do it right)
- How to take criticism without either crying or punching a wall
- How to figure out the unwritten rules of your workplace culture
- How to manage your boss (yes, that's a thing)
- How to prioritize when everything is "urgent"
- How to work with people from different departments who seem to speak entirely different languages
- How to build relationships with people who can help your career
- How to know when to ask questions vs. when to figure it out yourself

We wrote this book to be your secret weapon—the insider's guide that transforms confused graduates into confident professionals who just might actually enjoy Monday mornings.

WHY THIS BOOK IS DIFFERENT (IN OUR OPINION, CAUSE IT IS OUR BOOK AFTER ALL)

Most career advice is either painfully obvious ("Network more!") or hilariously out of touch ("Just walk into the CEO's office and introduce yourself!").

But this book is different because we've been there, screwed up, learned lessons the hard way, and lived to tell the tale. Everything we put in it we've used or seen used in actual workplaces. It's not a theoretical paper based on double-blind studies, or a tome padded with stories to make the book bigger. It's not detached from the daily reality of office life. We tell you what really works and what's true, even when it's uncomfortable. And we've worked hard not to jam it full of corporate buzzwords or empty motivation, just real stuff. (Though learning to use corporate speak the right way can be a tool to... how should we put it... "ROCKETSHIP your career by aligning personal and corporate synergies.")

Consider this your cheat codes for the game everyone else is playing blindfolded. Read it straight through for the full transformation, or use it as an emergency guidebook.

In the next few chapters, you're probably going to:

- Have several "OMG, that's exactly it!" moments
- Figure out why certain colleagues get ahead (hint: it's not always nepotism)
- Learn the actual rules of the game you've been playing with one hand tied behind your back
- Discover your professional superpower might be something school never graded
- Get mad that nobody told you this stuff sooner

By the end, you'll be that person everyone asks, "How do you always know what to do?"

Fair Warning

This book will challenge some cherished beliefs about meritocracy, hard work, and what "professionalism" really means. You'll find that some of your "weaknesses" might be strengths in disguise, and some "strengths" are holding you back.

Ready to get started?

Ok. Enough chatter. It's time to unveil the unwritten rules that crack the code on winning at work. We're going to start with why everything that made you a superb student might be making you surprisingly average on the job.

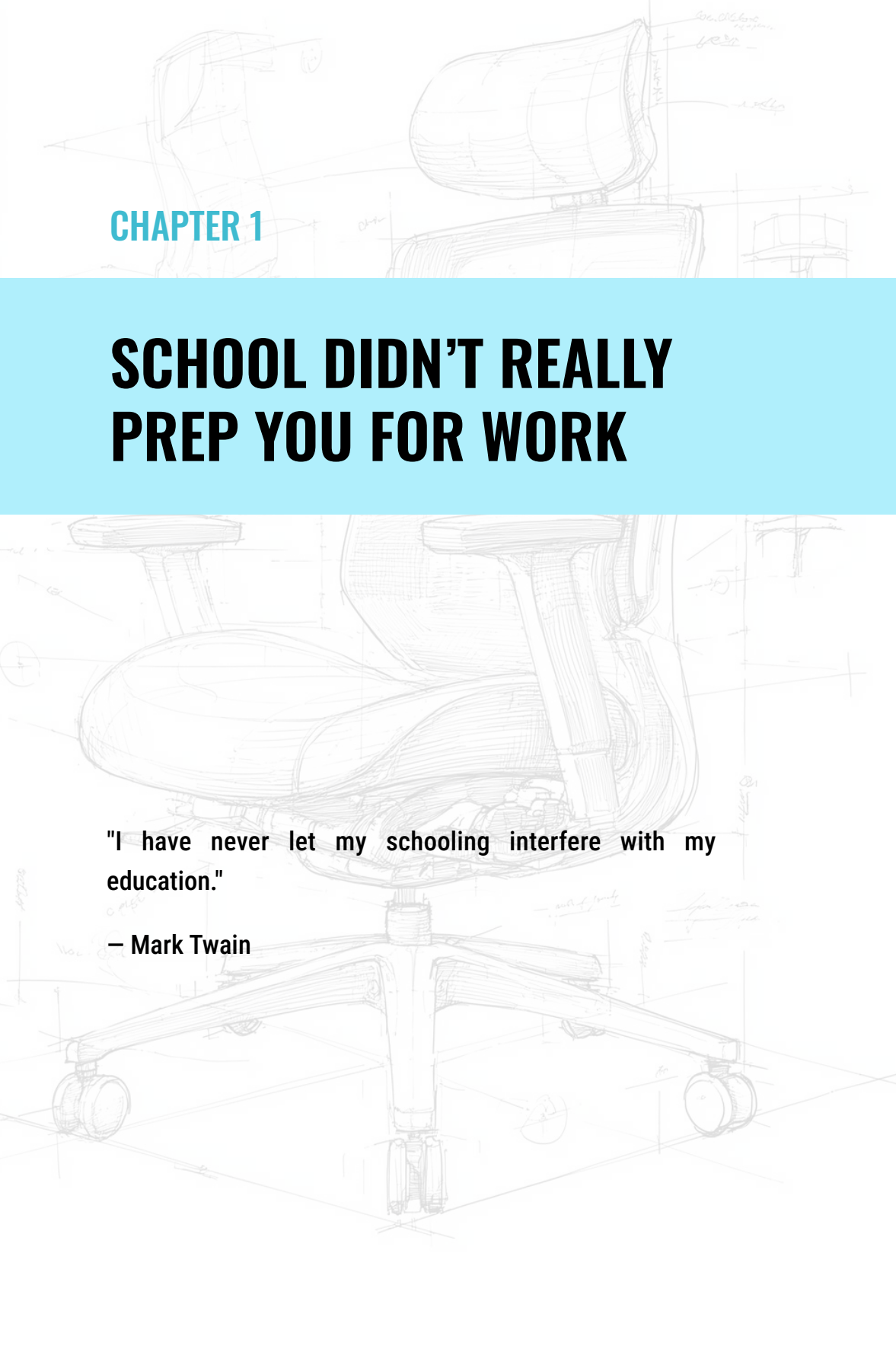
Welcome to work.

Kevin Gosa & Bryan Horvath

Two professionals who learned the hard way

SECTION I: THE GREAT TRANSITION

**WHY THE WIRING YOU
DEVELOPED IN SCHOOL IS NOW
WORKING AGAINST YOU**

A detailed pencil sketch of an office chair, showing the seat, backrest, armrests, and five-star base with casters. The drawing is done in a loose, artistic style with many construction lines and hatching for shading. The chair is viewed from a slightly elevated side angle.

CHAPTER 1

SCHOOL DIDN'T REALLY PREP YOU FOR WORK

"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."

— Mark Twain



We've heard sentiments like this lots of times at many different workplaces from archetypes like "J": valedictorian, student body president, the professor's favorite example of "how it's done." Essentially Hermione Granger. Three months into their dream consulting job, they were drowning in cryptic feedback about "executive presence" and "strategic thinking" while M, who said they barely

graduated, was getting praised in all-hands meetings for "moving the needle."

If this doesn't yet sound painfully familiar it will soon. You just spent two decades becoming a world-class student. Now you're turning your attention to becoming a world-class professional. On the surface the worlds look the same, but in reality they are far from it.

RULE 1

You're not the customer anymore.

Think about your entire educational experience from kindergarten through college. What was the main focus? YOU. Your growth. Your knowledge. Your grades. Your achievements. Every paper you wrote, every test you took, every project you completed—it was all designed to develop and assess YOU as an individual. Even group projects (which everybody hates) ultimately resulted in YOUR grade.

The educational system is brilliantly designed as a personal development machine. Schools market themselves on their ability to help YOU succeed. Their brochures show happy students achieving their dreams. Because they do indeed help you do that in part. Their websites rightfully highlight graduate outcomes and career placement rates, because if the degree is to have real world value to you, it must help you. You are, in essence, a customer purchasing a service.

To be clear, we're big fans of college (we have multiple degrees ourselves) and believe academic rigor and scholastic purity are wonderful, core essentials in the higher education landscape and an unparalleled pathway for people to build an incredible life and legacy. Yet, it's still true that it must be overtly worth it so people keep applying, and so they attract next year's enrollees, and so on. The school has important incentive to keep its students satisfied with it. To make sure you feel fulfilled and rewarded.

(Because if you didn't feel that way, how could the Alumni Association hit you up for donations for the rest of your life. LOL. No offense intended to all the alum association pros out there.)

But then you graduate and suddenly nobody cares about your personal journey. Your first day on the job, nobody's thinking, "How can we help this fresh new graduate develop into their best self?" They're thinking, "We're paying this person money, so what are they going to do for us?"

This reversal happens because the fundamental relationship has changed. YOU have become the service provider now. That paycheck comes with invisible fine print: "In exchange for this money, we expect you to contribute to corporate goals, not to your own fulfillment." Your employer isn't paying you to find yourself, they're paying you to help them accomplish THEIR mission. Because if they fail to achieve it, then no one there has a job and the marketplace goes without whatever the company was offering to society.

Every company exists for some purpose, whether it's selling shoes, developing software, or providing healthcare. That purpose—that mission—is the sun around which everything else orbits. You are not the sun anymore. You're more like Mercury. Still very important to the solar system! But not the center of it.

RULE 2

Knowledge isn't enough.

The gap between what school teaches and what work requires isn't some accidental oversight that will soon be corrected. Universities weren't created to get people jobs. When Harvard was founded in 1636, it wasn't to help colonial Americans climb the corporate ladder. It was mainly to train ministers and provide the wealthy a classical education. Meanwhile,

if you wanted to learn an actual job skill, you became an apprentice—no philosophy classes required.

Fast forward to late last century. Manufacturing jobs were fewer, tech took over routine tasks, companies stopped training employees from zero and started demanding they come more pre-trained. Suddenly, everyone needs a college degree just to get their foot in the door. In 1950, less than 8% of Americans had a bachelor's degree. Today it's closer to 38% for all adults and for the age group 25–34, it's approximately 41%. The college degree went from "elite status symbol" to "basic job requirement" faster than you can say "Sallie Mae."

FROM THE DESK OF KEVIN

When I started my first job out of graduate school, it was clear on day one that what I wanted to do within my role as assistant to the CEO—or even the way I wanted to do things assigned to me—weren't the chief concerns of the CEO. Where she needed results were her priority areas. And she wanted the work produced in a manner that meshed with her mindset. She had all kinds of demands and pressures on her that I knew nothing about. Her priorities and preferences had to become my priorities and preferences because, despite what the job description said, my real job was to be as valuable to the CEO as possible. Working for her was a crash course in having a boss and learning that I didn't know nearly as much as I thought I did. (TL;DR: We're still friends to this day despite the rough start I had on the school-to-work learning curve.)

Today, most students go to college for one reason: to get a job. But most colleges are still running on an operating system built for something else. Despite rising pressure to deliver career outcomes, many institutions remain anchored in an older ethos: learning for its own sake, the pursuit of knowledge as a noble end. The lecture halls may be filled with career-focused students, but the soul of the university still whispers Plato, not PayPal. And that is a very good thing in our opinion.

Colleges and universities aren't blind to the shift. Degree programs in business, tech, and healthcare have surged and career centers are booming. Still, this newer vocational layer sits atop a much older foundation and the tension between the two is shaping the future of higher education. Even with this effort to help with the big transition, a major gap still remains.

School drills deep into the "why" (theories, concepts, principles) and the "what" (facts, information, subject matter). But the workplace? It's all about the "how." How do you navigate office politics without becoming a jerk? How do you figure out what your boss actually wants when they give vague directions? How do you prioritize when three different people are telling you their project is the most important?

The skills lacking among new graduates aren't technical, they're interpersonal and practical.

RULE 3

School habits won't cut it.

The strange, frustrating reality, is that the habits that made you a star student can quietly tank your effectiveness on the job. In school, they earned you A's. In the work environment, they'll earn you blank stares, missed deadlines, and slowed career growth. Here's a few of the biggest offenders we've observed.

PERFECTIONISM

Remember those papers you'd revise a dozen times to make sure you get a 91 instead of an 89? If you try that strategy on the job, you just wasted time that could've pushed three other projects across the finish line. Your boss most likely doesn't want or even notice pristine perfection all the time. They need production and they still want quality—things double checked, done, functional, and on time. But work doesn't wait around for perfection.

In school, perfectionism was rewarded. In your new world, it's often a liability. The extra 2% polish rarely justifies the 50% more time. As one leader has told us, *"I'd rather have three solid solutions on my desk early than one perfect one that arrives after the problem or opportunity has gotten away from us."*

FLYING SOLO

Thanks to those all-nighters you may have (emphasis on MAY) saved your grade at the last minute all by yourself. Nothing was worse than having to wait on your lab partner for some reason to finish the paper. But when you're at work, collaboration isn't a punishment. It's a regular Monday through Friday now. One long group project (more on that later). The trouble is that when Chad drops the ball, you don't get to email the professor. You must adapt, negotiate, and still deliver. There isn't time for excuses or blame. And employers don't want to hear them. The work just needs to get done. So you must forge forward with Chad anyway. Because despite your own skills and abilities, you don't have the capacity to go it alone anymore. You will need others.

WAITING TO BE ASKED TO SHARE

We're not exactly sure how it goes these days, but you used to have to raise your hand and wait to be called on to contribute in school. It was

protocol and it was polite. But in a room full of other go-getters trying to get noticed by the boss, that's a fast track to being silent all the time. Quite unnoticed in fact. Too often the brashest and most bold are heard because they take up all the space talking. And you'll find the most meetings aren't well set-up to solve for this. So you must find the right time and way to bring your voice to the table.

ALWAYS LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT ANSWER

School trained you to find the correct solution, to share the proper answer that was offered in the lesson or the book. But when you're the new associate in the room, there usually isn't a "right" answer. Just trade-offs, partial information, and shifting deadlines. Success comes from making the best decision you can with the information you have and owning it, not waiting for perfect clarity. Many are used to crushing it at school, but aren't ready for the challenge of regular "failure" or shortcomings at work.

CHASING GOLD STARS

We'll dive into this more later, but in school, the system constantly told you how you were doing—grades, GPAs, rubrics, comments. At the office? Guess again. You need to get comfortable measuring progress by impact, not by praise, and establishing your own barometer. If you wait for someone to tell you you're doing a good job, you might always be waiting.

STAYING IN YOUR LANE

School kept things neat. English class was not math class. Your history paper didn't need to be written in iambic pentameter. Your science project didn't need a musical soundtrack. But when you have a job, everything's mixed. The best presentations use great visuals. The best reports tell stories. And the best employees blend those elements to get results.

If work feels weird, it's not because you're doing it wrong, it's because... say it with us... you're playing by the wrong rules. The habits that got you through school were built for a different game. Now it's about solving problems, moving work forward, and doing it alongside real people, in real time, with all the mess that brings.

One of the first steps is to let go of the clean simplicity of that student mindset and start embracing the messy world of thinking like a pro.

RULE 4

Clarity is the exception, not the rule.

Educational systems excel at clarity. You get syllabi with detailed expectations, rubrics that spell out exactly how you'll be evaluated, and regular feedback through grades and comments. The goals are explicit, the timeline is fixed, and the metrics for success are clear. Even when the material is challenging, the framework for learning it rarely is.

Your new universe offers no such clarity. A former colleague of ours, who switched from teaching high school to corporate training, once explained it kinda like this: "In school, everything's spelled out. Do this reading. Complete this assignment. Study for this test. Having a new job is like being dropped into a foreign country where nobody gives you a phrasebook, but they still expect you to order dinner and not accidentally insult someone's mother."

Nowhere is this lack of clarity more pronounced than in jargon and phrases that dominate the hallways and *Teams meetings*.

We need this ASAP

- What you think: Drop everything right now!
- What they often mean: Possibly anytime between now and next month.

- What to ask: "When do you need this to make your deadline?"

Be more strategic

- What you think: I need to think harder.
- What they mean: Stop doing tasks, start solving problems. Stop focusing only on your list. Zoom out.
- What to ask: "What are the most pressing problems we are trying to solve?" Before you start any work.

Use your judgment

- What you think: There's no right answer.
- What they mean: There's definitely a right answer, figure it out but don't ask me.
- What to do: Find out what's happened in the past, who the stakeholders are, and how everyone else is defining success.

The list of phrases keeps going:

Take initiative = Figure out what needs doing without being asked.

Think like an owner = Care about the outcome, not just your part in it.

This lack of clarity often catches people early in their career off guard. Many spend their first weeks waiting for explicit instructions, detailed project plans, or clear assignments—the office equivalent of a syllabus. But instead of receiving step-by-step guidance, they're met with questions about why they haven't taken initiative. The expectation is that you'll identify what needs to be done and start doing it, without waiting for explicit permission or detailed instructions.

THE HARD TRUTH: Clarity is the exception, not the rule.

You'll encounter informational ambiguity: incomplete, conflicting, or excessive information that makes priority determination difficult. The average office worker faces over 170 information decisions daily, most with inadequate context.

You'll face role ambiguity: unclear expectations about responsibilities, authorities, and performance standards. These correlate most strongly with workplace stress and reduced effectiveness.

You'll experience relationship ambiguity: uncertainty about how different organizational functions should interact and where decision boundaries lie. This tension increases significantly in complex organizations and cross-functional initiatives.

You'll deal with temporal ambiguity: unclear timeframes, shifting deadlines, and competing schedule priorities. This challenge particularly affects newer professionals transitioning from structured academic timelines.

And you'll confront strategic ambiguity: uncertainty about organizational direction and how individual contributions connect to larger purposes. This one most strongly impacts engagement and discretionary effort.

And yet, the people who succeed aren't necessarily the ones with the most direction. They're the ones who learn how to move without it. They ask smarter questions. They test assumptions early. They build systems to evaluate competing priorities when no one else will. They develop instincts, not for certainty, but for navigating fog.

So no, it's not fair. And no, it's not easy. But the sooner you stop waiting for perfect clarity, the sooner you start building the skills that get rewarded. No one's coming to hand you a map. You're going to have to learn how to chart your own course. And once you do, you'll be more effective than you thought possible.

RULE 5

Adaptation is required.

Let's do some sobering math. You spent roughly 17+ years in school (kindergarten through college). You'll probably work for about 43 years (from around age 22 to 65). That means you spent 17 years practicing how to be a student and zero years practicing how to work everyday. Yet, you'll spend 43 years on the clock. Even if you've been on the job for 5 years, you're not even close to balancing the scales.

This imbalance explains so much of the struggle in early career years. You've become an expert at "studenting"—taking tests, writing papers, absorbing and repeating information. You're calibrated for summers off and light course loads. But you've had almost no practice at "working," at building relationships across hierarchies, creating within constraints, delivering amidst uncertainty, and balancing competing priorities. Every. Single. Day. And unlike school, work never ends.

The sooner you can get started on adapting to these realities and learning the rules, the sooner you restart the clock on how you'll win for the next four decades. It'll be like the difference between black-and-white and color at the movies. You're looking at the same images, hearing the same sounds. But when the picture is color, a whole new world of insight and information is visible that tells the fuller and more detailed story about the environment. Once you start to see it, then you can better contend with it.

Here's the liberating secret we've learned over the years: Those "naturally gifted" colleagues who seem to effortlessly swim through workplace politics? They're not smarter than you. They just figured out the real rules faster. And now you're learning them too.

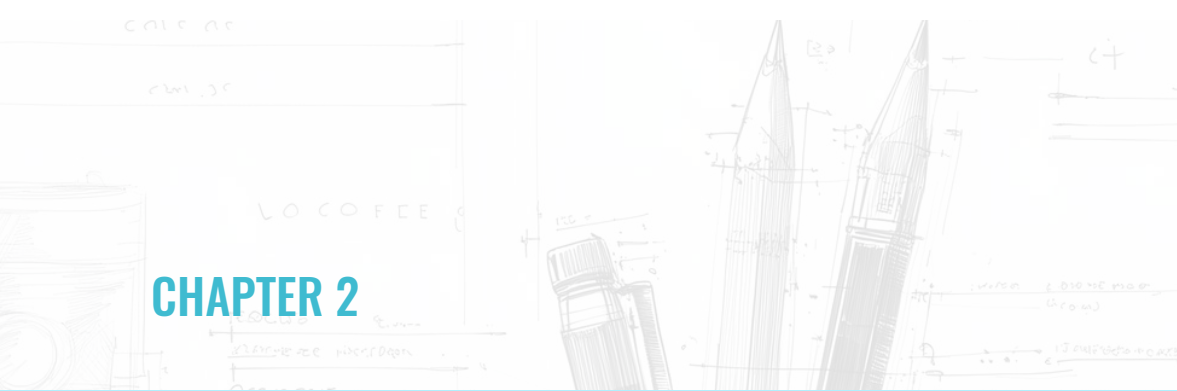
KEY TAKEAWAYS

—Chapter 1 Cheat Sheet—					
	 Rewards	 Rules	 Measures	 Feedback	 Success
School	Rewards Individual Excellence	Clear Rules	Measures Effort	Provides Constant Feedback	Your Grade = Your Effort
Work	Rewards Collective Success	Hidden Unwritten Rules	Measures Outcomes	Expects Self Direction	Your Success = The Team's Success

1. **Work and school operate by completely different rules.** What earned you top marks in school often works against you now. Success depends on adaptability, speed, and contribution to team outcomes.
2. **You are no longer the customer.** You're now the service provider. In school, the system was designed to support your growth; at work, you're expected to contribute to your organization's goals, often without much handholding.
3. **Success in the working world depends on self-direction and initiative.** No one is handing you a syllabus; you need to seek clarity, prioritize effectively, and start moving even when the path isn't clear.
4. **Ambiguity is a permanent feature of work, not a bug.** The people who thrive aren't those who wait for perfect information, but those who move forward confidently through the absence of clarity.
5. **To succeed, you must unlearn school habits and rewire for the real game.** Let go of perfectionism, waiting for permission, and chasing praise. Start focusing on delivering, building relationships, and thinking like an owner.

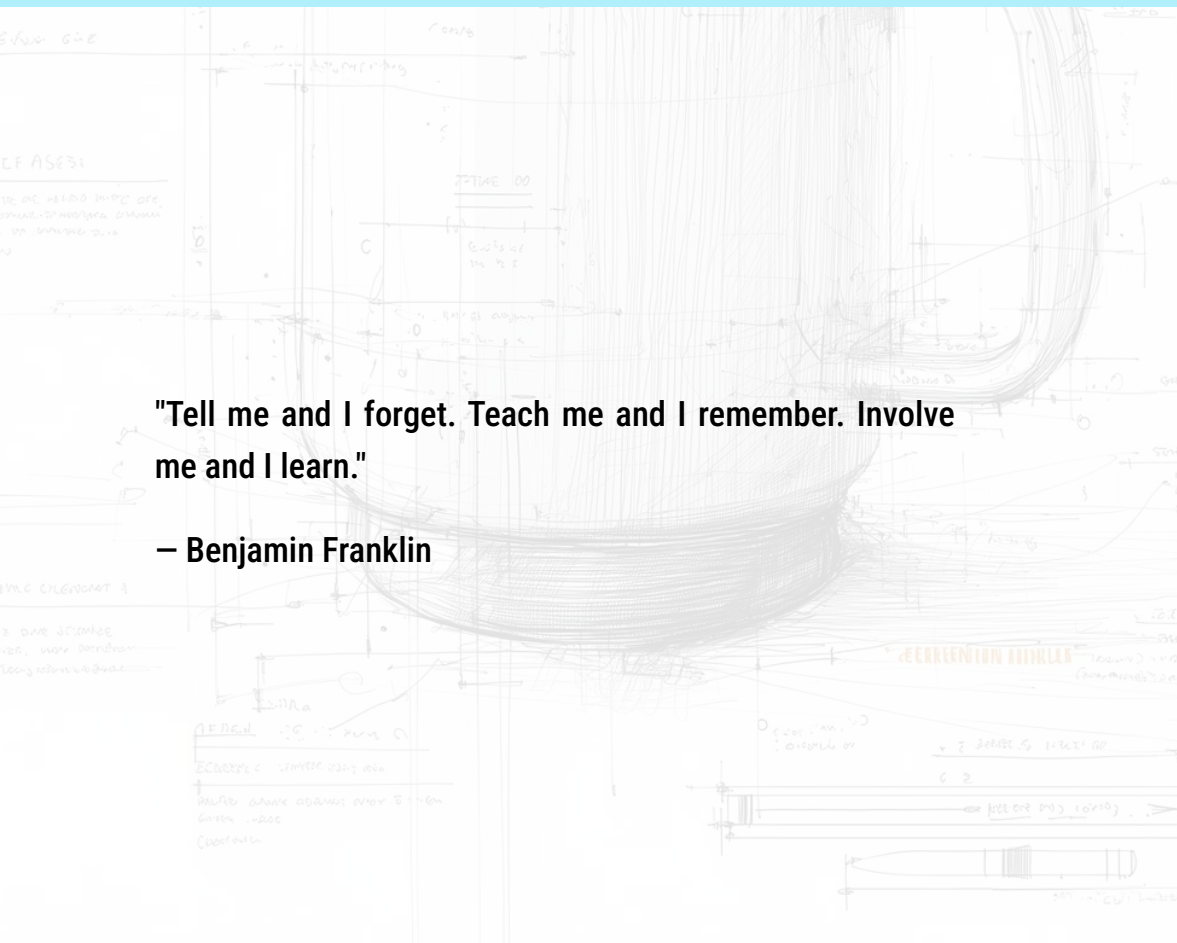
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What's one belief or behavior from school you might need to unlearn in order to succeed at work?
2. Recall a moment when you received unclear feedback (e.g., "not moving the needle"). What do you think the real message might have been?
3. How do you currently define success for yourself? How is that definition shaped by your past experience in school, and how might it need to shift to reflect the realities of work?
4. What's one workplace behavior you've seen others use effectively that wasn't taught or encouraged in school? How will you begin to practice it?



CHAPTER 2

WORKING WITHOUT A NET, A SYLLABUS, OR A NAP



"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."

— Benjamin Franklin

Imagine you've spent your whole life hiking well-marked trails with regular rest stops, clear mile markers, and rangers offering guidance. Suddenly, you're dropped into an unmarked wilderness where the path forward isn't obvious, rest areas are self-created, and the journey has no defined endpoint. This is the professional landscape you now face, both exhilarating and disorienting in its vastness and complexity.

Of course, knowing that this is the new reality, isn't the same as knowing how you're going to go about addressing it. We've already alluded to bits and pieces of what we're diving into in this chapter. Now we want to go deeper. To better understand how the tectonic shifts in the landscape force a change not only in perspective, but also in practice. Because the environment has changed dramatically, you'll have to change and adapt as well. Think of it as evolutionary biology 101 for life after academia.

RULE 6

There are no more semesters,
just year-round work.

The academic calendar might be the most psychologically satisfying work structure ever created. Every few months, you hit a reset button. New

classes. New professors. New notebooks with crisp, unmarked pages. Even if you tanked a Physics 101 exam, come January, you're starting fresh with the science course (perhaps wisely switching to Astronomy for Non-Majors).

A cycle of defined effort, completion, and renewal is deeply ingrained in your psyche after 17+ years of education. The academic year has natural breathing points built into its timeline—winter break, spring break, summer vacation. You ended each semester emptying your mental tank, knowing you'd have time to refill it before the next challenge.

The working world operates on an entirely different timescale. A company's strategic plans typically span three to five years and sometimes even longer. While they may be reviewed annually, the core direction and major initiatives often extend far beyond a single year. Instead of working in 15-week sprints with clear endpoints, you're now running an ultra-marathon where the finish line keeps moving. You don't know what life might look like in 3 years, but your company has real plans for that time. So now you have a timescale that feels abstract compared to the semester-by-semester thinking you are used to.

This heretofore almost completely unconsidered timescale creates several challenges:

Coordination complexity: Strategic plans aren't created or executed in isolation. They coordinate activities across entire organizations. Marketing aligns with product development, which aligns with sales, which aligns with customer support, and so on (at least on paper). Your work becomes one instrument in a much larger orchestra. In school, if you changed your approach to an assignment, it affected only you. If you work in operations and your department shifts priorities, it impacts inventory management, staffing plans, customer commitments, and financial projections. Nothing happens in isolation.

Constant evolution: Despite spanning multiple years, company strategies rarely remain static. Market conditions change. Competitors make

unexpected moves. New technologies emerge. A strange paradox has now emerged: you're working toward long-term goals that may shift before you reach them.

An associate who's been through several strategic planning cycles, might describe the challenge thusly: "We set three-year goals, but we revise them every six months. It creates this weird situation where you're simultaneously thinking long-term and constantly adapting short-term. In school, the syllabus rarely changed mid-semester. Here, our 'syllabus' gets updated while we're still working through it."

No natural breaks: Perhaps the biggest difference is the absence of true breaks or hiatuses in the strategic planning cycle. One quarter rolls into the next. One fiscal year closes, and another immediately begins. Projects may conclude, but the overall work continues without the clearly defined pauses that punctuated academic life.

How do the people who succeed adapt to this extended timeframe?

They create their own milestones. While the organization may not provide natural break points, you can create your own. Setting personal milestones at regular intervals gives you the satisfaction of completion that semesters once provided.

They find the sub-plots. Within the grand narrative of a company's strategic plan are numerous smaller stories. Projects have beginnings, middles, and ends. Quarterly goals provide shorter-term focus. These sub-plots can give you the more immediate sense of purpose and completion that semesters once did.

They build in recovery periods. Without institutionally provided breaks, you need to consciously create your own recovery periods. Strategic use of vacation time, weekends, and even daily boundaries can help prevent the burnout that comes from continuous work without refresh points.

The longer timeframe of workplace planning does offer something academic semesters rarely did: the chance to be part of something truly

substantial. Most significant organizational accomplishments—developing new products, entering new markets, transforming industries—require sustained effort over years, not months. The strategic plan, for all its complexity and relentlessness, creates the container for work that has lasting impact. All that time you spent working on something, or even just a part of something, can really make a difference.

RULE 7

You don't own your "work"
time anymore.

We remember course registration fondly. That magical window when we could design our ideal weekly schedule. Early morning classes or afternoon sessions? Monday-Wednesday-Friday or Tuesday-Thursday? Four-day weekends or spreading classes evenly? We orchestrated our academic life around personal rhythms and preferences.

Maybe you deliberately avoided any class before 11 a.m. for four straight years. Or stacked all your classes on Tuesday and Thursday so you'd have four-day weekends. You were the master of your universe!

That gave you plenty of space to design a schedule around how you like to do things. To work, study, eat, play, party. Did your professor or classmates care about or monitor your work process or just the final output? No. How you got to the finish line didn't really matter, just that you finished your work. Last-minute paper writing. Intensive study sessions right before exams. As long as assignments landed in their inbox by the deadline, your approach to getting there remained private and personal.

That's not exactly how things play out in the workforce, where the ownership of your time undergoes a dramatic reversal. In that world the organization's operational needs typically dictate when and how work happens, along with the global social contract of the "workday." Even in

the age of remote work, semi-mythical 4-day work weeks, hybrid schedules, and the like, you are not entirely in control of your time. Even for the two of us who have run our own business for 15 years our time is directed by the needs of our clients.

At work we're all here to create value and deliver for or on behalf of others. We aren't the customer anymore, remember? You'll hear about "value" a lot in this book and it isn't just a cliché, it's a real currency. It's how companies and employers measure that the work anyone does is helping drive the organization toward achieving its purpose. No place pays people to simply be around. That investment in human capital has to return real, material benefit.

This time arrangement requires an adaptation of our approach and understanding.

It's hard to hide. In professional settings, your work process becomes observable in ways it never was in education. Your methods, pace, and habits are all visible to colleagues and supervisors, creating a new layer of accountability. It's not just the end-product that matters, but each incremental step along the way that is interdependent with the work of many others. There's a constant awareness that others can observe your patterns. Your calendar is visible, your response times are noted, your focus in meetings is evaluated. Suddenly all that personal activity becomes a public performance.

Everybody has to stay in sync (ideally at least). The interconnected nature of organizational work creates significant constraints on personal schedules. When multiple people need to collaborate, individual timing preferences often take a back seat to collective coordination needs. You might be a night owl who does your best thinking after 8 p.m., and that worked perfectly in college. But in your new job key decisions happen in morning meetings, and your teammates need your input during standard business hours. This forces a sometimes tough recalibration of your productivity patterns to align with organizational rhythms.

Impact is always compounding. Work habits that might have only affected you in school can create wide-ranging consequences in work environments. When your work output serves as someone else's input, your timing and quality directly impact their ability to function effectively. Many of us may find ourselves with a team member who consistently finishes tasks just before deadlines, technically on time, but with no buffer. This creates immense pressure on the review team, forces other teams into rushed work, and generates stress throughout the project pipeline. What once seemed like a personal work style can disrupt the entire workflow ecosystem.

How do you develop the right mindset to help you embrace this new relationship with time?

Understand core hours and expectations. Every workplace has different norms around when people need to be present and available. Some have strict 9-5 (or 6 or 7 p.m.) expectations; others offer more flexibility. But almost all have some core hours when collaboration happens and availability is expected.

Plan for dependencies. Once you understand who depends on your work and when they need it, you can work backward to create realistic timelines that account for others' needs.

Communicate your process. While you have less control over your time, you can still advocate for work patterns that help you perform at your best. Frame these preferences in terms of how they benefit the team and the work, not just your personal comfort.

Manage energy, not just time. While you can't always control when work happens, you can often control how you prepare for it and recover from it. Protecting your morning for preparation, scheduling breaks after intense sessions, and saving routine tasks for natural energy dips, helps you work with your biology instead of fighting it.

The transition from self-directed time to company time can feel constraining, but within those constraints, you can still find meaningful autonomy. The more you understand what success looks like and how it's defined where you work, the better you can take charge of your time within the boundaries of your workplace.

RULE 8

Build your own breaks,
or you won't get one.

One of the biggest jolts when you leave school for the working world is realizing: the breaks are gone.

School ran on a rhythm of intensity, then recovery. Finals week crushed you but then came winter break. Spring semester's over? Cue summer vacation. That stop-start pattern got baked into your brain over years of schooling. You worked hard because rest was always just around the corner.

After graduation? The calendar flattens out. No semester break. No clean finish line. Just an endless string of weeks with no built-in reset. Sure, there are holidays—and maybe your office "soft closes" in December—but the underlying expectation is continuity, not collapse and rebuild.

Suddenly, it's mid-December, and you're still staring at project deadlines that stretch into January. You keep waiting for the familiar shift into full disengagement, and it never comes. It's like your body is expecting a full stop, but the system just wants a slightly quieter sprint.

This is one of the hardest recalibrations to make. Understanding that work doesn't come in waves with guaranteed off-seasons. You must build your own pit stops along the way.

Schedule regular recovery periods, treating them as non-negotiable appointments with yourself. This might be daily (a genuine lunch break), weekly (a tech-free evening), monthly (a full weekend without work email), and annually (completely disconnected vacation time).

Professional athletes don't train at maximum intensity every day—they deliberately cycle between exertion and recovery. Similarly, the effective and experienced among us recognize our energy patterns and plan our work accordingly.

Find meaning in continuity. While academic breaks provided clear punctuation points, the continuity of work allows for deeper engagement with problems, relationships that develop over years rather than semesters, and the satisfaction of seeing long-term impact unfold.

RULE 9

Success at work isn't graded,
it's interpreted.

Listen, getting grades wasn't always the fun part of school. For some it was a regular sweat inducing terror. But regardless of whether you got good grades or "don't tell your parents" grades, at least the difference between levels was crystal clear:

- A = Excellent
- B = Good
- C = Average
- D = Poor but passing (just don't tell your folks)
- F = You might be back home next semester

You knew exactly where you stood at all times. Got an 87%? That's generally a B+. Need an A? You better aim for 93% or higher.

In most places of work some form of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) sort of replaces grades. That is to say they feel like grades at first glance but with some crucial differences:

Environmental factors matter (a lot): Your grades weren't directly affected by the economy, market conditions, or what other classes were doing. Your KPIs absolutely are influenced by factors beyond your control. Yet more often than not, the goals remain the same even with the new obstacles in your path.

Team dependence: Your KPIs can also depend on other people doing their jobs well. In software development, deployment speed metrics depend on how quickly the QA team tests the code and how responsive the infrastructure team is to requests. Coders can write perfect code quickly, but if those other teams are swamped, metrics suffer.

Manager Mindset: Despite every organization's best attempts to create equitable standards of performance measurement, we don't believe the human element has been totally subdued. Even if in the official performance report the numbers are standardized, every manager is likely judging people slightly differently. Even if they don't mean to. And certainly on a day-to-day basis the subjective views and preferences of any manager influence how they review and lead.

The arbitrary nature of targets: What we often hear is that many workplace goals feel like they were plucked from thin air. "Increase website conversion by 15%." Why 15%? Why not 12% or 18%? Often, there's no clear rationale beyond "it sounds ambitious but achievable."

In many sales organizations we work with, the teams can be cynical about the intentionality of their targets. It feels more like: "They take whatever you did last year and add 20%." It doesn't matter if the market has changed or if you already maxed out potential in your territory. The goal is always more than before regardless of context.

The “always more” reality: Perhaps most frustrating of all, workplace success often feels temporary and insufficient. Met your targets this quarter? Great, they'll be higher next quarter. Crushed your annual goals? Wonderful, don't get comfortable.

Not long ago an A was the unambiguous ceiling of achievement, now work rarely allows you to feel like you've definitively "won."

If you're going to handle these shifting metrics you need to:

- Understand exactly how your role contributes to key organizational metrics, even if indirectly. If you can articulate this clearly, you'll not only feel more connected to the bigger picture, but you'll also be better positioned to demonstrate your value when it matters.
- Build a personal learning network to replace the built-in support of education from professors, teaching assistants, and study groups. Identifying people with expertise you want to develop, who are willing to provide honest feedback, and who can offer perspective from different roles helps create the support structure education once provided.
- Maintain achievement portfolios to track progress and accomplishments in environments where metrics continually evolve. Creating tangible documentation of completed projects, successful initiatives, and positive feedback provides reference points for personal development and performance discussions when institutional memory proves short or inconsistent.

Sometimes in the world of work, success is the story you tell about your work after the fact. These strategies can help you take charge of ensuring that your efforts and contributions are beneficial to you, in the absence of clear communication, plans, endpoints, and instructions.

RULE 10

There will be no syllabus.
Ever again.

Every semester you used to get a gift delivered to you on an 8.5x11" 20lb weight matte white silver platter. (At least that's what we got back in the 90s. We imagine now you get a link to some horrible GUI webpage.) It was the path to achievement and it was right in front of you. The syllabus told you what to do and when to do it. Rubrics spelled out what "excellent" looked like, right down to the font size. It was predictable. It was beautiful.

Fast forward to your first gig (and second and third ad infinitum) post college and projects will show up half-defined. Progress metrics will shift mid-flight. Customer complaints or investor concerns will drive changes in focus. New company leadership will bring in fresh ideas and vision, and force redirection of time and effort. There'll be no rubric, no roadmap, and sometimes not even a clear destination, just "keep moving forward everyone." But you'll be expected to figure it out as you go and sometimes while the targets are moving.

Even a well-defined strategy eventually butts up against reality. Companies love to create impressive strategic plans with vision statements and high-level objectives. "We will be the leading provider of solutions in our industry!" Great. What does that mean for what you should do today? This week? This month? The translation from 30,000-foot strategy to ground-level action items is often murky at best and completely missing at worst.

Where once there were detailed maps for familiar terrain, now you must chart your own course, and redraw it when the landscape changes. The game isn't about following instructions anymore. It's about figuring out how to survive in a world where it seems everyone's building the playbook from scratch.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of work life is how frequently even experienced leaders operate without complete information or clear guidelines. Where you see a poised executive making confident pronouncements, we know that they're working with partial data and educated hypotheses. Same goes for your assured manager presenting the quarterly strategy who is actually making reasonable projections based on limited indicators. In other words, everyone is partially faking it.

Your economics professor likely had a PhD and years of specialized training. The boss who's making decisions affecting dozens of careers might have been promoted because they were good at sales or engineering, not because they demonstrated any particular skill at managing people.

And of course, just when you think you understand how things work, key people leave and new ones arrive. Unlike school, where professors typically stayed put for at least a semester, a workplace can feel like trying to build a sandcastle while the tide is coming in.

Many of us find ourselves years into our careers and are just beginning to recognize that mastery is now less about eliminating uncertainty and much more about getting comfortable with it. The distinction between junior and senior professionals often lies not in who has more answers, but in who has developed better frameworks for approaching questions that have no definitive solutions.

You can more effectively deal with this lack of structure by:

- Creating your own structure. In the absence of a syllabus, create your own. Break amorphous projects into concrete tasks with self-imposed deadlines. Develop personal systems for tracking priorities and progress.
- Building your support system. Since help won't be scheduled at convenient office hours, proactively build your network of mentors, peers, and advisors.

- Embracing uncertainty as the constant. Accept that it isn't a temporary state to get through and that the goal isn't to eliminate it, it's to get comfortable operating within it.

You're now in a world characterized by unmarked territories where you must create your own maps, establish your own rhythms, and define your own vision for success.

While initially disorienting, this less structured terrain offers genuine opportunities for innovation and authentic contribution. Without the predetermined pathways of academic frameworks, you are more free to craft a journey that genuinely reflects your unique strengths and perspectives. It's ironic that the cluster\$^% that creates all your challenges also creates space for original approaches and meaningful impact. We'd call that shocking, but once you've been working long enough it'll start to seem pretty normal. (A scary thought perhaps, but a true one.)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **You must create your own structure.** Without semesters, syllabi, or built-in breaks, you must create the structure school once provided—through milestones, routines, and recovery systems.
2. **Work time is shared, visible, and interdependent.**
3. **In professional life, your time isn't your own.** How and when you work affects others, and success depends on aligning your rhythms with the team.
4. **There's no fixed rubric for success.** KPIs, goals, and priorities shift based on market forces, leadership changes, and team dynamics, meaning success becomes something you help define and demonstrate through impact and initiative.
5. **Comfort with ambiguity is a core competency.** Work rarely offers clarity, and thriving requires reframing uncertainty as a permanent condition to accept, not a temporary problem to solve.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where in your current work are you still expecting a clear syllabus or roadmap—and how could you begin to create your own instead?
2. How do your personal work rhythms align or clash with your team's core hours and collaboration needs?
3. What metrics or indicators help you track success in your role when formal KPIs are vague, shifting, or missing?
4. When faced with confusion at work, what is your instinctive reaction—and how could you practice staying grounded and strategic in those moments?

SECTION I EXERCISE

THE PROFESSIONAL TERRAIN NAVIGATION EXERCISE

Visualize your work environment as a landscape—full of challenges, resources, and opportunities. Use this worksheet to build a clearer picture of where you stand and how to move forward strategically.

Step 1: Chart Your Landscape

Label each area of your professional landscape. Write brief descriptions or examples:

- **High-Challenge Zones** (Where are you most stretched?) Note projects or responsibilities requiring significant stretch
- **Resource-Rich Areas** (Who or what supports you?) Note people, information, or tools that provide support
- **Uncharted Territory** (What don't you fully understand yet?) Note aspects of your role or organization you don't yet understand
- **Natural Strength Spots** (Where do your strengths shine?) Note areas where your capabilities align perfectly with requirements
- **Energy Renewal Spaces** (What restores your energy?) Note activities or relationships that replenish motivation

Step 2: Analyze Your Terrain

For each area above, reflect and respond to the following:

- What specific strategies would help you navigate this particular terrain?
- Who or what could improve your visibility or confidence here?
- Is there an opportunity to turn this challenge into a point of distinction?

Step 3: Plan Your Moves

List three concrete actions you'll take this week based on your map:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

By visualizing this environment as a landscape to be understood rather than a problem to be solved, you shift from reactive survival to strategic engagement. Revisit and refine this map as your terrain knowledge develops and the landscape itself evolves.

SECTION II: UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF

**THE SELF-AWARENESS
SUPERPOWERS THAT GET
YOU PROMOTED, HOPEFULLY**

A detailed technical drawing of a shopping cart, showing various views including a top-down view, a side view, and a perspective view. The drawing includes numerous dimension lines and annotations, typical of a mechanical or industrial design sketch. The cart has a rectangular frame with multiple shelves and a base with four wheels.

CHAPTER 3

PUTTING YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

"The soft stuff is always harder than the hard stuff."

—Roger Enrico, former CEO of PepsiCo

It's true that everyone is looking to hire the best people they can find. And there's a belief that the "top of class" type is what everyone wants. The kind that led their computer science program, could code circles around classmates, and landed that coveted position at a prestigious tech firm. Six months in, some of those brilliant people are headed toward performance probation. Not because of technical skills—those were still stellar—but because they weren't adept at the more "human" or "soft skill" side of work. They misconstrued projects and progress by not communicating clearly, or they interrupted colleagues in meetings, or they responded defensively to feedback (or didn't even respond at all). As their managers end up telling us when we prepare for the company offsite, "Their work is fine, but their interpersonal skills and demeanor are undermining a lot of what they do."

We've seen this story play out countless times. Starting a career isn't just about mastering spreadsheets, coding languages, design tools, or client presentations. Your success hinges on something far more fundamental: how well you understand and present yourself in the professional world. How well you connect to others and connect them to you. Understanding your authentic strengths, productive patterns, and areas for growth becomes essential when external structures provide fewer guideposts. By developing clarity about your internal wiring, both its capabilities and

limitations, you'll create the personal compass needed to make wise choices in ambiguous situations.

While technical skills might get you hired, how you show up day after day, your "professional presence," will in no small part determine how far you go and how fulfilling your journey will be. This presence isn't about portraying a false image or playing office politics. It's about consistently bringing your best self to work through a powerful combination of courtesy, competence, and care for details.

Companies everywhere are filled with brilliant people who struggle because they haven't mastered these fundamentals. The one thing you can't be is your own worst enemy. Understanding these elements can prevent the hindering of promising careers through addressing and embracing entirely fixable habits. These fundamentals are becoming increasingly important as the impact of "Artificial Intelligence" continues to evolve how we approach work. As functions that have been traditionally characterized as "hard" or "technical" skills are supplemented or even replaced with AI, the spotlight on the human side of work and "non-technical skills" will grow brighter and become a larger differentiating factor as companies evaluate and promote their employees.

RULE 11

Courtesy isn't optional.

Now that you work around other humans in high intensity situations, courtesy functions as both a moral good and a strategic advantage. When faced with difficult colleagues, including those who may be overly critical or challenging to work with, the approach one takes can significantly impact relationship dynamics. While natural responses often include avoidance or defensiveness, these reactions typically reinforce negative patterns.

A more effective strategy involves consistent, genuine kindness, even when it isn't immediately reciprocated. This includes regular professional courtesy, expressing authentic interest in others' perspectives, and acknowledging the benefits of critical feedback. Such approaches demonstrate emotional intelligence and maturity.

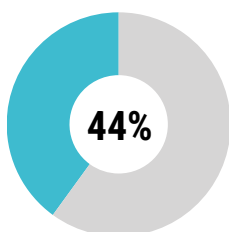
Over time, this consistent behavior can transform challenging relationships. Initial criticism may gradually shift to constructive guidance, and difficult colleagues may eventually become advocates. This transformation occurs not through manipulation but through genuine human connection and the establishment of mutual respect.

The strategic usefulness of courtesy lies in its ability to convert potentially adversarial relationships into collaborative ones, creating more diverse networks that support career development and advancement opportunities.

WHY COURTESY WORKS AND WINS OVER TIME

Courtesy isn't just about being nice, it's about recognizing the humanity in others, even when they make it difficult. Everyone is fighting battles you know nothing about. That difficult coworker might be dealing with a sick parent, financial stress, or impostor syndrome just like anyone else.

Courtesy and professional kindness creates psychological safety—an environment where people feel comfortable taking risks, admitting mistakes, and bringing their full creativity to work. When this evolves into a commitment and reputation at work, you become someone others want to collaborate with, support, and champion.



Enhanced Team Performance: A Canadian civil service study (APEX) found that those exhibiting kindness experience a 26% increase in energy, 36% higher job satisfaction, and 44% greater commitment to their organization

The workplace isn't always a meritocracy, but courtesy compounds like interest. Small, consistent acts of consideration create a reputation that precedes you. When people speak about you in rooms you're not in (and they will), do you want them saying "they're brilliant but difficult" or "they're brilliant and great to work with"?

Developing simple practices like publicly acknowledging team members' contributions, remembering personal details, and offering help before being asked can go a long way toward building a reputation for courtesy. Emotional intelligence and kindness can make you invaluable to your leaders and teammates in ways that transcend your technical contributions.

But courteous doesn't mean being a doormat.

Being courteous and kind doesn't mean being weak or letting people walk all over you. It means setting boundaries with respect. "I understand your feedback and critique, and would also appreciate any proactive ideas or suggestions that I could build on." is both kind AND firm.

Kindness without boundaries isn't sustainable. You can decline extra work, push back on unreasonable requests, and address problematic behavior—all while maintaining respect for the other person's dignity. The formula is simple: be warm in your manner and clear in your boundaries.

THE HARD TRUTH: There are some people out there that even courtesy and kindness can't crack.

People who have chosen to look out for themselves above and often at the expense of others. Liars. Cheats. Abusers. Being strategically courteous will likely not make any difference with these types. And while it's always best to give people the benefit of the doubt, it's a fool's errand to think that you can get everyone everywhere to like and respect you. Be cautious when you think you're dealing with someone like this.

This is especially true for marginalized groups. Groups whose voice isn't given a proper place at the table, whose members are often excluded from key decisions or opportunities, who can be viewed with a broad prejudicial brush and not treated as equals. For those in the majority group, it's even more important that the gesture of courtesy and respect is generously given. But if you feel constantly stepped on, talked over, and dismissed, it's important to recognize that your voice matters and you may need to—courteously—become more dogged, demonstrative, and...louder. You can be a staunch advocate for yourself and others, not acquiescing to the status quo, without choosing belligerence as your first weapon. Confident, firm, calm, courteous advocacy (especially when directed at the right ally and authorities) can help accelerate inclusion [sometimes].

RULE 12

Be a thermostat, not a thermometer.

Think about your workplace. There's already plenty of natural intensity—deadlines, competing priorities, budget constraints, personality differences. That's normal workplace combustibility. The question is, will you be the cooling system or the extra fuel on the fire?

Consider a typical crisis scenario: A critical system fails right before a major deadline. Some people will immediately catastrophize. "This is a complete disaster!" Others will assign blame. "Who was responsible for testing this?" Still others will become paralyzed or scattered. None of these reactions helps solve the actual problem.

The professional who brings calm to the situation, who stays cool and collected, isn't ignoring the reality, they're creating space to address it effectively. They're saying through their demeanor and actions: "This is manageable. Let's focus on solutions." When we train facilitators, we like to talk about the importance of being calm, cool, and collected.

Calm refers to internal emotional stability—the ability to manage your physiological and psychological reactions to pressure. It involves maintaining perspective during challenging situations, regulating your nervous system's response to stress, distinguishing between genuine emergencies and routine challenges, and accessing rational thinking even during emotional activation.

Cool describes your external presentation—how you're perceived by others during high-pressure moments. It includes controlled verbal and non-verbal communication, measured pace and volume of speech, intentional body language and facial expressions, and appropriate demeanor regardless of circumstances.

Collected represents your cognitive organization—your ability to maintain structured thinking and response patterns despite disruption. This encompasses staying focused on relevant information, organizing thoughts coherently under pressure, maintaining priorities when faced with distractions, and following logical progressions rather than reactive tangents.

Every workplace has what we call "heaters" and "diffusers." Heaters amplify tension and stress, often unintentionally. They react to every minor issue, spread unverified information, focus on blame rather than solutions, and process their anxiety publicly. Their emotional state is contagious, and not in a helpful way.

Diffusers take a different approach. They:

- Respond rather than react to challenges
- Bring evidence and clarity to emotional conversations
- Acknowledge concerns without amplifying them
- Focus attention on what can be controlled
- Model composure when others are scattered

The one who reduces heat quickly becomes invaluable not because they ignore problems, but because they create the conditions where problems can actually be solved.

RULE 13

Competence is your baseline.

The working world doesn't operate on partial credit. Projects are either done well enough to serve their purpose or they're not. Your boss isn't grading on a curve, they're comparing your work to what the client/customer/organization needs.

Many new professionals experience a shock during their first performance reviews. What they considered "exceptional effort" is often revealed to be merely the baseline expectation.

We see this time and time again facilitating conversations about performance review processes. Managers and company leadership see a "3 – Meets Expectations" as a good thing. But when you've strived for A's your whole life and get a 3 instead of a 5 it can be confusing.

"I gave my max effort. I did everything right. I turned everything in on time. I didn't miss a day of work. I hit my numbers and I got a 3.5? I don't understand."

THE HARD TRUTH: Unlike at school where every year you level up barring absolute failure, and where straight "As" qualify you for privileges and honors, employers only need their people to meet expectations, for individuals to do their part so that collectively the company achieves its objectives and targets.

There's really no reward simply for "doing your job." Getting paid IS the reward. At most places of employment it can be nearly impossible to divine exactly how to get that coveted 5. And to be honest companies are largely disincentivized to give them. Inherent to the ecosystem of work is the reality of the bottom line. Keeping costs down and revenue up. If a company can't make more than it spends it's not long for the world. And because the reward for work is pay and not grades, when every employee wants to "level up" there's a very real cost. And if we're being REALLY honest, that's not wrong. As we'll say many times: It's a feature of the system not a bug. Most people's job is simply to get the job done.

There are raises and promotions to be gotten. There are opportunities. But they won't be handed out simply because you show up and do your job well. If what you're most concerned about is how you level up at any given organization, after you've integrated some of the ideas that follow, one of the best ways is simply to ask:

"I'm really interested in my long term future here at COMPANY WHATEVER, how can I pursue growth opportunities? What is most important to the company when considering pay increases and promotions? I want to develop and be more effective here, so any advice and perspective you have would be invaluable to me."

Maybe don't ask it EXACTLY that way. But you get the idea. Before you jump right to that on day three of your new job however, here are a few ideas you should think about.

EMBRACE THE STANDARDS & NORMS

When adjusting to a new work environment, it's necessary to observe and adapt to the norms around performance expectations. Someone might move from a traditional company that values thoroughness and detailed documentation to a fast-paced startup where speed trumps perfection. In these situations, working in the wrong style—like creating elaborate, detailed reports—can actually hurt your effectiveness if your colleagues

are all sending quick bullet-point summaries before moving to the next priority.

Be sure to observe what "good work" looks like in your specific workplace. Some organizations prioritize speed and quick iterations, while others expect meticulous attention to detail. Once you recognize these unwritten expectations, you can adjust your approach to match what's actually valued. When people make this adjustment, they typically start receiving much more positive feedback because they're delivering what the organization needs rather than what they think it should need.

TRY THIS

Identify the top performers in your role or department. What specific behaviors or qualities make their work stand out? Make a list and look for patterns. These are your benchmarks for excellence in your particular workplace.

RESTATE TO MAKE SURE YOU KNOW WHAT'S REQUIRED

"So what I'm hearing is you need this presentation by Thursday, with special focus on the Q3 numbers, and recommendations for next steps. Is that right?" This simple habit prevents countless miscommunications.

You can save yourself weeks of wasted effort by consistently confirming assignments this way. If your boss asks you to, "Give me the numbers on the Miller account," before diving in, respond, "Just to clarify, you'd like a comprehensive financial analysis of all our work with Miller over the past year? Or are you looking for something more specific like the last campaign metrics?" It might turn out your boss just needs the contact information for their accounting department!

The clarification playbook:

1. Restate the assignment in your own words.
2. Ask about specific deliverables and format.
3. Confirm timeline and priorities.
4. Identify key stakeholders and their expectations.
5. Request examples of similar successful work if available.
6. Do all of these succinctly and quickly.

NOT EVERYTHING YOU DO WILL BE IN THE JOB DESCRIPTION

That carefully crafted job description you applied for and that you regularly look at wondering when you're going to do all the things they hired you for? Yea, consider it a starting point at best. In reality, most roles involve a healthy dose of "other duties as assigned."

We've done a lot of work in the nonprofit industry where the gap between the job description and the actual work is often significant. Someone hired as data analyst will likely find themselves a month later at the organization's annual fundraising gala designing name tags, coordinating with vendors, and even picking up the keynote speaker from the airport. Though none of these tasks may show up officially as part of the role, a willingness to help with the organization's priorities demonstrates that you are a team player and that you understand how to be part of the bigger picture. Those things will not go unnoticed.

Just remember if and when you say, "I got this," be sure you got it.

Just like how the hours of prep and review and peer groups and studying and practice tests were part of your scholastic journey and yet not on the syllabus, there are many unwritten essentials for every job like:

- Building relationships across departments
- Mentoring newcomers (formally or informally)
- Representing your team or organization externally

- Contributing to workplace culture
- Adapting to evolving priorities and technologies
- And others

Don't shy away from these aspects of work thinking that if you just deliver deliverables that will lead to success. Lean into "working." Celebrating the wins of others and your employer as much as you seek ownership of your own wins.

FEW THINGS GO ACCORDING TO PLAN

Every workplace has its version of "the printer exploded the night before the paper is due." The ability to adapt when things go sideways matters more than the ability to execute when everything's perfect. Reliability and readiness are superpowers. Being the person who consistently says, "I'll handle it," and then actually does creates a reputation that propels careers forward.

The readiness mindset:

- Anticipate what might go wrong and have backup plans.
- Be aware of projects adjacent to yours that matter to the whole team's success.

There's a caveat to all this: just because you pick up the slack when the plan goes awry, doesn't mean you're off the hook for delivering your regular work. As you seek to be a problem solver and reliable contributor to the whole (including your own work) keep this in mind:

- Be selective about what you commit to (say no when necessary).
- Over-communicate progress on important deliverables.
- Build in buffer time for unexpected complications.
- If you may miss a deadline, flag it early with a solution.
- Follow through on even small commitments.

RULE 14

Execution on small things
matters.

What if we told that almost everything you do will be in the spotlight. Because, sometimes, it will be. A dashed-off email might be forwarded to the CEO, and someone might base critical decisions on that random spreadsheet you created.

In the office, or the Zoom room, small errors can have outsized impact on perception. Consistent minor mistakes in client communications—like typos, formatting inconsistencies, or small calculation inaccuracies—often damage credibility far beyond their apparent significance. While these details might seem inconsequential, they create ripple effects that influence how others evaluate your overall competence.

When stakeholders notice small oversights, they naturally question the rigor and reliability of your broader work. This skepticism follows a logical pattern: if someone misses visible details that could easily be caught, what might they be overlooking in areas requiring deeper expertise or judgment? The pattern creates a trust deficit that can undermine otherwise excellent work.

Perception is crucial. How your work looks often influences how people judge its substance. Fair or not, a polished presentation signals attention to detail and respect for your audience. The quality of visible elements becomes a proxy for evaluating the invisible aspects of your work—your analytical thoroughness, your commitment to excellence, and your respect for the recipient's time and intelligence.

DETAIL ORIENTATION DOESN'T MEAN PERFECTIONISM

Being detail-oriented means focusing on the details that matter most. The trick is discernment, knowing which small things have big impacts.

It's not a question of which corners to cut, but one of understanding what drives success. It can take time to learn this when you're entering a new workplace, but paying attention to it can help you identify the kinds of performative time-wasters that don't matter. Time is precious and there's always way more to do than can be done. So, finding the details that deliver is a smart approach to maximizing your effectiveness.

DOUBLE-CHECK YOUR WORK

Simple but powerful. Build a habit of reviewing everything before it leaves your hands. Ask yourself: "If this were the only example of my work someone saw, would I be proud of it?"

Don't let your little mistakes make more work for others. We all make mistakes. The best colleagues fix their own mistakes before they become someone else's problem. When errors do occur, addressing them promptly and completely demonstrates both accountability and consideration for others. The best approach includes clear acknowledgment, quick correction with highlighted changes, and specific steps to prevent recurrence.

Respect people's time: Nothing communicates professionalism like being prepared, punctual, and efficient with collective time.

Implementing simple time management practices, like distributing agendas with pre-reading materials before meetings and strictly adhering to start and end times, can transform organizational culture around time use. These boundaries typically lead to better preparation and more efficient collaboration.

Follow through on commitments: Remember the small promises. The article you said you'd send, the introduction you offered to make, the feedback you agreed to provide. Reliability in small things builds trust for big things.

Develop systems, not just intentions: Don't rely on memory alone. Create systems to manage details, whether it's a task management app, a follow-up protocol, or a project checklist.

Consistent follow-through requires systematic approaches rather than good intentions. Many find that implementing end-of-day review practices helps track commitments and schedule specific fulfillment times. These systems create a reproducible practice that can help you create a strong reputation for excellence.

How you do the work is often as important if not more so than what you're doing. If you take care of the small things all the time, you set yourself up for bigger successes.

INTEGRATING COURTESY, COMPETENCE, AND CARE

Observing careers across various industries reveals a pattern that separates those who merely survive from those who genuinely thrive. It's not about being perfect at everything, it's about integrating these fundamental elements in a way that creates a compelling professional presence.

Remember this when thinking about putting your best foot forward: it's not about perfection. It's about showing up as your most competent, caring, and courteous self consistently. This foundation will carry you through challenges, build your reputation, and ultimately help you thrive in any workplace.

Our observation of many career trajectories repeatedly demonstrates that courtesy without competence is ineffective. You'll be well-liked but not respected. Competence without courtesy is unsustainable. You might succeed short-term but eventually hit relationship barriers. Readiness without attention to detail is risky. You'll respond to crises but may create new ones through carelessness.

When you integrate all these elements—being courteous, building competence, staying ready, and caring for details—you become the colleague everyone wants to work with and the professional everyone wants to hire. It's that simple...and that difficult.

Your reputation isn't built on grand gestures or occasional brilliance. It's built on consistent, daily choices to show up at your best, especially when no one seems to be watching. Because someone always is. (And in the age of digital communication and documentation, someone is literally always watching!)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Lead with courtesy:** Approach all workplace relationships with genuine consideration, even (especially) with difficult people and even when it's not reciprocated right away, because reputation compounds over time.
2. **Master competence:** Understand and deliver what excellence looks like in your workplace, not just in general, but in context.
3. **Stay ready:** Develop the ability to adapt quickly when plans change and to step up when unexpected needs arise.
4. **Care about details:** Pay attention to the small things that signal professionalism and respect for others. Small errors can create trust gaps that outweigh their size. Details shape your credibility.
5. **Integrate all elements:** Recognize that your professional presence is strongest when kindness, competence, and care work together.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think about someone in your workplace whose professional presence you admire. Which aspects of kindness, competence, and care do they demonstrate effectively?
2. What's one small detail in your work that you could pay more attention to that would significantly improve others' perception of your professionalism?
3. When have you been caught unprepared at work? What systems or habits could you develop to be more ready for similar situations in the future?
4. How can you demonstrate kindness to a difficult colleague while still maintaining appropriate boundaries?
5. What's your personal "quality standard" for your work? Is it aligned with what your organization actually values?

A technical drawing of a mechanical device, possibly a cable management system, featuring a curved cable and various structural components with dimension lines.

CHAPTER 4

MIRRORS ARE GREAT TOOLS

A technical drawing of a mechanical device, possibly a camera or a similar instrument, mounted on a tripod base. The drawing includes various dimension lines and labels.

"Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom."

—Aristotle

Picture this: a recently hired associate at a marketing agency with a few quality campaigns already on their resume, walked into their first client meeting brimming with confidence. During the discussion, they interrupted the senior strategist to explain a "better approach" to the client's social media strategy. The room went silent. Later, their manager pulled them aside and said something game-changing for them: "Your ideas aren't bad, but you haven't established enough credibility and authority to be heard yet. First, listen to truly understand their business as well as they do. Give space for the trust to build. Then your ideas can really find their place at the table."

This "moment" illustrates a critical insight: Technical knowledge without self-awareness is not just ineffective but can be actively counterproductive. The associate thought they were impressing everyone with their brilliant ideas. Instead, they were broadcasting their lack of understanding about client relationships and organizational dynamics.

Self-awareness might be the most underrated skill in today's workplace. It's perhaps the single most essential hallmark of a mature professional. While technical expertise gets the spotlight, knowing yourself—your strengths, weaknesses, triggers, and patterns—creates the foundation for everything else. Without this knowledge, people operate like ships without

navigation instruments: they might move forward, but they have no reliable way to correct their course when they inevitably drift off target.

Self-awareness gives you a decisive advantage wherever you work. Everyone needs to develop it systematically and learn to leverage it for both personal growth and professional gains. Understanding these principles early can prevent painful missteps that derail otherwise promising careers.

RULE 15

Know your strengths, own your blind spots.

One of the greatest paradoxes of self-awareness is that it begins with acknowledging its absence. That means recognizing there are aspects of yourself and your work that remain blind spots.

There's something refreshingly authentic about people who can say, "I'm great at data analysis, but I struggle with public speaking," or "This is my area of expertise, but for that question, we should consult with Sarah." This kind of honest self-assessment builds trust.

Being open with your colleagues in this way takes a certain amount of courage, but it also invites others in, creates natural opportunities to support each other, helps define important areas for collaboration, and ultimately makes the whole team stronger.

Self-awareness creates a permission structure for others to be authentic too. When a leader admits they're still learning something, it gives team members permission to acknowledge their own growth areas without fear of judgment.

TOOLS FOR SELF-DISCOVERY

While no assessment tool is perfect, frameworks like CliftonStrengths, MBTI, DiSC, or People Styles can provide useful insights for understanding yourself and others. The value isn't in the label you receive but in the conversations these frameworks enable about preferences, motivations, and differences.

A word of caution: Don't let assessments become boxes that limit you. "I can't lead that project because I'm an introvert," or "That's just how INTJs communicate," are misuses of these tools. Personality isn't destiny, it's a starting point for development.

You need to approach your development with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Make a practice of asking for feedback after major projects, targeting different stakeholders: your boss, direct reports, peers in other departments, and vendors. What makes this approach powerful is listening without justifying, thanking people for their honesty, and visibly incorporating their feedback.

Steps toward having a growth mindset:

- Seeking feedback from diverse perspectives.
- Distinguishing between the emotional sting of criticism and its potential usefulness.
- Viewing mistakes as data points, not defining moments.
- Cultivating relationships with people who will tell you the truth.
- Regularly revisiting your assumptions about your strengths and weaknesses.

TRY THIS

Create a “ME AT WORK” User Manual

When starting a new role or project, share a brief overview of how you work best:

- 1. Communication preferences: How you prefer to receive information (email, chat, in-person).*
- 2. Decision-making style: Your approach to making choices (analytical, intuitive, collaborative).*
- 3. Stress responses: How you typically react under pressure.*
- 4. Feedback reception: How others can best give you constructive input.*
- 5. Core values: What principles guide your approach day-to-day.*
- 6. This kind of openness accelerates team functioning and demonstrates mature self-awareness.*

RULE 16

Admitting mistakes quickly
builds trust over time.

Confronting mistakes proactively is one of the most powerful demonstrations of self-awareness. When pros discover errors in their work, they face a critical choice: They can hope the mistake goes unnoticed or they can take immediate ownership.

Being successful usually means choosing the path of proactive acknowledgment. This approach—taking full responsibility, offering

solutions, and implementing preventive measures—not only resolves immediate issues but also builds profound trust. Leadership development reports from McKinsey, Google, Dweck, and others identify this type of ownership as evidence of leadership potential, often weighing it more heavily than technical prowess when considering advancement opportunities. We've seen enough people with brilliant skills struggle due to this that, stats or not, we can affirm the truth of these ideas.

Understanding the nature of your mistakes helps you address them more effectively and develop systems to prevent similar errors in the future.

ERRORS OF OMISSION

These are the sins of neglect, the things that you failed to do which you should have done.

When you encounter errors of omission, the most effective response combines immediate accountability with both short-term solutions and long-term prevention. Rather than making excuses or deflecting responsibility, mature folks acknowledge oversights promptly, communicate transparently with all affected parties, and develop systematic solutions that transform individual mistakes into organizational improvements.

The best recovery approaches involve not only fixing the immediate problem but also creating alternative solutions that might be more amazing than the original plan. This approach often transforms potential relationship damage into strengthened connections based on demonstrated accountability and problem-solving ability.

Common errors of omission include:

- Forgetting key tasks: Missing deadlines or overlooking steps in a process
- Neglecting to inform stakeholders: Failing to keep relevant people updated

- Skipping verification steps: Not checking work before submitting it
- Missing contextual information: Lacking awareness of important background

We all have limited cognitive bandwidth. The higher your workload, the more likely you are to drop something important. Creating systems to catch these potential oversights is essential for reliability.

ERRORS OF COMMISSION

These are active mistakes—taking the wrong action rather than failing to act.

Decision errors often occur when short-term benefits obscure long-term consequences. When people prioritize immediate gains (like cost savings) without thoroughly evaluating potential risks, they frequently encounter significant downstream costs that far outweigh the initial advantages. These situations highlight how judgment errors typically involve overlooking warning signs or failing to consider ripple effects rather than simply lacking information.

Types of commission errors:

- Judgment errors: Making poor decisions despite having necessary information
- Value compromises: Taking actions that conflict with professional ethics
- Insubordination: Deliberately ignoring established protocols or instructions
- Overconfidence: Proceeding without sufficient verification or consultation

When you've made a commission error:

1. Resist the urge to defend a failing decision.
2. Analyze what information you missed or misinterpreted.
3. Take decisive action to correct course.

4. Be transparent about what led to the error in judgment.
5. Extract learning that improves your decision-making process.

The path to rebuilding trust after these mistakes is longer because they involve active choices rather than oversights. Recovery requires honesty, visible corrective action, and demonstrated learning over time.

ERRORS OF AMBIVALENCE

Perhaps the most insidious category, ambivalence mistakes stem from lack of care or engagement.

Ambivalence manifests as:

- Disengagement: Going through the motions without genuine investment
- Attention lapses: Making mistakes due to divided focus or distraction
- Procrastination: Delaying important work until quality or timeliness suffers
- Minimal effort: Doing just enough to get by rather than striving for excellence

Signs you might be experiencing ambivalence include:

- You can't remember what you worked on yesterday
- You find yourself doing the minimum required
- You feel nothing when receiving feedback (positive or negative)
- You stop suggesting improvements or asking questions
- You catch yourself counting the hours until you can leave

The antidote to disengagement is reconnection to purpose, to people, or to personal growth. If you can't find that connection in your current role, it may be time for a change.

TRY THIS

The Weekly Review

Set aside time at the end of each week to reflect on these questions:

- 1. What went well this week and why?*
- 2. What challenges did I face and how did I respond?*
- 3. What patterns am I noticing in my work and interactions?*
- 4. What feedback did I receive (directly or indirectly) and what does it tell me?*
- 5. What's one thing I want to do differently next week based on these reflections?*

RULE 17

Reflection is a skill.

Self-aware humans implement deliberate systems for analyzing their work patterns and decision-making processes. Rather than treating mistakes as isolated incidents, they document both the errors and the psychological or situational factors that contributed to them. This structured approach to reflection helps identify recurring cognitive patterns that might lead to future errors.

Through consistent documentation and analysis, you can recognize specific mental states, such as rushing to demonstrate capability, seeking quick wins, or avoiding difficult conversations, that often precede mistakes. With this awareness, you can develop personalized safeguards

that trigger when these high-risk mindsets appear, such as deliberately slowing down, seeking additional perspectives, or implementing extra verification steps.

Effective reflection practices:

- Regular timing: Scheduled reflection at daily, weekly, or monthly intervals
- Consistent questions: Using the same prompts to track patterns over time
- Written documentation: Capturing insights that might otherwise be forgotten
- Action orientation: Translating insights into specific behavior changes
- Progress tracking: Monitoring how reflection leads to improvement

The key is consistency. Like compound interest, the benefits of regular reflection accumulate over time, building self-knowledge that helps you make better decisions and overcome workplace challenges more effectively.

SEEKING AND PROCESSING FEEDBACK

Feedback is the mirror that shows us what we cannot see ourselves. Yet many either avoid feedback entirely or dismiss it defensively when it doesn't align with their self-image. Self-awareness demands we actively seek feedback, even when it might be uncomfortable. We need to recognize that others often see patterns and tendencies in our behavior that remain invisible to us.

Three questions that can invite impactful feedback from your team are:

1. "What should I start doing that I'm not currently doing?"
2. "What should I stop doing that isn't helping us succeed?"
3. "What should I continue doing that's working well?"

By framing feedback in terms of specific behaviors rather than personal qualities, you make it easier for team members to provide honest input. Implementing changes based on what you hear builds trust and a safe environment for candor.

The feedback processing protocol:

1. Listen without interruption or defense.
2. Ask clarifying questions to ensure understanding.
3. Thank the person regardless of how the feedback feels in the moment.
4. Take time to reflect privately before deciding what to integrate.
5. Follow up to share what you're implementing and why.

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS

We all have "hot buttons," situations or interactions that trigger strong emotional responses that may not be proportional to the actual event. These triggers often have roots in past experiences, core values, or deep insecurities.

Being self-aware means we need to identify our triggers and develop strategies to manage them effectively. It's why we've already gone over the importance of being calm, cool, and collected.

Trigger management strategies:

1. Identify your common triggers through reflection on past strong reactions.
2. Notice physical cues that signal a trigger is being activated (tension, increased heart rate, changed breathing).
3. Create a brief mental or physical pause when triggered.
4. Develop prepared responses for common trigger situations.
5. Debrief with yourself after triggered reactions to refine your management approach.

RULE 18

Those who grow fastest admit
they need to.

The most effective workers share a paradoxical quality: they combine deep confidence with genuine humility. This seemingly contradictory pairing comes from accurate self-knowledge, understanding both their significant capabilities and their very real limitations.

A classic self-awareness sentiment goes like this: "I spent the first five years of my career trying to be a genius. I spent the next five years realizing I wasn't one. I've spent every year since then figuring out how to make the most of exactly who I am." That's the self-awareness advantage in a nutshell.

This level of self-awareness—not just knowing what you do well and poorly, but understanding your patterns and triggers—creates a foundation for sustained success that technical skills alone cannot provide.

Self-awareness gives you distinct advantages:

- Strategic role selection: Choosing positions that align with your strengths
- Complementary team building: Surrounding yourself with people whose capabilities offset your limitations
- Pattern interruption: Recognizing and redirecting unproductive personal tendencies
- Decision clarity: Understanding how your biases affect your choices
- Targeted development: Focusing growth efforts where they'll have maximum impact
- Authentic leadership: Building trust through genuine confidence and appropriate vulnerability

In a world of increasing specialization and technical expertise, the ultimate competitive advantage may be the most human skill of all:

knowing yourself deeply and accurately and using that knowledge to continuously evolve.

Self-awareness isn't just about avoiding mistakes, it's about maximizing your unique potential. When you understand your distinctive strengths, values, and working style, you can design a career that energizes rather than depletes you, contribute in ways that matter most, and build relationships based on authentic connection rather than impression management.

FROM THE DESK OF KEVIN

I'm a talker. I process verbally. I ruminate orally. And for more than a few years I was too quick to share at meetings. I'd share too long. I'd rush to get my voice into the fray. And even though my contributions were sometimes good, the way I delivered them shortcut my inclusion and reputation. I had to recognize that I needed to learn to listen more and listen first. To invest in understanding others and including them. It took a long time to change my default operating settings. And even today I still have to be cognizant of my tendency to take over a conversation. So I regularly pay attention to myself in group settings. I am keenly aware of my behavior, choices, and posture. Willful self-awareness has been a major part of my success and growth. But it's never automatic. And even though it gets easier, it still takes effort.

The journey to self-awareness never truly ends. As your roles change, as you develop new skills, as you face new challenges, your understanding of yourself must continuously deepen and expand. Those who thrive longest are those who remain perpetually curious about themselves, about their reactions, their assumptions, their blind spots, and their evolving capabilities.

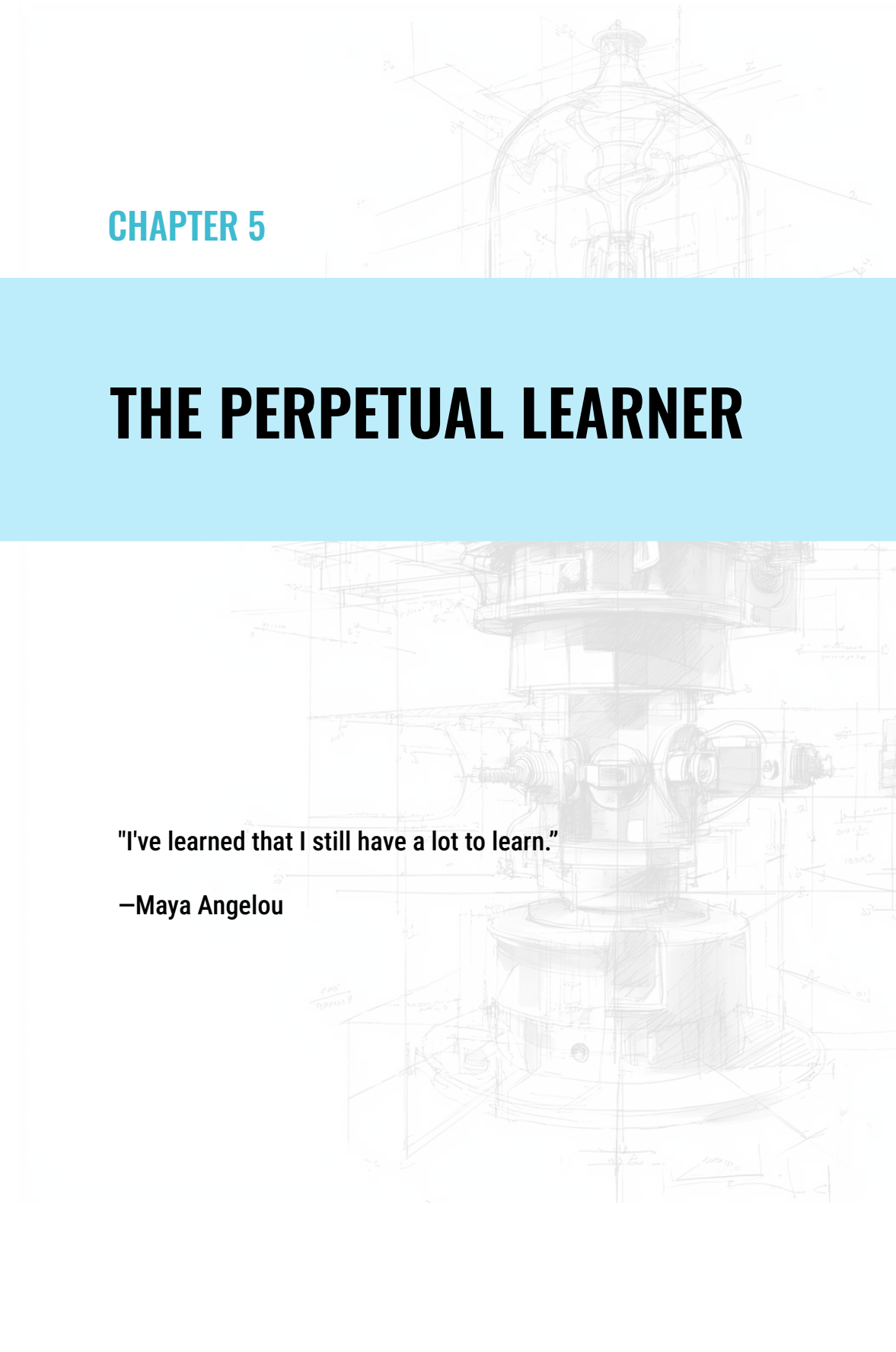
In the end, self-awareness wins the day not because it makes you perfect, but because it makes you adaptable. And in a world of constant change, adaptability may be the most valuable skill of all.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Humility opens the door to growth:** Acknowledging what you don't know opens the path to learn and improve.
2. **Know your patterns:** Understand your default reactions and triggers—so you can manage them, not be ruled by them.
3. **Own mistakes completely and distinguish between types of mistakes:** Taking full responsibility for errors builds trust and transforms mistakes into opportunities for growth. Recognizing whether you've made an error of omission, commission, or ambivalence helps you develop targeted prevention strategies.
4. **Make reflection a practice:** Regular, structured self-reflection accelerates development and deepens self-awareness.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What was the last significant mistake you made professionally? How did you handle it, and what would you do differently now?
2. In the past week, what patterns have you noticed in your work style or emotional reactions? How might understanding these patterns help you be more effective?
3. What's one area where your self-perception might differ from how others see you? How could you get honest feedback about this gap?
4. Think about a colleague you consider highly self-aware. What specific behaviors demonstrate their self-awareness, and which could you adopt?
5. What aspect of your professional self would you like to understand better? What one step could you take this week to develop greater insight in this area?

A faint, light blue technical drawing of a mechanical device, possibly a lamp or a piece of machinery, is visible in the background. It features various lines, dimensions, and a central bulbous structure.

CHAPTER 5

THE PERPETUAL LEARNER

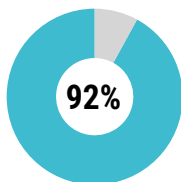
"I've learned that I still have a lot to learn."

—Maya Angelou

In academic settings, learning comes from the professor. In professional environments, learning can come from anywhere and anyone. And learning as a professional is a bit more of a means to an end like solving problems, leaning into the mission, advancing organizational objectives, as opposed to the whole reason you show up at all.

Yet, paradoxically, your ability to learn continuously—even from making mistakes—may be your most valuable asset.

In a rapidly changing world where LLMs, GPTs, and Robots are evolving and technical knowledge becomes outdated faster than milk in a hot car, what separates out achievers is how quickly and effectively they can learn what they don't yet know. The capacity for continuous learning, for approaching each experience with curiosity, humility, and systematic reflection, will sustain your career long after your formal education fades into distant memory.



Organizations with strong learning cultures are 92% more likely to innovate, 52% more productive, and 17% more profitable. (Bersin by Deloitte, 2017)

RULE 19

Learn to learn on your own.

Most people have developed robust learning skills through their educational experience. The crushing pressure of exams, capstone projects, and looming deadlines. Despite the chaos, students typically know how to approach it: break down the material, prioritize what to study, find the right resources, and put in the hours.

Being a systematic and a dedicated learner may be the most valuable asset gained from education. Not the specific content knowledge, but the ability to acquire and apply new information efficiently. Then, its application must be adapted for the complexity of work.

CONVERTING ACADEMIC LEARNING METHODS TO CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As we’ve already covered, the gaps between the academic and working worlds can often create challenges for people early in their career. But there are also some very important benefits as well. The skills that made students outstanding in academic settings can be powerful tools for post-collegiate learning when adapted to workplace realities:

Academic Learning	Professional Adaptation
Syllabus	Create your own learning roadmap for necessary skills
Assigned readings	Curate industry publications, books, and resources
Study groups	Form peer learning groups with colleagues
Office hours	Identify mentors and request specific guidance
Exams and papers	Create practical projects to apply new knowledge
Semester timeline	Set personal learning milestones and deadlines

FROM THE DESK OF BRYAN

Fresh out of college with an engineering degree, I landed a job in the chassis division (think suspension, brakes, etc.) of a big three automaker in Detroit. I had a boss who was known for giving "opportunities" to young engineers with a bit of a sink or swim approach. When my chance came, I was determined to be the first entry level engineer to really wow the team, whatever I thought that meant at the time. I got my opportunity and found myself in the design garage with a prototype car on a lift and a group of senior engineers gathered under the car with pens at the ready to critique. As I explained my brilliant solution and pointed out how it would work, a colleague interrupted with crushing words... "Wouldn't it be easier and cheaper to just..." And he was right. What I had neglected to do was clarify about 5 things including the reality of the assembly line sequence. Turns out there is a line worker inside the car at that point in the assembly so my extremely elaborate one person solution wasn't even needed. It was the equivalent of designing an expensive, complicated, robotic way to uncork a bottle of wine only to have someone say, I got it –it's a twist off. Failure is a great teacher. I learned a lot that day and used that experience to become a student of the bigger picture—the processes, people, and other design and engineering elements—that connected to my work. And that has served me well throughout my career.

That humbling moment taught me something crucial: work spaces don't just require different knowledge than the classroom, they demand a fundamentally different relationship with learning itself.

The key difference is that you must now drive this process yourself, without the external structure provided by academic institutions. You need to become your own learning architects, designing systems for continuous growth that serve your specific career needs. You should treat skill development as an active project, not a vague aspiration to be wished for, and analyze requirements, allocate resources, track progress, and measure outcomes with the same rigor you apply to your core work.

RULE 20

Curiosity is a competitive advantage.

More and more we've come to believe that curiosity is perhaps the most underrated skill in life. It's the engine that drives continued growth long after formal education ends.

CURIOSITY AS A FORWARD-LOOKING GROWTH MINDSET

Curiosity shows up when you're not afraid to dig a little deeper. Maybe you're in a meeting and someone throws out a bunch of numbers or talks about a process you don't totally get. Instead of just nodding along, you jump in and ask how they got there or why things work that way.

Doing this shows you're interested in more than just ticking boxes, you really want to understand what's going on. It helps you learn new things, connect with people in other teams, and sometimes spot ways to improve things that nobody else has noticed yet.

Leaders typically respond positively to this kind of engagement, as it demonstrates both intellectual curiosity and initiative. The willingness to ask clarifying questions in group settings not only benefits the individual

but often elevates the understanding of the entire team, as many others may have the same questions but hesitate to ask them.

Curiosity is about more than filling knowledge gaps. It's about actively seeking new perspectives, questioning assumptions, and exploring emerging trends. It's forward-looking, focused not just on understanding the current landscape but anticipating how it might evolve.

How often do you take the time to ponder, "I wonder why...?"

Curiosity in practice:

- Wondering why processes exist the way they do
- Seeking to understand the context behind decisions
- Taking interest in adjacent fields and departments
- Exploring new tools and methodologies within your field
- Asking "what if?" questions that challenge assumptions

The curious professional never stops asking, "Why?" and "How?" and "What else might work?" This mindset leads to innovations, improvements, and opportunities that others miss.

Many early-career folks hesitate to ask questions, fearing it will expose their ignorance or waste people's time. Yet observation of senior leaders reveals something surprising: the most respected executives often ask the most questions. Their inquiries aren't displays of knowledge but genuine efforts to understand.

A word of caution: do try not to ask questions just to hear yourself talk. That, of course, is not curiosity.

QUESTIONS THAT UNCOVER FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Not all questions have equal weight. Some merely clarify existing information, while others open entirely new avenues of exploration.

Questions can be powerful tools for identifying both organizational opportunities and personal development paths. The right questions help map the terrain ahead and spot promising directions before they become obvious to everyone.

The most valuable questions often:

- Challenge underlying assumptions
- Connect seemingly unrelated areas
- Explore root causes rather than symptoms
- Consider future implications beyond immediate outcomes
- Reframe problems in ways that reveal new solutions

But to ask them well you should:

- Frame questions from curiosity, not criticism.
- Clarify what you understand before asking about what you don't.
- Be specific rather than general.
- Listen fully to the answer without planning your next question.
- Follow up when the answer reveals new areas for exploration.

Here's a question taxonomy that can be useful:

- Clarifying questions ensure basic understanding: "Could you explain what you mean by 'streamlined process'?"
- Probing questions explore underlying assumptions: "What led us to focus on this particular approach?"
- Strategic questions examine broader implications: "How does this initiative align with our priority of expanding into new markets?"
- Learning questions seek to fill knowledge gaps: "Could you walk me through how the current system works?"
- Challenge questions (when used judiciously) test the strength of ideas: "What would happen if our key assumption proved incorrect?"

TRY THIS

For one week, commit to asking at least one forward-looking question daily. Note how it changes your awareness of potential opportunities and challenges on the horizon.

RULE 21

You know a lot. But not everything.

Professionals have more degrees than ever before and that education provides a valuable foundation, but the map is not the territory. A degree gives tools to understand the world—it doesn't guarantee mastery of the specific environment one is entering. This might be one of harder adjustments to the world of work. And to be honest it doesn't stop after a few years. You'll find yourself in the position of knowing that you know a lot and yet having to accept that you might not know as much as you think. About the company, the market. The audience, the team, the product, and on and on.

The gap between theoretical knowledge and workplace application can be substantial. Education teaches historiography, not how to make historical research relevant to a museum's fundraising goals. It teaches coding principles, not how to collaborate with designers and product managers in an agile environment. It teaches psychological theories, not how to maneuver the practical HR realities of compensation negotiations and performance improvement plans.

RECOGNIZING THE SHELF-LIFE OF YOUR CURRENT EXPERTISE

In many fields, the half-life of technical knowledge is shrinking dramatically. What someone learned in their degree program may be outdated within years or even months. This was true even before the proliferation of AI tools that allow anyone to become a pseudo-expert quite quickly. (And to make this reality more difficult, we'll see later that often close enough can sometimes be good enough.)

Those who thrive long-term aren't those who cling to their original training. They're those who recognize that expertise is provisional and requires continuous renewal. The most forward-thinking pros don't just update their knowledge reactively; they anticipate areas where current expertise might become outdated and prepare accordingly.

What worked six months ago might be obsolete tomorrow. Rather than positioning yourself as an expert with fixed knowledge, develop systems for continuous learning: follow key thought leaders, participate in learning communities, experiment with emerging platforms, and set aside dedicated time each week to explore new developments.

This approach transforms potential career threats, like rapidly changing technologies and methodologies, into opportunities for growth and differentiation.

RULE 22

Learning how to work is its own full curriculum.

Working effectively is a skill set separate from technical or academic expertise. It includes navigating organizational politics, managing energy across the workday, collaborating across different communication styles, and understanding unwritten cultural norms.

We'll dive into some of the mindsets that are cornerstones for success in future chapters. But without question, a learning posture is foundational.

THE CAREER-LONG LEARNING CURVE

It's easy to assume that professional accomplishment would flow naturally from academic abilities. But being technically capable and qualified to do a job is just step one. Some other differentiators are the secondary skills most have never been explicitly taught: how to scope projects realistically, manage stakeholder expectations, give and receive constructive feedback, balance competing priorities, etc.

What many don't realize is that this learning curve never truly ends. As careers advance, the skills that matter evolve significantly. Managing oneself as an individual contributor requires different capabilities than leading a team. Leading a team differs from managing a department. Executive leadership presents yet another set of challenges.

It's best to develop a systematic approach to learning and really lean into the process at each stage. There are many ways to this, but a few stand out as helpful and easy to embrace:

- Reflection routines: Regular assessment of what's working and what isn't.
- Feedback mechanisms: Structured ways to gather input on effectiveness.
- Organizational awareness practices: Methods for understanding changing dynamics.
- Relationship development: Approaches for building networks that provide insight and support.
- Environmental scanning: Techniques for identifying shifts in industry practices and expectations.

The fundamentals of good work don't change, but how those fundamentals manifest in practice evolves constantly.

THE META-SKILL ADAPTATION

You're not likely to have one job at one organization for the next 40 years. Without a doubt you'll change roles, companies, even industries. And you'll have to figure out how to carry your lessons forward while learning new ones.

The transition between different organizational contexts, whether from a large corporation to a startup, from one industry to another, or even between departments within the same company, often requires a complete recalibration of approach. Decision-making processes, communication norms, and success metrics frequently differ drastically across these environments. Adaptation requires treating each new context like learning a new language: through systematic observation, strategic questioning, intentional experimentation, and continuous refinement.

This meta-skill, the ability to decipher how learning happens in different contexts, becomes increasingly valuable as careers grow more fluid. With people changing roles, organizations, and even industries more frequently, the capacity to quickly understand how to be effective in new environments creates significant advantage.

Each workplace has its own "learning language" and with it a list of effective ways to acquire and apply new knowledge in that specific context:

- Do people learn through formal documentation or informal conversations?
- Is trial-and-error encouraged or is precision expected from the start?
- Are questions welcomed openly or expected to be researched individually first?
- Is knowledge shared freely or held as currency?
- Do people learn mostly through training or through on-the-job experience?

TRY THIS

In your current workplace, identify the primary channels through which important knowledge flows. Is it meetings? Documentation? One-on-one conversations? Observation? Once you understand how learning happens in your environment, you can position yourself to access those streams more effectively.

EMBRACING THE IDENTITY OF A PERPETUAL LEARNER FOR CAREER LONGEVITY

How we see ourselves shapes our actions. People who identify as "continuous learners" approach challenges, feedback, and mistakes differently than those who see themselves as "knowledgeable experts."

The expert focuses on demonstrating competence; the learner focuses on developing it. The expert fears looking foolish; the learner understands that looking foolish is often part of growth. The expert defends current knowledge; the learner remains open to better information.

Some of the most dynamic professionals we work with aren't necessarily those who start with the most impressive credentials or highest technical aptitude. They're the ones who maintain a learning orientation throughout their careers—staying curious, asking questions, recognizing their knowledge gaps, and continuously developing both their specialty expertise and their understanding of how to work effectively.

One word of caution: Don't let the need for perpetual learning lead you to inaction, however. There's always more you won't know. And as you grow in wisdom you'll be able to take smart action even when you haven't learned everything you might have wanted to.

In the end it isn't a specific skill set that might become obsolete which guarantees long-term accomplishment. It's the meta-skill of learning how to learn in each new context. Master that, and you can remain valuable regardless of how any industry evolves. Your education hasn't finished. It's just entering a new, less structured, and potentially more valuable phase. Embrace it. After all, in a world where change is the only constant, the perpetual learner isn't just employable—they're indispensable.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Leverage academic learning skills:** The learning methods that made you successful in school can be powerful at the office when adapted appropriately.
2. **Cultivate forward-looking curiosity:** Develop genuine interest in emerging trends, adjacent fields, and organizational dynamics beyond your current role, and use that curiosity to uncover needs and ideas others might miss.
3. **Ask strategic questions:** Use inquiry not just to clarify but to uncover insights, challenge assumptions, and shape future directions.
4. **Recognize knowledge obsolescence:** Understand that expertise has a shelf life and requires continuous renewal, especially in rapidly changing fields.
5. **Develop learning systems:** Create sustainable routines and practices for continuous development throughout your career.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What learning methods from your academic experience could you adapt for your professional development? Which might need significant modification?
2. What area adjacent to your current expertise are you genuinely curious about? How might exploring it create future opportunities?
3. What question could you ask in your next meeting that might reveal new possibilities rather than just clarifying existing information?
4. Which aspects of your current knowledge or skills might be at risk of becoming outdated in the next few years? How could you prepare for this?
5. What learning routine could you realistically commit to implementing weekly? What might make this sustainable over the long term?

SECTION II EXERCISE

BUILD YOUR PERSONAL LEARNING SYSTEM

Part 1: Reflect (3–5 minutes)

Think about your current approach to learning in your job. Then respond to the following prompts:

1. What's one skill, topic, or area of your work you wish you understood better?
2. When was the last time you intentionally tried to learn something new professionally? What prompted it—and how did you go about it?
3. What gets in the way of your ongoing learning right now? Be honest.

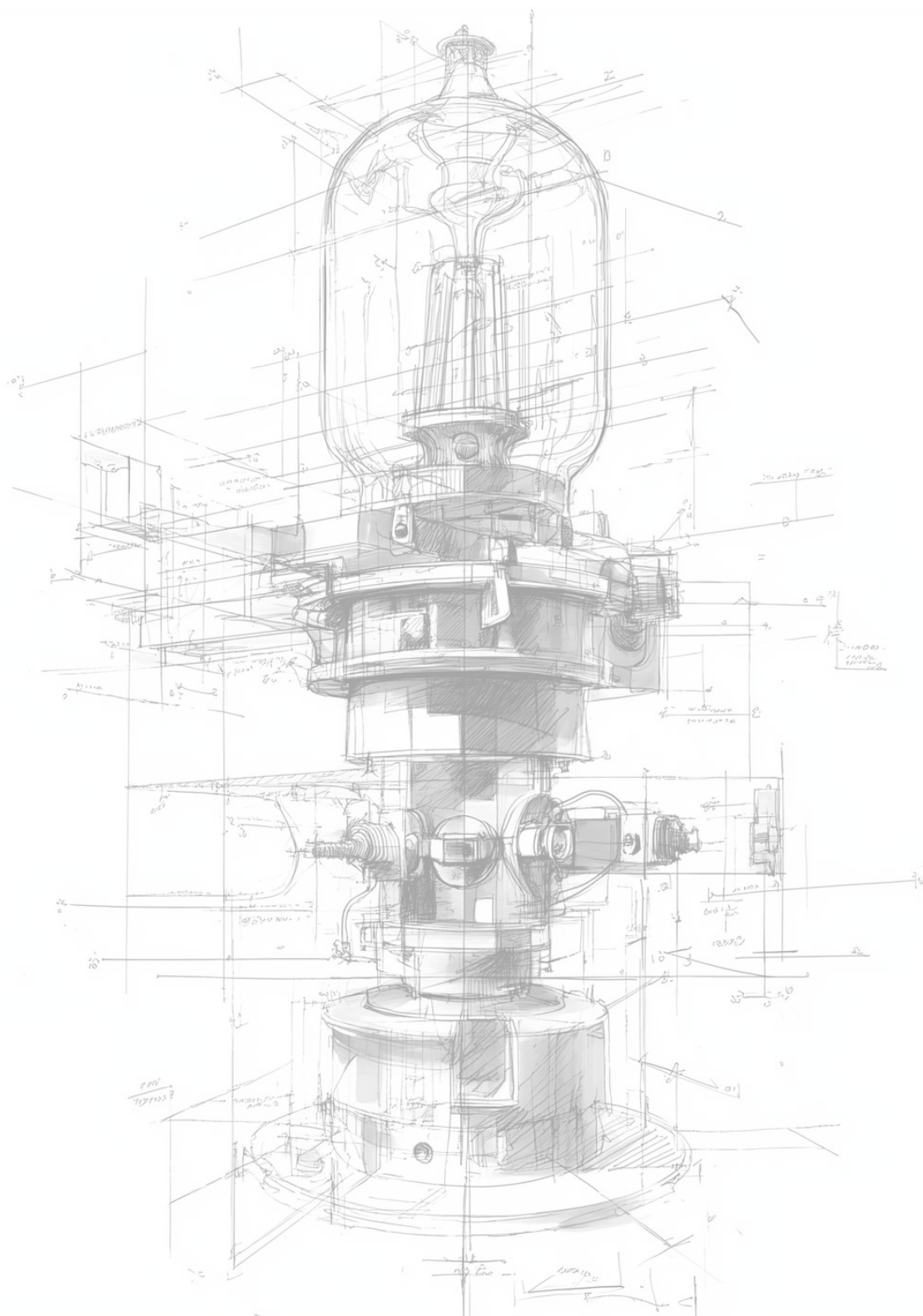
Part 2: Design (5 minutes)

Now sketch the outline of a simple, sustainable learning system you could realistically commit to. Use the prompts below to make it actionable:

- **Topic or focus area:**
What's the first thing you want to learn more about?
- **Map your learning sources by category:**
 - People (mentors, experts, peers with complementary knowledge)
 - Content (journals, books, courses, podcasts, newsletters)
 - Experiences (projects, stretch assignments, skills practice)
 - Reflection tools (journaling methods, feedback mechanisms)
- **Frequency and format:**
How will you build it into your week? (e.g., 30 minutes Friday afternoon, lunch-and-learn once a month, daily article before work)
- **Tracking progress:**
What's a lightweight way to track what you're learning or applying?
- **Commitment cue:**
How will you remind yourself to follow through? (e.g., recurring calendar event, accountability buddy, end-of-week journal)

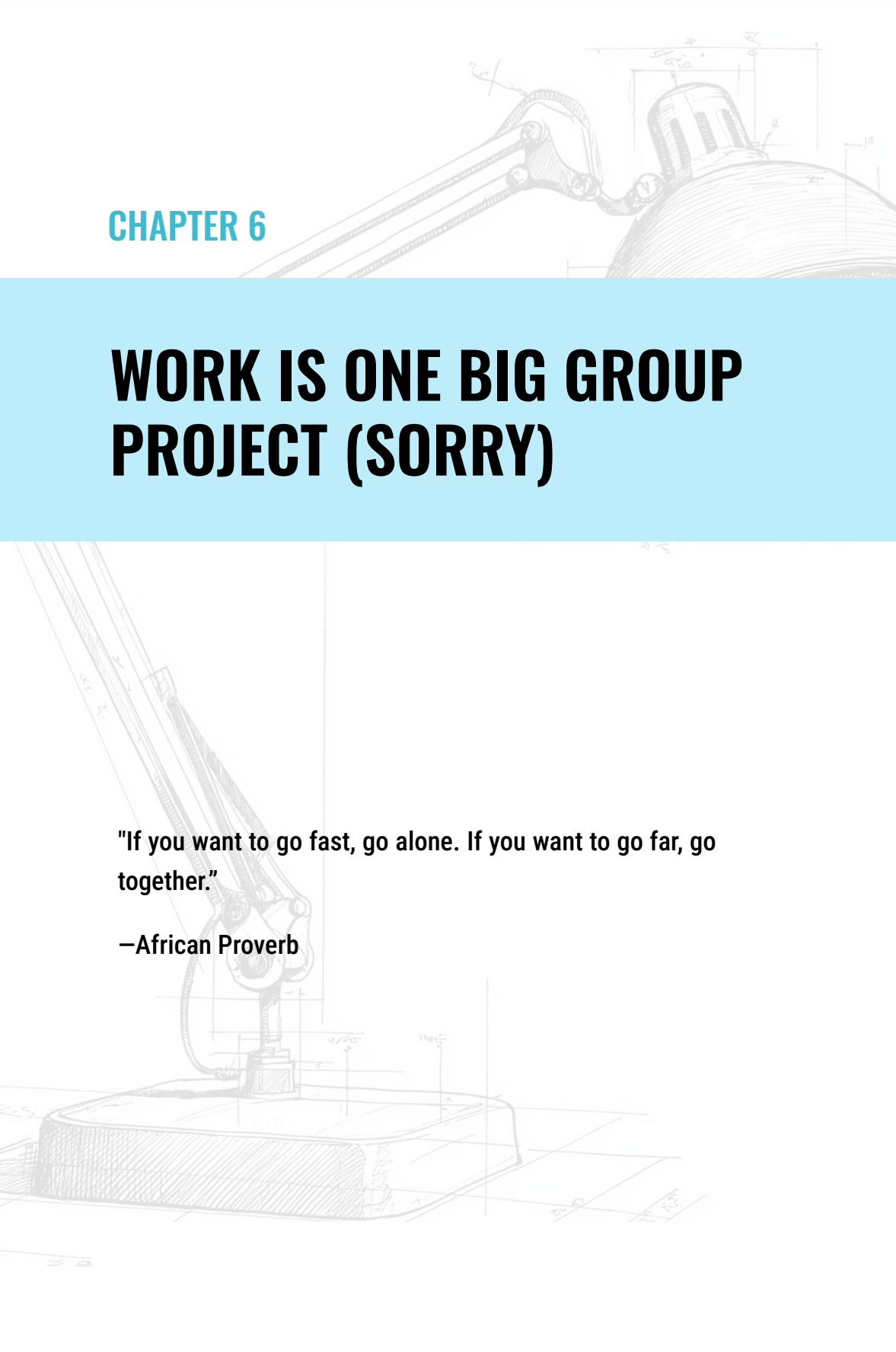
The goal isn't to create a perfect learning system immediately, but to begin intentionally designing an environment that supports continuous growth throughout your career. As one executive put it, "The person who is still learning after five years in the industry isn't competing with colleagues, they're competing with who they were last year." And that's a race worth winning.

Bonus: Name your learning system just for fun. Giving it a title might make it feel more like a personal project than a vague intention.



SECTION III: WORKING WITH OTHERS

**OFFICE POLITICS FOR
PEOPLE WHO HATE OFFICE
POLITICS**

A detailed technical sketch of a robotic arm, rendered in a light blue line-art style. The arm is shown in a curved, reaching position, with various joints, cables, and structural components visible. The sketch is overlaid on a light blue background that features a horizontal band containing the main title. The bottom portion of the image shows the base of the arm and its connection to a platform, with additional technical lines and annotations.

CHAPTER 6

WORK IS ONE BIG GROUP PROJECT (SORRY)

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

—African Proverb

A marketing specialist spent weeks perfecting a campaign launch, meticulously crafting messaging and designing compelling visuals. The day before launch, she discovered the sales team hadn't been briefed on the new offering, the customer support team wasn't prepared for questions about the product, and the website team hadn't allocated resources to update the necessary pages. Her perfectly conceived campaign collapsed because she had treated it as an individual achievement rather than a collaborative effort requiring coordination across multiple departments.

This scenario illustrates a significant shift from academic to professional life: the move from individual to interdependent work.

In school, your performance was largely evaluated based on your personal effort and output. You wrote your own papers, took your own exams, and received your own grades. Even group projects typically ended with individual assessments.

But on the job you can't escape the realities of workplace interdependence. No job truly exists in isolation and your work affects colleagues throughout your organization (and vice versa). These

interconnections influence your effectiveness, help you build productive relationships across departmental boundaries, and develop the relationship capital that enables you to achieve results in collaborative settings.

By recognizing how your work fits into larger systems and processes, you can focus your efforts where they'll have the greatest impact and avoid the frustration of creating work that, however excellent on its own, fails to achieve its purpose due to poor integration with the organization's broader efforts.

RULE 23

Nobody succeeds alone.

WORKPLACE DEPENDENCIES

Think of your organization as a living ecosystem rather than a collection of separate individuals or departments.

Even the most technically specialized roles exist within these webs of mutual dependence. The most brilliant surgeon cannot provide care if the operating room isn't properly scheduled or necessary equipment isn't available. The most innovative software developer's code becomes meaningless if it doesn't integrate with systems that others maintain or if it doesn't address user needs identified by the product team.

This ecosystem reality means that organizational effectiveness depends not just on individual excellence but on how well the connections between roles function. The quality of these connections—the handoffs, the communication, the alignment of priorities—often determines success or failure more than any individual's brilliance.

Many of your workplace dependencies are obvious: You need information from a colleague to complete your report. You require approval from your manager before proceeding with a project. You depend on another team to complete their portion of a deliverable before you can finalize yours.

But other dependencies remain invisible until they become problematic:

- The IT infrastructure that enables your daily work.
- The onboarding processes that integrate new team members.
- The knowledge management systems that preserve institutional learning.
- The facilities maintenance that creates a functional work environment.
- The administrative support that handles logistics and coordination.

These less visible dependencies often become apparent only when they break down—when the server crashes, when a new team member lacks critical information, when the office environment becomes dysfunctional.

You need to understand both visible and invisible dependencies. To recognize that your ability to deliver results depends on many factors beyond your immediate control and develop strategies to manage these interdependencies proactively.

THE WORKPLACE RELAY RACE

In case the whole ecosystem metaphor is a little too Biology 101 (or whatever science area is the correct one, we were musicians and engineers at school), you can think of your workplace efforts like relay races: you receive inputs from others, add your uniqueness, and pass the result on to the next person in the process.

For a mundane, yet relevant example—given the kind of stuff you end up doing at work no matter what level you're at or what your specialization is—here's how things play out in a financial reporting process:

1. Sales representatives enter customer data and transaction information.
2. Finance analysts aggregate and reconcile this data.
3. Accounting professionals apply appropriate standards and regulations.
4. Financial controllers review for accuracy and compliance.
5. Executives add context and strategic interpretation.
6. Communications specialists translate technical info for stakeholders.
7. Designers create visual presentations of key findings.
8. Investor relations professionals prepare for analyst questions.

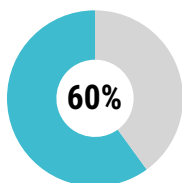
At each stage, the excellence of one person's work directly impacts the next person's ability to perform effectively. If sales representatives enter incomplete data, analysts work with flawed inputs. If analysts miss their deadlines, accountants have compressed timeframes. This chain of dependencies means that individual performance cannot be evaluated in isolation. It must be considered within the context of the entire process.

And just like in a relay race, the quality and timeliness of the handoff of your work creates ripple effects that extend far beyond your immediate responsibilities. If you've ever watched Olympic track and field, you've seen how important and precarious the handoff of the baton is. And how important doing it well and on time is.

- A marketing specialist delays providing campaign details, causing customer service representatives to be unprepared for incoming questions.
- An engineer fails to document a technical change thoroughly, leading to confusion and rework for maintenance teams months later.
- A project manager captures meeting decisions incompletely, resulting in misaligned efforts across multiple teams.

Understanding these ripple effects helps you prioritize your efforts where they'll have the greatest positive impact on others' work. It also helps you recognize when upstream issues are causing challenges for your own work, allowing you to address root causes rather than symptoms.

Every time work transitions from one person or department to another (the "handoff") there's potential for loss through misunderstandings, delays, or misaligned expectations. These handoff points represent both risks to be managed and opportunities for improvement.



60% of errors in organizations can be traced to poor handoffs or unclear communication between teams.

(Joint Commission, 2017)

RULE 24

Cross-functional fluency is a career superpower.

While organizations create departmental structures for good reasons, these structures also create boundaries that can impede effective collaboration. Different departments often develop their own languages and terminology, priorities and metrics, communication styles, and even cultural norms.

These differences can make cross-departmental collaboration challenging. Finance may speak in terms of ROI and capital allocation while Marketing focuses on brand equity and customer engagement. Engineering might emphasize technical excellence and stability while Product prioritizes feature development and user experience. These differing perspectives, however valuable, can create friction when departments need to work together.

TRY THIS

The Cross-Departmental Shadow Day

1. Identify a department whose work significantly impacts yours (or vice versa).
2. Request permission to "shadow" someone in that department for part of a day.
3. During your observation, note:
 - What priorities drive their decision-making.
 - What challenges they face that weren't obvious to you.
 - How your department's work affects their effectiveness.
 - What information or support might help them succeed.
4. Follow up with a brief thank-you note sharing one insight you gained.
5. Implement one change to your work based on what you learned.

This direct exposure to another department's reality builds understanding that no amount of secondhand information can provide.

Among key skills you should develop is the ability to "translate" between different departmental languages and priorities. This doesn't mean becoming an expert in every function, but rather developing enough understanding of different areas to facilitate productive collaboration. Honing this skill will make you incredibly valuable to management and can help ensure you are included in larger cross departmental projects due to the ability to translate and work effectively across verticals. Given the rapid integration and automation of AI, adding these types of skills on top of your role's technical skills may add job security as well.

Here again your highly developed learning apparatus is a major asset because you can:

- Learn key terminology from other departments
- Understand different groups' primary metrics and concerns
- Frame proposals in terms relevant to each stakeholder
- Anticipate potential cross-functional challenges

Someone needs to ensure that Marketing understands Engineering's timeline constraints, that Finance appreciates Customer Support's resource needs, and that everyone recognizes how their piece fits into the larger puzzle. That person can be you. And if it is, you make yourself invaluable to others in addition to adding to your own sense of accomplishment.

RULE 25

Office politics aren't totally pure evil.

Let's talk about the elephant in the conference room: politics. Not the governmental kind, but the complex web of relationships, alliances, and power dynamics that influence decisions in every workplace.

POWER ISN'T JUST ON THE ORG CHART

The executive assistant who's been with the CEO for 15 years often is more influential than some directors. And the quiet engineer who everyone consults before making technical decisions and made themselves a power center at the company regardless of title. Unsurprisingly, the team that brings in the most revenue often gets resources at other teams' expense.

Formal authority is just one of multiple influence sources in workplace environments. You'll encounter **expertise power**—influence derived from specialized knowledge or skills valued by the organization. This power source increases significance as work becomes more knowledge based.

FROM THE DESK OF BRYAN

I shared earlier about my failure to clarify some pretty important parameters when I was presenting a solution to a group of senior engineers. Sometimes failure is just failure and the lessons learned are incremental or even ambiguous, but the lesson I learned that day actually transformed my thinking and approach and has stuck with me ever since. It opened my eyes to being curious about all the other people and departments that are interconnected to my work. Shortly after the day, I began to pop in to the machine shop and garage. I visited the other engineering departments, introduced myself to people in logistics and supply chain. I took a genuine interest in the ripple effect and it has made me a coalition builder in a variety of ways over the course of my career. It has helped me learn to be a translator and to effectively articulate challenges and issues from multiple party's perspectives. Time and time again people tell me I really "get them" and that I truly understand what they deal with in their role. I often seem to be able to connect the dots in unique and helpful ways across the teams we work with in our consulting practice. I am wired this way naturally, but that early career failure activated something that I might not have realized until much later in my career.

It paid hilarious early dividends as well. Just a few months later, I needed to make an emergency trip to a vendor, and because in my "wanderings" I got to know the staff in the fleet management office, the clerk let me check out a super luxury car for the trip, even though I was technically not supposed to. From that day on, no one ever thought twice about my car privileges (or lack thereof) and I got invited frequently by senior engineers on mid-day "missions" (read: a quick trip to another engineering facility followed by a very long, amazing lunch) because I could get "the nice cars" and they got a built in chauffeur. In addition to the free lunches, I met a lot of colleagues and learned a ton about other projects I would otherwise not have even known about.

You'll see **relationship power**—influence stemming from connections to key stakeholders. *Harvard Business Review* cites professionals with strong networks across organizational boundaries typically exercise 30-40% more influence than those with similar positions but limited connections.

You'll observe **resource control**—influence based on control over budgets, information, or other valued resources. This power base often outweighs formal authority in determining actual organizational influence.

You'll experience **coalitional influence**—power created through alliances with others sharing common interests. Decisions supported by multiple stakeholders are 3-4 times more likely to be implemented according to McKinsey & Company than those with similar merit but narrower support.

And you'll encounter **reputational authority**—influence stemming from personal credibility and track record. This power base often transcends organizational boundaries and persists through structural changes.

Understanding these diverse influence sources doesn't require adopting manipulative approaches. Rather, it provides realistic assessment of how decisions actually occur in organizational settings, enabling more effective navigation and contribution.

You might learn this lesson when your perfectly logical proposal is rejected without explanation. Later, you discover it had stepped on the toes of an influential senior manager in another department—someone whose support you needed but hadn't secured beforehand. "I thought good ideas would speak for themselves," you might think. But then you learned, "Now I know they need influential people to speak for them too."

Understanding these dynamics isn't about becoming manipulative, it's about recognizing that human organizations run on relationships as much as rules and procedures.

RULE 26

Being connected is as important
as being competent.

While the shift from independent academic work to interdependent regular work may initially feel constraining—to depend on others and to have others depend on you—this web of interdependence actually creates possibilities far beyond what any individual could achieve alone.

Don't fight against this reality of interdependence. Instead, embrace it, developing the awareness to map connections, the skills to manage dependencies, and the relationship capital to navigate complex organizational systems. Try to recognize that your impact depends not just on what you do individually but on how effectively your work integrates with the broader work ecosystem.

By understanding and embracing interdependence, you position yourself to create value that extends beyond your immediate responsibilities. You become not just an individual contributor but a connection point that enhances the effectiveness of the entire system around you. This perspective magnifies your individual contribution, allowing your talents and efforts to have far greater impact than they could in isolation.

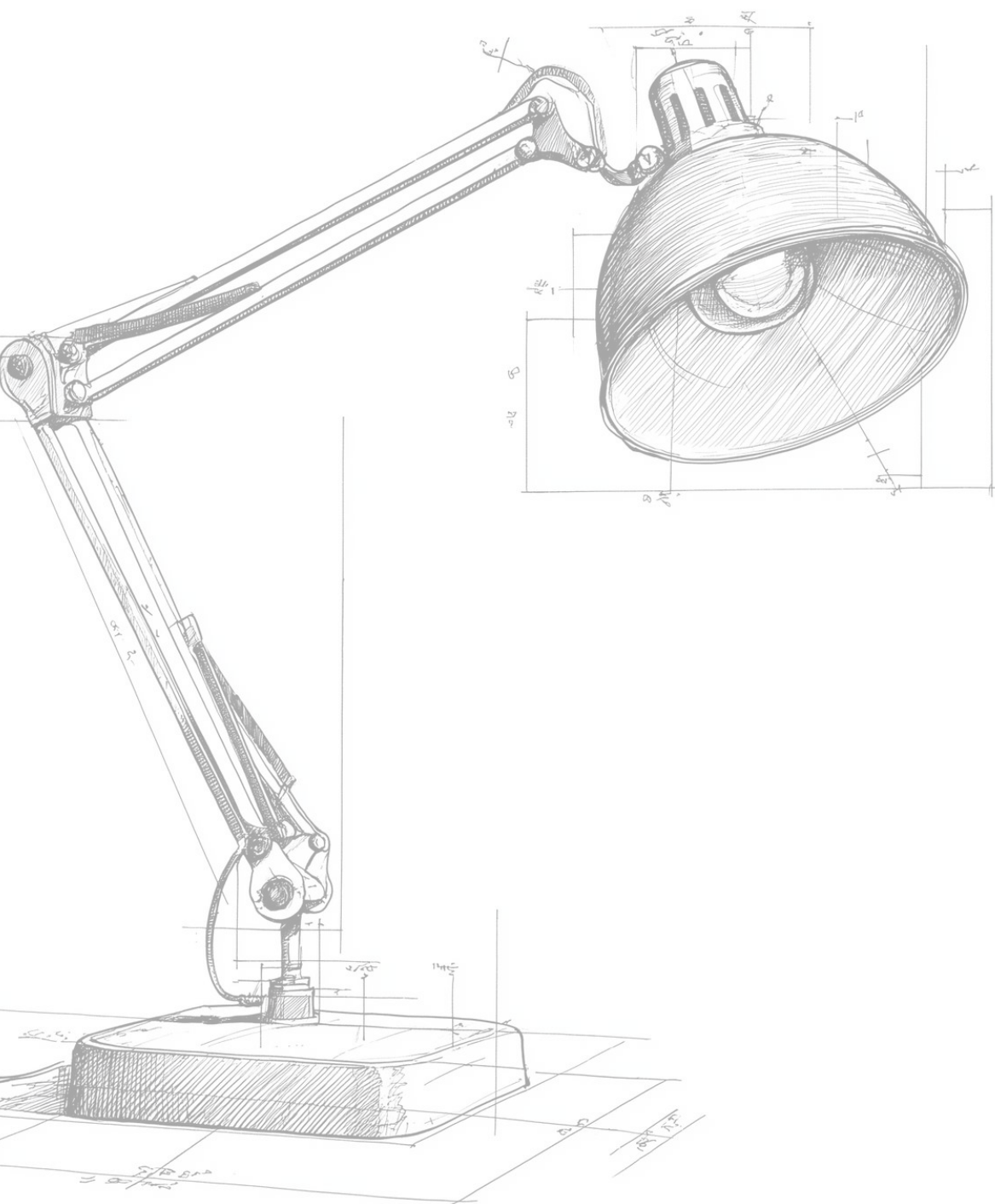
As you continue your journey, remember that no job exists in isolation. Every role is embedded in a web of relationships and dependencies that both constrain and enable your effectiveness. Learning to walk this web skillfully is a powerful accelerator for your career impact and success.

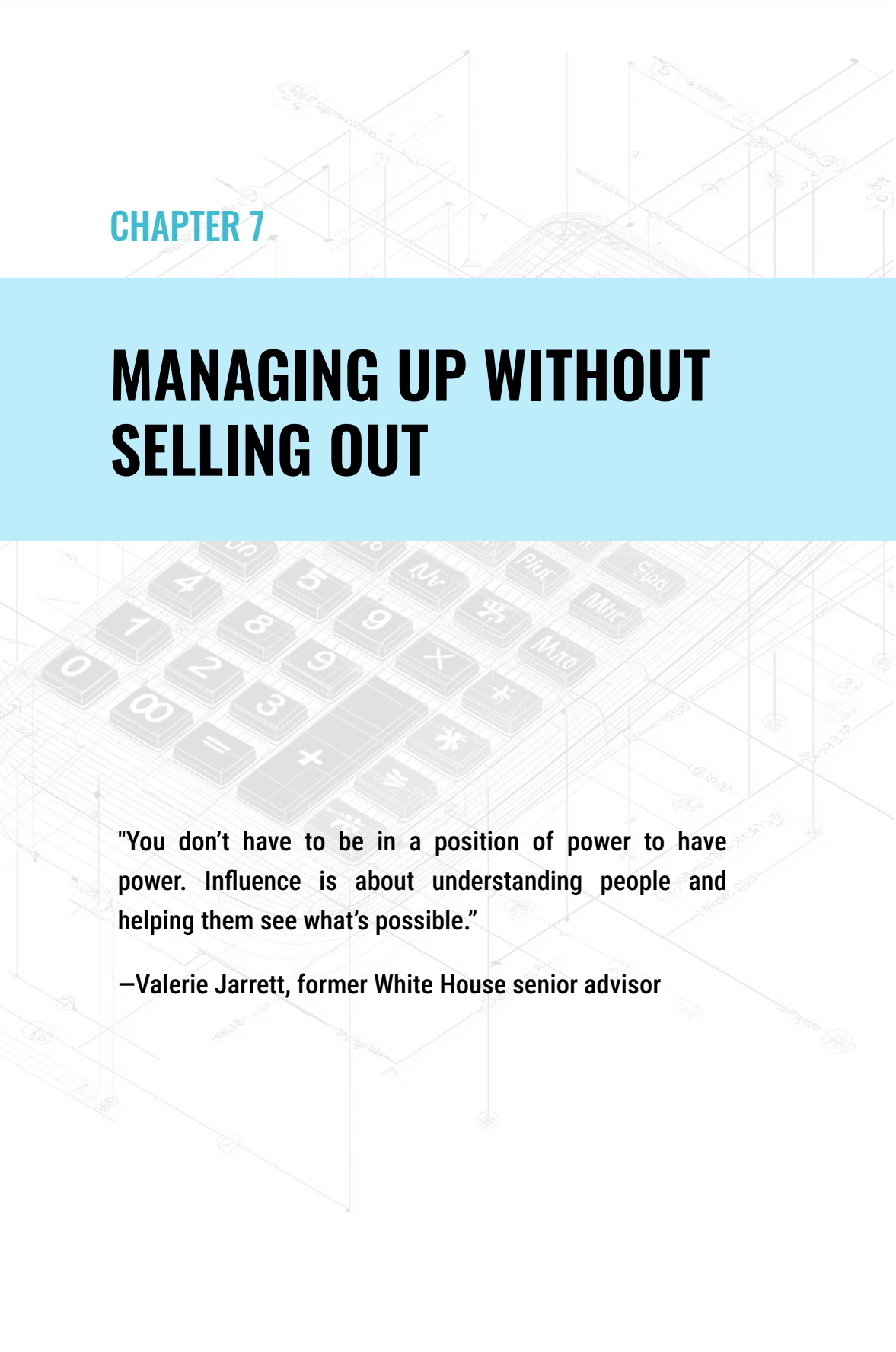
KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Interdependence is fundamental:** No matter how specialized your role, no role operates in isolation—your results depend on how well you connect with others up, down, and across your organization.
2. **Handoffs are critical junctures:** The transitions between individuals and departments often determine whether progress is preserved or lost. Each handoff is a moment of risk—or opportunity. Managing them well builds trust across teams.
3. **Cross-departmental collaboration requires translation:** Different departments have different languages, priorities, and perspectives. The ability to build bridges and to speak across functions—translating priorities and language—makes you invaluable
4. **Influence comes from trust, not just title:** Influence isn't just about authority. It's about trust, reputation, and your ability to manage human systems skillfully.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are your most critical dependencies—the inputs from others that most affect your success—and how intentionally are you managing those relationships today?
2. Think of a recent project that involved multiple departments. What communication or coordination challenges arose? How might those challenges have been addressed differently?
3. Where do silos exist in your organization? How do those silos impact collaboration—and what low-lift bridges could start to connect them?
4. Consider a "distant department" that seems unrelated to your work at first glance. Can you map the unexpected ways their work connects to (or influences) yours?
5. What structures or practices in your organization either support or hinder effective interdependence? And what's one small change you could influence to improve interdependence?



The background of the slide is a light blue architectural drawing featuring a grid of lines and various geometric shapes. Overlaid on this is a detailed image of a calculator, showing its keypad with numbers, mathematical symbols like plus, minus, multiply, and divide, and function keys like 'C' (clear) and 'MC' (memory clear).

CHAPTER 7

MANAGING UP WITHOUT SELLING OUT

"You don't have to be in a position of power to have power. Influence is about understanding people and helping them see what's possible."

—Valerie Jarrett, former White House senior advisor

After years of academic independence where your progress depended almost entirely on your individual effort and intelligence, you find yourself out in the working world where, as we've seen, the rules are very different. Now picture that you've prepared a detailed proposal for improving a key process, backed by data and research. You present it confidently to your manager, expecting immediate approval based on the merit of your ideas. Instead, she responds, "This is interesting, but it doesn't align with our department's current priorities. Let's revisit this next quarter."

You might leave the meeting deflated, wondering why your well-reasoned proposal hit a wall. You did everything right. Or did you?

This scenario illustrates a significant adjustment in transitioning from education to employment: learning to navigate authority relationships effectively. In academic settings, merit and effort typically lead directly to recognition and achievement. Being effective often depends on understanding the complex dynamics of organizational authority and learning to be productive within those structures.

No one automatically knows what it means to have a "boss" or how to communicate effectively up the chain. But it is possible to transform reporting relationships from sources of conflict into launchpads for career growth and job impact. Maneuvering the sometimes challenging terrain of organizational hierarchy without sacrificing your integrity or unique perspective doesn't happen by accident.

To be clear, the goal isn't to make you subservient or to encourage political game-playing. Rather, it's to help you understand the legitimate purpose that authority structures serve in organizations and how to work effectively within them to advance both your career and your organization's mission.

RULE 27

A boss isn't a teacher.

A "BOSS." EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE.

No matter where you work or what you do, someone is going to be calling the shots. CEOs answer to boards and shareholders. Entrepreneurs answer to customers and market forces.

Your boss might be called a supervisor, manager, team lead, or director, but whatever the title, this person has been given authority over certain aspects of your work life. This authority isn't arbitrary or designed simply to control you. When properly implemented, organizational hierarchy provides clarity, alignment, and efficiency.

Consider the alternative: If every decision in an organization required group consensus, if every employee could pursue whatever priorities they personally deemed important, the result would be chaos. Organizations

establish authority structures to coordinate efforts, allocate resources, and ensure alignment toward common goals.

One of the primary reasons bosses exist is that they possess a broader view of organizational priorities and constraints than individual contributors typically have.

While you might be focused on your specific projects or tasks, your manager is likely balancing:

- Strategic priorities from senior leadership
- Resource limitations across the team
- Competing demands from other departments
- Historical context about previous approaches
- Political realities within the organization
- Long-term implications beyond immediate outcomes

This doesn't mean your perspective isn't valuable. It means your view is part of a larger puzzle that your manager is responsible for assembling. Effective managers serve as translators between organizational strategy and day-to-day execution. Ideally, they interpret high-level directives from senior leadership and transform them into actionable work for their teams. Simultaneously, they communicate team challenges, accomplishments, and needs upward to inform strategic decisions.

This two-way translation is essential for organizational effectiveness. Without it, senior leaders would make decisions divorced from frontline realities, while the rest of us would work without understanding how their efforts connect to larger objectives.

Recognizing this helps you grasp why your boss sometimes seems to change direction or priorities in ways that might appear inconsistent from your perspective. Often, they're responding to shifts in organizational strategy or constraints that haven't yet been fully communicated throughout the company.

THE HARD TRUTH: If you google or AI long enough you'll come across lots of ideas and alternatives to the traditional, hierarchal organizational model.

And at first glance these systems seem loaded with potential and are very attractive. They promise to give more power and agency to employees, eliminate authoritarian roles and behaviors, drive culture, bring people together. All things that really do seem like good ideas.

Yet, none of these models has proven sustainable over a longer period. Even Zappos—the chief example of "holacracy"—has shifted away from it in recent years.

Many reasons account for this: the ever-increasing complexity of the work, the time, and cognitive burden on all people in these systems, the legal and other risks in leaderless environments, and of course our own evolutionarily cultivated psychological needs. (There's also Dunbar's number, social dynamics, cultural realities, etc...). Since between the two of us we still don't have a Ph.D. in organizational or other human psychology fields, we'll leave further explanation to those folks.

Nevertheless, you have a boss now, and pining for a complete overhaul of the system won't help you survive the one you're presently in. And of course you'll have a boss for many years to come. In all likelihood, if you're reading this book one day you'll BE the boss. You'll be the one trying to lead your team, division, or even whole company. You'll have the decision-making pressure, the goals and targets, the responsibility.

Our hope is that you can better accept this environment, try to improve it, and one day be the best leader you can. One that your team loves and your boss does too.

TRY THIS

The Perspective Shift Exercise—For one week, after each interaction with your manager, take a moment to consider:

1. What organizational pressures might be influencing their priorities?
2. What information might they have that isn't visible to you?
3. How might they be balancing competing interests that you're not aware of?

This simple reflection can transform how you perceive management decisions and requests, shifting from potential frustration to greater understanding and empathy.

RULE 28

Being right isn't enough.

One of the hardest lessons for bright, ambitious professionals, is that being technically correct doesn't always win the day. Your boss might make a decision you disagree with, and sometimes they'll even make an objectively suboptimal choice based on the information you have.

Organizational effectiveness requires alignment more than it requires perfection. Sometimes the "wrong" decision executed with full team commitment outperforms the "right" decision met with resistance or half-hearted implementation.

This doesn't mean you should abandon critical thinking or stop advocating for better approaches. It means understanding that implementation is as important as ideation, and implementation requires organizational buy-in.

Not every hill is worth dying on and asserting your "rightness" (even if you are right) is often the easy choice, the self-indulgent choice. Try to develop the judgment to distinguish between:

- Issues that are preference-based (where reasonable people can disagree)
- Issues with minimal long-term impact (where the cost of resistance exceeds the benefit)
- Issues that genuinely require advocacy despite potential resistance

When you choose your battles selectively and focus your advocacy on truly consequential issues, you build credibility that makes your voice more influential when it matters most.

THE SUBTLE ART OF PERSUASION

Often, the gap between being right and being effective is a persuasion gap, not a substance gap. You might have the superior solution, but if you can't communicate it in ways that address your manager's priorities and concerns, it won't gain traction.

If you want to be effective, you can't just be right about things, you need to be persuasive about them too. You must understand that having the best idea is only the first step; the second step is building the support necessary for implementation. The good news is that persuasion can be developed and improved. You don't have to be born to sell cars to be more convincing.

HELPFUL PERSUASION POINTS

- Know what they care about: Align with their priorities before presenting your own.

- Study their goals: What outcomes are they measured on?
- Match their style: Are they big-picture, data-driven, risk-averse?
- Use their language: Mirror their terminology and framing.
- Choose your moment and method: When and how you share your idea matters as much as what it is.
 - Pre-suade: Plant the seed casually before the pitch (send an article, drop a comment).
 - Pick the right time: Low-stress, high-attention windows work best (e.g., mornings, early week).
 - Package it clearly: Use short, well-framed messaging. Don't ramble.
- Make it feel collaborative: People support what they help create.
 - Lead with questions: "How do you think we might tackle X?"
 - Reflect back their ideas: Show how your idea builds on their direction.
 - Share credit subtly: "This came out of conversations with the team and some things you've said recently..."
- Reduce the perceived risk: The easier and safer it feels, the more likely they'll say yes.
 - Pre-empt objections: Name concerns before they do.
 - Show a plan: Be ready with next steps, not just ideas.
- Frame the stakes (gain/loss): Tie your idea to what they want and what they risk missing.
 - Highlight gains: "This could help us hit X goal faster."
 - Expose opportunity cost: "If we don't shift, we might keep spinning our wheels here."
 - Connect to mission or impact: Make it about the bigger picture, not just your preference.

The next time you are presenting an idea to your manager, step back to consider your manager's top current priorities and how your proposal connects to those priorities. Consider potential objections and prepare thoughtful responses. Determining the ideal timing and setting for the

conversation is pivotal to a successful pitch. This mind-set and preparation transforms being right into being effective.

RULE 29

Managing up is a skill worth mastering.

Clear expectations are the foundation of successful workplace relationships, yet expectations are often communicated incompletely or ambiguously. Proactively seeking clarification is a mark of professionalism.

This comes back over and over again in our work not only on the strategic front, but also the relational one: don't stop at clarifying the what, seek to understand the why. When you really understand the purpose behind requests or the work, you can make better decisions about implementation details and adjust appropriately when circumstances change.

When receiving assignments, paraphrase the request back, then ask, "What would make this deliverable exceptionally valuable to you?" This simple question often reveals unstated expectations and priorities.

One challenge you must overcome is how to establish a regular communication rhythm with your manager to prevent problems before they arise. Everyone's time is short and there's always a reason for being distracted or needing that time for something else. There's always more work to do. But intentional communication is the glue that can hold a lot of things together. The ideal frequency and format will vary based on your manager's preferences and your organization's culture, but finding an intentional way to stay connected to your teammates and manager prevents both micromanagement and disconnection.

In other words, don't mentally skip team meetings or your one-on-ones. These are the places where the real work of winning at work happens. Be present. Be engaged. Read the room. Find ways to improve these sessions. Make the most of every opportunity to create value for others and be helpful beyond just getting your tasks done. If you can master communication and "managing up" there's no ceiling on your potential.

BUILDING TRUST

When you're managing up, it's easy to assume trust starts with proving your track record. Show your boss the wins, the metrics, the ROI and trust will follow, right?

Not necessarily.

Think about how trust really works in your life. Outside of work, what makes you trust someone? The real cornerstone of trust-building is listening deeply to understand what another person values and then caring about that as much or more than your own concerns. Yes, reliability matters—doing what you said you'd do. But trust is built less on performance and more on a sense of shared understanding, care, and time.

In the working world, especially with your manager, trust deepens when you show that you *understand what they care about*, and that you care about those things, too.

Let's say your manager (we'll call them Greg) prioritizes consistency, predictability, and alignment in how marketing is executed across the organization. Those values shape how Greg sees success. So, when you deviate from that—say, by launching a bold campaign without warning or using a different tone than what's been standard—you may think you're being creative or results-driven. But to Greg, it might read as risky, unpredictable, or misaligned.

And when that happens repeatedly, it doesn't matter how good your results might be. If Greg doesn't feel like you "get" what matters to him, he won't trust you to execute your work without more direct and likely intrusive oversight. You'll be seen as a problem, not a team player.

Why? Because Greg, like many leaders, has come to believe that their way of working is what got them to where they are. Their style, preferences, and decisions have been reinforced over time through promotions and praise. In their mind, that's the formula for winning. So, when your approach clashes with theirs (even if you get results) it can feel to them like a challenge to their worldview.

Is that fair?

Not really. But it's common.

We all fall into this trap sometimes: believing that our success is the direct result of our own choices, rather than a mix of effort, timing, support, and circumstance. It's part of the broader "self-made" myth that shows up everywhere from LinkedIn hustle culture to corporate boardrooms.

If you try to build trust *only* by performing well, you may hit a ceiling. But if you can first build trust by aligning with what your boss (and their boss) cares about, you earn the space to take bigger swings later. Once they believe you're not going to put them at risk, they're far more likely to back your ideas—even the unconventional ones.

Trust creates room for autonomy.

So ask yourself, how do I succeed in this environment?

It helps to think like an evolutionary biologist. Organisms don't change the environment to fit them, they adapt to survive within it. It's the same in your career. Especially early on, making headway depends on your ability to adapt. Once you've adapted, *then* your brilliance matters more. Then you'll have the room to try new things and push boundaries.

And if biology wasn't your favorite in college, we can take a page from Kevin's experience as a saxophonist.

Picture a jazz musician getting hired to play in the horn section for a pop-rock band. They might be incredibly talented, able to improvise, innovate, and dazzle on a solo. But if they start riffing every chance they get between verses, the band's going to shut it down. Not because the musician isn't skilled, but because they're not in sync with the context.

In a band not used to hearing jazz vocabulary tossed around, you earn the space to solo *after* you've proven you can follow the tune the way the band wrote it. In time, when the band trusts you to make the music event better, to add your unique voice without overwriting what was great to begin with, you get more freedom to roam.

That's how it works at work, too. Before you take creative leaps or challenge the status quo, you have to demonstrate that you understand the structure, the rhythm, the values of the people around you, especially your manager. Then you aim to repeatedly deliver good work within that context. That's what builds trust. And trust is what buys you freedom.

THE NO-SURPRISES RULE

Few things damage trust with management faster than unwelcome surprises. Effective upward communication means ensuring your boss never feels blindsided by information they should have known earlier. This doesn't mean escalating every minor issue. It means developing judgment about what matters to your manager and ensuring they hear important information—especially problems or delays—from you first, not from others. If you aren't sure whether a situation merits escalation or not, ask a colleague. Or, raise the issue with your supervisor, admit you don't yet know if this merits their attention, and you wanted to both inform them and better understand how to take ownership in future.

Yes, there's some risk with being the bearer of bad news. But there's a TON more risk in avoiding the issue.

When challenges arise, communicate them promptly along with:

- The nature and scope of the issue
- Potential impact on deadlines or outcomes
- Options you're considering or actions you've already taken
- Any support or resources needed

This approach demonstrates ownership while keeping your manager appropriately informed. It's an "I got this" approach. Of course, sometimes at the first sign of trouble some managers are apt to dig in or take over. Partially because they've likely been through something like this before and can address it quickly, and partially because their ass is on the line too. Despite that, communication is vital because your relationship with your manager matters, a lot. Rule 30: Your relationship with your manager matters, a lot.

RULE 30

Your relationship with your manager matters, a lot.

"Wait, didn't you just say that?" Yes. Yes, we did. But it's double true. This is the person that has the most influence over your experience in any job. So doing everything YOU can do to make it successful benefits you. And them too.

IN AN IDEAL WORLD... THEY GET THE MOST OF YOUR BEST.

The best boss-employee relationships are characterized by mutual respect and shared purpose. Your boss shouldn't want to control you, they should want to channel your talents toward meaningful outcomes.

In healthy organizations, your boss becomes a multiplier of your effectiveness. They clear obstacles, provide necessary resources, offer

strategic guidance, and create conditions where you can do your best work. They push you to grow while protecting you from unnecessary distractions.

Take time to understand what success looks like for your boss. What metrics are they evaluated on? What keeps them up at night? When you frame your work and communication in terms that align with their priorities, you position yourself as an ally rather than just another demand on their attention.

One of the best ways to build a positive relationship with your manager is to try and help them to succeed. We don't mean insincere flattery or political maneuvering, it's about recognizing that their success and yours are interconnected.

Ways to support your manager's effectiveness without compromising your integrity include:

- Deliver on commitments reliably.
- Provide solutions alongside problems.
- Prepare thoroughly for meetings they attend.
- Communicate in ways that help them make good decisions.
- Represent the team positively to others.
- Look for ways to advance initiatives they care about.

You're creating the conditions for mutual benefit by supporting your manager.

And don't forget, your boss likely has experience and institutional knowledge that can significantly accelerate your development if you're open to learning from them. Rather than viewing feedback as criticism, approach it as valuable data. Rather than seeing guidance as micromanagement, recognize it as an opportunity to benefit from hard-won lessons. Be sure to actively seek input from your manager rather than avoiding or resenting it.

RULE 31

A new boss means a
new playbook.

THE HARD TRUTH: Remember when we said, "Being right isn't everything?" (just a few pages back).

This is one of those times. Without a doubt a time will come where you have a manager or executive whom you truly believe—largely based on real-world evidence—is not as smart as you. Even when you consider their greater level of experience and workplace acumen you might find it very hard to take direction from this person.

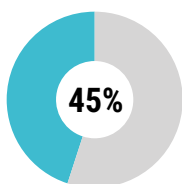
When, and when is probably the right word, you reach this moment it will most likely be the first time you're looking up at someone in direct authority that just isn't in your league. The odds of this happening at university are incredibly slim. Professors are the ultimate SMEs (subject matter experts). They've forgotten more about your subject than you'll ever learn and all they do is teach that material over and over again. It's relatively easy to respect your professors for the most part, even the ones you didn't love.

It's another story altogether to respect a boss whom you *know* you're smarter than. Unfortunately, it doesn't matter. Your perception of the gap between your intelligence and theirs has very little bearing on whether or not you're killing it in your role and career. You have requirements and goals and targets, and even if your boss seems an impediment to achieving them, it's on you to figure out how to overcome that challenge. To be clear, we're talking about competence here not abusiveness. If you have an abusive manager that's a different story. But if you simply think they're just bad at their job, it doesn't give you license to be bad at yours.

As we've noted before, there's no semester break coming. So unless you leave or they do, you have to find a way to make the situation work and

learn to leave your ego at home sometimes. It can be hard to do. But in the long run your career will be better off for it anyway.

Unless the departing leader is the aforementioned subpar one, the frequency of leadership changes is almost always disruptive, and something you'll have to learn to handle. Just when you've figured out exactly how your boss likes reports formatted, what topics make them excited, and which meetings you can skip, they take a new job, and you start all over with someone who has completely different preferences.



45% of employees experience a direct manager change within a 3-year period.
(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022)

Leadership turnover is a fact of organizational life. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), the average employee tenure is around four years, with management positions often having even higher turnover rates. Learning to adapt to new leaders is requisite.

This is where your years of new teachers and new rubrics is a real boon to your handling a situation. You have to constantly evaluate and recalibrate. A management change provides an opportunity to reset relationship dynamics. Even if you had challenges with your previous boss, you begin with a clean slate.

Your goal is to position yourself as a valuable team member who can help the new leader succeed while remaining adaptable to evolving expectations. And though adapting to new leadership is important, maintaining continuity in your core responsibilities ensures organizational stability during transitions.

Focus on:

- Documenting ongoing projects and their status.
- Preserving institutional knowledge that might otherwise be lost.

- Maintaining important relationships with stakeholders.
- Continuing progress on critical initiatives.
- Supporting colleagues who might be struggling with the change.

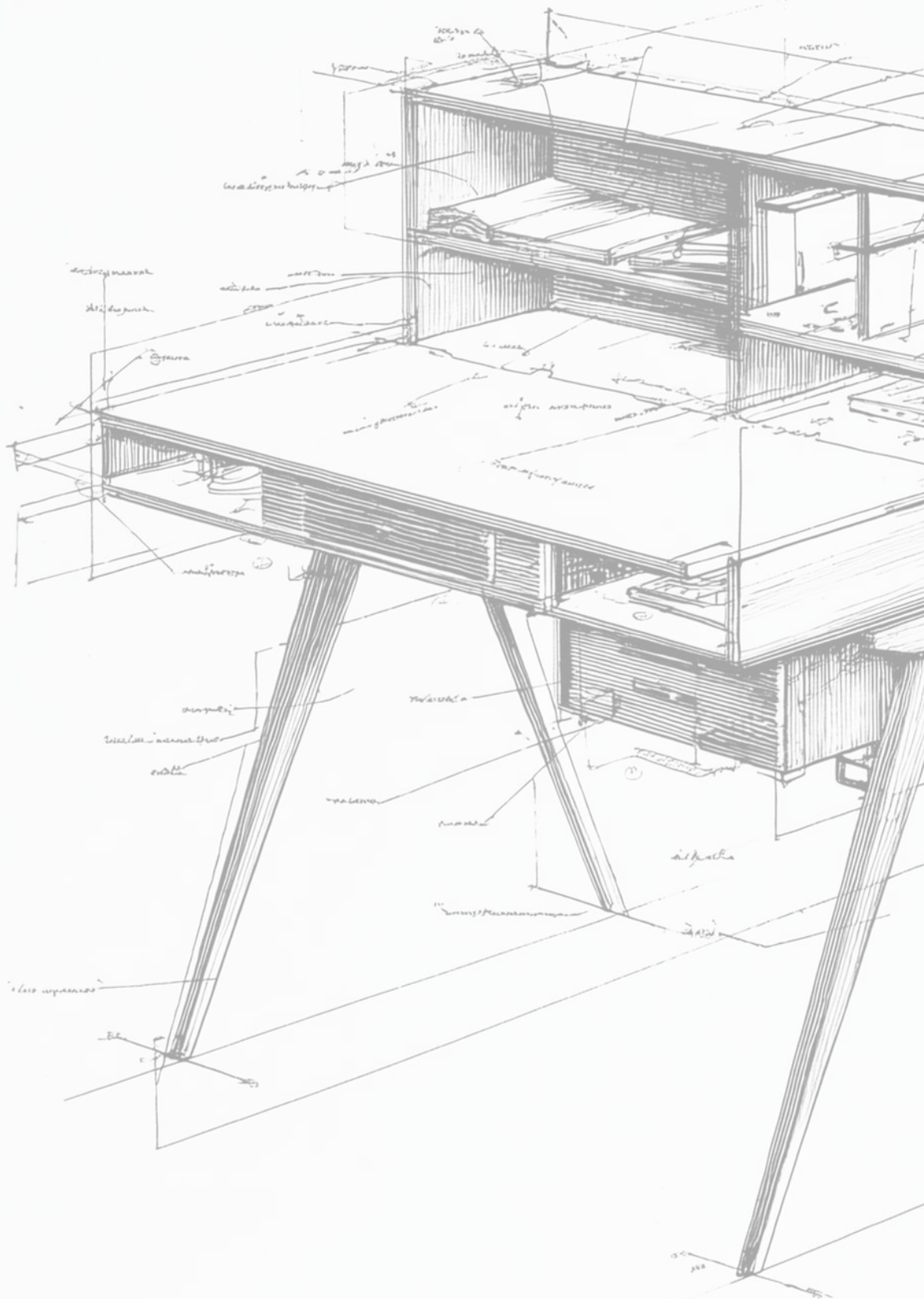
This balanced approach—adapting to new leadership while maintaining operational continuity—demonstrates maturity and professionalism during potentially disruptive transitions.

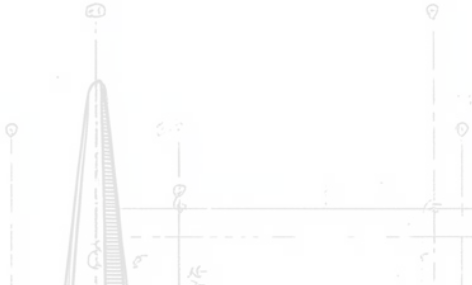
KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Authority serves a purpose:** Organizational hierarchy, when functioning properly, provides clarity, coordination, and momentum. When used well, it accelerates shared success.
2. **Effectiveness trumps correctness:** Being right isn't enough; success requires building support for your ideas and aligning them with organizational priorities.
3. **Clear expectations prevent problems:** Proactively seeking clarification and maintaining consistent communication prevents misalignment and builds trust.
4. **Manager relationships are strategic assets:** The boss-employee relationship, when approached thoughtfully, can significantly accelerate both individual and organizational success.
5. **Adaptability to leadership changes is essential:** Developing the ability to adjust to new managers while maintaining operational continuity is a valuable skill.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

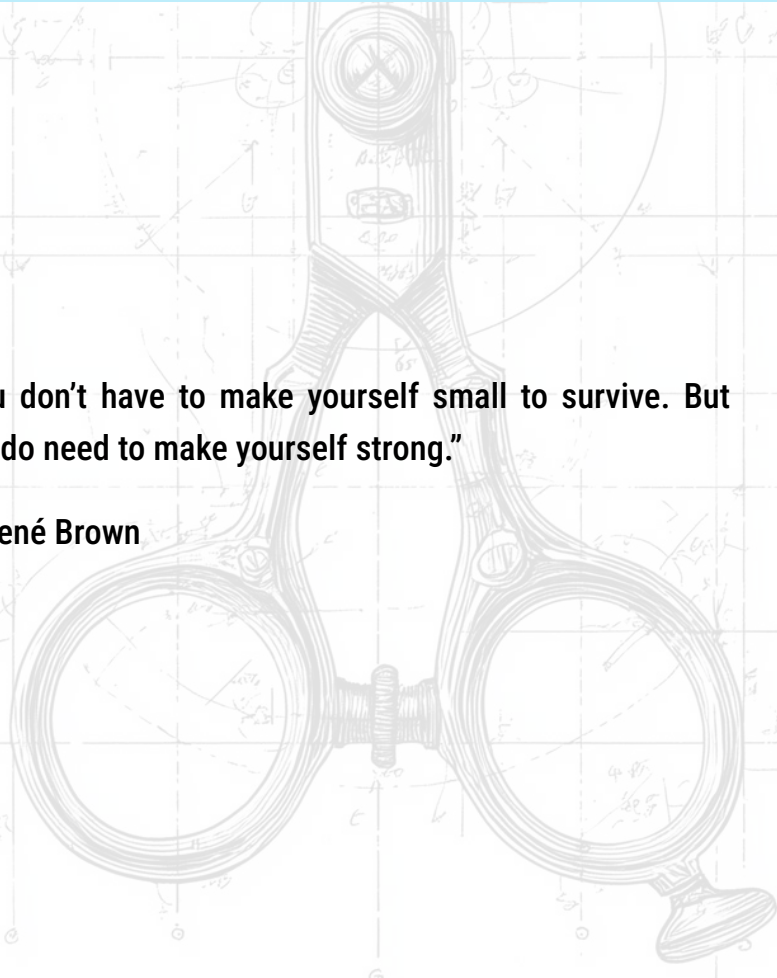
1. How well do you understand your manager's priorities and pressures? What questions could you ask to gain greater insight?
2. Think of a recent situation where you believed you were right but struggled to gain support. How might framing, timing, or relationship-building have shifted the outcome?
3. What is your current communication rhythm with your manager? If it's not ideal, what's one thing you could do to recalibrate it together?
4. How has your approach to authority relationships evolved since you began your career? What hard-won lesson most shaped your current approach?
5. When was the last time you experienced a change in leadership? How effectively did you handle the transition? What would you do differently next time?





CHAPTER 8

IS IT TOUGH LOVE OR JUST TOXIC?



"You don't have to make yourself small to survive. But you do need to make yourself strong."

—Brené Brown

A young software developer joined an emerging tech startup known for its innovative products and demanding culture. During her first code review, the senior developer dissected her work with brutal precision, pointing out inefficiencies and potential bugs in front of the entire team. She left the meeting feeling humiliated and questioning her abilities, wondering if she'd made a terrible career choice.

Two weeks later, at another startup across town, a different developer submitted his first major feature. His team lead provided equally rigorous feedback, identifying similar issues and opportunities for improvement. Yet this developer left the review feeling challenged rather than defeated, with clear direction for growth and a stronger connection to his team.

Same industry. Similar feedback. Dramatically different experiences. What made the difference?

This scenario illustrates one of the nuanced challenges you can face: distinguishing between environments that push you toward growth and those that simply push you down. It's about recognizing when pressure serves a purpose and when it merely serves someone's ego. It's about

knowing when to adapt to high standards and when to exit toxic situations.

We all need more practice on how to address this critical distinction. Some workplace intensity is not only beneficial but necessary for growth, while other types of pressure create needless suffering and stifle both performance and potential. The more you learn to recognize the warning signs of truly toxic environments while developing the resilience to thrive in constructively challenging ones the better.

Read carefully, this isn't about encouraging you to tolerate abuse or lower your standards for how you deserve to be treated. Rather, it's about developing the discernment to distinguish between discomfort that leads to growth and dysfunction that leads to damage—a distinction that will serve you throughout your entire career.

RULE 32

Tough feedback helps you grow but
abuse just breaks you.

THE REALITY CHECK: TOXIC CULTURE IS VERY REAL

According to a 2023 MIT Sloan Management Review study, "A toxic corporate culture is by far the strongest predictor of industry-adjusted attrition and is 10 times more important than compensation in predicting turnover."

Toxic workplaces exist, and they're more common than they should be. If you're in an environment where people are regularly belittled, manipulated, or made to feel worthless, that's not "tough love."

Here's a scene that is not out of the realm of possibility: you're starting a role where your orientation includes watching a senior team member receive a public dressing-down for a minor mistake. The message is clear:

fear and humiliation are management tools here. Or maybe your department has cycled through five employees in your position during the past year, all of whom left citing "personal reasons." These aren't likely signs of high standards; they're maybe red flags indicating dysfunction.

Abuse of power comes in many forms:

- The manager who takes credit for your work while blaming you for mistakes.
- The boss who plays favorites so blatantly that everyone walks on eggshells.
- The leader who uses fear and intimidation rather than inspiration and guidance.
- The organization that preaches work-life balance while implicitly rewarding those who sleep under their desks.

One of the biggest warning signs is hypocrisy. Watch out for places where leaders demand one standard from their team but operate by completely different rules themselves. Organizations where the stated values and the rewarded behaviors contradict each other are breeding grounds for toxicity.

Perhaps the clearest sign of a truly toxic leader is one who criticizes without ever offering pathways to improvement. If you're constantly told what's wrong but never given tools, feedback, or opportunities to get better, you're not being challenged, you're being set up to fail.

THE GROWTH ZONE: THE PUSH TO ACHIEVE GREATNESS THROUGH MOTIVATION

Now here's where it gets tricky. Some of the most effective leaders you'll encounter can definitely be described as tough. They set high standards. They push people beyond their comfort zones. They don't accept mediocre work. But, and this is the critical difference, their toughness comes from a place of belief in your potential, not from a need to demonstrate their power. **Tough isn't the same as toxic.**

Here's another scenario. A creative director reviews a team's campaign proposal. She meticulously scrutinizes weaknesses in the concept, questions assumptions in the strategy, and sends the team back to rework significant portions. What makes this constructive rather than toxic is that she also:

- Explains specifically why certain approaches won't work.
- Connects her feedback to client needs and campaign objectives.
- Offers concrete suggestions for improvement.
- Expresses confidence in the team's ability to elevate the work.
- Makes herself available for follow-up questions and guidance.

Think about it like this: does your leader's toughness energize you or drain you? After a challenging conversation, do you feel motivated to prove yourself or do you feel defeated before you've begun? The former might be a sign of positive toughness; the latter suggests toxicity.

In most environments, the standard isn't just whatever makes you comfortable or happy. There's an external benchmark—client expectations, market demands, organizational goals—that exists regardless of how we feel about it.

In yet another scenario, you're part of a team developing software for air traffic control systems. The quality standards aren't arbitrary or designed to make developers' lives difficult, they're essential for safety. Or consider a legal team preparing documents for a high-stakes lawsuit. Attention to detail is necessary to protect the client's interests.

Tough leaders understand these realities. They know that missing targets or delivering low quality work has real consequences for the organization and, ultimately, for everyone's job security. When they push you, it's often because they're trying to align your work with those external standards.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN: DISCOMFORT AS A GROWTH MECHANISM

Achieving anything worthwhile usually involves some discomfort, we all know this instinctively. Great achievements rarely come easily. This doesn't mean work should be constant suffering, but it does mean that growth typically happens when we're stretched beyond what feels comfortable.

Think about skill acquisition in any domain:

- You struggle through awkward practice before developing muscle memory.
- You make numerous mistakes before achieving mastery.
- You face rejection and criticism before refining your approach.
- You experience uncertainty before developing confidence.

The pattern is nearly universal, whether you're learning to code, developing management skills, or building client relationships. The path to excellence runs directly through discomfort.

The people who become the most effective leaders really understand this growth mechanism well and deliberately create environments where:

- Challenges slightly exceed current capabilities.
- Failure is treated as data, not disaster.
- Effort and improvement are recognized alongside outcomes.
- Comfort zones are continually expanded, not maintained.

Whether you're in a for-profit business competing for market share or a nonprofit competing for limited funding and attention, the world is challenging.

In 2023, approximately 20% of new businesses failed within their first year, and only about half survived beyond five years. In such an environment, maintaining high standards is often simply about survival.

TRY THIS

The Feedback Analysis Tool—After receiving challenging feedback, ask yourself these questions:

1. Was the feedback specific and actionable?
2. Did it focus on my work rather than my character or worth?
3. Were clear improvement paths suggested or available?
4. Does meeting this standard serve a legitimate purpose?
5. Is this standard applied consistently across the team?

The more "yes" answers, the more likely the feedback is constructive toughness rather than toxic behavior.

Leaders have a responsibility to get the most from their teams, and sometimes that means being tough on underperforming individuals or groups. The key distinction to remember is that effective toughness is always in service of your growth and the organization's mission, never simply as a display of power or to satisfy someone's need for control.

RULE 33

High standards are healthy.
Double standards are toxic.

While internal motivation is powerful, external standards and accountability often bring out our best work in ways self-direction alone cannot. Effective workplaces harness this psychology productively. They create clear standards that define quality, establish deadlines that create productive urgency, develop accountability systems that ensure follow-through, and prioritize recognition structures that reinforce desired performance.

High standards don't just improve current performance, they also accelerate your growth. When you consistently work in environments with demanding expectations, you develop capabilities that stay with you throughout your career. Many people who spend time in demanding environments like management consulting, investment banking, or rigorous creative agencies find that even after leaving, they maintain higher personal standards than before. The external demands have become internalized as performance baselines.

We believe, and can say from real experience, that external standards are valuable. But they must be accompanied by appropriate support to be constructive rather than crushing. Without implementation resources, high standards become impossible expectations rather than growth catalysts.

Elements of effective support include:

- Skills training that builds necessary capabilities.
- Examples that illustrate what "good" looks like.
- Feedback that identifies specific improvement areas.
- Resources sufficient for the expected quality level.
- Time appropriate for the complexity of the task.
- Mentorship that accelerates learning curves.

Here's two scenarios to think about:

Scenario A: A manager asks for "presentation-quality" financial analysis by tomorrow, offers no examples or guidelines, provides no tools beyond basic spreadsheets, and gives no feedback beyond "this isn't what I wanted."

Scenario B: A manager requests the same analysis, shares examples from previous projects, ensures access to proper analytical tools, maybe provides a template to work from, and offers to review a draft halfway through the process.

FROM THE DESK OF KEVIN

I had already experienced several different types of jobs, retail and grass cutting and such, and finished two university degrees by the time I finally sat down at my first full time desk job as assistant to the CEO. I thought I was prepared for tough critique thanks to the rigorous and critical process of finishing a master's in music. But imagine my dismay when I was tasked with taking minutes for numerous committee meetings of the board of directors, and after the submission of almost every first draft, my boss would return the papers BLOODY. I wasn't a professional writer, mind you, but had a solid command over the written word and yet I had never seen so much redline and correction in my life. She'd mark-up my work as if I barely knew the English language. Over time and through much trial and error, I eventually improved. But it was unpleasant to feel like my work just never measured up.

It could've been easy to take it personally—like a commentary on my intelligence. But the truth was, I didn't know the first thing about taking effective corporate meeting minutes. My choices and preferences as a "writer" were not relevant. The minutes needed to say certain things a certain way or else problems arose later. Disputes over allocations, internal politicking, etc. My boss needed those minutes written accurately (which I was okay at doing) but also strategically. That was where I was over my skis.

The choice I had to make was do I get mad at her, or do I get better at doing this. I chose the latter. And am grateful because I learned so much from working for her for many years.

Both scenarios have high standards, but only the second creates quality conditions for excellent performance. The difference isn't in the expectation but in the implementation support.

RULE 34

Sometimes the strongest move is knowing when to leave.

Not all workplace challenges are created equal. Some demand adaptation; others signal it's time to leave. You must develop your personal "adaptation threshold"—the boundary between growth-inducing challenge and harmful stress.

Your adaptation threshold will be influenced by:

- Your career stage and financial situation.
- Available alternatives in your field and location.
- Your support system and resilience reserves.
- The growth potential of the current role.
- The likelihood of improvement in the environment.

Once again, adaptation doesn't mean accepting toxic behavior. But it also doesn't mean running from tough situations. It means developing skills to work through genuinely productive challenges while recognizing when an environment that consistently crosses the line from demanding to damaging.

STRATEGIC ADAPTATION: TECHNIQUES FOR CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENTS

When you've determined a challenging environment is worth adapting to, several strategies can help you thrive:

1. Clarify expectations relentlessly

In high-pressure environments, assumptions are dangerous. Develop the habit of confirming expectations:

- "Just to make sure we're aligned, the priorities for this project are X, Y, and Z in that order."
- "I understand the deadline is Tuesday. Can we discuss what 'done' looks like specifically?"
- "Based on your feedback, I'll focus on improving A and B for the next version."

This proactive clarification prevents misalignment and demonstrates your commitment to meeting standards.

2. Build support networks

No one succeeds in challenging environments alone. Strategically develop relationships with:

- Peers who can provide perspective and emotional support.
- Mentors who have dealt with similar challenges.
- Allies in different departments who can offer insights.
- External contacts who can provide industry context.

These networks provide both practical assistance and psychological safety during difficult periods.

3. Manage your capacity deliberately

Challenging environments require sustainable approaches to energy management:

- Identify your high-energy periods and protect them for demanding tasks.
- Create recovery rituals between intense work blocks.
- Establish clear boundaries for genuine off-time.
- Monitor for signs of approaching burnout.
- Prioritize sleep, exercise, and nutrition as non-negotiables.

Your ability to perform under pressure depends directly on your physical and mental reserves.

4. Focus on growth metrics

In demanding environments, measuring personal growth alongside performance helps maintain perspective:

- Track skills developed, not just outcomes achieved.
- Document challenges overcome and lessons learned.
- Identify ways current struggles build marketable capabilities.
- Recognize incremental improvements even when they fall short of ideal standards.

This growth focus provides motivation beyond external validation and builds career capital regardless of your current role's duration.

RECOGNIZING WHEN IT MIGHT BE TIME TO LEAVE

Sometimes, the healthiest response to a toxic environment is to exit. Here are some indicators that suggest it may be time to move on:

1. Impact on your health

Physical symptoms often appear before conscious recognition of toxic environments:

- Persistent sleep disturbances
- Anxiety, depression, or panic attacks
- Frequent illness from compromised immunity

Your body's signals deserve attention. No job is worth continually sacrificing your health.

2. Value misalignment

When workplace practices consistently contradict your core values, the resulting cognitive dissonance creates serious psychological strain:

- Observing unethical treatment of customers or employees
- Being expected to mislead or withhold information

- Witnessing discrimination or harassment without consequence
- Seeing destructive behaviors consistently rewarded

Working against your values and ethics erodes not just job satisfaction but your sense of self.

3. Absence of growth

Even challenging environments should offer development. Warning signs include:

- Feedback focused on criticism without learning opportunities
- Skills stagnation over extended periods
- Limited exposure to new responsibilities or projects
- Mentorship and training consistently deprioritized

If you're enduring difficulty without corresponding growth, the equation doesn't balance. But, remember to give it time.

4. Deteriorating performance

Sometimes the clearest sign of a poor fit is declining effectiveness:

- Decreasing quality despite increasing effort
- Chronic procrastination or avoidance behaviors
- Inability to meet standards despite genuine commitment
- Feedback that never improves regardless of changes made

When the environment consistently prevents your success, despite good-faith efforts, structural issues may be at play.

RULE 35

Resilience is essential.
(But, cynicism is not a virtue.)

Challenging work environments present a difficult balance: how do you develop the strength to withstand pressure without becoming hardened, cynical, or disengaged? How do you build resilience while preserving your humanity? This balance—resilient without being rigid, strong without being hard—represents the gold standard for development in demanding environments.

Resilience requires boundaries. But the right kinds. Effective boundaries protect without isolating, filter without closing off, and limit negative impact without limiting growth.

It's important to deliberately direct your finite energy toward what matters most and distinguish between experiencing emotions and being defined by them. This will help build resilience without requiring disconnection from your work or colleagues.

But remember, no one builds resilience alone. Be sure to cultivate relationships with colleagues who provide honest feedback and understand the specific challenges of your environment. It's also important to develop connections outside your organization who can provide unbiased perspective on workplace situations and emotional support without organizational politics. And of course, never forget what really makes you, "you." Maintain strong non-work relationships and activities that remind you of your value beyond your professional identity and ground you in enduring values and priorities.

This multilayered support system prevents any single workplace challenge from becoming all-consuming.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Distinguish between rigor and toxicity:** High standards and accountability drive growth; abuse and manipulation cause harm without benefit.
2. **Recognize the benefits in discomfort:** Professional development often happens at the edge of your comfort zone. Growth requires productive challenge.
3. **Know your adaptation threshold:** Develop clear criteria for when to persist through difficulty versus when to exit harmful situations.
4. **Leverage external standards:** Objective benchmarks and accountability often elevate your performance beyond what self-direction alone might.
5. **Identify toxic patterns early:** Learn to recognize destructive workplace dynamics before significant damage occurs.
6. **Build resilience deliberately:** Develop mindsets, boundaries, and support systems that enable sustained performance in challenging environments without sacrificing well-being.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think of a challenging experience you've had. What made it constructive rather than toxic? Or if it was toxic, what specific patterns made it harmful? What signals can you look for in future situations?
2. What's your typical response to critical feedback? What adaptations should you use to address that response and learn from the input while protecting your confidence?
3. What are your personal indicators that a challenge has crossed from productive discomfort into harmful stress?
4. How have external standards or accountability helped you achieve results you might not have reached on your own? How could you deliberately incorporate more productive accountability?
5. What boundary practices have you found most effective for maintaining resilience in challenging situations? Where might your boundaries need strengthening?
6. What support resources do you currently have for handling workplace challenges? What additional support might be beneficial to develop?

SECTION III EXERCISE

DIFFICULT DEPENDENCIES: DEVELOPING A SOLUTION-ORIENTED MINDSET

Sometimes your most important dependencies involve people or departments that are consistently problematic—unresponsive, unreliable, or difficult to work with. While it's tempting to simply complain about these situations, you need to develop strategies for managing difficult dependencies.

Select a dependency challenge you are dealing with, identify it as a procedural, capacity, or relationship challenge, and use the following mapping process to evaluate and create a solution pathway:

For procedural challenges (when systems or processes create bottlenecks):

- Map the exact steps in the current process.
- Identify specific friction points or delays.
- Research why those points exist. They may serve purposes you don't see.
- Propose targeted improvements that respect valid constraints.
- Pilot new approaches on a small scale before pushing for broader change.

For capacity challenges (when others lack resources to meet commitments):

- Prioritize your requests based on true need, not preference.
- Provide as much advance notice as possible.

- Help make the case for additional resources if appropriate.
- Explore whether you can absorb some of the work.
- Adjust your own planning to accommodate realistic timelines.

For relationship challenges (when interpersonal dynamics create friction):

- Focus discussions on specific work outcomes, not personalities.
- Seek to understand their constraints and priorities.
- Find areas of genuine alignment to build from.
- Involve neutral third parties when necessary.
- Document agreements to prevent misunderstandings.

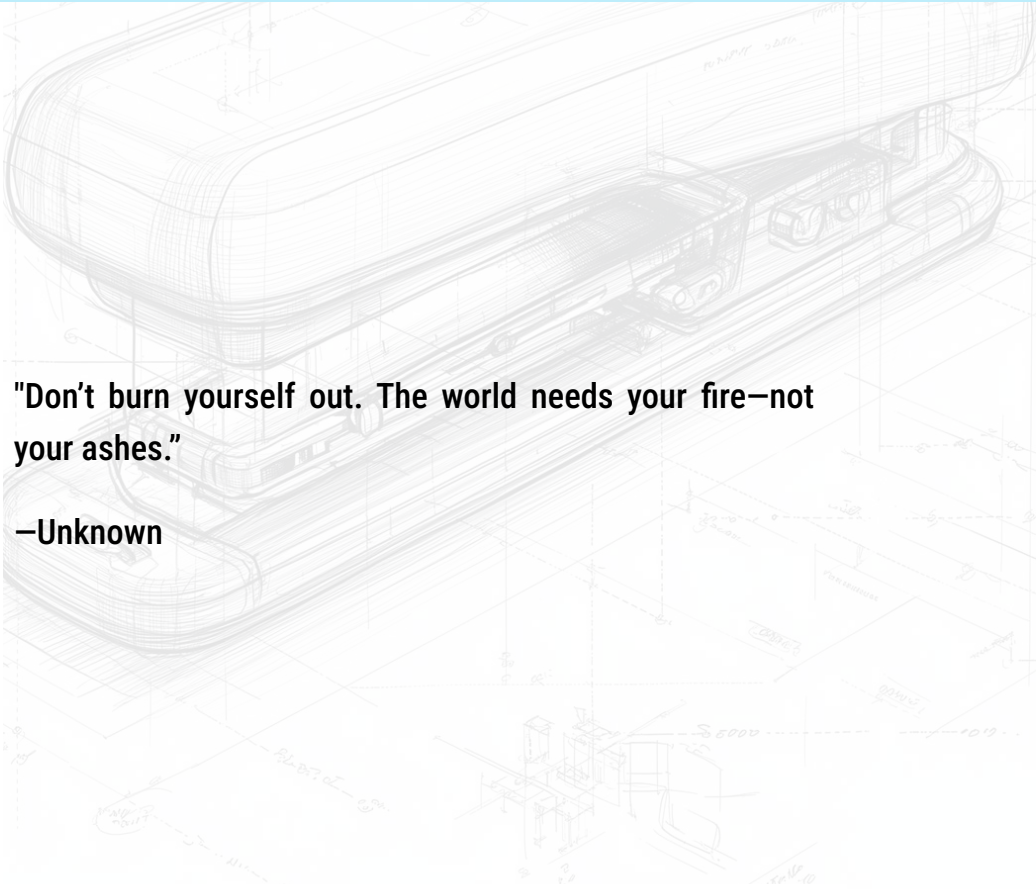
Knowing this stuff is only half the battle though. Actually approaching difficult dependencies as problems to solve rather than excuses for non-performance is the other half.

SECTION IV: PROFESSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

**HOW TO WORK SMARTER
WHILE EVERYONE ELSE
BURNS OUT**

CHAPTER 9

SUSTAINABLE EXCELLENCE

A detailed technical line drawing of a car chassis, showing various components like the engine, transmission, and suspension. The drawing is rendered in a light, sketchy style with many lines and annotations, typical of a technical sketch or a preliminary design drawing. It is positioned in the background, behind the text.

"Don't burn yourself out. The world needs your fire—not your ashes."

—Unknown

Remember the pace of your college days? The crash and recovery cycle that allowed you to keep up a fever pitch. All-nighters fueled by caffeine, sugar, unhealthy snacks, possibly other substances, and sheer will, followed by days of TV and sleeping on the sofa eventually leading to that most coveted season of existence that you will miss the rest of your life: SUMMER BREAK.

But trying to pull off that same routine at work, month after month, year after year, with no end in sight, will leave you stumbling incoherently at meetings for weeks on end.

A critical recalibration is required when transitioning from education to working life: developing a sustainable approach to excellence. Many of us, even years into our careers, have not solved this puzzle. We remember back when we had boundless energy and little responsibility. We remember our younger days and how we crammed our way through it to victory. And we think we can replicate that approach because it's what we know, and it's worked before. And those habits might serve you well during brief intense periods. But they become actively destructive when applied to long-term performance.

The goal isn't to work less hard or to lower your standards. Rather, it's to work in ways that allow you to maintain high standards consistently over the decades of your career instead of burning brightly for a short time before flaming out. After all, true excellence isn't measured by how exceptional your performance is on your best day, it's measured by the value you create reliably year after year, through all the seasons of your career.

RULE 36

Work is a marathon.

One of the more jarring discoveries about professional life is that work just...keeps...going. The moment you clear your inbox, more emails arrive. The day you finish a major project, another one begins. You never reach a point where everything is complete, and you can just stop.

Understanding this never-ending nature of work changes how you approach it. When you realize there will always be more to do tomorrow, regardless of how much you accomplish today, it becomes clear that sustainable pacing isn't just nice to have.

In this marathon consistency trumps intensity. Marathon training doesn't consist of running 26.2 miles once a week. It involves running shorter distances consistently, gradually building capacity through regular practice rather than extreme pushes. The teammate who reliably delivers quality work day after day builds deeper trust than the one known for occasional heroic efforts surrounded by periods of unavailability or subpar performance.

This consistency applies not just to work output but to all aspects of professionalism:

- Reliable follow-through on commitments

- Consistent meeting preparation
- Stable emotional presence
- Dependable communication
- Regular contribution to team objectives

A sprint mentality—periodic bursts of intense work followed by collapse—extracts costs that accumulate over time:

Physical costs: Sleep deprivation, compromised immune function, digestive issues, and increased risk of chronic disease all correlate with prolonged overwork. Your body keeps score, even when your mind tries to ignore its signals.

THE HARD TRUTH: If you're reading this then you're probably still at or near peak human performance years.

18-36 or so on average. (That's not scientific. Just, let's say...experiential. Your results may vary.) A day is coming when things don't work like they used to. Recovery takes longer. Your stamina fades sooner. You gain wisdom and efficiency and other benefits as you age, but if your way of working relies on youthful performance endurance levels, you'll find yourself tapping out sooner than later in your career.

Cognitive costs: The evidence is boringly consistent. Mental performance declines with overwork. The bitter irony is that working longer hours often delivers diminishing returns. Each additional hour yields less quality output as fatigue impairs judgment, creativity, and accuracy.

Emotional costs: The burnout cycle typically begins with emotional exhaustion—feeling drained, unable to muster enthusiasm for previously engaging work. This often progresses to cynicism and a sense of reduced accomplishment, creating a downward spiral of disengagement.

Relationship costs: Sustainable careers require sustainable lives. When work consistently consumes the time and energy needed for meaningful

personal relationships, the resulting isolation further contributes to burnout and diminished well-being. (We'll talk work-life integration later.)

Reputational costs: While periodic heroic efforts might earn short-term recognition, consistent overwork eventually leads to mistakes, missed deadlines, or interpersonal friction. The professional known for reliable excellence ultimately outperforms the burnt-out former star.

Just as marathon runners follow structured training plans that balance effort and recovery, you need deliberate approaches to build sustainable capacity.

RULE 37

Find your pace.
(It won't be a sprint.)

Sometimes when we think of time management we think of squeezing more activities into limited hours. But there's another way to look at it. We can think of it as energy management. Energy management focuses on maximizing your meaningful output in those hours by maintaining optimal physical, emotional, and mental energy.

This shift in perspective—from time as your scarcest resource to energy as your most valuable asset—can change how you approach work. Instead of asking, "Do I have time for this?" You begin asking, "Is this the best use of my limited energy?" Learning to accept that energy is limited is a big step forward.

You might consider adopting this approach: "I don't try to be the person who works the most hours. I try to be the person who brings the most energy and clarity to the hours I work." We've adopted that in our work years. We are ruthless about where we direct our focus. Because there are always more projects and client needs than we technically have time for.

FROM THE DESK OF KEVIN

I play a lot of golf. I'm sure you're shocked. A middle-aged guy who likes to golf. But nonetheless the stereotype rings true for me. Despite the game itself, golf does give me lots of opportunity to talk to random strangers from all walks of life. Especially at my local municipal course. I was recently sharing with a playing partner that Bryan and I are writing this book. And he said two things that are pertinent to where we are right now. One is that he wished he'd had a book like this a few years ago. And, two, that he's burnt out and looking to get out of his job and the city and find something simpler up in Vermont. Shortly after he shared this, I uncovered that he's not yet 30. And I believe him when he says he's burnt out. But I couldn't help but wonder if that was work's fault, or if this state was somewhat of his own making. There are jobs and fields that do really churn through people and perhaps that's a contributing factor. But I hear a similar sentiment from many people in the 28-34 range. The tough part about feeling this way is that they all have a lot of working years ahead of them. And it doesn't seem they got started with the right mentality to be successful over the long haul. I often offer some of the very things you're reading right now to them in conversation and people invariably find the perspective helpful—and of course I hope you do too.

Elite athletes understand that improvement comes not just from the rigor of training but from the growth and healing that occurs during recovery. The same principle applies to knowledge work. Sustainable high performance requires deliberate oscillation between engagement and renewal.

Using an approach like the somewhat cheesily named "Pulse Method" can help create the rhythm and intentionality necessary to manage your pace over time. (It could just as easily have been the "rest" or "break" or "downtime" method, but whatever.)

Daily pulses: Alternating periods of focused work with brief recovery (a walk, brief meditation, social connection)

Weekly pulses: Ensuring at least one day per week with minimal work demands

Quarterly pulses: Planning more substantial recovery periods every few months

Annual pulses: Taking vacations that allow genuine disconnection from work demands

Those who maintain effectiveness in high-burnout industries often establish non-negotiable renewal practices: brief walks after periods of intense focus, no work emails during specified times, regular days completely unplugged, and annual periods entirely away from work demands. Regardless of what approach you might end up using or creating for yourself, be intentional with it. Document what you're doing, test, and adapt. If you do this you'll find your pace.

RULE 38

Burnout doesn't make
you a hero.

Sustainable excellence requires both strong commitment to your work and clear boundaries around it. Without boundaries, commitment becomes consumption. Without commitment, boundaries become limitations. Setting boundaries isn't only about doing less. It's also about ensuring you can continue to contribute at a high level throughout your career.

At offsites we run healthcare professionals often describe things along these lines: "This field can consume everything you're willing to give and then ask for more. Learning to be fully present with patients when working, then fully present with family when not, takes practice. But that boundary is what allows sustained practice without losing humanity or passion for healing."

Just as your capabilities develop over time, your capacity for sustained effort can grow. You might think of it like strength training: You don't start by trying to lift the heaviest weights in the gym. You build up gradually, with proper form, and eventually, you'll handle more than you initially thought possible.

Marathon runners learn to recognize early signs of dehydration or injury, being sustainable in your career means developing awareness of your personal warning signs before reaching critical burnout. You have to identify your specific patterns before they escalate into larger problems. This early detection allows for minor adjustments rather than major interventions.

Elite athletes don't wait until they're injured to rest. Recovery is programmed into their training plans. Build renewal into your regular routines rather than waiting until you're already exhausted. That renewal and recovery is not isolated to one area of your whole personhood. You need to think about physical, mental, emotional, and even spiritual practices that encourage recovery.

Physical renewal:

- Adequate sleep (non-negotiable for cognitive performance)
- Regular movement throughout the day
- Nutritious food that supports energy and focus
- Time outdoors and in natural settings

Mental renewal:

- Periods of focused attention balanced with mental rest

- Learning activities unrelated to work requirements
- Creative pursuits that engage different mental modes
- Mindfulness practices that build attention regulation

Emotional renewal:

- Meaningful social connection
- Expressions of gratitude and appreciation
- Activities that generate positive emotions
- Reflection practices that create meaning from experience

Spiritual renewal:

- Connection to purpose beyond immediate tasks
- Alignment of daily activities with core values
- Contribution to something larger than yourself
- Practices that provide perspective on daily challenges

You may be early in your career right now and some of this seems off on the horizon. But time has a way of moving more quickly every year. At some point you'll be shocked to find you've been working for 20 years. Starting new habits and mindsets later is always a bit more difficult. Embracing these truths now can help keep you fresh and functional today, while getting you ready for later when the pressure on you is greater and your need to be savvy with time and energy is too.

TRY THIS

Establish a Personal "Shutdown Ritual."

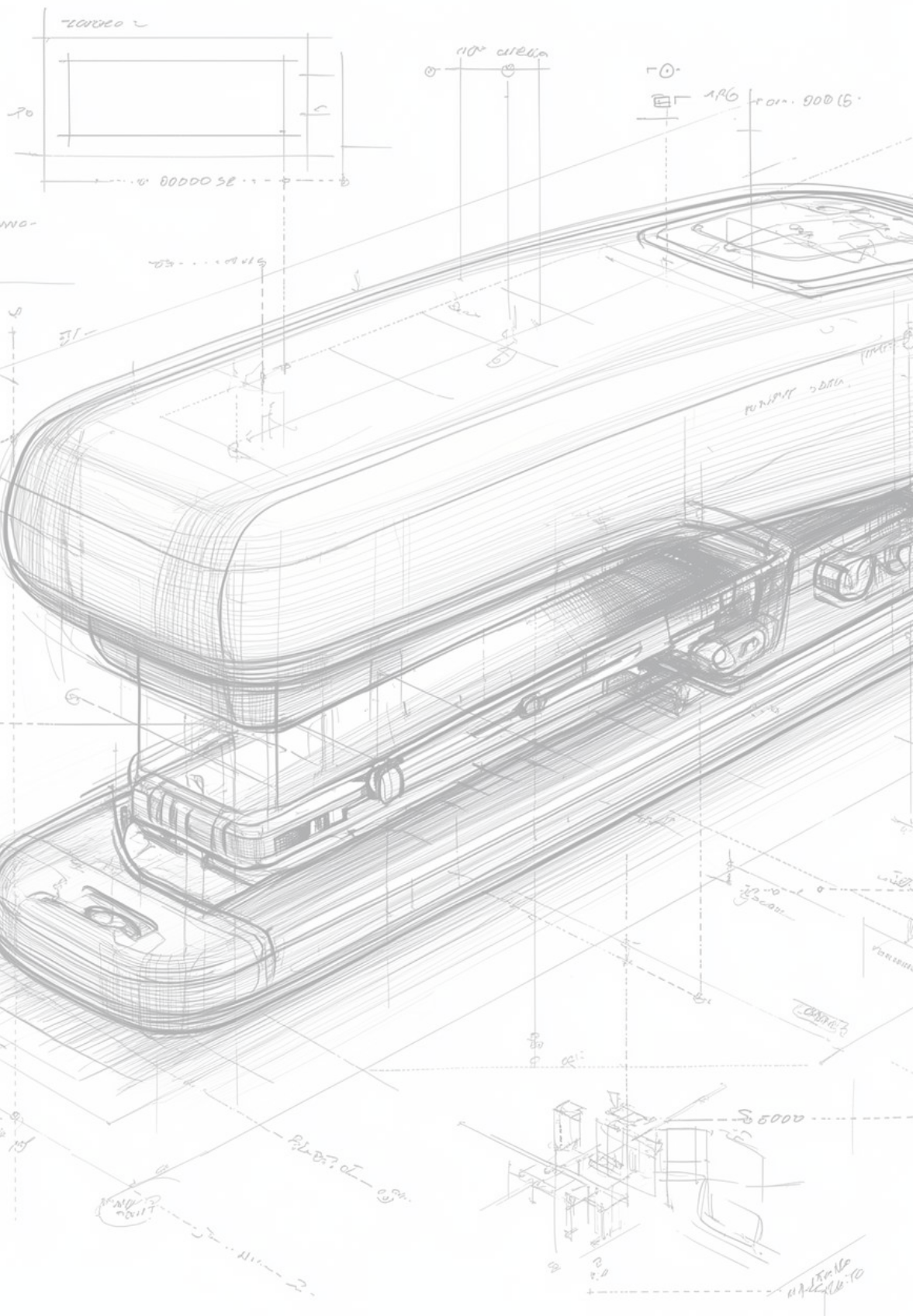
Choose a consistent action to signal the end of your workday—closing your laptop, writing tomorrow's top 3 priorities, or taking a 5-minute walk. Do it daily for one week and reflect on how it affects your stress, clarity, and evening recharge.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **The professional world is a marathon, not a sprint.** The work habits that might have served you in school become actively destructive when applied to long-term performance.
2. **Sustainable excellence requires managing energy, not just time.** Understanding your personal rhythms and honoring your need for recovery enables consistent high performance.
3. **Consistency builds more trust than heroics.** Those who advance are typically those who deliver reliably excellent work rather than oscillating between spectacular efforts and burnout recovery.
4. **Boundaries enable commitment.** Setting appropriate limits around your work ensures you can sustain that dedication over decades.
5. **Your health is your foundation.** Sleep, nutrition, movement, and stress management are essential components of sustainable excellence.
6. **Recovery is essential for peak performance.** Building renewal into your regular routines prevents burnout and maintains your capacity for focused engagement.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What patterns from your academic life are you currently applying to your work? Which of these serve you well, and which may need adjustment for long-term sustainability?
2. How would you rate your current balance between engagement and renewal? What one practice could you implement to improve this balance?
3. What are your earliest warning signs that you're approaching your limits? How can you spot and respond to those signs earlier, before they compound?
4. Where do you currently focus on effort over effectiveness? What approaches might help you work smarter rather than just harder?
5. What recovery practices do you currently treat as optional that might better serve you as non-negotiable commitments?
6. How clearly can you articulate your sustainable pace—the level of engagement you can maintain consistently over months and years rather than days or weeks?



CHAPTER 10

THE RESILIENCE REQUIREMENT

"Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."

—Nelson Mandela

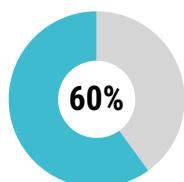
Every one of us has already experienced tough moments on the job, or will soon. You start your dream job at a technology company, full of enthusiasm. Three months in, your carefully crafted presentation gets dismantled by executives who question your core assumptions. The project timeline you meticulously planned collapses when a key vendor fails to deliver. Your department undergoes restructuring, and suddenly you're reporting to someone who seems unimpressed with your work. It's in these moments that something fundamental in you is tested: your resilience; your capacity to withstand pressure, handle setbacks, and maintain effectiveness through challenging circumstances.

This quality—what some refer to as grit—isn't a personality trait that you either have or don't. It's a capability you can develop. And in the unpredictable, sometimes chaotic environment of modern work, it's pretty important.

Most work situations present many different kinds of challenges that uniquely converge: prolonged uncertainty, constantly shifting goals, interpersonal friction, public failure, and feedback that can feel deeply personal. Your ability to withstand these challenges—to absorb their impact without breaking, to learn from them rather than being diminished

by them, and to maintain forward momentum despite them—will significantly influence your trajectory.

The goal isn't to make you impervious to stress or to glorify struggle for its own sake. Rather, it's to help you develop the inner resources to address challenges effectively, turning potential career derailers into opportunities for growth and advancement.



**Workers with high emotional resilience are
60% less likely to burn out.**
(American Psychological Association, 2022)

RULE 39

Every career has storms.

We could share platitudes and stories about overcoming the wind and weather of work, but you've heard the like already. And it should come as no surprise that you're likely to face more day-to-day adversity working than anywhere else in your life because work is where we spend most of our waking hours, tackling complex challenges with other imperfect humans and all the rest. Your resilience in the face of this adversity—your grit—becomes another of your most valuable assets.

As we often say to people at offsites and retreats, if work was always fun and easy, they wouldn't have to pay us to do it. Those Instagram posts showing perfectly curated "office vibes" with inspirational quotes about "doing what you love" are about as realistic as those "follow my morning routine" posts on LinkedIn.

Work is inherently challenging. It involves solving complex problems with limited information, balancing competing priorities, managing interpersonal dynamics, and delivering results under pressure. Even in roles you genuinely enjoy, there will be aspects that test your patience, challenge your capabilities, and push you beyond your comfort zone.

OK fine. We'll share a hypothetical anecdote. Consider a situation where you've carefully planned a project timeline, only to have half the requirements change two days before delivery, a team member call in sick, and a system crash. You might find yourself working late, surviving on vending machine snacks, and questioning your career choices. Hopefully you've cultivated some sustainable excellence practices that help you weather the situation, but even if you haven't you have to find a way power through.

This isn't an exceedingly rare occurrence, it's just...work. Not every day, but often enough that you need to be prepared for it.

Those who thrive long-term aren't those who avoid these challenges—that's impossible. They're the ones who develop the capacity to work through them effectively, learning from each difficult situation and building the resilience to tackle the next one with greater skill.

And this is a time when your deep history with the academic environment can help you. Crushing that long paper, passing that tough calc class, graduation; those markers are hard to replicate. But overcoming challenges and being resilient in the face of tough work gives that same deep satisfaction you knew well.

THE HARD TRUTH: Deadlines Don't Care About Your Feelings.

In the working world, pressure rarely comes in predictable waves. It is more like the weather in the Pacific Northwest: always present in some form, occasionally torrential, and you just learn to function within it.

FROM THE DESK OF BRYAN

As an early career engineer, I was given the opportunity to work on a really interesting project. In the automotive world we were often working on cars that would not be released for 5+ years. Some new engine technology had been developed for the next generation of cars, but my boss wanted to see if it could be retrofitted for current models. Enter one of the most intense seasons of my career. My team was given a six month window and put on a seven day cycle (and remote work had not yet been invented). As an engineer I quickly mathed that out to understand that it meant zero days off for quite some time. We cycled and rotated the workload to make the best of it. The work was challenging and fun, the schedule was not. I was excited to solve the problem and began to realize success could mean a big career advancement. I was all in. After a few months of total investment and progress, upper management walked in on a Thursday morning and scrapped the entire project. Over. Done. No conversation. To say it was difficult would be a massive understatement. I was frustrated and angry. How could they do this? Thankfully, my team was mostly later career engineers who had a much broader career perspective than I did and had actually been through this a few times. They had developed something I had not yet: resilience and grit. That experience, though I would not want to do it again, did help me to take a step back, to pace my work and expectations in a healthier way and ultimately to develop more resilience to handle the difficult seasons of being a professional. I always say it wasn't a good experience, but it was good experience.

Deadlines rarely exist in isolation. As we've discussed, your organization is an ecosystem and your deadline is connected to someone else's deadline, which is connected to a larger organizational commitment. Missing your part creates cascading effects that impact colleagues, clients, and potentially the organization's reputation and financial health. This is why work-life balance is so hard in the real world of work. (Again, more on that later.) Sometimes the work itself is placing demands on you and your time and energy. It's not your boss directly, it's not arbitrary. It can't always be put on hold for your "personal day." Often, success or failure comes down to getting the work done when it needs doing. Even when that's unattractive and inconvenient.

This interconnectedness means that "I wasn't feeling it" or "I needed more time to perfect it" rarely qualify as acceptable explanations for missed commitments. Learning to deliver quality work on schedule—sometimes regardless of your emotional state or circumstances—is a fundamental professional skill.

RULE 40

Feedback isn't failure.

Your first performance review in your new role might nearly give you an ulcer. You've been working diligently for months, but suddenly you're being evaluated on criteria you didn't even know existed. "Shows leadership in cross-functional initiatives." What does that even mean when you're just trying to figure out how to use the copier without causing a paper jam?

Performance reviews, quarterly business reviews, OKRs, KPIs—the corporate world is always trying to find new or more effective ways for measuring your contribution with acronyms and numbers. Unlike academic grading, which typically focuses on assessing concrete assignments against clear rubrics, workplace evaluation often includes

subjective elements like "demonstrates strategic thinking" or "contributes to positive team culture."

This subjectivity and lack of clarity can be deeply uncomfortable, especially for those accustomed to clear rubrics. Learning to journey through this fuzzier evaluation landscape, to understand the unwritten expectations, to communicate your contributions effectively, and to incorporate feedback constructively is a big part of resilience.

TRY THIS

Don't wait for performance reviews. Develop self-evaluation strategies as a means of continual growth. An easy method is the five-minute self-assessment. Every week pause and ask: What went well this week? What could have gone better? What's one thing I'll focus on improving next week? This builds the self-awareness muscle that makes formal reviews less painful.

Let's say you've been spending three weeks creating what you thought was a brilliant customer analysis, only to have your VP glance at it for 30 seconds before saying, "This isn't what I asked for." The problem? They hadn't told you what they wanted, they'd just assumed you could read between the lines, or just knew. Or more likely, thought they'd already told you or mentioned it in a meeting.

But they didn't. Leaders often have a clear picture in their heads but communicate only fragments of it. This isn't usually malicious—they're just busy and forget that you don't share their context or experience. The resulting misalignment leads to frustration on both sides.

Developing the resilience to handle these situations productively—to seek clarification without seeming incompetent, to adapt to shifting

expectations without becoming cynical, and to learn from miscommunications rather than being discouraged by them—distinguishes those who advance from those who stall out in frustration.

UNFAIR CRITICISM

Receiving criticism that's productive is helpful. But there are times when you'll find yourself on the receiving end of unmerited, unwarranted, and unfair criticism. And often that comes at CYA (Cover Your Ass) moments. When projects go sideways—and they will—the finger-pointing begins.

You might experience a situation where a senior colleague subtly shifts blame to you during a project post-mortem. What you later realize is that they were protecting themselves from criticism from their boss, who is unforgiving of mistakes.

These dynamics create a particularly challenging resilience test. You must simultaneously defend your reputation, maintain productive relationships, and extract useful learning from the situation.

Documenting key decisions and instructions in writing can be a great practice to ensure everyone is on the same page. A simple email saying, "Just to confirm what we discussed..." isn't you being paranoid. And it saves everyone from the fallibility of human memory.

Balancing these objectives requires emotional regulation, strategic thinking, and interpersonal savvy beyond what most academic environments demand.

At the end of the day it was unlikely that being liked by your professor dramatically affected your grade, but the bad news here is that being liked by your boss, or at least understood and appreciated by them, can make a huge difference. Fair? Not really. True? Too often. HR teams work hard to create systems to eliminate this kind of thing. But there's just no full accounting for the "human" part of human resources.

RULE 41

Emotional regulation isn't soft.

Even if you feel like you've got resilience and sustainable excellence nailed and you're easily handling tougher situations and delivering good work, the day will come when you're pushed too far. Something sends your emotions just over the red line, in that moment, workplace emotional responses can hijack effective action. We're only human after all. (Well at least those of us who are not AI avatar replicants.)

This might be one of the most important things we see over and over again. Those who self-indulge the reactive side of responding to insufferable work nonsense set themselves up for stagnation and even more frustration. So, developing techniques and perspectives to regulate these reactions in real time is essential for resilience.

GROWTH MINDSET

While external circumstances influence your resilience challenges, your internal mental models largely determine how effectively you respond. Developing constructive ways of thinking about workplace challenges creates the foundation for resilience.

Research by psychologist Carol Dweck distinguishes between fixed mindsets (believing capabilities are static) and growth mindsets (believing capabilities can develop through effort). This distinction profoundly affects our pursuit of resilience. With a fixed mindset, challenges threaten your identity: "If I struggle, it means I'm not good enough." With a growth mindset, challenges offer opportunity: "This difficulty is how I develop new capabilities."

Ok. It's probably not too wild to picture yourself receiving critical feedback on your first major project. With a fixed mindset, you might think, "I'm just

not cut out for this field." With a growth mindset, you might think, "This shows me specific areas where I can improve my approach."

Deliberately cultivating a growth mindset—focusing on learning and development rather than fixed ability—transforms how you experience workplace difficulties. Challenges become growth opportunities rather than threats, setbacks become learning experiences rather than failures, and feedback becomes valuable data rather than personal criticism.

When facing a difficult workplace situation, ask yourself: "What can I learn from this that will make me more effective in the future?" This simple reframing shifts focus from threat to opportunity, activating a growth mindset. (We'll come back to the growth mindset and personal development again later.)

THE PAUSE BUTTON

When facing criticism, conflict, or setbacks, your initial emotional reaction rarely produces your best response. Creating a deliberate pause between trigger and response allows your rational mind to engage before you act.

Techniques for creating this pause include:

- Taking a slow, deep breath before responding
- Asking a clarifying question to create response time
- Using phrases like "Let me think about that" or "I'd like to consider that before responding"
- Physically stepping away briefly when appropriate ("I need to get some water")

This pause ensures you engage from a centered rather than reactive state.

THE PHYSICAL RESET

Your physiological state directly influences your psychological resilience. When stress activates your sympathetic nervous system (fight-or-flight

response), your thinking narrows, your emotional reactivity increases, and your access to creative solutions diminishes.

Simple physical interventions can shift this state:

- Several slow, deep breaths (extending exhales longer than inhales)
- Brief movement (stretching, walking, changing posture)
- Progressive muscle relaxation (tensing and releasing muscle groups)
- Cold stimulus (splash of water, cold drink)
- Brief exposure to nature (looking out a window, stepping outside)

These techniques create measurable shifts in your nervous system that enhance your capacity to respond effectively to challenges. Using practices like these creates a "reset button" routine for stressful situations.

THE REFRAMING PRACTICE

How you interpret challenging events significantly influences their impact. Developing the ability to find constructive perspectives—without denying reality—enhances resilience.

Effective reframing helps you find legitimate alternative perspectives that create space for effective action.

For example:

- Instead of "This feedback means my work is inadequate." Try: "This feedback helps me understand how to better meet expectations."
- Instead of "This reorganization is destroying everything we've built." Try: "This reorganization creates an opportunity to influence a new direction."
- Instead of "I'm overwhelmed by impossible demands." Try: "I need to have a conversation about prioritization."

The goal isn't to ignore difficulties but to frame them in ways that enable constructive responses rather than paralysis or resentment.

Putting any of these ideas into practice will help. But don't underestimate how long it can take to make them automatic. Be patient. And give yourself a break when you screw up. Cause you will.

RULE 42

You'll bounce back faster
when you don't try to alone.

The final tool in your resiliency toolbox might be the most important.

THE HARD TRUTH: College as an experience for many (though not always for all) is a time when you form a bit of a collective that's hard to replicate ever again.

Friends, classmates, peers, advisors, all of whom band together in different ways to gain strength and joy from another. Some of our longest standing relationships go back to freshman year, people we still connect with and rely on. But in the workforce that's not so easily formed. Your life is fuller, people have more responsibilities that chip away at their once abundant free time. Your circle does get a little smaller so finding people you really have affinity with is tougher. And if you're changing jobs every few years it's hard to take those new relationships with you when you go.

The working world can be lonely. Even when you have a partner or spouse. Forming new adult relationships is a challenge. And as family or kids or promotions or work travel enter the picture, they increase that difficulty. Yet no one maintains resilience entirely through individual effort.

So while this next short bit is important, we won't sugarcoat it. It won't be easy. In fact it might be the hardest stuff to follow through on in the whole book. But its value is incalculable. As hard things often are.

Before we dive into some recommendations, the biggest lesson in forming new communities is to be open. Look always to build common ground first. Not everyone will be a "forever friend," but that's ok and shouldn't stop you from seeking to form meaningful relationships.

Deliberately cultivating relationships with colleagues who can provide perspective, guidance, and encouragement significantly enhances resilience.

Your colleagues and extended network might include:

- Peers facing similar challenges who can provide validation and practical advice
- Mentors who have dealt with comparable situations and offer wider perspective
- Sponsors who can provide organizational support and opportunity during difficult periods
- Cross-functional relationships that offer different perspectives on challenges

Building these relationships before you need them—making deposits in the "relationship bank" during good times—ensures resources are available when challenges arise.

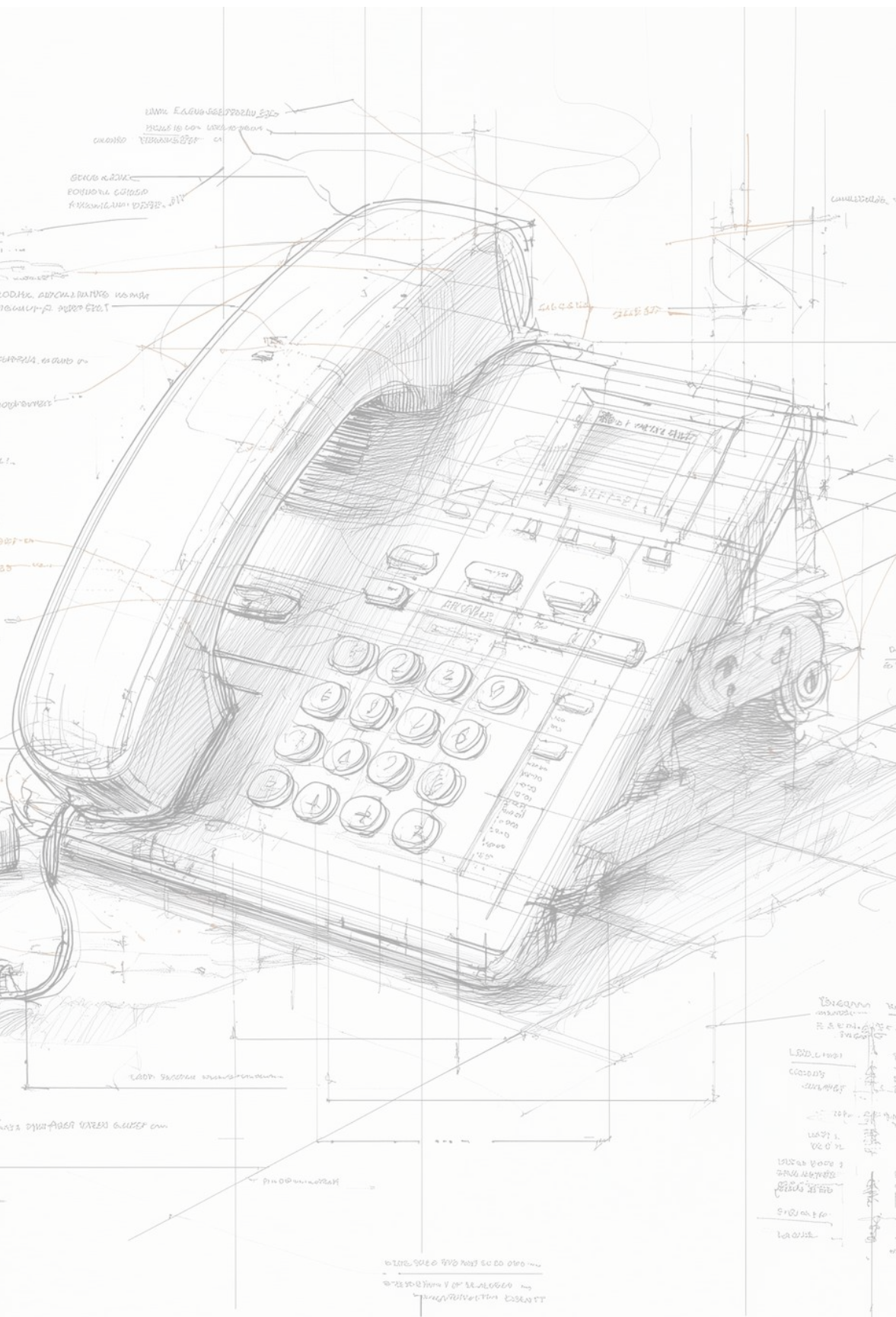
It's much easier to build resilience when you don't have to do it alone. And resilience truly is requisite.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Resilience isn't optional.** It's a core skill. Work presents challenges that education rarely does, and your ability to deal with these challenges significantly influences your career trajectory.
2. **Pressure at work is constant rather than cyclical.** Unlike academic settings with defined high-stress periods, workplace pressure ebbs and flows but never disappears completely.
3. **Organizational change and criticism are inevitable aspects of professional life.** Developing constructive responses to these challenges is essential for long-term success.
4. **Perspective significantly influences resilience.** How you frame challenges—as threats or opportunities, as permanent or temporary—largely determines their impact.
5. **Emotional regulation skills enable effective responses to workplace challenges.** Developing the ability to manage your reactions in difficult moments enhances both immediate and long-term resilience.
6. **External support systems reinforce internal resilience practices.** Building professional relationships and personal foundations before you need them ensures resources are available during challenging periods.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What types of workplace challenges currently test your resilience most severely? What patterns do you notice in these situations?
2. What mental models or perspectives help you maintain resilience during difficult periods? How might you strengthen these perspectives?
3. What physical and emotional regulation techniques work best for you in high-pressure moments? How consistently do you apply these approaches?
4. How strong is your current support network? Where might you benefit from developing additional relationships?
5. When have you persisted through a difficult situation that ultimately proved worthwhile? What gave you the determination to continue?
6. When have you realized that changing direction was more appropriate than continued persistence? What signals helped you make this determination?
7. What personal practices or routines currently support your resilience? How can they get stronger?



CHAPTER 11

BEYOND BUSY WORK

"Don't mistake activity with achievement."

—John Wooden, legendary coach



In this scenario you're completing a detailed analysis that took three weeks of intense effort, only to discover it was filed away and never used. Picture spending months building a comprehensive report that your manager glances at for thirty seconds before moving on to other matters. These aren't imaginary scenarios. They happen.

In our consulting practice, many projects require extensive deliverables and one of the most important lessons we have learned is the distinction between effort, output, and value. This transition from activity-based to value-based work is a critical component for performance in the world beyond school. In many areas of life, simply completing assigned tasks correctly often guarantees success. In professional settings, perfect execution of the wrong activities yields little, regardless of the effort invested.

This distinction—between effort, output, and value—forms one of the critical separations between educational and professional achievement. Students are primarily evaluated on what they produce (papers, exams, projects); professionals are ultimately evaluated on the value they create (problems solved, deals closed, opportunities captured, outcomes improved).

When you fail to recognize this distinction, even after years on the job, you often fall into an activity trap. You can work incredibly hard on tasks that, while completed successfully, contribute little to organizational goals. You can mistake motion for progress, busyness for effectiveness, and output for impact.

The goal isn't to work less or to diminish the importance of diligent effort. Rather, it's to ensure that your effort and output connect to real gains—to outcomes that advance your organization's mission and enhance your impact. By making this connection explicit, you position yourself not just as a reliable doer of tasks but as someone who understands why those tasks matter.

RULE 43

Be an owner, not a renter.

The distinction between ownership and rental mindsets profoundly affects quality output. Those with rental mindsets do the minimum required and leave problems for others to solve. Those with ownership mindsets see issues and think, "That's my responsibility to fix."

Ownership doesn't require formal authority. It's a mindset available at any organizational level. It involves:

- Taking responsibility for outcomes beyond your explicit job description.
- Addressing problems rather than working around them.
- Thinking long-term about sustainability, not just immediate completion.
- Caring about quality even when no one is watching.
- Identifying improvements beyond what's been requested.

You take care of most things you own because you understand their worth. This sounds simplistic, but it's the foundation of excellence. Care about the details. Care about the impact of your work on others. Care about the mission of your organization.

When you genuinely care about your work and its effects, creating value becomes natural rather than forced. You automatically think about quality, impact, and improvement because you're invested in the outcomes, not just the activities.

This care manifests in seemingly small ways that accumulate to significant impact:

- Double-checking calculations before sharing them.
- Following up to ensure a solution actually resolved the problem.
- Considering how your work affects colleagues downstream.
- Seeking feedback to improve future deliverables.
- Celebrating others' contributions to shared success.

Organizations can measure activities and outputs, but they can't mandate care. It's a personal choice that dramatically influences your professional impact.

RULE 44

Effort matters, but value gets rewarded.

EFFORT: NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

For most things, we're conditioned to believe there's a direct correlation between effort and results. Study harder, get better grades. Practice more, improve your skills. Put in the hours, see the rewards. This mental model isn't entirely wrong. But in the working world, visible effort alone won't get you very far.

As we said earlier, work is hard. But simply working hard isn't likely to be the difference maker for your job or your career. It's easy for some people to create an effort-illusion: to create the appearance of working without ever getting anything done.

OUTPUT: QUANTITY ≠ QUALITY

Beyond the effort illusion, focusing solely on output without considering its quality or relevance is the next trap.

When you're trying to win at work simply finishing a task doesn't usually count to your credit if it's not hitting the minimum quality level. Simply done at all won't count as "good enough." (Though, like we said earlier, perfection isn't always the goal either.) Work that's completed incorrectly or insufficiently creates new problems that someone (often, but not always, you) will need to fix.

You might experience this lesson firsthand when rushing through a client deliverable to meet a deadline. Yes, you technically "finish" the project on time, but the work is so sloppy that you end up losing the client. The real cost of hasty output is far greater than if you'd simply requested a deadline extension.

That brings us to a central point. Completion is merely a prerequisite not the endgame.

VALUE: THE ONLY CURRENCY THAT REALLY MATTERS

At its core, your job—heck, any job—is about creating value for others. Full stop.

This realization might hit you during a particularly frustrating project. You've been tasked with building a reporting dashboard that nobody seems to care about. You're putting in the effort and producing the output, but something feels empty about the work. During a casual conversation with a sales director, you might ask why this dashboard matters. Her

FROM THE DESK OF KEVIN

I have a confession. Sometime late in the last century I was employed part-time by a large national chain retail store. I had the unenviable duty of unloading the shipping trucks at 6 a.m. in freezing Wisconsin winters. Then I took the merchandise and stocked the shelves. Now, picture in your mind being 16 or 17 and spending your Saturdays and weekday evenings this way. It's safe to say you might have also lacked enthusiasm at times for the work. Whenever I was too mentally weak and undisciplined to do the work, I'd grab a nearly empty box and feverishly walk around the store with my brow furrowed as if I was on some mission of tremendous importance. I was in fact just "looking busy." I had this activity dialed in. No one ever openly questioned me about what I was doing. I just was clearly putting in the effort. But not really.

[It is more than possible I subconsciously stole this idea from Seinfeld's George Costanza. I can neither confirm nor deny any direct or indirect influence.]

That was a low stakes situation. A part-time high school job. But you can imagine the equivalent at the career level. There are many ways you can just look busy for the sake of putting in effort. You need that effort to produce not simply be performative.

explanation completely shifts your perspective. The reports you're creating are helping the sales team identify at-risk accounts before they churn, potentially saving millions in revenue. Suddenly, your work has context. You're not just completing a task; you're helping protect the company's financial health and, by extension, people's jobs.

TRY THIS

Pick one task you're working on this week and ask:

- *What problem does this solve?*
- *Who benefits from this?*
- *How will I know if it made a difference?*

If you can't answer these questions easily, pause and clarify the purpose with your manager or stakeholders.

Value is about the gains and progress that the work you do creates for the larger “why” of any given situation. Focusing on value, the worthiness (or is it worthwhileness) of every choice and action will reframe the way you work. And when you really learn to identify the things that are most important to greater goals and good, you’ll find you can save a lot of time, headaches, and energy.

The most potent people we encounter in the working world are the ones whose choices and labor drive real gain, not just for themselves, but for their teams and broader colleagues.

RULE 45

Do the work, and know
why it matters.

Transitioning from an activity focus to a value focus requires a fundamental shift in how you think about your work. This isn't just about what you do but about how you conceptualize your role.

In the activity mindset, you think primarily about completing tasks and meeting explicit expectations. Your focus remains on the immediate work in front of you, measured by inputs (time spent, effort expended) and

outputs (deliverables completed). Success means finishing what you were assigned.

In this mindset, you think primarily about solving problems and creating impact. Your focus extends beyond immediate tasks to their purpose and effects. You measure quality contributions by outcomes (problems solved, improvements made) rather than activities. Generating meaningful results that advance organizational goals is the objective.

Consider how this mindset shift might appear in practice for a customer service representative:

- Activity focus: "Today I responded to 45 customer emails, achieving my daily quota."
- Value focus: "Today I resolved 32 customer issues completely, preventing the need for follow-up contacts. I also identified a recurring problem with our checkout process that's generating unnecessary support tickets and shared this insight with our product team."

Same role, entirely different focus. The value-focused professional isn't just processing tickets, they're solving problems and contributing to systemic improvements.

THE KEY QUESTION: AM I MAKING OTHER PEOPLE'S WORK EASIER?

Value rarely exists in isolation. We talked earlier about "hand-offs," when your output becomes someone else's input. The best pros understand this chain reaction and optimize their work to enhance others' effectiveness.

Case in point: a project manager who exemplifies this principle. Before sending any documentation to the development team, she asks herself, "What questions will they have after reading this? What information might be missing that would slow them down?" By anticipating these gaps, she prevents dozens of clarification meetings and keeps projects moving smoothly.

Contrast this with another colleague who dumps raw data on the analytics team without any context about what questions need answering or how the information will be used. Now there's extra work to do as the analysts have to schedule meetings just to understand the basic parameters of what's needed.

The difference? One is thinking about her output; the other is thinking about the value chain.

This connection to others' work applies regardless of your role. Executives who provide clear direction make their teams more effective. Engineers who document their code well make maintenance easier. Administrative professionals who anticipate needs prevent bottlenecks before they occur.

THE PROFESSIONAL PROGRESSION

Most careers follow a predictable evolution in this area:

Entry level: Primarily evaluated on effort. Are you showing up, working hard, and demonstrating commitment?

Mid-level: Increasingly judged on output. Can you independently produce quality work at a reasonable pace?

Senior level: Almost exclusively valued for impact. Does your presence significantly enhance the organization's ability to achieve its goals?

The sooner you start thinking in these terms, the faster you'll progress through these stages.

CONTEXT IS CRITICAL

The principles of value creation apply across roles and industries, but their application varies based on context:

In **execution-focused roles** (operations, administration, production), value often comes from reliability, efficiency, and quality. The question becomes:

"How can I perform these necessary functions in ways that reduce friction, prevent problems, and enable others' effectiveness?"

In **innovation-focused roles** (research, design, strategy), value often derives from insight, creativity, and problem definition. The key question shifts to: "How can I identify opportunities, generate novel solutions, and envision possibilities others don't see?"

In **relationship-focused roles** (sales, customer service, management), value centers on understanding, connection, and enablement. The central question becomes: "How can I understand others' needs, build productive relationships, and help others achieve their goals?"

Regardless of your specific role, the value mindset remains the same: focusing beyond activities and outputs to the difference your work makes.

RULE 46

If no one knows the value you created, it doesn't count.

Creating value is only half the equation—ensuring that it is recognized and leveraged is just as critical. This doesn't mean becoming a walking advertisement for your achievements. (We all know that person and let's just say they're SUPER fun at parties and happy hours.) It means learning the skill of non-slimy self-promotion: communicating your contributions in a way that is clear, grounded, and aligned with the bigger picture.

In a perfect world, good work would speak for itself. But in reality, work rarely speaks. It has to be spoken for. If you don't articulate the worth of what you're doing, people will fill in the gaps (often incorrectly), or worse, overlook your contributions entirely. This isn't about bragging. Quite the opposite. It's about helping others make informed decisions based on the reality of what you bring to the table.

Think of it as professional visibility, not vanity. Easier for some than for others, but in a crowded workplace filled with noise, gossip, nonsense, and braggadocio, it's pretty important.

When you share your accomplishments clearly and contextually, you're not just building your own reputation, you're helping your team, your department, and your company understand what's working. And that kind of clarity and commitment to the business builds trust.

A common trap in workplace communication is focusing too much on what you did, rather than why it mattered. Activities describe the motion; outcomes describe the meaning.

Compare these two updates:

- **Activity-focused:** "I spent the week updating our customer database and standardizing the contact information formats."
- **Value-focused:** "I cleaned and standardized our customer database, reducing errors in email campaigns and improving segmentation for more effective outreach."

The second version doesn't just inform, it makes a case for why the work matters. It tells a story that others can act on.

Wherever possible, use numbers to ground your story. Data provides clarity. It builds credibility. Even ballpark estimates help people understand scale and impact.

- "Shortened the monthly reporting process by 2 days."
- "Improved onboarding time by 25%, helping new hires get productive faster."
- "Increased customer retention by 5% through proactive account management."

Numbers don't brag. They inform.

Communicating this effectively also means tailoring your message to your audience. What counts as "impact" to one group may not register for

another. Frame your contributions in terms of what your listener cares about.

- Executives care about big-picture results: growth, revenue, risk mitigation, and strategy.
- Team-leads care about efficiency, collaboration, and clear progress against goals.
- Technical colleagues want to understand the "how"—the innovation, the process, the reliability.
- Customers and clients care about outcomes: speed, ease, reliability, satisfaction.

When you translate your work into their priorities, you make it easier for them to view you as indispensable.

THE HARD TRUTH: You can do everything "right" and still get overlooked.

You can create clear, measurable value. You can learn to communicate it without ego. You can avoid busywork, prioritize outcomes, and tailor your messaging to every audience. And still, someone less competent, less committed, or frankly less capable may get promoted ahead of you. Paid more than you. Recognized more publicly than you. Invited to the table you've been building, quietly, behind the scenes.

Sometimes it's politics. Sometimes it's favoritism. Sometimes it's just the dumb luck of timing. And sometimes, no one will be able to explain it at all.

This doesn't mean the principles in this chapter don't matter. It means they matter even more. (Regardless of how sick of the word "value" you are by now.)

Because while there will always be outliers—people who fail upward, who charm their way to influence, who inherit power or pretend their way into it—the majority of people who build lasting careers and meaningful

reputations still do so the right way: by showing up, doing the work, and proving their usefulness over and over again.

Fairness isn't promised. But dignity and momentum come from refusing to lower your standards just because the game feels rigged. Yes, be politically savvy. Yes, learn to sail the messy waters of workplace dynamics. But don't let cynicism rot your foundation. Stay anchored in what's real: outcomes, impact, and integrity.

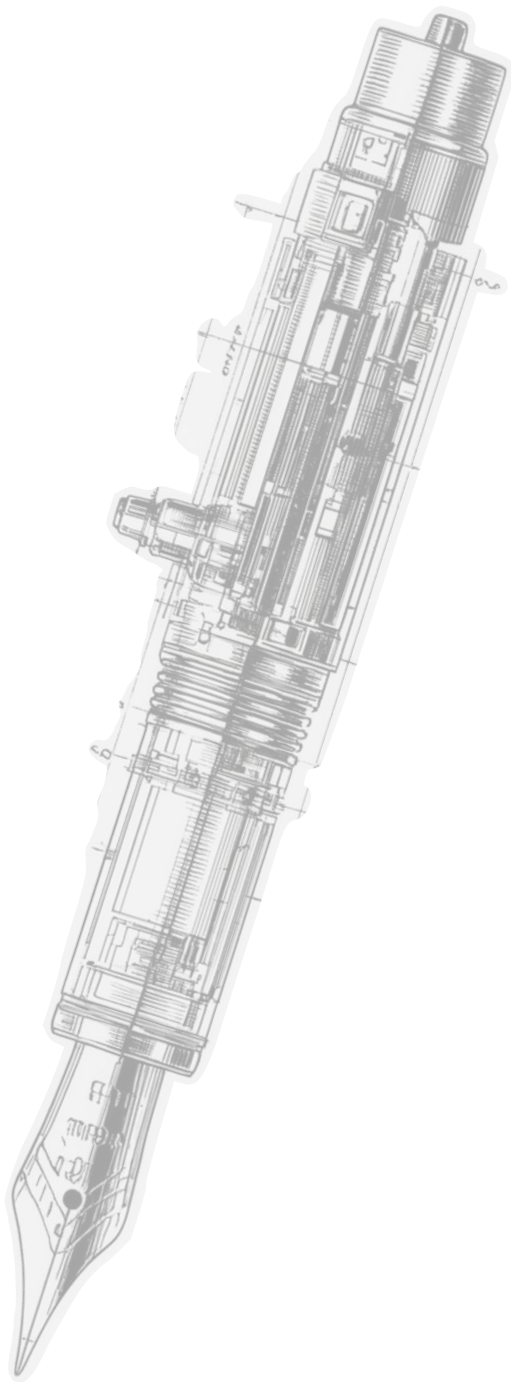
Because even when it's not rewarded immediately, real value leaves a trail. And over time, that trail is what leads to trust, leadership, and influence that sticks. You won't always be seen right away. But you'll be *buildable*. And that, more than visibility, is what sustains a career.

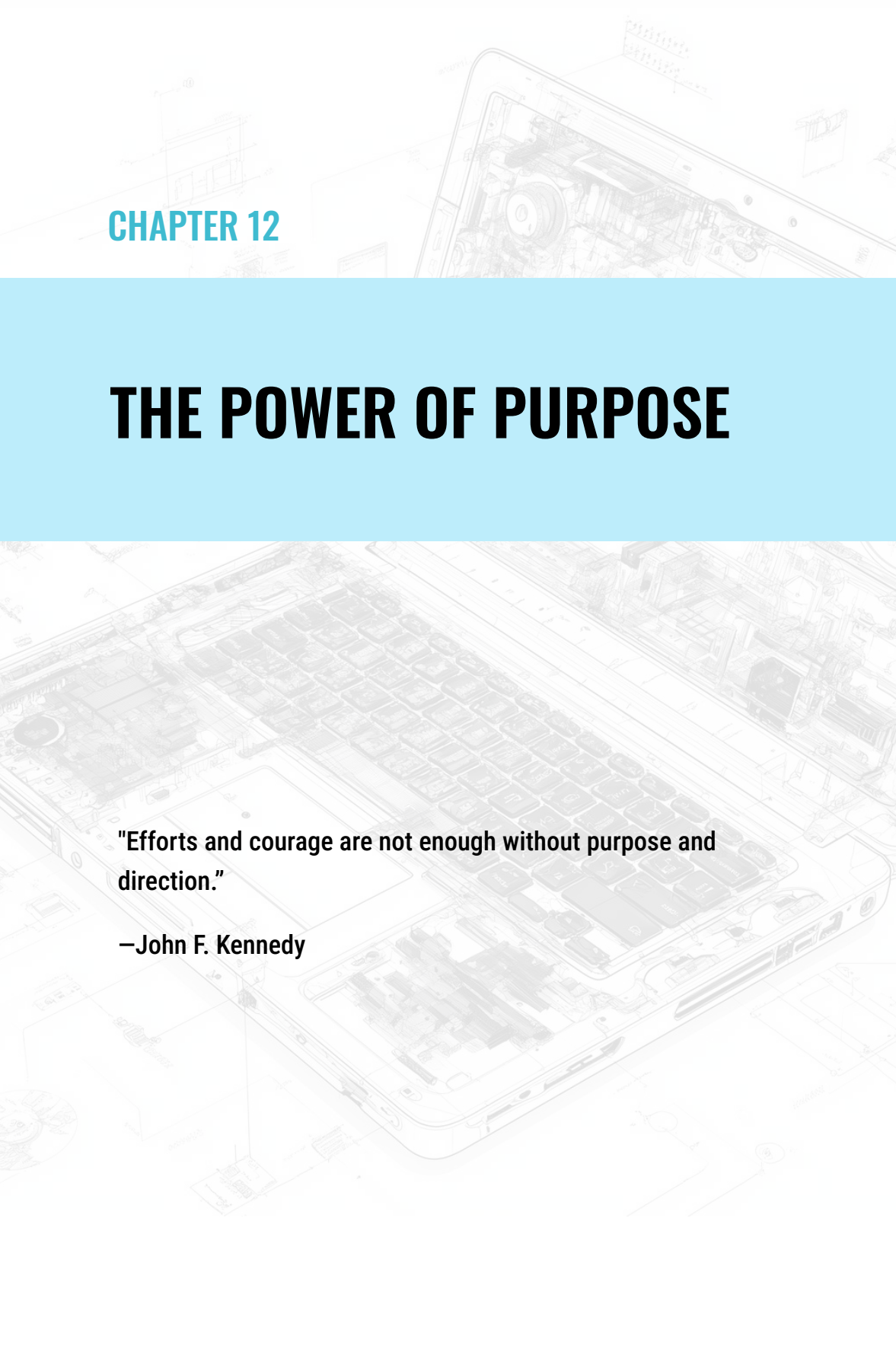
KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Value outcomes over activities.** While effort matters, busy doesn't mean valuable—results are what matter most.
2. **Output is necessary but insufficient.** Producing deliverables is just the beginning; their impact determines their true worth.
3. **Value comes from solving problems and advancing goals.** Connecting your work to organizational objectives transforms tasks into meaningful contributions.
4. **Strategic prioritization maximizes impact.** Focusing your limited time and energy where they create the most punch will distinguish you.
5. **The ownership mindset drives everything.** Taking responsibility beyond your formal role unlocks opportunities to make significant contributions.
6. **Effectively communicating value enhances its recognition.** Articulating the impact of your work in terms relevant to different audiences ensures your contributions are appropriately appreciated.
7. **Your evolution depends on shifting from effort to value.** The sooner you make this transition, the faster you'll advance in your career.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what areas of your work do you currently focus more on activity than value? What specific shifts might help you reorient toward impact?
2. Think about a recent project that created significant value. What made it valuable, and how can you apply those elements to other aspects of your work?
3. What problems do you see in your organization that nobody seems to be addressing? Which of these might you be positioned to help solve?
4. How effectively do you currently communicate the value of your work? What specific improvements in your communication approach might help others better understand your contributions?
5. What tasks currently occupy your time that create minimal value? What do you have to do to eliminate, automate, or reimagine these activities?
6. Who in your environment seems particularly skilled at creating and communicating value? What specific practices might you learn from their example?



A detailed technical line drawing of a laptop, showing its internal components like the keyboard, trackpad, and various electronic parts. The drawing is rendered in a light, semi-transparent style, serving as a background for the text.

CHAPTER 12

THE POWER OF PURPOSE

"Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction."

—John F. Kennedy

What separates average employees from the really good ones often isn't skill, it's vision.

Some people show up to check boxes. Others show up to move the mission forward. Same tools, same job description, radically different impact. They see the bigger picture. They understand how their work is more beneficial and meaningful when it's tethered to vision for their team, division or company.

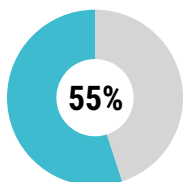
When you connect your work to a purpose beyond your task list, everything changes. You make smarter decisions. You show up with more resilience. You spot opportunities others miss. You care more and so do the people around you.

This isn't abstract or philosophical. Understanding the *why* behind your work sharpens your decisions about the *what* and *how*. Seeing your role as part of a bigger picture brings clarity, motivation, and creativity. And aligning your actions with the organization's mission doesn't just elevate your output—it elevates *you*.

People who do this are more than just reliable contributors, they're also major strategic assets. They're the ones leadership notices. The ones who

get tapped for opportunities. The ones who move from execution to influence.

We all need to be intentional about developing that kind of mission-driven mindset—one that turns everyday responsibilities into meaningful contributions. Because when your work serves something larger than yourself, you don't just do more, you become more.



Employees who see a connection between their work and the organization's mission are 55% more likely to be high performers. (Gallup, 2022)

RULE 47

The pros always start with why.

In his seminal work *Start With Why*, Simon Sinek argues that great leaders and organizations inspire action by starting with "why"—their purpose, cause, or belief—rather than starting with "what" they do or "how" they do it.

Every organization exists to solve some problem or meet some need. Your job, regardless of its specific functions, exists to help address that core challenge.

The power of a purposeful connection becomes clear when people reframe their work in mission terms. Customer service representatives shift from "answering phones and handling complaints" to "reducing anxiety for customers during difficult moments." Accountants move from "processing numbers" to "ensuring financial integrity that builds

stakeholder trust." Maintenance technicians transform from "fixing equipment" to "preventing disruptions to critical services."

This connection often requires looking beyond immediate activities to their ultimate impact. You might need to trace several steps between your daily tasks and the outcome they enable, but this thread always exists. Your challenge is to identify it and keep it front of mind.

Seeking out that thread matters because not everything an organization does carries equal importance. Mission-aligned pros develop keen awareness of what truly drives organizational success and focus their efforts accordingly.

Mission alignment works most effectively when it connects daily activities to both immediate team objectives and broader organizational strategy.

This multi-level alignment considers:

- Organizational mission: The fundamental purpose your organization serves.
- Strategic priorities: The current focus areas advancing that mission.
- Team objectives: Your group's specific contribution to those priorities.
- Individual responsibilities: Your personal role in supporting team objectives.

TRY THIS

Review recent company communications, quarterly goals, and leadership messages. Identify the top 3-5 organizational priorities mentioned consistently. For each priority, note specific initiatives, metrics, or outcomes being tracked. Map your current responsibilities and projects to these priorities, identifying areas where you could increase your contribution to key priorities.

When this alignment isn't clear—when you can't trace the connection between your tasks and organizational objectives—it's appropriate to seek clarification from the manager you've spent a ton of time developing a good working relationship with.

DEFINE SUCCESS, ALWAYS

A pillar of our work in both consulting and facilitation is establishing clear definitions of success before beginning any significant work. We're not obsessed with pure metrics, though those matter. It's about understanding what "mission accomplished" looks like for each initiative.

Before starting projects, we always ask:

- How will we know if this succeeds?
- What specific outcomes would represent victory?
- How does this success contribute to our larger purpose?

This practice of defining success in mission terms rather than activity terms keeps work focused on outcomes rather than outputs. (Sound familiar?) It prevents the common trap of confusing motion with progress, of staying busy without advancing meaningful objectives.

GIVE MORE CREDIT THAN YOU TAKE

Now, we know we also say to make sure that people know the good work you're doing, but as a leader, the irony is that credit-sharing typically earns more respect and influence than self-promotion. When others see that you care more about advancing the mission than about personal recognition, they become more willing to support your initiatives, share information with you, and advocate for your ideas. One of the clearest indicators of a mission-first mindset is how someone handles recognition. Those focused primarily on personal advancement hoard credit. Those focused on the mission distribute it generously.

Credit-sharing is as strategic as it is magnanimous. By recognizing others' contributions, you strengthen the collaborative networks essential for mission accomplishment while simultaneously building your reputation as a leader focused on collective success rather than personal glory. After your next amazing project, write a brief email to your manager highlighting specific contributions from at least three other people who helped make it possible. Be detailed and generous in your recognition. You'll strengthen relationships while demonstrating your mission focus.

RULE 48

Even the boring stuff matters.

Another reality shock: not every day will feel meaningful or impactful. In fact, many won't. Most days are just kind of...well, there.

You might find yourself complaining to a mentor about spending days on what felt like busywork—reformatting presentations, gathering metrics, scheduling meetings. She might laugh and say, "Welcome to the big leagues. You can't avoid this kind of work, but you do need to find meaning in it while gradually shifting your role toward more of what energizes you."

She would be right. Over time, you might learn that some of those "mundane" tasks were actually teaching you valuable skills and giving you visibility into how decisions were made. The tasks didn't change, but your perspective did.

Meaning and purpose are critical factors in satisfaction and performance. However, many necessary workplace activities lack obvious connection to inspiring purposes.

This reality affects workers across levels: Entry-level employees spend 30-40% of time on routine administrative tasks. Mid-level managers devote

25-35% of time to compliance and reporting activities. Even executives allocate 15-25% of their schedule to governance requirements.

The challenge lies not in eliminating these necessary activities but in connecting them meaningfully to larger purposes.

You can try several approaches for finding significance in apparently routine work:

- You can consciously link specific tasks to their ultimate impact, even when that connection spans multiple steps. Those who regularly practice this connection report significantly higher engagement with routine work.
- You can find meaning in how work is done rather than just what is accomplished. Quality standards and process excellence can provide satisfaction even in routine activities.
- You can approach routine tasks as opportunities to develop expertise and efficiency. The experience of progressive skill development creates engagement regardless of task content.
- You can find meaning in how work supports colleagues and the team rather than in the tasks themselves. This social framing significantly increases satisfaction with otherwise routine activities.
- And you can approach routine work with continuous improvement orientation. Even small enhancements to standard processes create meaning through creative engagement.

These approaches don't transform all work into profoundly fulfilling experiences that rival base jumping the Alps, but they provide practical strategies for finding meaning amid necessary routine.

When you take a step back and intentionally connect your day-to-day work with something bigger than yourself, you stop just surviving your job and you start shaping your career. Purpose isn't just a nice-to-have for idealists; it's a compass and a fuel source. The people who lead, influence, and endure aren't always the smartest or most experienced, but they are the ones who know why they show up every day. And, they help others

rediscover their why as well. No matter your title or how far along you are in your career, you have the power to ground your work in meaning, and that can make all the difference.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Mission alignment creates mutual benefit.** Connecting your work to organizational purpose enhances both your impact and your advancement.
2. **Purpose provides clarity amid complexity.** Understanding the "why" behind your work improves decision-making about the "what" and "how."
3. **Purpose communication enhances engagement and effectiveness.** Sharing the "why" behind work improves both motivation and execution quality.
4. **Mission culture develops through consistent practices.** Regular connection to purpose through questions, stories, and recognition establishes collective alignment.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How clearly can you articulate your organization's core mission in simple terms? How might a clearer understanding of this purpose enhance your daily work?
2. Think of a recent project or task that felt particularly meaningful. What specific connection to larger purpose made it significant? How could you create more such connections in your ongoing responsibilities?
3. Where do you currently see disconnects between stated organizational priorities and actual decisions or resource allocations? What does it take to manage these disconnects while maintaining mission focus?
4. In what areas might you be allowing personal preference or convenience to override mission alignment in your work? What specific adjustments would strengthen this alignment?
5. How effectively do you currently communicate purpose when assigning work or making requests? What improvements in this communication might enhance both execution and engagement?

SECTION IV EXERCISE

DESIGN YOUR RESILIENCE RITUAL (7-DAY CHALLENGE)

Building resilience means cultivating the small, repeatable habits that help you reset, learn, and move forward with intention. Over the next week, try this four-part daily ritual to build that muscle. The time investment is small; the payoff is cumulative.

1. Morning Intention (1 minute)

Start your day by answering two questions:

- What's one thing I can directly control today?
- What mindset do I want to bring to whatever challenges arise?

Write it down or speak it aloud. Framing your day with intentional focus strengthens your sense of agency.

2. Midday Reset (5 minutes)

Pause—away from screens if possible—and check in with yourself:

- Where's my energy? My attention?
- What do I need to adjust to finish the day well?

This is a moment to breathe, reset posture, hydrate, stretch, or reframe your thinking. Even a micro-shift can re-center you.

3. End-of-Day Reflection (5 minutes)

Before closing your laptop or shifting into personal time, take a few minutes to ask:

- What did I handle well today?
- Where did I struggle and what can I learn from it?
- What pattern am I starting to notice about my reactions to stress?

Mentally "close the tab" on the workday to help preserve your boundaries.

4. Weekly Perspective (10 minutes on Day 7)

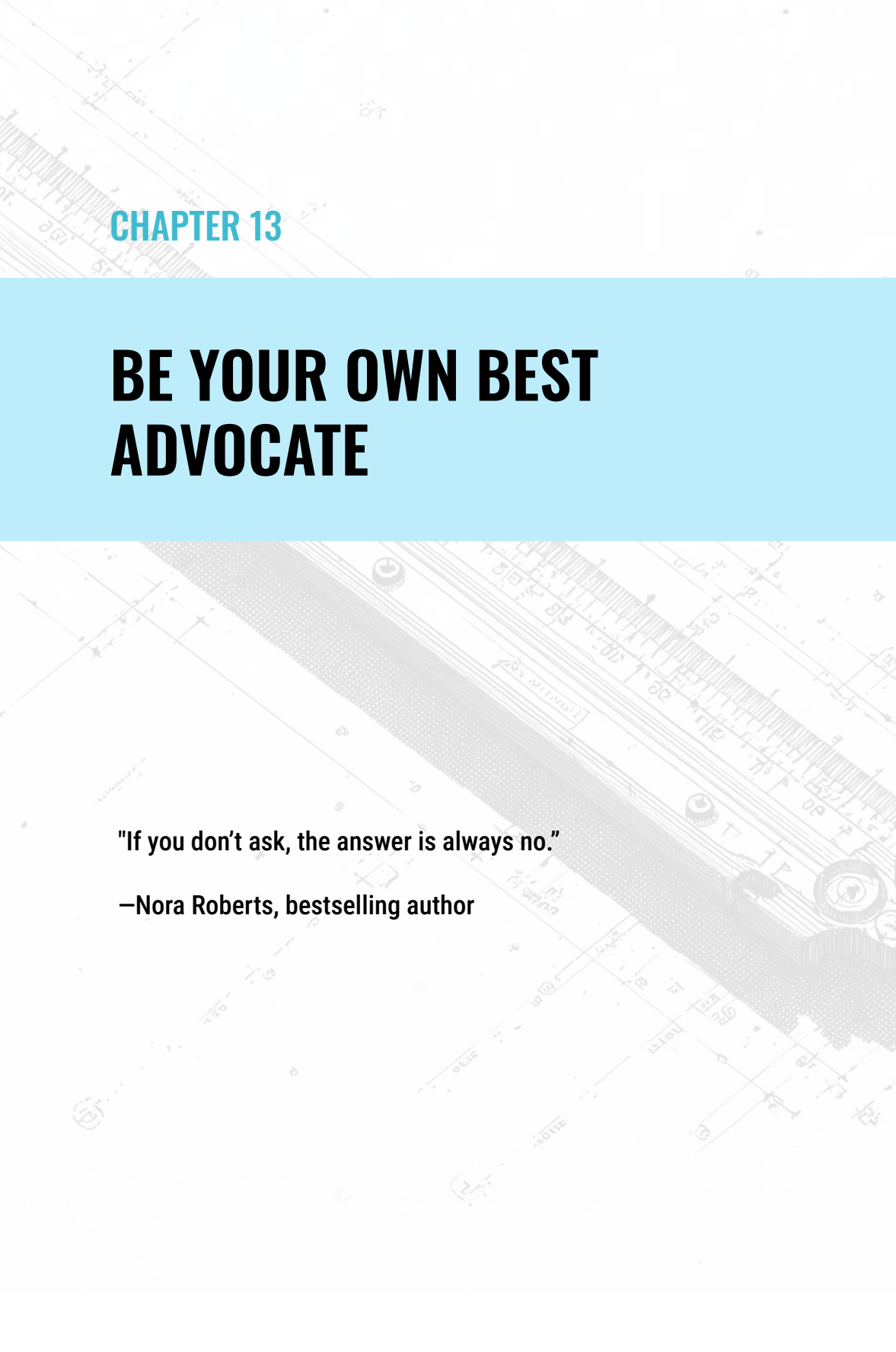
Look back over the week with a wide lens:

- What challenged me—and how did I grow?
- What themes keep showing up?
- How does this connect to the professional I want to become?

Then acknowledge your own progress—even if it's imperfect. That's the point.

SECTION V: WORK- LIFE INTEGRATION

**SETTING BOUNDARIES
WITHOUT KILLING YOUR
CAREER**

The background of the entire page is a light gray architectural drawing or blueprint. It features various lines, circles, and text, including the word "TITLE" and some numbers, which are slightly faded and oriented diagonally.

CHAPTER 13

BE YOUR OWN BEST ADVOCATE

"If you don't ask, the answer is always no."

—Nora Roberts, bestselling author

The transition from education to professional life often brings a dramatic shift in workload expectations. Many newer (and older) professionals find themselves drowning in projects with impossible deadlines, their inbox overflowing with "urgent" requests. They work nights and weekends, miss personal events, and cancel plans with family. This pattern stems from a fundamental misconception: that advocating for reasonable workloads and boundaries is somehow selfish or unprofessional.

The reality is quite different. The office is not designed to automatically protect your well-being. That responsibility falls on you. Self-advocacy is called that for a reason. But there's a way to do it that has a better chance to build your reputation rather than damaging it.

Historically, findings in organizational psychology going back decades reveal an interesting paradox: the ones who establish clear boundaries often earn more respect, not less. In studies of psychological safety, leaders who model healthy boundaries foster more trust and less burnout in teams (Edmondson, 1999 [the GOAT study on the topic]; Bahadurzada, Edmondson & Kerrissey, 2024). And according to research on assertiveness and self-differentiation (Lazarus, 1991), people who express

boundaries clearly are perceived as more self-assured and competent. The evidence continues to grow stronger over time.

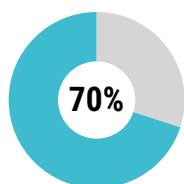
However, how you advocate matters tremendously. People who frame boundaries in terms of productivity and effectiveness are viewed more favorably than those who cite personal preference alone.

Self-advocacy also connects to larger concepts of psychological safety in the world. Environments where people feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, and admitting limitations produce better outcomes across nearly all metrics of organizational performance. Your self-advocacy contributes to creating these conditions, not just for yourself but for your entire team.

RULE 49

Everyone is struggling.

What you'll quickly discover is that nearly everyone around you is fighting their own battle. Beyond the power suits and Jimmy Choos, virtually everyone in organizational settings experiences significant challenges, insecurities, and pressures that remain largely invisible to colleagues.



70% of professionals experience imposter feelings at some point in their career—doubting their competence and fearing they're a fraud among their peers. (International Journal of Behavioral Science 2011 - Gravois, 2007)

This reality contradicts the common perception that established pros have somehow "figured it out." The challenges simply evolve rather than disappear.

This is particularly true at executive levels. A report from Korn Ferry finds that up to 71% of C-suite executives report battling imposter-syndrome symptoms with many experiencing what might be called "leadership isolation"—feeling unable to express uncertainties due to positional expectations.

Understanding this universal human element transforms how you interpret workplace interactions. The difficult colleague may be struggling with personal challenges invisible to you. The seemingly arbitrary decision from leadership may reflect pressures and constraints you cannot see. The overwhelming project specifications might stem from your manager's anxiety about their own performance evaluation.

This perspective doesn't excuse unprofessional behavior or poor leadership, but it provides context that enables more effective navigation. By recognizing the universal humanity behind the facades, you develop greater empathy, reduce unnecessary personalization of workplace challenges, and maintain more realistic expectations of both yourself and others.

And it highlights the importance of pursuing both excellent communication and listening skills.

COMMUNICATION AND EXPECTATIONS

The first step in advocating for yourself is simply understanding what's really expected of you. In many workplace cultures, there's a gap between what's said and what's meant. Learning to bridge this gap starts with asking good questions.

When your boss drops a new project on your desk, don't just nod and say, "I'll get it done." Instead, try approaches like:

- "Happy to take this on. Can we align on timeline so I'm prioritizing the right way across projects?"

- "What would 'great' look like here? Are there examples I should model or landmines to avoid?"
- "How much time do you think this should take?"
- "Is there anyone else I should loop in early or keep updated as I work on this?"

Questions like these accomplish two things: they show strategic thoughtfulness (not just a task-focus), and they give you real information to manage your time and energy.

Questions function not just as information-gathering tools but as subtle interventions that reshape conversations and expectations. They tell us something about actual requirements versus assumed ones, create space for collaborative problem-solving, and allow the other party to maintain face while modifying unreasonable expectations.

The questioning approach can sometimes shift vague directives into better defined parameters. It also protects against a common phenomenon where urgency is overestimated. What seems "urgent" to the requester may have flexibility that only becomes apparent when directly discussed.

Not all questions are equally effective. The most effective clarifying questions:

- Begin with acknowledgment of the request's importance
- Focus on understanding rather than evaluation
- Explore parameters rather than fundamental purpose
- Offer options rather than objections
- Connect to organizational priorities

For example, instead of, "Is this really necessary by Friday?" (which questions judgment), you might ask, "To deliver this effectively by Friday, I'll need to prioritize it over the quarterly report. Does that alignment work with our department goals?" This formulation acknowledges the deadline while placing it in a larger context of competing priorities.

It's not just what you say but how and when you say it, and whether you've listened well and paid attention to the context around you or not. A theme we've tackled before in "managing up."

When faced with "unreasonable" demands or workloads, ineffective communication often manifests as either complete acquiescence or frustrated complaints. Neither approach serves your interests. Complete acquiescence leads to burnout, while complaints without solutions position you as part of the problem rather than a collaborative problem-solver.

So effective self-advocacy has to employ a solution-focused framing. Of course these kinds of conversations aren't best as improvised ones but rather strategically planned:

1. Clarify your objective: What specific adjustment are you seeking?
2. Identify motivations: Why would this change benefit key stakeholders?
3. Anticipate concerns: What objections might arise?
4. Prepare alternatives: What options could meet both your needs and organizational requirements?
5. Select appropriate timing: When will the conversation be most productive?
6. Choose suitable format: Would this discussion be best in person, by video, or in writing?
7. Plan follow-up: How will you ensure implementation and assessment?

This approach significantly increases the likelihood of successful self-advocacy while preserving professional relationships. Remember, you aren't the customer, you're the value creator.

When things are important to you, you have to take care with how you handle the situations. But taking care of yourself in this way is one part of the bigger picture of feeling like a whole integrated person at work.

RULE 50

Advocating for yourself works better
when you advocate for others too.

One of the best ways to advocate for yourself is to genuinely care about your colleagues' well-being too.

When you help create a culture where people's needs and limitations are respected, you benefit from that culture too. This might look like:

- Speaking up in meetings when you notice a teammate seems overwhelmed.
- Acknowledging when deadlines might be unrealistic for the whole team, not just you.
- Celebrating others who set healthy boundaries.
- Checking in with new team members about their workload adjustment.

If you can help normalize these conversations for everyone, you create an environment where your own needs can be expressed without judgment.

But this approach also connects to broader organizational dynamics. Workplaces function as systems where norms and practices become self-reinforcing. So by introducing and supporting more sustainable expectations, you contribute to gradual cultural shifts that benefit both individual well-being and organizational effectiveness.

Overwork leads to diminished productivity, increased errors, and eventually burnout and turnover. All costly outcomes for organizations. When you advocate for reasonable workloads and boundaries, you're not just helping yourself and others, you're helping your company get your best work. If you're advocating for more reasonable workloads and boundaries, emphasize this connection. Your request isn't about personal preference but about optimizing performance.

THE HARD TRUTH: Despite your best efforts, your thoughtful questions, your data, and your solutions, sometimes you'll be met with passive resistance and even a hard no.

"That's not how we do things here." Or, "We're an all hands on deck all the time kind of place." "Work hard, play harder, and then come back to work."

Nearly everyone feels overworked and underpaid. It's become nearly impossible to avoid this kind of culture and set of expectations. And it seems to affect every field and every sector. We could spend hours talking about why this is, about what went wrong, when, and who's to blame. But those kinds of forensic interrogations just don't make any difference in the here and now. You're feeling the burn today. The answer to every question you don't ask is already "no." So despite the ubiquitous feeling that the situation of overwork can't be fixed, it surely won't ever be if you don't find the most savvy and strategic angle to advocate for change.

RULE 51

Taking time off is a professional strategy.

At least one part of the solution to this overworked reality is PTO. Your paid time off is part of your compensation package. You've earned it. Yet many leave vacation days unused, worried about appearing uncommitted.

We see two common reasons people fail to take their due time. One is related to the team. As a committed and caring professional, you don't want to let your team down. To put them in a position of even more overwork to cover you. And since work never ends, you never feel like there's a good window, which is connected to the second reason. Your boss doesn't make taking vacation easy because there's never a good time. Some people often fear the confrontation about vacation. Others don't care and take vacation whenever they want even to the detriment of

themselves, the team, and their goals. The answer—like almost everything—is somewhere in the middle.

And HOW you take time off matters.

- **Ineffective approach:** Requesting vacation days at the last minute, during critical project phases, or leaving others to pick up your slack without preparation.
- **Effective approach:** Planning ahead, communicating early, ensuring your responsibilities are covered, and documenting your processes so things run smoothly in your absence.

We hope you're ready for this old chestnut (yes, that's a real phrase which can be heard most famously in the classic film *White Christmas*): studies show that regular periods of disconnection improve performance. The folks who take regular vacations report higher productivity upon return, show greater creativity in problem-solving, experience fewer symptoms of burnout, demonstrate stronger long-term commitment to their organizations, and make fewer critical errors in judgment. (American Psychological Association, *Stress in America* (2018); Harvard Business Review (2015), *Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time*)

From a purely economic perspective, unused vacation is compensation you've effectively returned to your employer. Americans collectively forfeit billions in unused paid time off annually, essentially providing free labor and diminishing their own well-being simultaneously.

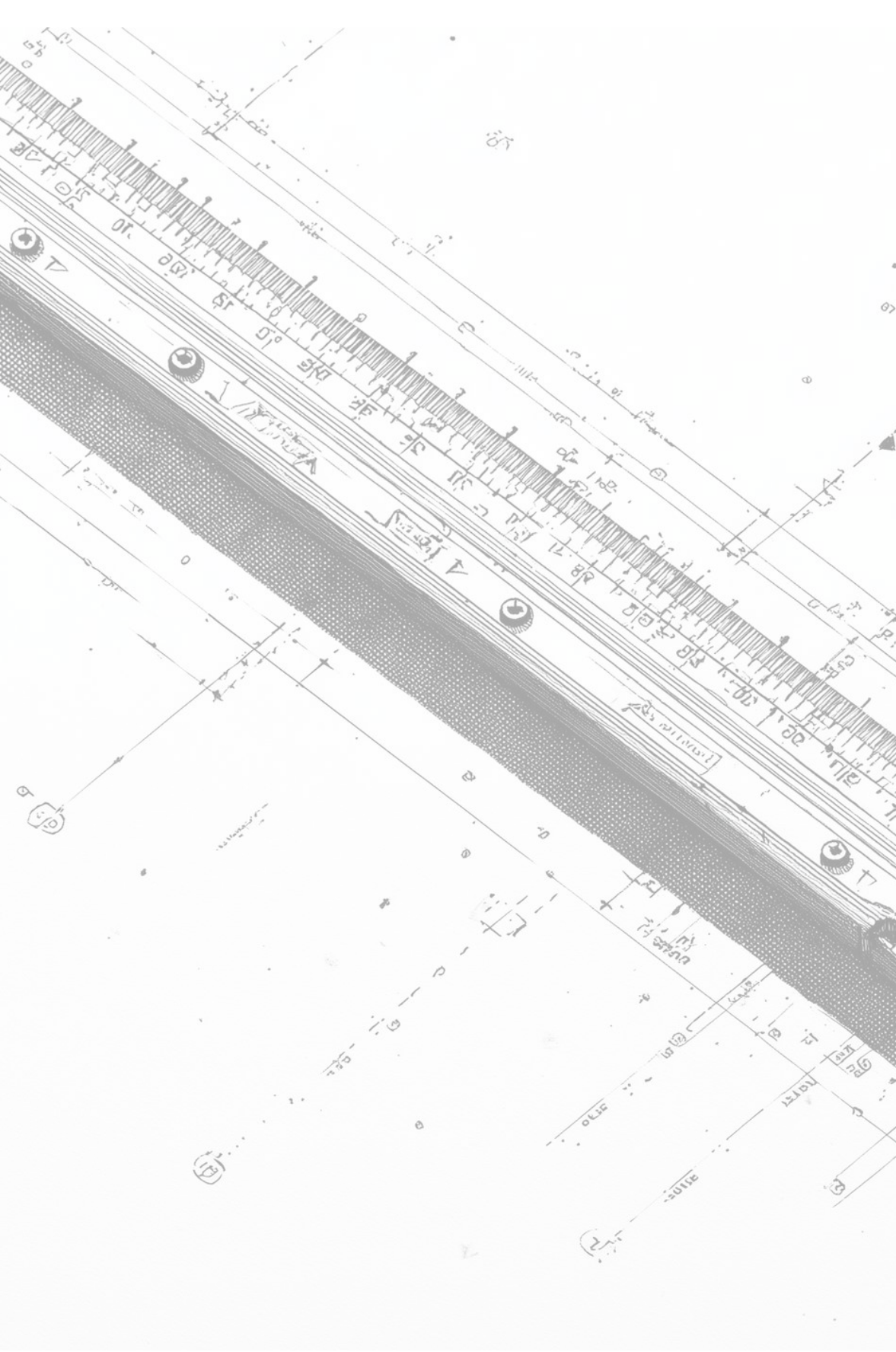
Even if you don't have somewhere exotic to go, you still need the respite. And you need to unplug and unwind. Don't skip that vacation. You've got the rest of your life of work ahead of you, don't miss out on living today because you're thinking about tomorrow.

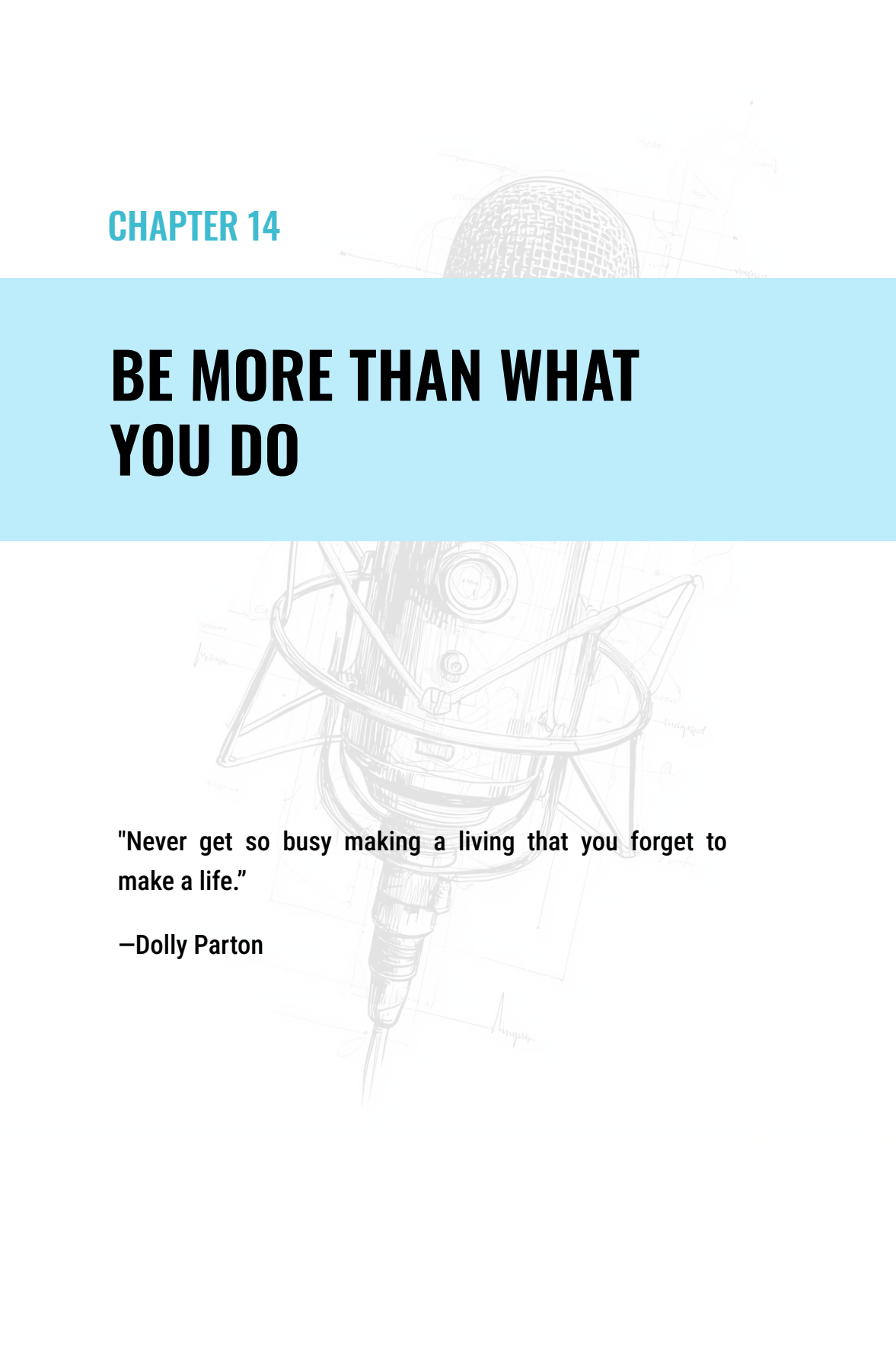
KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Self-advocacy is not selfish:** Setting appropriate boundaries demonstrates commitment to sustainable excellence, not lack of dedication.
2. **Questions create clarity:** Strategic questioning establishes expectations and demonstrates thoughtfulness while gathering information.
3. **Solution-focused communication works best:** Presenting alternatives rather than complaints transforms boundary discussions into collaborative problem-solving.
4. **Emotional regulation enhances effectiveness:** Maintaining calm, cool, and collected demeanor significantly increases the impact of your self-advocacy.
5. **Supporting others creates mutual benefit:** Normalizing appropriate boundaries for everyone builds cultures that respect sustainable practices.
6. **Time off requires planning:** Taking your earned PTO strategically shows respect for both your needs and organizational requirements.
7. **Performance science supports sustainable practices:** Connect your boundary needs to evidence about how they enhance your effectiveness.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What assumption about "expected availability" in your workplace most significantly impacts your well-being? Can you begin testing whether this assumption is accurate?
2. Think of a current workload challenge. What specific clarifying questions could help you better understand the actual requirements and priorities?
3. What prevents you from using your earned time off? How could you address those obstacles using the principles in this chapter?
4. When have you successfully advocated for a boundary or limitation? What made that conversation effective, and how could you apply those lessons to future situations?
5. What physiological signals tell you that you're approaching your capacity limits? Can you use these as early warning signs rather than waiting for full burnout?
6. Where do you see opportunities to support others' appropriate boundaries in your workplace? How might this contribute to healthier collective practices?
7. What specific evidence could you gather about your own performance patterns to support future advocacy conversations?





CHAPTER 14

BE MORE THAN WHAT YOU DO

"Never get so busy making a living that you forget to make a life."

—Dolly Parton

“So, what do you do?” It’s often one of the first questions people get asked when meeting someone new. This seemingly innocent conversation starter reveals a profound assumption in modern society: that our professional roles define who we are. For many young people, the answer to this question can feel tremendously important, as if it captures their entire worth as a person and their whole future.

In our achievement-oriented culture, the line between what you do professionally and who you are as a human being can easily blur. But there’s a critical distinction between your job and your identity; maintaining this separation matters. We all need to learn how to build a life that’s fulfilling across multiple dimensions, not just the professional one.

RULE 52

Work can be meaningful, but it
can’t be everything.

Finding meaning in your work is wonderful. Humans naturally seek purpose, and given that we spend more waking hours working than doing anything else, it's reasonable that those contributions would represent an important source of fulfillment.

Studies in positive psychology published by *Journal of Career Assessment* and *Research in Organizational Behavior* confirm that meaningful work contributes significantly to overall life satisfaction. This isn't something to dismiss or diminish. When your work aligns with your values and uses your strengths, it can be deeply fulfilling.

Several factors can help you find that meaning:

- Using your distinctive capabilities in service of challenging tasks
- Working in contexts that reflect your core values
- Seeing the tangible effects of your efforts on others
- Having appropriate autonomy over how you approach your responsibilities
- Finding opportunities for growth through your work

But beyond the psychological rewards, work provides the opportunity to contribute to building a better world for others—to solve problems, create useful products or services, or otherwise improve lives. This contribution helps foster a well-lived life.

Think about the people you most admire. Is it solely their achievements that inspire you? Or is it their character, their relationships, their impact across multiple domains of life?

Even the most legendary career successes—the Steve Jobs and Ruth Bader Ginsburgs of the world—are remembered as complex, multifaceted humans, not just for their fame or notoriety.

And you are just as complex as them. You are:

- A friend, family member, partner
- A citizen of your community and world

- A person with unique experiences, perspectives, and wisdom
- Someone with passions, curiosities, and talents beyond your job description
- A human being worthy of rest, joy, and fulfillment

When you over-identify with your role in the office, you create vulnerability for your sense of purpose and self. Any setback—a missed promotion, a failed project, even normal criticism—becomes an existential threat to them.

For years we've cultivated a multidimensional model of identity development and this has proven to be practically true as well as experiential useful. From our vantage point healthy adult identity encompasses numerous domains:

- **Relational identity:** Who you are in connection with others
- **Moral identity:** Your values and ethical frameworks
- **Cultural identity:** Your relationship to cultural heritage and community
- **Creative identity:** How you express and actualize your distinctive gifts
- **Physical identity:** Your relationship with your body and physical capabilities
- **Spiritual identity:** Your understanding of meaning, purpose, and transcendence
- **Civic identity:** Your role as a citizen and community member

Professional identity is just one dimension among many. When this single dimension dominates, other equally important aspects of selfhood can atrophy, creating psychological vulnerability.

The next time you introduce yourself, or when someone asks what you do, find a way to tap into these other senses of identity. It'll help remind you what's true of, well, you. And you might also find that you can make deeper connections with others when you see them as more than a job-holder.

RULE 53

Holistic life goals
aren't a luxury.

It seems cliché. And we won't go deep into this with you, as there are AMPLE other authors and gurus who speak to this. But we will say that there's a reason this topic gets so much coverage. Just showing up to work each day for the rest of your life will leave you flattened. And yet without the goal-shaping convenience and rhythm of picking a major and new classes each year, new extracurricular and clubs, etc., it's all too easy to slip into the humdrum of life as usual.

Your career is one domain for setting and achieving meaningful goals. If you want to produce a more complete picture of a full life, you need to consider what you want to experience, learn, create, or contribute outside of work. Set some goals for yourself. 1 year, 5 year, 10 year. Have a vision for where you want to be down the road **APART** from your work and your wallet.

Several categories of life goals are often associated with fulfillment across research studies and cultural contexts (and common sense):

Experiential goals involve seeking specific experiences like travel, cultural events, or engagement with nature. Experiences contribute more to lasting happiness than material acquisitions, creating memories and personal growth that persist long after the experience itself ends.

Learning goals focus on developing knowledge or capabilities outside work requirements. You might choose mastering a language, understanding historical periods, or cultivating artistic skills. These pursuits often engage different thought processes than work-related learning, providing both cognitive balance and purely intrinsic satisfaction.

Relationship goals address the quality and nature of your connections with others, such as developing deeper friendships or building meaningful

family traditions. The relationship-focused nature of these goals provides important balance to the often individually oriented nature of achievement.

Physical goals involve bodily capability or experience, such as completing fitness challenges or mastering movement practices. These aspirations reconnect us with our embodied existence often neglected in knowledge-work environments (i.e. sitting a desk and computer all day everyday).

Creative or expressive goals focus on making or sharing—writing, music, visual arts, or other forms of creation. These activities can be tremendously fulfilling, and engage different aspects of your skills, providing outlets for expression that may find limited space in work contexts.

Rather than treating these non-work goals as secondary to career objectives—perpetually deferred in favor of professional demands—you should take an integrated approach to life planning. Clarify your core values that transcend these domains, imagine success across them, distribute time and energy across them, and periodically reassess balance as life circumstances evolve. We know that sounds like a dull way to essentially have more fun in life. But the problem with adulthood is that fun usually doesn't happen on accident anymore.

RULE 54

Relationships need as much
care as resumes.

One of the clearest indicators of life satisfaction as we age is the quality of our relationships. Yet these are often the first casualties when work becomes all-consuming. Like we said earlier, for most, making new friends and finding new long-standing relationships will never again be as easy as it was in those collegiate years and circumstances. Yet their contribution to your fulfillment in and out of work is undeniable.

Harvard's landmark 75-year Study of Adult Development offers perhaps the most definitive research on what creates a fulfilling life. Its central finding reveals that the quality of relationships predicts both happiness and physical health more reliably than any other factor, including professional achievement or financial gains.

While workplace relationships can certainly be meaningful, they often change as people move between roles and companies. The relationships that truly sustain us through career ups and downs are typically those we nurture outside the office—the friends and family who know us beyond our job titles and other accomplishments.

Much has been reported about the digital generation's tendency to withdraw from relationships. To make plans only to cancel them. Solitude and "alone time" do have tremendous benefits for our mental health and well-being. But relationships are an essential part of our humanity and we can't forget to seek them out and nurture them even if it isn't our first instinct.

Meaningful relationships require intentionality, particularly for people in demanding careers. Creating space for connection often happens through shared activities and non-work experiences that engage different dimensions of yourself.

RULE 55

Have a hobby.

That subtitle sounds a lot better than "get a life." But it does speak to the idea that you should have activities and interests you do just for fun. Activities you pursue purely for enjoyment, challenge, or self-expression serve critical psychological functions that professional pursuits often cannot fulfill. We might have been able to tuck this into RULE 53, but it's

important enough, and such good simple advice, that we wanted to have it stand alone.

Mentally engaging activities create genuine cognitive breaks from work preoccupations, allowing the mind to truly detach and recover. Hobbies provide experiences of competence and mastery without the formal evaluation components that accompany professional development, satisfying our need for growth in pressure-free contexts.

Despite these proven benefits, hobbies often disappear during the early career phase. This happens through several common patterns that might sound familiar. Many adopt a deferred enjoyment mindset, the belief that intense work focus now will enable leisure later, which often proves false as responsibilities typically increase rather than decrease over time.

TRY THIS

***Hobby Reclamation:** To rebuild this dimension of your life, begin by remembering what activities you loved before ambition took center stage. List everything that comes to mind, from childhood hobbies to college interests. Then explore which of these still spark interest, considering variations that might fit your current life circumstances. Start small by choosing just one activity and committing to 30 minutes a week—putting it on your calendar with the same commitment you'd give a work meeting. Look for communities, classes, or groups related to this interest, as embedding your hobby in social connection increases both enjoyment and commitment. Finally, when work threatens to encroach on this time, remind yourself that this isn't "extra"—it's essential to your wellbeing and sustainable performance.*

Our culture's productivity glorification contributes as well, with messaging that valorizes constant productivity and subtly devalues "unproductive" activities. After demanding workdays, energy conservation often kicks in,

FROM THE DESK OF BRYAN

My family often references time by my "hobby phases." They say things like, "Oh yeah that was a great trip and remember dad was in his juggling phase so it must have been like 2018." I love to learn and not just cursory stuff. I was the one always wanting to sign up for vocational classes to learn welding or woodworking or auto body repair.

It has produced a lifetime of "phases" and great hobbies that I have enjoyed and that have provided an outlet and balance to the pressures of work and career. One of my favorite hobbies was my amateur cake making phase. Known by my family and friends as "Cake Season," my kids and my wife all have birthdays within a month or so of each other. I was an engineer, but had zero knowledge of the physical limitations of cakes. Every year for their birthdays from that time till they were 16, I made a CAKE. It was a multi-week process that took over most of our 800 square-foot New York City apartment and birthed my wife's now love of bourbon. It was stressful. It was difficult. It was complicated and I absolutely loved it.

I built cakes that celebrated whatever the boys were into that year. Full size saxophone cakes that defied gravity, Super Hero ones that had motorized parts, Gaming cakes that looked like you could plug them in and play. I loved my cake phase. I also loved my furniture craftsman phase, and my custom guitar building phase, and my automotive and engine repair phase (still going as needed).

Each of these things ignited my imagination and allowed me to do and think about different things than I do during my workday. I wouldn't necessarily recommend most people take on a hobby the way that I do, but it's imperative—especially in a world where work and leisure time are so blurred—to find hobbies or activities that are an outlet. I facilitated a team retreat earlier this year and found out the CEO recently got into latch-hook rug making. We connected because, hilariously...I actually had a latch-hook rug making phase when I was about 12 years old.

creating a tendency to default to passive leisure rather than more engaging but initially energy-requiring hobbies.

In other words, you'll need some hobbies if you want to fulfill your other life goals. (Caveat: Netflix nights don't count.) So maybe don't give ALL of your energy to work. Save some for the fun stuff. The stuff that might also help you form stronger relationships outside of work. (Kevin might suggest joining a bowling league, but to each their own.)

RULE 56

Don't forget to actually
live your life.

When Maya Angelou was asked about her many careers—as poet, memoirist, actress, director, civil rights activist, and more—she famously said: "I have lived a life. Not just existed."

That distinction between living and merely existing is bedrock. Existing is going through the motions, checking boxes, climbing ladders without questioning their destination. Living is engaging fully with the richness and complexity of human experience.

The hours you spend at work represent a substantial portion of your life. Approach them not just as means to a paycheck or stepping stones to advancement, but as opportunities to express your values, develop your capabilities, and make a positive difference.

There will be difficult days when the gap between ideal and real feels insurmountable. There will be moments of doubt about your path or your abilities. This is part of every meaningful career journey. In those moments, return to your foundations, your core values, your support network, and your commitment to continuous growth.

Remember that you're not alone in this transition. Millions have walked this path before you, and millions more will follow. Reach out for support

when you need it. Offer help when you can provide it. The communities we build around our professional lives often become sources of not just practical assistance but deep friendship and belonging.

The most potent folks we've coached and advised over the years aren't those who sacrificed everything for their careers. They're the ones who brought their whole selves to their work—all the wisdom, creativity, and perspective that comes from a fully-lived life.

This part of your life and identity is one dimension of who you are, an important one, but still only one. In a culture that increasingly equates career achievement with personal worth, maintaining this perspective requires deliberate intention and consistent practice.

The strategies outlined in this chapter won't instantly transform cultural messages about work centrality or organizational expectations about professional dedication. However, they provide practical approaches to developing and sustaining a more balanced, multidimensional sense of self, one that incorporates achievement within a larger framework of human flourishing.

Through cultivating relationships, engaging in personally meaningful activities, pursuing diverse goals, developing varied capabilities, and making conscious choices about identity expression, you create a life defined by fullness rather than narrowness. This expanded sense of self not only reduces vulnerability to setbacks but also opens possibilities for deeper satisfaction and more complete self-actualization.

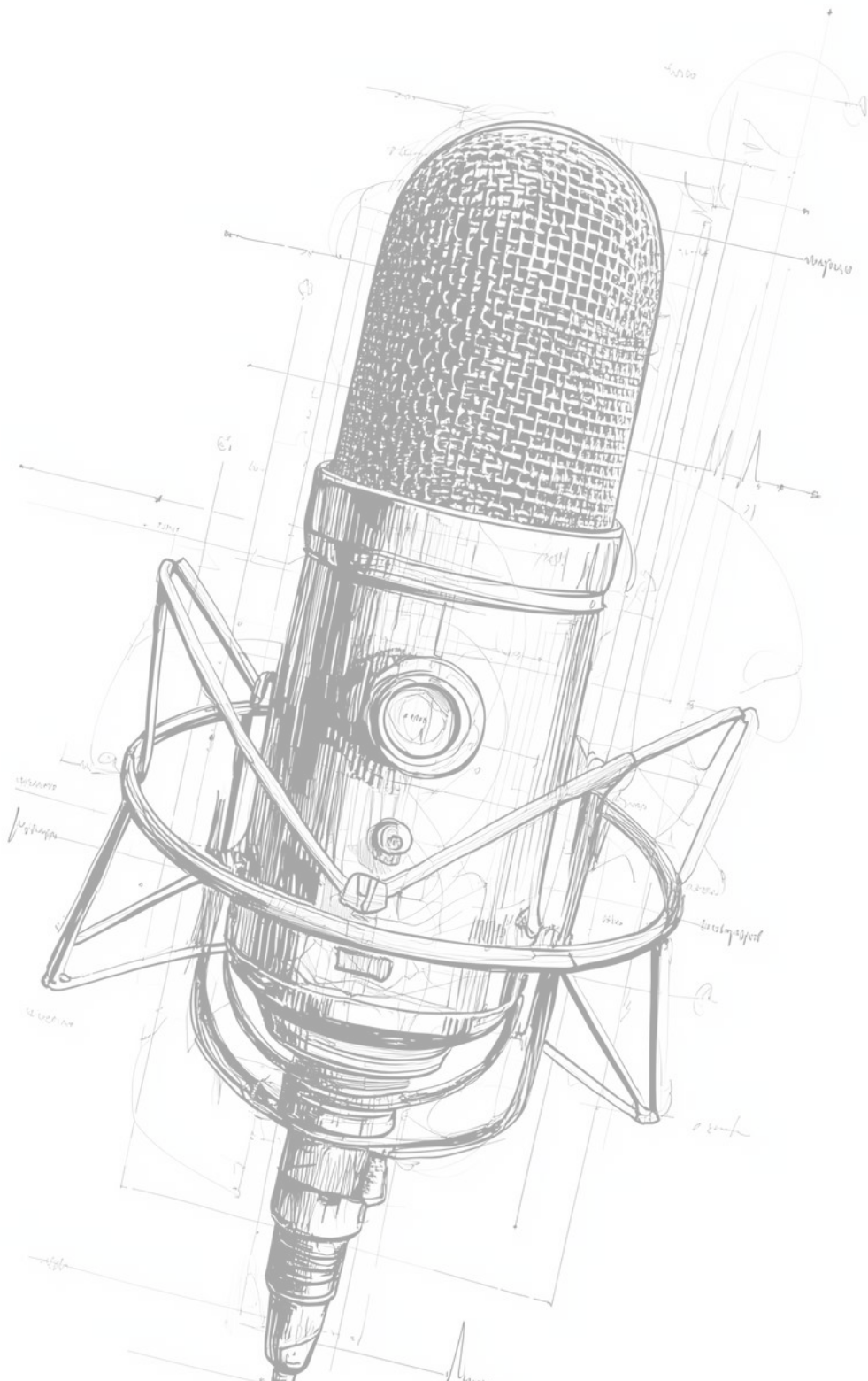
Life may always exert a gravitational pull toward work-centered identity. Consider this chapter a counterweight.

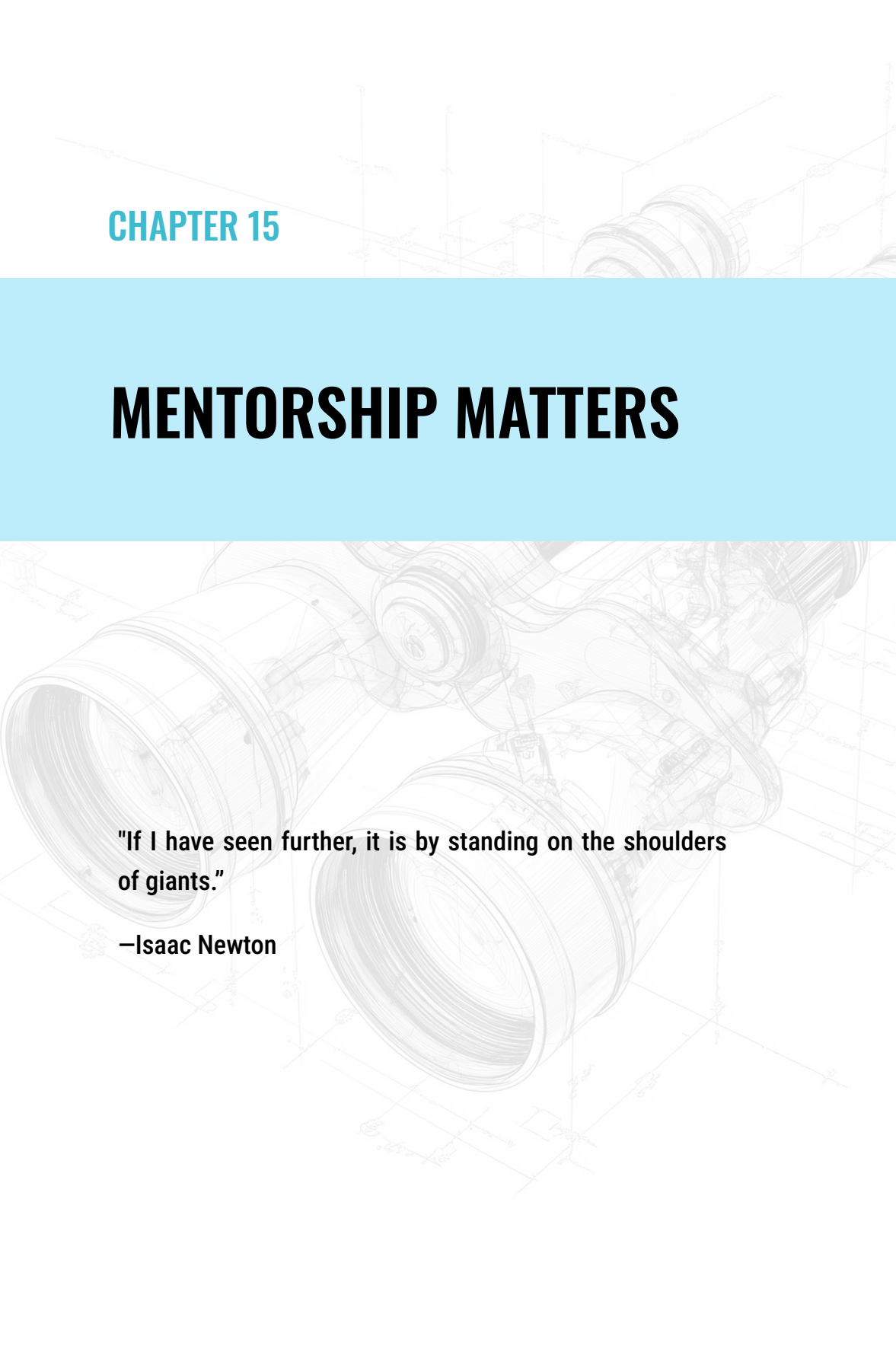
KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Your job is part of your identity, not the whole of it.** While meaningful work matters, over-identifying with your profession creates psychological fragility and life imbalance.
2. **A multidimensional identity strengthens resilience.** Investing in relationships, hobbies, personal growth, and community creates buffers against professional setbacks and burnout.
3. **Relationships are a stronger predictor of long-term well-being than career success.** Deep personal connections—not titles, achievements, or salary—are most closely linked to happiness and health over a lifetime.
4. **Engagement in non-work activities is essential.** Hobbies, learning, and creative pursuits replenish energy, support cognitive performance, and enable full self-expression.
5. **Building a well-lived life requires intentional choices,** especially in a culture that equates worth with productivity. Reclaiming your identity beyond work takes practice, boundaries, and conscious rebalancing, but pays lifelong dividends.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. If I could no longer do my current job, what parts of my identity would still remain strong and meaningful?
2. What parts of myself have I unintentionally neglected or allowed to atrophy because of work demands?
3. When was the last time I engaged in an activity purely for joy, curiosity, or self-expression—with no productivity goal attached?
4. What are three non-work goals I care about deeply? What's one small step I could take toward each one this month?
5. How might my future self—20 or 30 years from now—wish I had invested more time or attention today?



A faint, light blue technical drawing of mechanical components, possibly lenses or camera parts, serves as the background for the entire page. The drawing includes various lines, circles, and dimension lines, typical of engineering blueprints.

CHAPTER 15

MENTORSHIP MATTERS

"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

—Isaac Newton

When you transition from education to this next phase of life, you bring valuable skills and knowledge with you. Yet, despite your preparation, a vast territory of knowledge remains invisible, not because you lack intelligence or education, but because certain aspects of workplace reality simply can't be learned from textbooks or courses, or even this book!

This gap between what you know and what you need to know turns into one of the most significant challenges in early career development. It's the reason why two equally talented professionals with similar educational backgrounds can experience dramatically different trajectories.

At some point you might be starting a new role in an unfamiliar industry. You've prepared thoroughly, researched the company, studied relevant technical material, and developed skills that match the job description. Yet within weeks, you realize there's a whole universe of knowledge you didn't even know to look for. You discover unwritten rules about how decisions really get made. You encounter historical context that explains seemingly irrational processes. You begin to sense relationship dynamics that influence which ideas gain traction. You notice subtle communication

patterns that signal importance or urgency in ways no orientation handbook described.

This knowledge exists beyond what any training program or orientation can provide. It's the organizational equivalent of dark matter, invisible but powerfully influential, shaping outcomes in ways that remain hidden until someone helps you see them.

When you're new to an environment, you face a fundamental challenge: you lack awareness of your own knowledge gaps. You don't know what you don't know, which makes self-directed learning inadequate for certain critical areas. Even the most diligent self-education can't reveal blind spots whose existence you can't detect.

Without external perspective, these blind spots can persist for years, creating obstacles that delay or derail your progress. Mentorship provides the essential outside viewpoint that helps illuminate these areas before they become significant problems.

RULE 57

You can't figure out everything alone.

Even in an age of unprecedented information access, certain types of knowledge remain resistant to self-directed learning. This isn't due to information scarcity but to the nature of the knowledge itself.

A mentor acts as a bridge to forms of learning that resist self-teaching. They provide interpretation that transforms raw experience into useful wisdom, helping you develop nuanced understanding in months that might otherwise require years of unguided experience.

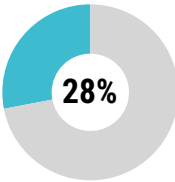
Throughout history, apprenticeship models dominated professional development across virtually all fields. While formal education has replaced some aspects of these systems, the fundamental mechanism—

learning through guided practice and observation—remains irreplaceable for developing certain capabilities.

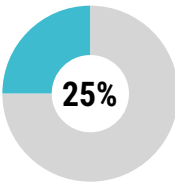
Modern workplace structures have largely dismantled formal apprenticeship without replacing its developmental function. Mentorship preserves this essential learning pathway within contemporary workplaces, offering an essential complement to formal training and self-directed learning.

Multiple studies demonstrate significant advantages for professionals who secure effective mentorship. Employees with mentors are promoted more frequently than those without mentorship support, often advancing at rates several times higher than their non-mentored peers. People with mentors receive higher compensation and more frequent raises than those with similar performance metrics but without mentoring relationships. Those with mentors develop key capabilities faster than those relying solely on formal training and self-directed learning. Across industries, mentored employees consistently report higher job satisfaction and engagement scores than those working through challenges without guidance.

A 2024 study by MentorcliQ revealed that employees involved in mentoring programs experienced significant career progression:



of mentees received a salary grade increase, compared to just 5% of non-participants.



of mentors also saw salary grade increases, versus 5% of those not involved in mentoring.

These benefits appear particularly pronounced for early-career professionals facing initial workplace transitions, though mentorship continues to provide benefits throughout career progression. Even senior leaders benefit from mentoring relationships that offer fresh perspective and challenge established thinking patterns.

The process of identifying potential mentors is an important first step that deserves strategic consideration rather than haphazard approach.

FINDING A MENTOR

While structured mentorship programs do offer valuable entry points if you can find one, the most effective mentoring relationships often develop through thoughtful personal initiative. This requires actively identifying potential mentors whose guidance would be most helpful to you and your imagined ideal state.

Effective mentor identification means looking beyond obvious candidates to find individuals whose approach and capabilities align with your developmental needs.

- Look for people who demonstrate excellence in areas relevant to your aspirations—whether technical expertise, leadership approach, or relationship management.
- Seek those who thrive in organizational systems with evident skill and ethical integrity, maintaining effectiveness without compromising values.
- Notice who maintains positive relationships across organizational levels, connecting effectively with both senior leaders and front-line staff.
- Pay attention to who shows genuine interest in others' development, offering guidance without seeking credit.
- Consider whose communication styles seem compatible with your learning preferences, as even the most knowledgeable mentor will have limited impact if their communication approach doesn't resonate with you.

These potential mentors may exist within your immediate work environment or in adjacent professional spaces. They might be found in associations, alumni networks, industry groups, or even other organizations within your field. While direct supervisors can sometimes serve as effective mentors, often the most valuable guidance comes from those without direct authority over your performance evaluation, as this separation allows for more open discussion of challenges and vulnerabilities.

CLARIFY WHAT YOU ADMIRE AND NEED

Before approaching a potential mentor, reflect carefully on what specifically draws you to them. This reflection serves multiple purposes: it clarifies what guidance you're actually seeking, helps you formulate a more compelling invitation, and establishes clearer expectations for the relationship.

Are you drawn to someone's technical mastery, their strategic thinking, their communication approach, or their relationship-building skills? Do you admire how they maneuver through organizational politics, maintain work-life integration, or align their work with deeper values?

This specificity helps identify the most appropriate potential mentors for particular developmental needs. It transforms vague admiration into focused learning objectives.

The most powerful mentorship connections occur when mentees identify mentors who embody capabilities they genuinely aspire to develop. This is concrete evidence that your desired capabilities are attainable, which significantly increases motivation and learning to the hard part of pursuing growth. The question isn't simply *Who is successful?* but rather *Who embodies capabilities I genuinely want to develop?*

ASK WITH INTENTION

The mentorship invitation is a foundational moment that many potential mentees approach with unnecessary hesitation, ineffective framing, and a bundle of nerves. Most potential mentors respond positively to thoughtful requests as they might rarely have the opportunity to share their wisdom.

When crafting your invitation, include specific acknowledgment of what you admire about their skills or capabilities, clear articulation of what guidance you're seeking and why, realistic time parameters that respect their constraints, evidence of preparation demonstrating investment in the potential relationship, and flexibility about format and frequency of interaction.

For example, rather than a vague request like, "Would you be my mentor?" you might say: "I've particularly admired how you work across departments while maintaining strong relationships across teams. I'm working to develop those skills in my current role and would benefit greatly from your perspective. Would you be open to meeting monthly for about 30 minutes to provide some guidance in this area? I'm happy to work around your schedule."

This approach demonstrates thoughtfulness, specific interest, and respect for time constraints—elements that significantly increase positive responses.

RULE 58

No growth pains,
no professional gains.

GET HONEST FEEDBACK

One of the greatest aspects of mentorship is receiving candid feedback in a low-stakes environment. Your mentor isn't your supervisor, they're not

evaluating your performance for promotion or compensation decisions. You now have space for more honest conversations.

Effective feedback requires psychological safety—the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for sharing ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. Formal reporting relationships inherently involve evaluation that can inhibit the vulnerability necessary for developmental feedback. Mentoring relationships, by contrast, create a different dynamic where feedback serves solely developmental purposes rather than evaluative ones.

In this safer space, you can discuss challenges, uncertainties, and failures that you might hesitate to reveal in more evaluative relationships. You can share concerns about your approach or performance without fear that these admissions will appear in your next review. You can explore options and test ideas with someone who has no vested interest beyond your development.

This feedback function becomes particularly valuable for addressing blind spots. A mentor can tell you that your communication style, which you believe is appropriately direct, comes across as abrupt to team members who expect more context. They can observe that your reluctance to promote your accomplishments, which stems from genuine modesty, is limiting your visibility with senior leadership.

THE HARD TRUTH: A good mentor doesn't let you off the hook.

You'll have to face parts of your mindset or habits that aren't helpful to you. Critique is essential to mentorship. Mentors are not therapists. They aren't cheerleaders. They aren't there just to affirm you. Good mentorship is about helping you grow and stretch yourself. Like a good coach they want the best for you, but sometimes they'll suggest things that are hard to hear. And that's good.

BE A GREAT MENTEE

While focusing on mentor selection and qualities is important, your role proves equally important for relationship effectiveness. Your approach to the relationship significantly influences both its longevity and its impact.

To get the most of your mentorship, to honor your mentor's time and commitment, you need to be willing to commit to several behaviors:

- Be prepared and diligent, coming to interactions with specific questions and topics rather than expecting mentors to generate agendas.
- Show implementation commitment, thoughtfully applying guidance rather than simply receiving it.
- Communicate progress, updating mentors on how previous advice was implemented and what resulted.
- Take appropriate initiative, assuming responsibility for scheduling and maintaining relationship momentum.
- Receive feedback well, demonstrating openness to constructive criticism without excessive defensiveness.

The evidence is clear: mentorship becomes a critical accelerator for professional development that no amount of individual talent, educational preparation, or self-directed learning can fully replace. The guidance, feedback, network access, and opportunity visibility that effective mentorship provides creates measurable advantages that compound throughout careers.

This doesn't mean mentorship guarantees a promotion or that lack of mentorship ensures failure. Many professionals achieve significant accomplishments without formal mentoring relationships. However, the evidence strongly suggests that appropriate mentorship makes the journey more efficient, less painful, and ultimately more successful.

In a landscape of increasing complexity and rapid change, the wisdom of those who have been in a similar terrain is powerful. The mentor advantage isn't about finding shortcuts—it's about seeing further by standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **You don't know what you don't know.** Mentors help you see what you can't yet see—accelerating professional maturation and closing blind spots before they become career blockers
2. **Some knowledge resists self-teaching.** Certain capabilities develop primarily through guided observation and feedback rather than independent study or formal training.
3. **Mentorship delivers measurable benefits.** Mentees advance faster, earn more, and report higher satisfaction than non-mentored peers.
4. **Specificity enhances mentorship effectiveness.** Clear identification of what guidance you seek and why you've selected a particular mentor significantly increases both acceptance likelihood and relationship impact. Be specific about what you're asking and why—it's the difference between connection and confusion.
5. **Being a good mentee matters as much as finding a good mentor.** The approach you bring to the relationship—preparation, implementation, feedback receptivity—largely determines what you'll gain from it.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What areas of your professional growth feel unclear, stuck, or overwhelming—and who might help illuminate the path?
2. Have you been holding back from asking someone to mentor you? What fear or assumption is standing in the way?
3. Who do you admire—not just for their success, but for how they lead in their role or carry themselves?
4. What's one specific capability or career challenge you'd like guidance on—and who might offer it?
5. Are you approaching mentoring relationships with a learner's mindset—or are you hoping for validation or easy answers?

SECTION V EXERCISE

MENTOR MAPPING

1. Identify growth areas: List 3-5 specific aspects of your professional development where you'd like guidance (e.g., technical skills, leadership, industry knowledge, work-life balance).
2. List potential mentors: For each area, identify people whose experience or approach you admire. Notice where a potential mentor covers multiple areas.
3. Prioritize: Which areas are most important to you or your development or might require a longer term investment of mentorship to move the needle? Which areas could be helped by a conversation or two over coffee?
4. Prepare your approach: For your top choice of a mentor/area of focus, draft a specific request that:
 - Acknowledges something you genuinely admire about them
 - Explains why you're seeking guidance in this particular area(s)
 - Makes a clear but reasonable request (coffee, monthly check-in, etc.)
 - Offers to work around their availability
5. Start small: Begin with just one mentoring relationship and add others gradually as you develop the skill of being a good mentee.
6. Prepare for meetings: Always come with specific questions and updates on how you've applied previous guidance.

EPILOGUE

The Reality of Working in
the World That Is

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to
continue that counts."

—Winston Churchill

**The workplace isn't what you expected—but you can still
thrive in it.**

Organizations are complex systems created by and filled with humans. So, like people, they're replete with inherent contradictions, politics, failings, and limitations. Expecting otherwise sets you up for perpetual frustration and disillusionment.

Yet these imperfections don't negate the reality of meaningful work and positive impact. Between naive idealism and cynical disengagement lies the productive middle path: clear-eyed recognition of organizational realities combined with commitment to positive contribution and incremental improvement.

This balanced view—seeing the world as it is while working toward what it could be—enables sustainable career engagement. It allows you to invest

your energy where it will make genuine difference rather than exhausting yourself fighting unchangeable realities. It creates space for finding meaning and purpose amid organizational imperfections.

If you can hold onto this view you'll find greater satisfaction, improve your own performance and growth, and ultimately have a more significant impact on your career than those who adopt either purely idealistic or cynical stances. You'll also develop the wisdom to distinguish between what you can change and what you must accept, so you can focus your energy accordingly.

By understanding the reality of working in the world that is, you position yourself to make the greatest possible contribution to *the world that ought to be*.

Studies consistently identify meaningful contribution as the most significant predictor of sustained career satisfaction—more powerful than advancement, compensation, or recognition. Regardless of what you do for work, you have a chance to be part of making work better for others and make your own experience of work better in the process.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF TIME

Much of what makes early career stages challenging is the intensity and immediacy of everything. Everything feels urgent. Every decision seems potentially career-defining. Every mistake appears catastrophic.

One of the greatest gifts you can give yourself is perspective—the ability to see your current situation within the context of a decades-long career trajectory. When you take this longer view, you realize:

- Few individual projects or decisions are truly make-or-break
- Relationships matter more than any single deliverable
- Skills compound over time in ways that aren't always visible in the moment
- Recovery and resilience are more important than perfection

- Your definition of success will likely evolve significantly

This perspective doesn't mean being passive or uncommitted to your current work. Rather, it means approaching that work with a sense of proportion, understanding that today's urgent task is part of a much longer journey. Thankfully, perspective is something we can cultivate intentionally through practices like "past reflection, present engagement, and future consideration."

Past reflection provides valuable context for current decisions when applied constructively. It helps you extract learning from previous experiences, recognize patterns across similar situations, and avoid repeating mistakes.

Present engagement creates both performance quality and mental satisfaction. It helps you provide full attention during important activities, minimize distractions during key interactions, and develop relationships through attentive connection.

Future consideration enhances decision quality and the effectiveness of your development. It helps you anticipate consequences beyond immediate outcomes, evaluate present decisions against future objectives, and consider legacy beyond immediate recognition.

As with so much of what we've discussed in the book, being intentional with both your mindsets and your actions is the recipe. Don't let life and work happen to you accidentally.

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

OK! You've made it to the end of the book, but your growth is just getting started.

The chapters we've walked through together are more than a map for steering your early career—they're building blocks for a successful professional life.

The working world needs not just your skills and knowledge but your full humanity. It needs your creativity, your compassion, your integrity, and your unique perspective.

There's no single formula for getting it right. The specific path that works for you will depend on your values, strengths, circumstances, and goals. What matters isn't following someone else's template but finding an approach that aligns with who you are and what matters most to you.

So what now?

- **Keep learning.** Revisit a chapter when something resonates or when something falls apart. Context gives insight new meaning.
- **Keep noticing.** Watch how your values and skills evolve. Make adjustments with courage, not fear.
- **Keep connecting.** Share what you're learning. Ask for help before you really need it. Someday, offer mentorship when you're ready.
- **Keep showing up.** The professional world isn't perfect, but it's full of opportunities to make a difference. Be one of them.

And when work feels too hard, or the pressure feels too high, remember to:

- Know your worth.
- Guard your energy.
- Be more than what you do.

You won't always get it right. No one does. But now you have some tools, perspective, and language to meet challenges with intention.

Despite its flaws and challenges, work remains one of our most significant opportunities to contribute meaningfully to something beyond ourselves. The hours you spend in work settings will represent a substantial portion of your life. Approach them not just as means to a paycheck or stepping stones to advancement, but as opportunities to express your values, develop your capabilities, and make a positive difference.

If you remember one governing truth it should be this one: for 17+ years, educational environments provided you with structured learning paths, clear objectives, explicit evaluation criteria, and defined completion points. Professional settings will present ambiguous goals, implicit expectations, and continuous evaluation without clear endpoints. Be patient with yourself as you make the shift. Remember: it's a marathon. So that when you fail, which you likely will, you can give yourself a break.

The leap from education to employment is significant, but it's one you can make successfully. Armed with self-awareness, relationship skills, resilience, and a commitment to continuous learning, you have everything you need to not just survive but thrive.

The path won't always be easy, but it will be worth it.

Welcome to Work!

A SPECIAL INVITATION

There are 58 rules in this book.

But we actually wrote a 59th, and it might be the most important one we wrote.

We left it out on purpose. Not because it didn't fit, but because Rule 59 only makes sense once you've read the others. It's a rule that ties everything together, propels you forward, and is one most people spend an entire career learning too late.

Scan the code below to unlock Rule 59 and join thousands of professionals who are done leaving their success up to chance.

No fluff. No spam. Just the rule we couldn't put in print.



<https://welcometowork.co/rule59.html>

APPENDIX

Workplace Readiness Self-Assessment

INTRODUCTION

This assessment is designed to help you evaluate your preparedness for the workplace across the key dimensions discussed throughout this book. It's not about scoring "well" or "poorly"—it's about gaining insight into your current strengths and identifying areas for focused development as you begin your career.

For each statement, rate yourself on a scale of 1-5:

- 1 = Rarely true for me
- 2 = Occasionally true for me
- 3 = Sometimes true for me
- 4 = Often true for me
- 5 = Almost always true for me

Be honest with yourself. This assessment is for your benefit alone, and awareness of your current state is the first step toward growth.

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU

Self-Awareness & Personal Effectiveness

- ___ I can clearly identify my top strengths and areas for development.
- ___ I accurately assess how my work meets expectations without needing external validation.
- ___ I recognize my emotional triggers and manage my reactions effectively.
- ___ I maintain focus and productivity during challenging or stressful periods.
- ___ I seek and respond constructively to feedback, even when it's uncomfortable.
- ___ I take responsibility for mistakes without excessive self-criticism or defensiveness.
- ___ I adapt quickly when plans change or unexpected challenges arise.
- ___ I consistently follow through on commitments, both large and small.
- ___ I maintain a learning mindset, actively seeking to develop new skills and knowledge.
- ___ I balance confidence in my abilities with appropriate humility about what I don't yet know.

Subtotal: ____ / 50

SECTION 2: ABOUT OTHERS

Relationship & Collaboration Skills

- ___ I build positive relationships with people at all levels of an organization.
- ___ I communicate clearly and adjust my communication style based on the situation and audience.
- ___ I listen attentively and work to understand others' perspectives before responding.
- ___ I handle disagreements constructively, focusing on issues rather than personalities.
- ___ I recognize and respect different working styles and preferences.
- ___ I provide support to colleagues without being asked when I see opportunities to help.
- ___ I demonstrate appreciation for others' contributions and strengths.
- ___ I maintain appropriate professional boundaries while being authentically engaged.
- ___ I navigate authority relationships respectfully without being subservient.
- ___ I distinguish between constructively challenging feedback and toxic behavior.

Subtotal: ____ / 50

SECTION 3: ABOUT WORKING

Professional Approach & Work Management

- ___ I consistently produce work that meets or exceeds quality standards.
- ___ I manage my time effectively, meeting deadlines without last-minute rushes.
- ___ I prioritize tasks strategically based on importance and urgency.
- ___ I maintain focus on core responsibilities while remaining flexible to emerging needs.
- ___ I demonstrate resilience when facing setbacks or criticism.
- ___ I maintain productivity without constant external direction or motivation.
- ___ I approach problems systematically, considering multiple perspectives.
- ___ I balance attention to detail with appropriate efficiency.
- ___ I connect my daily work to larger team and organizational goals.
- ___ I maintain consistent effort over time rather than working in unsustainable bursts.

Subtotal: ___ / 50

SECTION 4: ABOUT WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Boundaries & Sustainable Performance

- ___ I advocate effectively for my needs without appearing entitled or demanding.
- ___ I distinguish between when to push through challenges and when to seek support.
- ___ I maintain personal well-being practices alongside professional responsibilities.
- ___ I set appropriate boundaries without apology or excessive explanation.
- ___ I engage fully with work while maintaining a separate personal identity.
- ___ I build support networks both within and outside my professional environment.
- ___ I recognize early warning signs of burnout or excessive stress.
- ___ I make time for activities and relationships that energize me outside of work.
- ___ I connect with mentors or advisors who can provide perspective and guidance.
- ___ I make decisions aligned with my long-term well-being, not just immediate demands.

Subtotal: ____ / 50

SCORING & INTERPRETATION

Total Score: ____ / 200

This assessment isn't about achieving a "perfect" score. Rather, it's designed to help you identify patterns of strength and opportunity across different dimensions of workplace readiness.

For Each Section:

40-50 points: This appears to be an area of significant strength. Consider how you can leverage these capabilities to support your development in other areas.

30-39 points: You have solid foundations in this area with some specific aspects to develop further. Identify the specific statements where you scored lower and focus on those.

20-29 points: This area presents meaningful development opportunities. Look for patterns in your lower-scored items to identify themes for focused growth.

Below 20 points: This area likely requires significant attention. Consider prioritizing development in these dimensions, perhaps seeking additional resources or mentoring.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

TAKE TIME TO REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS BASED ON YOUR ASSESSMENT RESULTS:

1. What patterns do you notice across the four sections? Are there consistent themes in your strengths or areas for development?
2. Which specific items scored lowest? Do these align with challenges you've experienced in previous work, internship, or academic settings?
3. Which of your strengths might you leverage to address your development areas? For example, if self-awareness is strong but boundary-setting is challenging, how could you use your self-awareness to recognize when boundaries are needed?
4. What surprises you about your results? Sometimes our self-perception differs from how others perceive us. Are there areas where you might benefit from seeking external feedback?
5. What specific, actionable steps could you take to develop in your lower-scoring areas? Consider resources, practices, or conversations that might help.

DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

BASED ON YOUR REFLECTION, IDENTIFY:

Three Key Strengths to Leverage

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Three Priority Development Areas

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

For Each Development Area, One Specific Action Step:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Resources or Support Needed:

Consider revisiting this assessment after six months in your new role to track your progress and recalibrate your development priorities based on your actual workplace experience.



FOR FURTHER READING

The journey from education to employment is complex and multifaceted. While this book provides a foundation, you may wish to explore specific aspects of professional development in greater depth. The following resources have been carefully selected to complement and expand upon the topics we've covered.

UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE DYNAMICS

"The First 90 Days" by Michael D. Watkins

A practical guide to moving into new roles, with strategies for quickly establishing credibility and building effective relationships. Particularly valuable for understanding organizational dynamics and making a strong initial impression.

"Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't" by Jeffrey Pfeffer

A candid examination of how power operates in organizations, with research-based insights into building influence. While some may find Pfeffer's perspective cynical, his analysis of workplace realities is invaluable for understanding organizational politics.

"The Culture Map" by Erin Meyer

Essential reading for those working in global or multicultural environments. Meyer provides practical frameworks for navigating cultural differences in communication, feedback, leadership, and decision-making.

"Thanks for the Feedback" by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

A transformative approach to receiving feedback effectively, regardless of how it's delivered. The authors identify three types of feedback and provide strategies for separating the signal from the noise in each.

SELF-AWARENESS AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

"Mindset" by Carol S. Dweck

Dweck's research on fixed versus growth mindsets offers profound insights into how our beliefs about ability affect our performance and development. Essential reading for understanding your own learning patterns and potential.

"Emotional Intelligence 2.0" by Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves

A practical guide to developing emotional intelligence, with specific strategies for self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Includes an online assessment tool.

"Atomic Habits" by James Clear

Clear presents a practical framework for developing positive habits and breaking negative ones. His focus on small, incremental changes is particularly valuable for early-career professionals establishing their work patterns.

"Designing Your Life" by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans

Based on a popular Stanford course, this book applies design thinking principles to career development. Particularly useful for those questioning their path or facing decision points about future direction.

COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

"Crucial Conversations" by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler

A practical guide to high-stakes conversations where emotions run strong and opinions differ. Provides specific techniques for maintaining dialogue when it matters most.

"Never Split the Difference" by Chris Voss

Written by a former FBI hostage negotiator, this book offers counterintuitive but highly effective approaches to negotiation. Particularly valuable for learning how to listen effectively and have difficult conversations.

"How to Win Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie

Though published in 1936, Carnegie's classic remains remarkably relevant. Its principles for building positive relationships through genuine interest in others transcend changes in workplace culture.

"Just Listen" by Mark Goulston

Goulston provides practical techniques for breaking through communication barriers and connecting with people, even in difficult situations. Particularly useful for understanding how to build trust through effective listening.

LEADERSHIP AND INFLUENCE

"Quiet" by Susan Cain

A thoughtful exploration of introversion in a world that often prizes extroversion. Valuable for both introverts seeking to leverage their strengths and extroverts seeking to better understand their quieter colleagues.

"Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion" by Robert Cialdini

A research-based examination of the psychology of compliance and persuasion. Understanding Cialdini's six principles of influence helps both in ethically persuading others and in recognizing when influence techniques are being used on you.

"Radical Candor" by Kim Scott

Scott offers a framework for providing feedback that is both kind and clear. Particularly valuable for those moving into leadership roles or seeking to have greater impact in their organizations.

"Drive" by Daniel H. Pink

Pink examines the science of motivation, challenging conventional wisdom about what drives high performance. Essential reading for

understanding both your own motivations and those of others you work with.

WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION

"Deep Work" by Cal Newport

Newport makes a compelling case for the value of focused, distraction-free work in an increasingly fragmented attention economy. Provides practical strategies for cultivating the ability to concentrate intensely.

"Essentialism" by Greg McKeown

A thoughtful approach to doing "less but better," with strategies for identifying what truly matters and eliminating everything else. Particularly valuable for those feeling overwhelmed by competing demands.

"Burnout" by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski

This book offers insights valuable to anyone in high-stress environments, especially women leaders. The authors combine scientific research with practical strategies for breaking the stress cycle.

"The Happiness Advantage" by Shawn Achor

Achor draws on positive psychology research to demonstrate how happiness fuels success, not the other way around. Offers practical strategies for cultivating well-being even in challenging environments.

CAREER STRATEGY AND DEVELOPMENT

"So Good They Can't Ignore You" by Cal Newport

Newport challenges the "follow your passion" career advice, arguing instead for developing rare and valuable skills. A thought-provoking perspective on building a compelling career through craftsmanship.

"Range" by David Epstein

Epstein argues for having broad experiences and diverse interests in an age of specialization. Particularly reassuring for those with varied interests who don't fit neatly into specialized career tracks.

"Pivot" by Jenny Blake

Blake offers a methodical approach to making career changes, with practical strategies for exploring options while maintaining stability. Valuable for those considering transitions or feeling stuck in their current roles.

"The Squiggly Career" by Helen Tupper and Sarah Ellis

Acknowledging that modern careers rarely follow linear paths, Tupper and Ellis provide practical tools for dealing with uncertainty and taking ownership of your professional development.

UNDERSTANDING ECONOMIC AND WORKPLACE TRENDS

"Thank You for Being Late" by Thomas L. Friedman

Friedman explores how accelerating technological change, globalization, and climate change are reshaping work and society. Valuable context for understanding the larger forces shaping your future.

"Remote" by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson

Written before the pandemic made remote work mainstream, this book offers insights into the benefits and challenges of distributed teams. Particularly relevant as hybrid and remote arrangements become increasingly common.

"The Future of Professions" by Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind

The authors examine how technology is transforming work, from law and medicine to education and consulting. Essential reading for understanding how your field may evolve in the coming decades.

"Rise of the Robots" by Martin Ford

Ford examines the impact of automation and artificial intelligence on the future of work. While some may find his perspective pessimistic, his analysis helps in understanding which skills will remain valuable as technology advances.

INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC RESOURCES

While general principles of professional development apply across fields, industry-specific knowledge is also essential. Consider supplementing these recommendations with:

- Professional associations in your field, which often provide networking opportunities, continuing education, and specialized publications
- Industry publications and newsletters that help you stay current with trends and developments
- Online learning platforms like Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, or edX for developing technical skills relevant to your field
- Podcasts focused on your industry or professional development more broadly

A NOTE ON IMPLEMENTATION

Reading about professional development is valuable only if you apply what you learn. For each book or resource you engage with:

1. Identify 2-3 key insights that resonate most strongly with your situation.
2. Develop a specific action plan for implementing each insight.
3. Share your learning with someone else—teaching reinforces understanding.
4. Schedule periodic reviews to assess how these ideas are working in practice.

Remember that professional development is not about collecting information but about transforming behavior. The measure of a resource's worth is not how much you highlight or underline, but how it changes your approach to your work and relationships.

Happy reading, and best wishes on your professional journey.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Psychological Association. (2022). *Stress in America™ 2022: Concerned for the future, beset by inflation*. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2022/report>

Angelou, M. (2013). *Conversations with Maya Angelou* (J. Elliott, Ed.). University Press of Mississippi.

Asana. (2022). *Anatomy of work: Global index report 2022*. Asana.

Association of Professional Executives. (2015). *Impact of kindness in professional settings*. <https://apex.gc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/civility-report-eng.pdf>

Bahadurzada, H., Edmondson, A., & Kerrissey, M. (2024). Psychological safety as an enduring resource amid constraints. *International Journal of Public Health*, 69, Article 1607332. <https://doi.org/10.3389/ijph.2024.1607332>

Bersin by Deloitte. (2017). *High-impact learning culture: The 40 best practices for building a learning organization*. Deloitte Development LLC.

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). *Number of jobs, labor market experience, and earnings growth: Results from a longitudinal survey*. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsoy.pdf>

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022). *Employee tenure summary*. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm>

Cross, R., & Thomas, R. (2011). A smarter way to network. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(7–8), 149–153.

Deloitte. (2017). *Rewriting the rules for the digital age: 2017 Deloitte global human capital trends*. Deloitte Insights. <https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/focus/human-capital-trends/2017.html>

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.

Gallup. (2022). *Re-engineering performance management: How companies are rethinking ratings, reviews and annual conversations*. Gallup, Inc.

Gallup, Inc. (n.d.). *CliftonStrengths assessment*. <https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/>

Google Re:Work. (2013). *Project Oxygen: Eight behaviors of great managers*. Google. <https://rework.withgoogle.com>

Gravois, J. (2007, June 8). You're not fooling anyone. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(40), A1. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/youre-not-fooling-anyone/>

Harvard Business Review. (2012, March 22). *The loneliness of command: CEOs and isolation*. <https://hbr.org>

Harvard Study of Adult Development. (n.d.). *Harvard second generation study*. Harvard Medical School. <https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org>

Jarrett, V. (2019). *Finding my voice: My journey to the West Wing and the path forward*. Viking.

Joint Commission Center for Transforming Healthcare. (2017). *Hand-off communications project*. The Joint Commission.

Kennedy, J. F. (1961, November 20). *Remarks at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame banquet*. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Korn Ferry. (2019). *Workforce 2024: The future of work and the people who will shape it*. Korn Ferry.

LinkedIn. (2016, April 12). *Will this year's college grads change jobs four times by the time they're 32?* <https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/job-hopping-gen-y-career-paths>

McKinsey & Company. (2014). Why leadership-development programs fail. *McKinsey Quarterly*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/why-leadership-development-programs-fail>

McKinsey & Company. (2015). Why implementation matters. *McKinsey Quarterly*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/operations/our-insights/why-implementation-matters>

MentorcliQ. (2024). *2024 mentoring impact report: Career growth, retention, and DEI outcomes*. MentorcliQ.

MIT Sloan Management Review. (2023). Toxic culture is driving the Great Resignation. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/toxic-culture-is-driving-the-great-resignation/>

Myers & Briggs Foundation. (n.d.). *MBTI basics*. <https://www.myersbriggs.org>

Newton, I. (1959). *The correspondence of Isaac Newton* (H. W. Turnbull, Ed., Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.

Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127.

Sakulku, J., & Alexander, J. (2011). The impostor phenomenon. *International Journal of Behavioral Science*, 6(1), 73–92.

Steger, M. F., Dik, B. J., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20(3), 322–337.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). *Business employment dynamics: Survival of private sector establishments by opening year*. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.bls.gov>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *Educational attainment in the United States: 2022*. <https://www.census.gov>

Waldinger, R., & Schulz, M. S. (2023). *The good life: Lessons from the world's longest scientific study of happiness*. Simon & Schuster.

World Economic Forum. (2020). *The future of jobs report 2020*. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020>

Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1), 21–33.

COFFEE

COFFEE

LO COFFEE

TECHNICAL

TECHNICAL

OFFER DEFIT

OFFER DEFIT

COFFEE

TIME 00

COFFEE

DECKENHOF HILLER

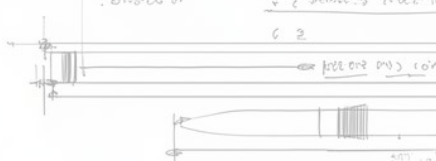
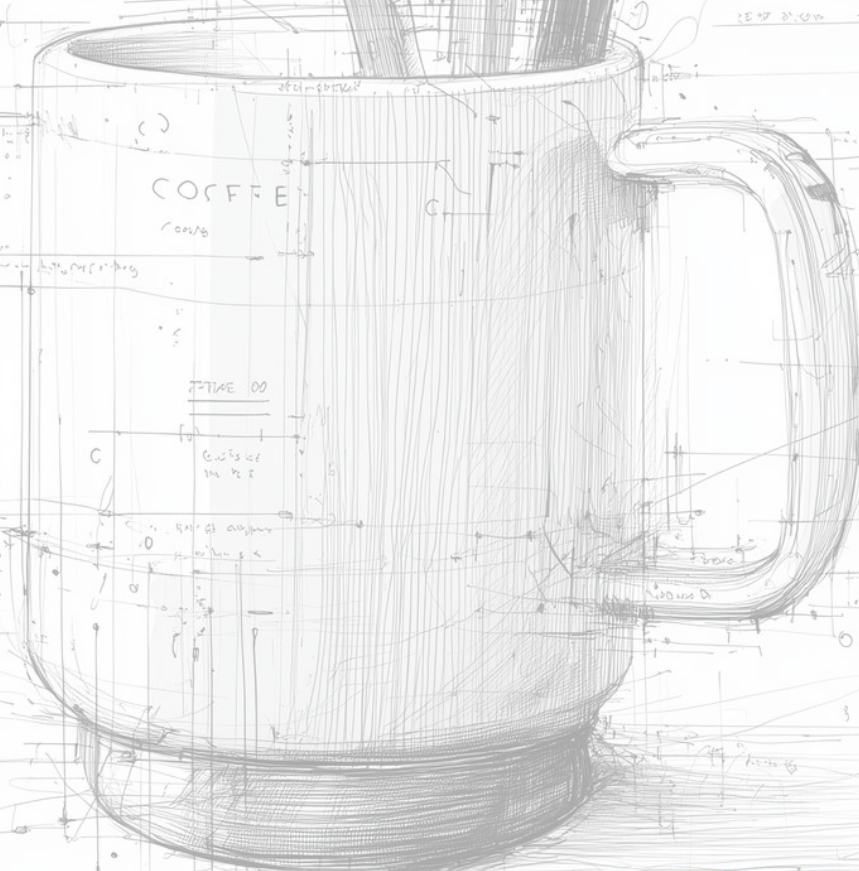
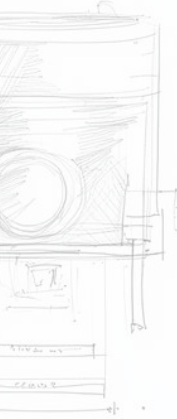
TECHNICAL

TECHNICAL

TECHNICAL

TECHNICAL

TECHNICAL



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kevin Gosa and **Bryan Horvath** have been collaborators for more than twenty years, long enough that most of what they know about leadership, culture, and organizational life they've worked out in conversation and real practice with each other. Their first book, *Fire the Foosball Table: A Practical Guide to Building and Leading Healthy Workplace Culture* (2022), distilled those years of conversation into a short, direct field guide that argued against the prevailing wisdom of the era — that culture is not what you put in the breakroom, it is what you do when no one is watching. *Welcome To Work* extends the same project to the other side of the table: the people just arriving.

Together they are the co-founders of **NYC Meeting Facilitators**, the leading strategic facilitation firm in New York City, and **Ballast**, an executive advisory and sensemaking practice that helps leadership teams navigate complexity, achieve alignment, and reach decisions without outsourcing their strategic judgment to outside consultants. Across all their business ventures they have designed and led hundreds of leadership retreats, board offsites, and high-stakes convenings for Fortune 100 companies, Forbes top 25 charities, global nonprofits, government agencies, technology startups, and grassroots community groups.

They have advised boards and C-suite leaders domestically and internationally, lectured for MBA programs and industry conferences, and led nonprofit incubators developing the next generation of mission-driven organizations.

Their unique combination — a saxophonist and an engineer navigating the boardroom — turns out to be a profoundly useful one. They continue to do their best work in real rooms solving tough problems with the people who actually live them.



Kevin Gosa is a strategic facilitator and consultant whose path to the boardroom ran through the bandroom. For the last thirty years, he has performed saxophone across the globe (from Texas to Thailand) and holds Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from the University of Kansas. That background in listening, improvisation, and reading a room has given him a rare ability to surface what's really happening inside an organization and help people move through it with clarity. Kevin serves as President of the Board of Riverview Jazz and lives in Jersey City, New Jersey with his wife Laura and their two sons.

—



Bryan Horvath is an entrepreneur and facilitator shaped by an unusually wide career: he has engineered Cadillacs for General Motors, toured forty-five states as the front man of a rock band, licensed his own inventions, and had a brief run as a semi-professional cake decorator. What that range gave him is a habit of looking for the pattern underneath — and rarely finding the answer where conventional wisdom says to look. He also co-founded Nonprofit Velocity to help mission-driven organizations connect vision to strategy and strategy to action. Bryan and his wife Laurie raised their two boys in New York City, where they have called home for twenty-five years.

