FOR LEADERS, AND THE PEOPLE WHO WORK FOR THEM

THINK FAST, SAY IT RIGHT

Don't Get Played at Work

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Author of *Clear at Work*

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Contents

How to Read This Book

HALF ONE · FOR MANAGERS AND EXECUTIVES

Chapter 1 The Moves People Make on Leaders
Chapter 2 Put on the Spot
Chapter 3 How Leaders Hurt Themselves
Chapter 4 Every Conversation Is a Sale
Chapter 5 What Everyone in the Room Really Wants
Chapter 6 Predicting the Reaction Before You Speak
Chapter 7 What-If Mapping Before a Hard Conversation
Chapter 8 When You're Blamed for a Result
Chapter 9 Delivering Bad News to Your Team or the Board
Chapter 10 When a Top Performer Threatens to Leave
Chapter 11 When the Goal Changes on You from Above
Chapter 12 When Someone Tests Your Authority
Chapter 13 When a Client or Partner Pushes on Price
Chapter 14 Buying Time Without Looking Weak
Chapter 15 Building Your Pattern Library
Chapter 16 Daily Drills to Train Your Speed
The Bridge One Conversation, Both Sides of the Table

HALF TWO · FOR FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES

Chapter 17 The Moves Managers Make, On Purpose or Not
Chapter 18 Called Out in Front of Coworkers
Chapter 19 How You Hurt Yourself
Chapter 20 Every Conversation with Your Boss Is a Sale
Chapter 21 What Your Manager Really Needs from You

Chapter 22 Reading the Room Above Your Manager
Chapter 23 What-If Mapping Before You Ask for Something
Chapter 24 When You're Blamed for Something You Didn't Do
Chapter 25 Asking for a Raise or Promotion
Chapter 26 Saying No to Extra Work
Chapter 27 When Your Manager Takes Credit for Your Work
Chapter 28 Reporting a Problem Without Becoming the Problem
Chapter 29 When a Customer Pushes You and Your Manager Isn't There
Chapter 30 Buying Time Without Looking Unsure
Chapter 31 Building Your Pattern Library
Chapter 32 Daily Drills to Train Your Speed

References

About the Author

How to Read This Book

This book is built in two halves that face each other across the same table.

Half One is written for experienced managers and executives: the people with authority, who are most often worked on from below and from the side without noticing it.

Half Two is written for front-line employees: the people learning to handle their managers, protect themselves, earn trust, and push back without paying for it.

Both halves follow the same four-part order. Part 1 shows how your own mind gets used against you. Part 2 teaches you to see the conversation ten moves ahead. Part 3 gives you the right thing to say in the situations that test people most. Part 4 trains you to think at lightning speed.

Between the two halves sits **The Bridge**: one conversation played from both sides of the table. Read it wherever you are in the book.

You can read straight through, or jump to the half that matches your chair today. Most people will sit in both chairs during their career, so the other half is worth reading too. Every chapter ends with a drill. The drills are where the book stops being information and starts being a skill.

If you need the basics of clear workplace communication first, start with *Clear at Work*, free at clearatworkcommunication.com.

HALF ONE

For Managers and Executives

You hold authority, so the risk is being managed from below and from the side without noticing.

CHAPTER 1

The Moves People Make on Leaders

Half One · Part 1: How Your Mind Gets Used Against You

It is 4:40 on a Thursday afternoon. Marcus, a regional director, has twenty minutes before his next call. One of his project leads knocks, leans in, and smiles.

"I know you're slammed. Honestly, you're the only person here who actually gets how this works, which is why I came straight to you. The vendor needs an answer by five or we lose the discount. I just need you to sign off on the extra spend. It's basically the same as last quarter."

Marcus signs. It takes forty seconds. It feels like good leadership: decisive, supportive, fast.

Three weeks later, finance flags the spend. It was not the same as last quarter. The discount deadline was not real; the vendor would have honored the price on Monday. And the project lead had already been told no by Marcus's own operations manager, which is why he came to Marcus at 4:40 on a Thursday instead of 9:00 on a Tuesday.

Nobody lied outright. Nobody threatened anyone. Marcus was not stupid, careless, or weak. He was played, and the play used four of the oldest moves in the workplace in a single minute: flattery, false urgency, a quiet appeal to guilt, and a carefully vague description of what he was actually signing.

This chapter is about those moves. Not because the people around you are villains (most are not) but because when you hold authority, people need things from you, and some of them will learn exactly which buttons get a yes. If you do not know where your buttons are, you cannot guard them.

Why Leaders Are the Easiest Targets

It sounds backwards. Leaders are supposed to be the sharpest people in the building. They have experience, judgment, and the final word. So why would they be easier to work than anyone else?

Three reasons.

First, you control what people want. Budget, promotions, schedules, exceptions, approvals, credit. Every one of those runs through you. A front-line employee might be manipulated once in a while. A leader is the destination for every request that needs a yes, which means every person with an agenda eventually walks through your door.

Second, your information is filtered before it reaches you. The higher you go, the more of what you hear has already been edited by someone who wanted you to hear it a certain way. Research on employee silence found that 85 percent of the people surveyed had at some point felt unable to raise an important concern with a supervisor, and the most common reason was fear of being seen negatively. Think about what that means from the other side of the desk. If most people hold back the bad news, then the news that does reach you is, on average, the version someone decided was safe to deliver. You are making decisions on curated information.

Third, you are busy, and busy people decide on autopilot. Leaders make dozens of decisions a day. To survive that volume, your brain takes shortcuts. You trust people who have been reliable. You approve things that sound like things you approved before. You respond to tone and confidence as signals of quality. These shortcuts are not flaws. They are how anyone with real responsibility gets through the day. But every shortcut is also a door, and the people who want something from you learn which doors are unlocked.

Put those three together and you get a simple rule: **the more authority you have, the more effort other people will put into managing you.** Some of that effort is healthy. People should think about how to bring you a proposal. But some of it crosses a line, and the line is this: when someone shapes the conversation so that you decide something you would not have decided with the full picture in front of you, you are being played.

Let's walk through the four moves you will see most often.

Move 1: Flattery That Doesn't Look Like Flattery

Everyone says they can spot a suck-up. And everyone can spot the obvious kind: the person who laughs too hard at your jokes or tells you your tie looks great every morning. That kind of flattery is harmless because it does not work. You discount it automatically.

The flattery that works is the kind that does not feel like flattery at all.

One of the most revealing studies on this comes from the corporate boardroom. Researchers James Westphal and Ithai Stern surveyed hundreds of CEOs and board directors at large

U.S. companies and then tracked who received new board appointments over the following years. Their finding was uncomfortable: how much a director ingratiated themselves with fellow directors was one of the strongest predictors of being invited onto more boards, more than the behaviors associated with good governance.

A follow-up study looked at which kinds of flattery worked best, and the answer was the subtle kinds. The most effective tactic was flattery disguised as a request for advice: not "you're brilliant," but "How did you manage to close that deal? I'd love to learn how you think about it." Another was disagreeing briefly before agreeing, so the agreement looked earned rather than automatic. Another was praising someone to their friends, knowing the praise would travel back. The researchers found that an executive who gave a nominating-committee member two advice-seeking compliments a year and enthusiastically agreed with them twice a year raised their chances of a board appointment by 68 percent.

Read that again. Four small moments a year, and the odds moved by more than two-thirds. These were not naïve people being flattered. They were some of the most experienced executives in the country. And the study found the tactics worked only when the target did not recognize them as a play.

Now bring that down to your own office. The flattery you need to watch for sounds like this:

- "You're the only one here who really understands this."
- "I wanted to run this by you first because you see things other people miss."
- "I know you'll get why this matters. Some people upstairs just don't."

- "I've learned more from you this year than from anyone."

Notice what these lines do. They do not just make you feel good. They position you as the smart, perceptive one, and then they quietly attach a request to that identity. If you are the one who "really gets it," then saying no feels like admitting you don't. The compliment becomes a trap that only a yes can get you out of.

The tell

Flattery on its own is fine. People appreciate each other, and a culture where nobody ever says anything kind is a miserable place to work. The tell is **timing**. When praise arrives right before a request, especially a request that skips a normal process, slow down. Ask yourself: if this person had said nothing nice at all, would I still agree?

What to say

You do not need to accuse anyone. You simply separate the compliment from the decision.

> *"I appreciate that. Let's look at the request on its own. Walk me through the numbers."*

That one sentence does three things. It accepts the kindness so nobody is embarrassed. It tells the other person, without saying so, that praise will not substitute for substance. And it moves you from feeling to facts, which is where good decisions get made.

Move 2: False Urgency

The vendor needs an answer by five. The client will walk if we don't commit today. The window closes at midnight. Corporate needs this number in an hour.

Sometimes deadlines are real. Often they are not, and even when they are, they are rarely as tight as they are presented.

Urgency works because it changes how your brain processes a decision. When you believe time is short, you stop gathering information and start acting on whatever you already have. You skip the phone call to finance. You don't ask what happens if you say no. You don't check whether the person in front of you was already turned down by someone else. Urgency doesn't make you decide badly by itself. It makes you decide with less, and the person creating the urgency usually controls what the "less" includes.

Salespeople have known this for a century, which is why "limited time offer" never goes out of style. Inside a company, the same move shows up in quieter clothes:

- A request that lands at 4:40 on a Thursday when you are rushing to your next meeting.
- An email with "URGENT" in the subject line about something that has been sitting for two weeks.
- "I need a quick yes or no" on something that is not quick at all.
- A report that shows up minutes before the meeting where you are expected to approve it.

The tell

Ask two questions. **Who set this deadline?** And **what actually happens if we miss it?** If the person pushing you cannot answer either one clearly, the urgency is probably theirs, not the situation's.

Also notice the pattern over time. If one person consistently brings you decisions at the last minute, that is not bad luck. People who learn that you approve things when rushed will keep rushing you.

What to say

> *"If the answer has to be today, the answer is no. If you can get me the full picture by tomorrow morning, I'll give it a real look."*

This is one of the most useful sentences in the book. It is not stubborn. It simply makes the cost of rushing fall on the person who created the rush, not on you. When the deadline is real, people will find a way to get you what you need. When it was manufactured, the deadline will suddenly turn out to be flexible.

If you cannot say no outright, buy the smallest amount of time that lets you think:

> *"Give me fifteen minutes. I want to check one thing."*

Fifteen minutes is enough to make a call, look at a number, or simply let the emotional pressure fade. You will be surprised how often the "one thing" you check changes the answer.

Move 3: Guilt

Guilt is the move that experienced leaders fall for most often, because experienced leaders tend to care. You care about your people, you remember what it was like to be in their position, and you want to be the kind of boss who has their back. All of that is good. All of it can also be used.

Guilt sounds like this:

- "After everything my team has done this year, I'd hate to tell them we can't."
- "I've never asked you for anything before."
- "I stayed until midnight three nights in a row on this."
- "I guess I just thought you'd support us."
- "If this doesn't happen, people are going to be really hurt."

Notice that none of these lines is an argument for the request. They are arguments about what kind of person you are if you say no. The request itself, whether it makes sense, whether it is fair to everyone else, whether it fits the plan, quietly drops out of the conversation. You end up deciding on your self-image instead of on the facts.

Guilt also has a long tail. A leader who gives in to guilt once teaches everyone watching that guilt works. Soon every request comes wrapped in a story about sacrifice, and the people who are too proud or too private to tell those stories, often your quietest and most reliable workers, fall behind the people who are good at performing their hardship.

The tell

Listen for whether the person is talking about the **request** or about **you**. "This investment will cut our processing time in half" is about the request. "I thought you of all people would understand" is about you. The second kind is a sign that the request may not stand well on its own.

What to say

Acknowledge the effort sincerely, because it is usually real. Then bring the decision back to the merits.

> *"Your team has worked hard this year, and I see it. That's exactly why I want to make this decision for the right reasons. Help me understand why this is the best use of the money."*

You have honored the person without letting their feelings make the decision. If the request is good, they will be able to make the case. If they can't, you have just learned something important about the request.

Move 4: Playing Dumb

The fourth move is the hardest to spot because it looks like a weakness instead of a strategy. Some people discover that the fastest way to get out of work, avoid accountability, or push a decision upward is to seem confused, helpless, or unsure.

- "I wasn't sure how to handle it, so I figured you'd want to decide."
- "I didn't know that was my job."
- "I tried, but the system is really confusing."

- "I didn't realize the client meant *that* deadline."

Every one of these, said once, is perfectly normal. People genuinely get confused. New employees genuinely don't know things. But when the same person is consistently confused about the same kinds of tasks, especially the unpleasant, risky, or tedious ones, you are looking at a pattern.

Playing dumb works on leaders for two reasons. First, most leaders got where they are by being capable, and capable people would rather just do the thing than watch someone struggle. Second, playing dumb pushes the decision, and therefore the blame, onto you. If you made the call, it's your call. The person who played dumb walks away clean.

There is a sneakier version, too: playing dumb about what you are signing. Marcus's project lead never said the spend was identical to last quarter. He said it was "basically the same." That vagueness was the whole move. Specific claims can be checked. Vague ones slide right past a busy reader.

The tell

The confusion is **selective**. It shows up for the hard parts and disappears for the easy ones. Or the description is **vague in exactly the places that matter**: the cost, the risk, the commitment.

What to say

Hand the thinking back without handing back blame.

> *"What would you do if I weren't here? Give me your recommendation and I'll tell you if I see a problem."*

And for vague claims:

> *"When you say 'basically the same,' what's different?"*

That second question has saved more budgets than any audit. Vague language almost always hides a difference someone hoped you would not ask about.

The Hidden Power of "Because"

There is one more thing to know, and it ties all four moves together.

In a famous experiment from the late 1970s, psychologist Ellen Langer and her colleagues had a researcher walk up to people waiting to use a library copy machine and ask to cut in line. When the researcher simply asked, "May I use the machine?" about 60 percent of people agreed. When the researcher added a reason, "because I'm in a rush," agreement jumped to 94 percent. Then came the strange part. When the researcher gave a reason that was no reason at all, "because I have to make copies," which was true of everyone in line, agreement was still 93 percent.

The word "because," followed by almost anything, switched people onto autopilot. They heard the *shape* of a reason and stopped checking whether it was a good one.

There was an important limit, though. When the request was bigger (twenty pages instead of five), the empty reason stopped working. Only a real reason moved people. When the stakes went up, people started paying attention again.

That limit is the lesson for leaders. The moves in this chapter work best on decisions that feel small: a quick sign-off, a minor exception, a favor. And most damage in organizations does not come from one giant bad decision. It comes from hundreds of small ones made on autopilot, each with a reason that sounded fine in the moment. Marcus's mistake did not feel like a big decision. It felt like a forty-second signature. That is exactly why it worked.

So when you notice that a request comes with a "because" attached, do the one thing the people at the copy machine did not do: **ask whether the reason actually supports the request.** "We need to approve this because the vendor needs an answer" is not a reason to approve. It is only a reason to answer.

Don't Become Paranoid

At this point, some readers will be tempted to treat everyone as a con artist. That is its own mistake, and an expensive one.

Most people who compliment you mean it. Most deadlines are real. Most people who mention their hard work are proud of it, not using it. Most confusion is honest. If you meet every request with suspicion, you will teach your team that bringing you anything is dangerous, and you will make the silence problem worse. Research on teams has consistently found that groups where people feel safe speaking up learn faster and perform better. A leader who treats every conversation as an attack destroys exactly that kind of safety.

The goal is not distrust. The goal is **awareness**. You want to notice the moves while still assuming good intent, so you can respond to the request rather than to the pressure. Almost every response in this chapter works whether the other person is

playing you or not. Asking to see the numbers, asking what's different, asking what happens if you wait: none of these insult an honest person. They only frustrate a dishonest one.

That is the beauty of it. You do not have to figure out someone's motives to protect yourself from them. You just have to slow the decision down enough to see it clearly.

Back to Marcus

Let's replay that Thursday afternoon with everything in this chapter in mind.

The project lead leans in. "You're the only person here who actually gets how this works..."

Marcus notices the compliment arriving right before the ask. He smiles. "Appreciate that. What do you need?"

"The vendor needs an answer by five or we lose the discount. It's basically the same as last quarter."

Two flags at once: a deadline Marcus did not set, and a vague description of the money. "What's different from last quarter?"

A pause. "The scope's a little bigger."

"How much bigger?"

"About thirty percent."

"Did you run it by operations?"

Another pause. "I talked to them. They had some concerns."

Now Marcus has the full picture in under a minute. "Here's what I'll do. If it has to be today, it's a no. Call the vendor and ask if the price holds until Monday. I'd bet it does. Then sit down with

operations, work through their concerns, and bring me one page tomorrow. If it makes sense, I'll sign it."

Same forty seconds. Completely different result. Marcus did not accuse anyone of anything. He did not lecture. He simply refused to let the shape of the conversation make the decision for him.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Authority makes you a target.** The more people need from you, the more effort they will put into managing how you decide.
- **The flattery that works doesn't feel like flattery.** Watch for praise that arrives right before a request, especially praise that casts you as the only one who "gets it."
- **Urgency shrinks the information you decide with.** Ask who set the deadline and what really happens if it's missed.
- **Guilt moves the conversation from the request to your self-image.** Honor the effort, then bring the decision back to the merits.
- **Selective confusion and vague language push decisions and blame upward.** Ask for a recommendation, and ask what "basically" means.
- **"Because" turns people onto autopilot, especially on small decisions.** Check whether the reason actually supports the request.
- **Awareness, not paranoia.** Every response in this chapter works whether the other person is honest or not.

Drill: The Five-Second Scan

For the next week, every time someone brings you a request that needs your approval, run a silent five-second scan before you answer:

1. **Praise?** Did a compliment arrive right before the ask?
2. **Clock?** Is there a deadline I didn't set?
3. **Guilt?** Is this about the request, or about what kind of person I am?
4. **Fog?** Is anything vague in the places that matter: cost, risk, commitment?

If you get even one yes, ask a single clarifying question before deciding. Keep a quick tally at the end of each day. Most leaders who try this are surprised by two things: how often the moves show up, and how rarely one good question fails to clear them away.

In the next chapter, we'll look at what happens when the pressure goes public, when you're put on the spot in front of your team, your peers, or the board, and every second you hesitate feels like an hour.

CHAPTER 2

Put on the Spot

Half One · Part 1: How Your Mind Gets Used Against You

The quarterly review is going well. Elena, the vice president of operations, has walked the leadership team through her numbers, and the room is nodding. Then, as she reaches her last slide, a peer from finance clears his throat.

"Before we move on, Elena, can you explain why your overtime costs are up eighteen percent when your volume is flat? I only ask because the CEO mentioned it to me last week."

Every head turns. Elena knows the answer. Two of her senior people left in the spring, and overtime covered the gap while she rehired. She has a plan, and the number is already coming down. But in this moment, with twelve faces watching and the CEO's name now in the air, her mind goes white. She hears herself start talking too fast. She explains the departures, then the hiring market, then the training time, then a vendor issue that has nothing to do with overtime. Four minutes later she is still talking, and the room has stopped nodding.

The finance director says, "Okay, maybe take that offline," and moves on. He has said almost nothing. He did not need to. The room will remember that Elena looked rattled, and nobody will remember the plan.

That is what it means to be put on the spot. It is not just a hard question. It is a hard question asked in public, at a moment you did not choose, framed in a way that makes any answer look like a defense. This chapter is about why that moment hits so hard, how people use it on purpose, and how to answer so the room remembers your judgment instead of your nerves.

Why the Spotlight Breaks Good Thinkers

Elena was not unprepared. She knew her business better than anyone in that room. So why did she fall apart?

Because public pressure changes the job your brain is doing. In a one-on-one conversation, your brain has one task: answer the question. In front of a group, it suddenly has three. It has to answer the question, monitor how everyone is reacting, and protect your standing. The second and third jobs eat into the first. You are trying to think while also watching twelve faces and imagining what each of them now believes about you. No wonder the answer comes out scrambled.

The body joins in. Your heart rate jumps, your breath gets shallow, and your attention narrows. That reaction evolved to help you run or fight, which is useful if you are being chased and useless if you are explaining overtime costs. The physical surge feels like danger, and your mind treats it as proof that something is going wrong, which makes the surge stronger.

Most people respond to this by trying to calm down. They tell themselves to relax. It rarely works. Researcher Alison Wood Brooks at Harvard found that most people believe calming down is the best way to handle performance anxiety, yet in her experiments the opposite approach worked better. In one study, people were told they would give a persuasive speech on camera

that a committee would judge. Before speaking, some were told to say out loud, "I am calm." Others were told to say, "I am excited." Independent evaluators rated the "excited" group as more persuasive, more competent, and more confident, and those speakers talked longer. In another study, people asked to "get excited" before a hard math test scored about 8 percent higher than people told to stay calm.

The reason is simple. Anxiety and excitement feel almost the same in the body: a racing heart, energy, alertness. Going from anxious to calm requires your body to come all the way down, which it will not do on command in the middle of a meeting. Going from anxious to excited only requires you to change the label. Same energy, different meaning. Instead of "something bad is happening," your brain hears "something important is happening."

You will see this idea again in Part 4, when we train fast thinking. For now, remember the first rule of the spotlight: **don't fight the surge. Rename it.** The energy you feel is the fuel for a good answer, not a sign that you are about to give a bad one.

How People Put You on the Spot on Purpose

Sometimes a public question is just a question. People are curious, or the issue genuinely needs airing. But leaders also get put on the spot deliberately, by peers competing for resources, by subordinates protecting themselves, and sometimes by bosses testing how you hold up. Here are the patterns you will see most.

The borrowed authority question

"I only ask because the CEO mentioned it to me."

This is what the finance director did to Elena, and it is one of the most effective moves in any meeting. It turns a peer's question into a question from the top, without the top person in the room to confirm it. Now Elena is not just answering a colleague. She is answering an invisible CEO, and she cannot ask what exactly was said or in what tone. The borrowed name raises the stakes and freezes the target.

The ambush with a number

"Your costs are up eighteen percent."

A specific number sounds like a fact, and a fact sounds like an accusation that has already been proven. Often the number is real but stripped of its context: eighteen percent compared to what period, measured how, driven by what? The person who brings the number has had days to prepare it. You have seconds.

The "just curious" trap

"I'm just curious why we went with that vendor."

The softness is the trap. "Just curious" makes the asker look harmless and any strong response from you look defensive. If you answer at length, you look like you are hiding something. If you answer briefly, you look dismissive.

The yes-or-no corner

"Simple question: will the project be done by March, yes or no?"

Real situations rarely fit in a yes or no. Forcing one does two things. If you say yes, you are now on the record with a promise. If you say no, you have admitted failure in public. If you try to explain, the asker says, "So that's a no," and summarizes your careful answer as defeat.

The late-meeting drop

The sensitive question comes in the last five minutes, when there is no time to answer properly and the meeting is about to end. Whatever impression forms in those five minutes walks out the door with everyone.

Why it works on leaders

You might think experienced leaders would be immune to this. They have sat through hundreds of meetings. But leaders have more to lose in public than anyone else. Your authority depends partly on looking in control. A front-line employee who stumbles on a question looks new. A vice president who stumbles looks like she might not have a handle on her own operation. The people who put you on the spot know that, and they know you know it.

There is also a contagion effect. Researchers Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens ran a series of experiments showing that when people watch someone publicly blame others, they become more likely to blame others for their own failures. Blame spreads through a room. Once the finance director put Elena on the defensive, the meeting shifted from "how do we solve this" to "whose fault is this," and the next person questioned would be more likely to point a finger too. A public ambush does not just hurt the target. It changes the temperature of the whole meeting.

The Five Mistakes Leaders Make on the Spot

Before we get to what to say, it helps to name what goes wrong. Elena made several of these in four minutes, and most leaders will recognize at least two.

1. Answering the tone instead of the question. The finance director's tone said, "You're in trouble." Elena answered that, with a defense, instead of answering the question, which was really, "What's driving the overtime and is it under control?"

2. Over-explaining. Under pressure, people pile up reasons, hoping one will stick. But every extra reason looks like an excuse, and a long answer signals worry. A short, clear answer signals control.

3. Accepting the frame. By jumping straight into explanations, Elena accepted that eighteen percent was a problem she had to justify. She never questioned whether it was the right number to look at.

4. Fighting back in public. The opposite failure. Some leaders respond to an ambush by attacking: "Well, if we're talking about cost overruns, let's look at finance's software budget." It feels satisfying for about ten seconds. Then the room sees two executives fighting, and both look smaller.

5. Promising on the spot. To make the pressure stop, people commit to things they have not thought through. "It'll be back to normal next month." Now that promise is in the minutes, and the person who ambushed you will remember it.

The Spotlight Formula: Pause, Frame, Answer, Close

Here is a four-step structure that works for almost any public question. It is simple enough to remember under pressure, which is the whole point.

Step 1: Pause

Take one full breath before you speak. It feels like an eternity to you. To the room it looks like thoughtfulness. A leader who pauses looks like someone weighing the question. A leader who answers instantly looks like someone reacting to it.

Use the pause to do two things: rename the surge ("this is energy, not danger") and find the real question underneath the asked question.

Step 2: Frame

Before you answer, put the question in the right context, in one sentence. This is where you take back the frame the asker tried to set.

> *"Good question. The overtime number is real, and it's tied to one specific issue."*

You have acknowledged the fact, which shows you are not hiding, and signaled that you understand it, which shows you are in control. You have also quietly shrunk the problem from "Elena's costs are out of control" to "one specific issue."

Step 3: Answer

Give the shortest complete answer you can. Ideally three sentences: what happened, what you are doing about it, and where it is heading.

> *"We lost two senior people in the spring, and overtime covered the gap while we rehired. Both roles are filled now. Overtime has already dropped for two straight months, and I expect it back to normal by the end of the quarter."*

That is it. No vendor story, no history of the hiring market. If anyone wants more, they will ask, and now you are answering from strength instead of piling on reasons.

Step 4: Close

End the exchange on your terms. Offer detail, but outside the spotlight.

> *"Happy to walk anyone through the month-by-month numbers after the meeting."*

The close tells the room that you are confident enough to show your work and disciplined enough not to take everyone's time doing it now.

Put together, Elena's answer takes about twenty seconds. Compare that to her four-minute scramble. Same facts. Completely different impression.

Handling Each Trap

The formula covers most situations, but each trap has a specific counter worth knowing.

Against borrowed authority

Do not fight the borrowed name, and do not panic about it either. Simply bring the absent person back into the open.

> *"Glad it's on her radar. I'll follow up with her directly so she has the full picture."*

You have just neutralized the move. The asker can no longer stand between you and the CEO, because you are going straight to her. And the asker now has to wonder what you'll tell her about how the question came up.

Against the ambush with a number

Ask one clarifying question about the number before answering it. Calmly, not combatively.

> *"Eighteen percent over what period? I want to make sure we're looking at the same thing."*

This buys you a few seconds, shows you know your numbers well enough to care about how they are measured, and often reveals that the comparison was cherry-picked.

Against "just curious"

Answer the curiosity at face value, briefly and warmly, as though there is no trap at all.

> *"Sure. We picked them because they were the only ones who could hit our delivery window. Happy to share the comparison if it's useful."*

When you treat a loaded question as an innocent one, the loading has nowhere to go.

Against the yes-or-no corner

Refuse the false choice politely, then give a real answer that is almost as short as a yes or no.

> *"It's not quite a yes or no. March is on track if the vendor delivers on the fifteenth. If they slip, we're looking at early April. I'll know by the first of the month."*

Three sentences, a clear condition, and a date when you will know more. That is a more useful answer than yes or no, and the room can see it.

Against the late-meeting drop

Name the time problem and schedule the conversation.

> *"That deserves more than two minutes. Let's put it first on next week's agenda, and I'll send a short note before then."*

The person who dropped the question loses the advantage of the clock, and you get to answer properly.

When You Truly Don't Know

Sometimes you are put on the spot with a question you cannot answer. The temptation is to bluff, to say something that sounds confident and hope nobody checks. Do not. A bluff caught in public damages your credibility far more than an honest gap.

Instead, say what you do know, admit what you don't, and commit to a specific follow-up.

> *"I don't have that number in front of me. What I can tell you is that the trend has been going in the right direction for two months. I'll have the exact figure to everyone by end of day tomorrow."*

This is a strong answer, not a weak one. It shows honesty, gives the room something useful, and sets a deadline you control. Then actually send the figure by end of day tomorrow. Following through on a small public promise builds more trust than any perfect answer.

When You Are the One Doing It

There is an uncomfortable flip side. As a leader, you put people on the spot all the time, sometimes without meaning to. Asking a direct report a pointed question in front of their peers, or asking a team member to defend a number in front of your boss, puts them in exactly Elena's position, but with even less power to push back.

Sometimes that is necessary. Accountability has to happen somewhere, and some issues need to be raised in the room. But remember the contagion research: when leaders blame publicly, blame spreads. The researchers' practical suggestion for managers fits the experience of many good leaders: give praise in public, and when blame truly has to be assigned, do it in private.

If you have to ask a hard question in public, use the same formula in reverse. Frame it fairly, ask for the real issue instead of a defense, and give the person a way to follow up offline. You will get better answers, and your team will learn that hard questions in your meetings are about solving problems, not about punishment.

Back to Elena

Let's replay the quarterly review.

The finance director: "Before we move on, can you explain why overtime is up eighteen percent when volume is flat? I only ask because the CEO mentioned it to me."

Elena feels the surge and lets it be energy. One breath.

"Good question, and glad it's on the CEO's radar. I'll make sure she has the full picture. The number is real, and it's tied to one issue. We lost two senior people in the spring, and overtime covered the gap while we rehired. Both roles are filled now, overtime has dropped two months in a row, and I expect it back to normal by the end of the quarter. Happy to walk anyone through the monthly numbers afterward."

Twenty-five seconds. She acknowledged the fact, took back the frame, neutralized the borrowed authority, gave a short, complete answer, and closed on her terms. The room keeps nodding. Later that week, she sends the CEO a one-paragraph note with the monthly trend. When the CEO next hears about overtime, she hears it from Elena first.

The finance director's move did not just fail. It made Elena look more in control than she did before he asked.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Public pressure gives your brain three jobs at once:** answer, monitor the room, and protect your standing. That is why smart people scramble.
- **Don't fight the surge, rename it.** Research shows reframing anxiety as excitement works better than trying to calm down.
- **Know the traps:** borrowed authority, the ambush with a number, "just curious," the yes-or-no corner, and the late-meeting drop.

- **Avoid the five mistakes:** answering the tone, over-explaining, accepting the frame, fighting back in public, and promising on the spot.
- **Use the formula: Pause, Frame, Answer, Close.** Aim for a complete answer in three sentences.
- **When you don't know, say so,** share what you do know, and commit to a specific follow-up.
- **Remember you put people on the spot too.** Praise in public, assign blame in private.

Drill: The Twenty-Second Answer

Once a day for the next two weeks, pick one tough question someone could ask you in your next meeting. Write it down. Then, out loud and with a timer, answer it using Pause, Frame, Answer, Close in under twenty-five seconds.

At first, most leaders run long. Their answers drift to sixty or ninety seconds as they add reasons and context. Keep cutting until you can say the whole thing in twenty-five seconds without rushing. By the end of two weeks, you will notice something: in real meetings, your answers will start coming out shorter and calmer on their own, because your brain will have practiced the shape.

For an extra challenge, have a trusted colleague ask your questions with a little edge in their voice, borrowing a senior name or dropping a number on you. The more realistic the practice, the less the real thing will shake you.

In the next chapter, we turn from what other people do to us to what we do to ourselves: the quiet habits that cause leaders to lose ground without anyone else lifting a finger.

CHAPTER 3

How Leaders Hurt Themselves

The first two chapters were about other people: the moves they make on you and the pressure they put on you in public. This chapter is harder, because it is about you.

Some of the worst damage leaders take in tough conversations is self-inflicted. Nobody flatters them, nobody ambushes them, nobody plays dumb. They simply walk into a conversation with a few habits that quietly hand away their position, and they never notice, because the habits feel like strengths. Explaining yourself feels like transparency. Deciding fast feels like decisiveness. Defending your team feels like loyalty. Each of these can be exactly what it feels like. Each can also be the thing that costs you the conversation.

Consider James, the owner of a growing logistics company with about sixty employees. James is smart, hardworking, and well-liked. He is also, by his own later admission, his own worst enemy in hard conversations. In one month, he lost his best dispatcher, overpaid a supplier by a wide margin, and damaged his relationship with his operations manager. Nobody outmaneuvered him. He did it to himself, three different ways, and each one started with a habit he was proud of.

Let's look at the habits.

Habit 1: Over-Explaining

James's operations manager, Priya, came to him with a concern. A new routing policy James had put in place was causing late deliveries on the east side. She had data. She was calm and specific.

James responded with eleven minutes of explanation. He walked Priya through why he had created the policy, the cost savings he expected, the competitor he had studied, the conversation he had with a consultant, and the three other options he had considered and rejected. He was not angry. He genuinely wanted her to understand.

Priya left the meeting without saying much. What she took away was not "James has good reasons." It was "James is not open to changing this." She stopped bringing him routing problems. Three months later, the late deliveries had cost the company two accounts, and James was furious that nobody had told him how bad it had gotten.

Somebody had. He explained her out of the room.

Why leaders over-explain

Over-explaining usually comes from a good place. Leaders want to be transparent. They want people to understand the reasoning behind decisions instead of just following orders. And when a decision is challenged, explaining feels more respectful than simply saying, "Because I said so."

But there is often something else underneath: discomfort. When someone challenges us, we feel exposed, and talking fills the space where that discomfort would be. Every additional reason is

a small brick in a wall between us and the possibility that we were wrong.

What over-explaining costs you

It signals defensiveness. A short answer says, "I'm confident." A long answer says, "I need you to agree with me." The more you explain, the less secure you look, which is the opposite of what you intended.

It shuts the other person down. When you talk for eleven minutes, the other person learns that raising an issue with you means sitting through a lecture. Remember the research from Chapter 1: in one well-known study, 85 percent of employees had at some point felt unable to raise an important issue with a supervisor, and fear of being seen negatively was the top reason. A leader who answers every concern with a long defense teaches people that the concern was a mistake.

It gives people more to argue with. Every reason you offer is a new target. If you give one solid reason, the conversation stays on that reason. If you give seven, the other person can pick the weakest one, knock it down, and make the whole decision look shaky.

It hides the real question. Priya did not need to know why James made the policy. She needed to know whether he would look at the problem. His explanation answered a question she never asked and ignored the one she did.

What to do instead

Use the **one-reason rule**. When you need to explain a decision, give your strongest reason in one or two sentences, then stop and ask a question.

> *"I put the policy in to cut fuel costs. What are you seeing on the east side?"*

That is it. If Priya wants more background, she will ask. Meanwhile, you have signaled confidence, kept the conversation open, and turned the focus to the information you actually need.

Habit 2: Deciding Too Fast

The same month, a supplier called James with a price increase. The supplier's account manager was friendly and apologetic. Costs were up everywhere, she said, and her company had to pass some of it along. She needed to lock in next year's rate by Friday.

James liked her. He was busy. He agreed on the call.

After he hung up, his purchasing coordinator mentioned that two other suppliers had been asking for their business for months. A quick round of calls showed that James had agreed to a price well above what the market would bear. The Friday deadline was not real either. When James called back to reopen the conversation, the account manager was polite but firm. He had already said yes.

Why fast feels good

Leaders are rewarded for decisiveness. Nobody wants a boss who sits on decisions for weeks. Speed feels like competence, and in many situations it is. Experienced leaders really can make good fast decisions in areas they know deeply. We will dig into how that works in Part 4, when we look at research on firefighters and chess masters.

But fast decisions are only as good as the pattern they are based on. James knew logistics. He did not know the current supplier market, because he had not checked it in two years. His instinct was working from an old picture. Speed turned a gap in his information into a costly commitment.

Fast decisions also feel good for an emotional reason: they end the discomfort. Uncertainty is unpleasant. Saying yes, or no, makes the unpleasant feeling go away. That is why so many bad decisions are made at the exact moment someone feels the most pressure. The decision is not really about the issue. It is about making the pressure stop.

The two-question test

Before committing on anything that matters, ask yourself two questions.

1. **Can this be undone easily?** If yes, decide fast. Speed matters more than perfection on reversible decisions. If no, slow down.
2. **Do I know what the alternatives look like right now?** Not two years ago. Now. If not, you are deciding blind, and the person on the other side probably knows it.

James's supplier deal failed both tests. A one-year price commitment was hard to undo, and he had no current picture of the market. That combination is a signal to buy time.

What to say

> *"I appreciate the heads-up. Let me look at our numbers and get back to you Thursday."*

Notice what this sentence does not do. It does not accuse the supplier of anything. It does not reject the increase. It simply moves the decision from "right now" to "after I know what I need to know." A reasonable partner will accept that. If someone refuses to give you even a day, that tells you a lot about the deal.

Habit 3: Defending Instead of Asking

The third wound was the most painful. James's best dispatcher, Andre, asked for a meeting. He said he was frustrated. He had been training new dispatchers for a year on top of his own work, without any change in title or pay, and he felt taken for granted.

James heard criticism, and he responded the way most people do when they hear criticism. He defended himself. He pointed out that he had given Andre a bonus the previous December. He mentioned that everyone was stretched thin. He said he had always tried to be fair. Every point was true.

Andre nodded, thanked James for his time, and resigned five weeks later for a job with a competitor that came with a supervisor title.

James never asked a single question in that meeting. He never asked what Andre wanted, what would make the training load feel fair, or what Andre saw for himself in two years. He spent the whole conversation proving he was a good boss, and in doing so, he proved the opposite.

The cost of not asking

Andre's story is extremely common. Gallup has found that replacing an employee can cost anywhere from half to two times that person's annual salary, and that is described as a

conservative estimate. In the same research, 51 percent of people who voluntarily left their jobs said that in the three months before they quit, neither their manager nor any other leader had talked with them about their job satisfaction or their future at the company. And 52 percent said their manager or organization could have done something to keep them.

Think about that. More than half the people who quit said nobody asked, and more than half said the departure was preventable. James was in a better position than most: Andre came to him and opened the door. James just did not walk through it.

Why we defend

When someone criticizes us, our brain treats it as a threat to our self-image. We stop listening to understand and start listening to respond. Every word becomes evidence for the prosecution or the defense.

There is an interesting clue in the research on blame. When Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens studied how blame spreads, they found that people who watched others blame became more likely to blame too, because it put them in a mode of protecting their own image. But when participants first did a simple self-affirmation exercise, reflecting on values that mattered to them, the urge to protect themselves disappeared, and so did the blaming. People who felt secure in who they were did not need to defend.

That finding points to something practical for leaders. The urge to defend is strongest when you feel your identity is on the line. If you can remind yourself before a hard conversation what you actually value (in James's case, being a fair boss who keeps good

people), then the criticism stops feeling like an attack on that identity and starts feeling like information that helps you live up to it.

What to do instead

When someone brings you criticism, try the **three-question response**. Before you say anything in your own defense, ask three questions, and listen to the answers.

1. **"What's been the hardest part?"** This invites the full story instead of the summary.
2. **"What would make this feel right to you?"** This turns a complaint into a solvable problem.
3. **"What do you see for yourself here a year from now?"** This shows you care about their future, which is exactly what the Gallup research says most departing employees never hear.

Only after you have heard the answers should you share your side, and even then, keep the one-reason rule in mind.

If James had asked those three questions, he might have heard that Andre wanted a title more than money, that a lead dispatcher role would have cost the company far less than replacing him, and that Andre was already talking to a competitor. All of that was in the room, waiting for a question.

Habit 4: Showing Your Cards Too Early

There is a fourth habit that shows up across all three of James's stories: telling the other side what you think before you know what they think.

In the routing conversation, James laid out his whole reasoning before asking what Priya had seen. In the supplier call, he made it obvious that he liked the account manager and was too busy to shop around. In the meeting with Andre, he revealed that he felt defensive about his fairness, which told Andre exactly how the conversation would go.

Negotiation research has a lot to say about this. When researchers Adam Galinsky and Thomas Mussweiler studied negotiations, they found that the first offer tends to pull the final deal toward it, like an anchor. But they also found that when the other negotiator focused on their own alternatives or the other side's limits, the pull of that first offer disappeared. Information is leverage. The person who reveals their position first, without knowing the other side's, gives away the most.

You do not have to be secretive or cold. But in any conversation that matters, try to learn before you tell. Ask what the other person is seeing, what they need, and what they have already considered. Then share your view. You will make better decisions, and you will say fewer things you have to take back.

Habit 5: Making It Personal

The last habit is the quietest. Leaders often take tough conversations personally, and then they make them personal for the other person, too.

When Priya raised the routing problem, James heard "your policy is bad," and then, underneath, "you are bad at your job." When Andre raised his workload, James heard "you are unfair." Once a conversation becomes about who is a good person, there is no clean way out. One of you has to lose.

The fix is to keep the conversation on the problem, out loud.

> *"So the issue is east-side deliveries running late since the change. Let's figure out what's driving it."*
> *"So you've been carrying two jobs for a year. Let's figure out what fair looks like."*

Naming the problem as a problem, separate from either person, turns the conversation from a contest into a project. You are no longer across the table from each other. You are on the same side, looking at the issue together.

Back to James

Let's replay one of James's conversations with everything in this chapter in mind. Andre asks for a meeting and says he feels taken for granted.

James feels the familiar urge to defend. Before the meeting, he reminds himself what he cares about: keeping good people and being fair. Criticism about fairness is not an attack. It is information he needs.

"Thanks for telling me directly. What's been the hardest part?"

Andre talks about the training load, the late nights, and how new dispatchers come to him with questions while he is trying to handle his own routes.

"What would make this feel right to you?"

Andre hesitates, then says it: he wants to be recognized as a lead, not just a dispatcher who happens to train people.

"And a year from now, what do you see for yourself here?"

"Honestly? I've been thinking about whether there's a future for me here at all."

Now James knows exactly where he stands. He does not over-explain, and he does not decide on the spot. "I'm glad you told me. You've been doing a lead's job without the title, and that's on me. Give me until Friday to put together what a lead dispatcher role would look like, including pay. I want you here."

Ten minutes, three questions, one reason, one commitment with a date. Andre does not leave for the competitor. The lead role costs James a fraction of what replacing his best dispatcher would have.

Chapter Takeaways

- **The most expensive damage is often self-inflicted,** and it comes from habits that feel like strengths.
- **Over-explaining signals defensiveness and shuts people down.** Use the one-reason rule: one strong reason, then a question.
- **Fast decisions are only as good as the information behind them.** Ask: can this be undone easily, and do I know the alternatives right now?
- **Defending instead of asking costs you people.** Gallup found 51 percent of people who quit said no leader talked to them about their future in their final three months.
- **Use the three-question response** to criticism: hardest part, what would make it right, and where they see themselves in a year.
- **Learn before you tell.** Revealing your position first gives away leverage.

- **Keep it on the problem.** Name the issue out loud, separate from either person.

Drill: The Habit Audit

For the next two weeks, at the end of each day, think back over your hardest conversation and score yourself on five quick questions:

1. Did I give more than one reason when one would have done?
2. Did I commit to something hard to undo without checking the alternatives?
3. Did I defend myself before asking a single question?
4. Did I share my position before learning theirs?
5. Did the conversation become about who was right instead of what was wrong?

Give yourself one point for each yes. Most leaders start the audit scoring two or three a day. The goal is not zero; nobody gets to zero. The goal is to catch yourself in the moment, at least once a day, and choose differently. After two weeks, you will start hearing the habits as they happen: the urge to explain, the pull to decide, the itch to defend. Hearing them is most of the battle.

In the next chapter, we'll tie Part 1 together with a simple idea that changes how you see every hard conversation: whoever is in front of you is selling you something, and you need to know what it is.

CHAPTER 4

Every Conversation Is a Sale

Half One · Part 1: How Your Mind Gets Used Against You

Carla is the chief operating officer of a regional healthcare services company. On a typical Tuesday, she has eleven meetings. If you asked her what she does all day, she would say she runs operations. If you followed her around with a notebook, you would see something different. You would see her being sold to, over and over, from 8 a.m. until she leaves.

At 8:30, a department head sells her on adding two positions. At 10:00, a software vendor sells her on a platform upgrade. At 11:15, her own chief of staff sells her on moving a deadline. At 1:00, the CEO sells her on taking over a struggling program nobody else wants. At 2:30, an employee sells her a version of a conflict with a coworker. At 4:00, a peer sells her on backing his proposal at Thursday's executive meeting.

None of those people would call what they are doing "selling." But each one walked in wanting Carla to believe something, feel something, or decide something, and each one had shaped the conversation to make that more likely. That is what selling is.

This chapter closes Part 1 with one idea that ties the first three chapters together: **every conversation where someone needs something from you is a sale.** Once you see it that way, the flattery, urgency, guilt, public pressure, and self-inflicted

mistakes from the earlier chapters stop looking like random workplace friction. They become recognizable parts of a pitch. And once you can see the pitch, you can evaluate the product.

What Is Actually Being Sold

In a store, the product is obvious. In a workplace, it usually isn't. People rarely sell you only the thing they are asking for. They sell three things at once.

1. A version of events. When an employee tells you about a conflict with a coworker, they are not giving you a neutral report. They are selling you their account of what happened: who started it, who was reasonable, who was difficult. When a department head explains why a project is behind, they are selling you a story about causes. The version of events matters because whoever controls the story controls what solutions look reasonable.

2. A decision. This is the visible product: approve the hires, sign the contract, move the deadline, back the proposal. Most leaders focus all their attention here. That is a mistake, because by the time the decision is on the table, the version of events has already done most of the work.

3. A feeling. Urgency, guilt, loyalty, fear, excitement, pride. The feeling is what closes the sale. A decision you would reject when calm becomes a decision you accept when you feel rushed, or flattered, or afraid of looking unsupportive.

Carla's 8:30 meeting shows all three. The department head told a story: his team is overwhelmed because volume grew faster than anyone expected (version of events). He asked for two positions (decision). And he mentioned, twice, that two of his people had

been crying at their desks that week (feeling). Every word may have been true. But Carla can only evaluate the request properly if she sees all three products and checks each one separately.

The Structure of a Pitch

Good salespeople follow a structure, whether they learned it in training or picked it up by instinct. People inside your organization use the same structure, usually without knowing it. Once you know the structure, you can follow along in real time.

Step 1: Build rapport

The pitch starts before the ask. It sounds like small talk, a compliment, or a reference to something you share. As Chapter 1 showed, this works far better than most people expect. In the boardroom research by Westphal and Stern, subtle flattery and agreement were among the strongest predictors of who got invited onto more boards. Rapport is not manipulation by itself; good working relationships need it. But notice when rapport is being built right before a request.

Step 2: Frame the problem

Next, the seller defines the problem in a way that makes their solution the obvious answer. "Our team is drowning" points toward more people. "Our process is broken" points toward new software. "The client is unhappy" points toward whatever concession the seller already wants to make. The framing step is where most decisions are actually made, because once you accept the problem as described, you have accepted most of the solution.

Step 3: Anchor

Then comes a number, a deadline, or a comparison that sets the range for the rest of the conversation. "We really need four people, but I'm only asking for two." "The vendor's list price is two hundred thousand, but they'll do one-twenty." "Most companies our size spend twice this."

Anchors are powerful. Researchers Adam Galinsky and Thomas Mussweiler found in a series of negotiation experiments that first offers pull final outcomes toward them: the higher the opening number, the higher the final settlement. The same thing happens inside companies. The first number mentioned in a budget conversation becomes the reference point, and everything after it gets judged as "more" or "less" than that number rather than on its own merits.

Step 4: Give a reason

As we saw in Chapter 1, the word "because" is strangely powerful. In Ellen Langer's copy-machine study, people let a stranger cut in line 60 percent of the time with no reason, and about 93 percent of the time when the stranger gave a reason, even a meaningless one like "because I have to make copies." Reasons don't have to be good to work, especially on small requests. They just have to be there.

Step 5: Create urgency

The deadline, the window, the risk of waiting. Urgency moves you from evaluating to acting.

Step 6: Close

Finally, the ask, often phrased to make yes the easiest answer. "So can I tell the team we're good?" "Should I have them send the paperwork over?" "I can count on you Thursday, right?"

This structure is not evil. Honest proposals use it too, because it is simply how persuasion works. The point is not to reject anything that follows the pattern. The point is to recognize which step you are in, so you can evaluate each one deliberately instead of being carried along.

How to Be a Good Buyer

If every conversation is a sale, then part of your job as a leader is to be a skilled buyer. Skilled buyers are not hostile. They are curious, clear about what they need, and hard to rush. Here is how to buy well inside your own organization.

Separate the three products

When someone brings you a request, mentally split it into the three products: the version of events, the decision, and the feeling. Then evaluate each one on its own.

For the version of events, ask: **Is there another way to tell this story?** Carla's department head said his team was drowning because volume grew. Another version: volume grew, but the team also lost efficiency after a scheduling change. Those two stories lead to different solutions. One says hire. The other says fix the schedule first.

For the decision, ask: **What would I need to believe for this to be the right call?** If adding two people is right, Carla needs to believe that the volume increase is permanent, that the current

team is working efficiently, and that the cost is justified by what the new people will produce. Now she has three things to check instead of one vague feeling.

For the feeling, ask: **Would I still agree if I didn't feel this?** If the image of people crying at their desks disappeared, would the case still stand? If yes, approve it with confidence. If no, the feeling is doing work the facts can't.

Question the frame before the solution

Most people argue with the solution. Skilled buyers question the problem definition first.

> *"Before we talk about adding people, help me understand what's driving the workload. Is it volume, process, or something else?"*

This question is respectful, and it often changes the whole conversation. If the department head has done his homework, he will have the answer, and the request will be stronger for it. If he hasn't, you have just avoided spending money on the wrong fix.

Reset the anchor

When someone opens with a number, don't let it become the center of gravity. The Galinsky and Mussweiler research offers a useful clue here: in their experiments, the pull of a first offer disappeared when the other negotiator focused on their own alternatives or on the other side's real limits. In plain terms, you neutralize an anchor by bringing your own reference point into the conversation.

> *"Set aside the four-person number for a second. What did volume per person look like a year ago compared to now?"*

Now the conversation is anchored to a real measure, not to the number the seller chose.

Check the reason

When you hear "because," ask whether the reason supports the request or merely accompanies it. "We need to move the deadline because the team is busy" is an accompanying reason; every team is busy. "We need to move the deadline because the data we depend on arrives two weeks late" is a supporting reason. Only the second one should change your mind.

Slow the close

When someone asks for a commitment, you are allowed to take one step back.

> *"I'm leaning yes. Send me a one-page summary with the numbers, and I'll confirm tomorrow."*

This does not insult anyone. It simply moves the final decision out of the emotional peak of the conversation. If the case is solid, the one-pager will be easy to write. If writing it down exposes holes, better to find them now.

When the Seller Is Your Boss

One of Carla's sales calls that Tuesday came from the CEO, who wanted her to take over a struggling program. This kind of sale is harder, because the seller has power over you, and "no" can feel like it isn't an option.

The CEO's pitch followed the pattern. Rapport: "You're the only one I trust with this." Frame: "The program needs a strong operator." Anchor: "It's really just a couple of hours a week." Close: "Can I tell the board you're on it?"

Carla does not have to refuse. But she can still be a good buyer. The program's version of events (it needs a strong operator) might hide a different story (it lacks funding, or its goals are unrealistic). The anchor (a couple of hours a week) might be far from reality. And the close (tell the board) would lock her in publicly before she knows what she's agreeing to.

A good-buyer response accepts the trust, then asks to see the product:

> *"I appreciate you thinking of me. Before you tell the board, give me a few days to look at the program's numbers and talk to the team. I want to make sure that when I say yes, I can actually deliver."*

No CEO worth working for will object to that. And Carla protects both herself and the CEO from a commitment that might fail. We will come back to selling upward, and to goals that change from above, in Chapter 11.

When You Are the Seller

This chapter has been about recognizing when you are being sold to. But leaders sell constantly too: to their teams, their bosses, their boards, their clients. Understanding the structure of a pitch makes you a better seller, and it also raises an important question about how you want to sell.

Every technique in this chapter can be used honestly or dishonestly. You can build rapport because you value someone, or as a setup. You can frame a problem accurately, or bend it toward the answer you want. You can give real reasons or empty ones. You can create urgency that reflects reality, or invent it.

The practical case for honest selling is strong. People eventually discover when they were sold a distorted version of events, and the damage to trust lasts far longer than the benefit of the decision you won. A leader known for honest pitches gets yeses faster over time, because people stop needing to check everything. A leader known for spin finds that every proposal gets picked apart.

So when you sell, use the same test you use as a buyer. Would your version of events survive someone telling it a different way? Would your request make sense without the emotional push? Would your reason still hold if someone asked, "Why does that matter?" If yes, sell with confidence. If no, fix the proposal before you pitch it.

Back to Carla

Let's replay her 8:30 meeting as a skilled buyer.

The department head opens warmly, then describes his team as drowning. He mentions people crying at their desks and asks for two new positions, noting that he really needs four.

Carla notices the three products. She takes the feeling seriously first, because it matters: "I'm sorry the team is having that kind of week. That's important, and I want to fix it."

Then she questions the frame. "Help me understand what's driving the workload. Is it all volume, or has anything changed in how the work gets done?"

He pauses. Volume is up about fifteen percent, he says. And yes, a new scheduling system went live in the spring, and it's been clunky.

She resets the anchor. "So set aside the four-versus-two question. If we fixed the scheduling issues, how much of the gap would that close?"

He isn't sure. Maybe half.

Now Carla can make a real decision. "Here's what I'd like to do. Let's approve one position now, because the volume increase is real and your people need relief this month. At the same time, let's get the scheduling vendor in next week. In sixty days, we'll look at the numbers again and decide on the second position."

The department head leaves with real help, faster than he expected, and Carla has avoided locking in a cost that a software fix might have solved. Nobody was accused of anything. She simply bought carefully.

Part 1 in One Page

This chapter closes Part 1. Here is the whole part in a few lines:

- **People need things from leaders, so they work on leaders.** Flattery, urgency, guilt, and playing dumb are the common moves (Chapter 1).
- **Public pressure scrambles good thinkers.** Rename the surge as excitement and use Pause, Frame, Answer, Close (Chapter 2).

- **Many wounds are self-inflicted.** Over-explaining, deciding too fast, defending instead of asking, showing your cards early, and making it personal (Chapter 3).
- **Every request is a sale of three products:** a version of events, a decision, and a feeling. Evaluate each one separately (Chapter 4).

Part 2 shifts from defense to offense. Instead of reacting to what people do in the moment, you will learn to see it coming: to understand what everyone in the room really wants, predict how they will react, and map the conversation before it starts.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Every conversation where someone needs something from you is a sale,** whether or not anyone calls it that.
- **Three products are always on the table:** a version of events, a decision, and a feeling.
- **Pitches follow a pattern:** rapport, frame, anchor, reason, urgency, close. Know which step you're in.
- **Question the frame before the solution.** Accepting the problem as described means accepting most of the answer.
- **Neutralize anchors** by bringing your own reference point.
- **Check whether reasons support the request** or just accompany it.
- **Slow the close** with a one-page summary and a confirmation the next day.
- **When you sell, sell honestly.** It wins faster over time.

Drill: Name the Products

For one week, after every meeting where someone asked you for something, take sixty seconds and write three short lines:

1. **Version of events:** What story was I sold? What's another way to tell it?
2. **Decision:** What did they want me to decide? What would I need to believe for it to be right?
3. **Feeling:** What emotion was in the room? Would I decide the same way without it?

At the end of the week, look back over your notes. Most leaders find a pattern: a few people who consistently sell with feelings instead of facts, a few frames that keep showing up, and at least one decision they would now make differently. That pattern is the start of the skill Part 2 builds: seeing the conversation before it happens.

CHAPTER 5

What Everyone in the Room Really Wants

Half One · Part 2: Ten Moves Ahead

Daniel had been general manager of a food-packaging plant for three years when corporate told him to combine the plant's two maintenance teams into one. On paper, it was simple. Two teams, two supervisors, overlapping work. One team would be cheaper and easier to schedule.

He called a meeting with the three people it affected most: Rosa, who supervised the day maintenance team; Kevin, who supervised nights; and Lauren, the plant's HR manager. He laid out the plan clearly, explained the cost savings, and asked for questions.

The meeting went badly in a way Daniel could not quite name. Rosa asked a dozen detailed questions about scheduling. Kevin said almost nothing and agreed to everything. Lauren kept bringing up the union contract. Nobody objected to the plan, exactly, yet Daniel walked out feeling like he had lost.

Over the next month, the merger stalled. Rosa's scheduling questions turned into a long list of "concerns" that needed to be resolved first. Kevin quietly started interviewing at another plant. Lauren raised a contract issue with the union that took six weeks to sort out. By the time the teams were combined, Daniel had lost his best night supervisor and two months of savings.

What went wrong? Daniel had talked about what the plan was. He never figured out what each person in the room actually wanted. Rosa was not really worried about scheduling. She was worried about whether she would be the one supervisor left standing. Kevin was not agreeable. He had already decided he was the one who would lose, and he was preparing his exit. Lauren was not obsessed with the contract. She had been blamed for a grievance two years earlier and was protecting herself from being blamed again.

Everyone in that meeting was having a different conversation. Daniel was the only one who didn't know it.

This chapter begins Part 2, where we move from defense to offense. In Part 1 you learned to recognize moves as they happen. Now you will learn to see them before they happen, and it all starts with the most important question in any hard conversation: **what does everyone in the room really want?**

Stated Wants and Real Wants

People almost never say exactly what they want. Not because they are dishonest, but because the real want is often too risky, too personal, or too unclear to say out loud. So they say something safer, and the safer thing becomes the stated want.

- Rosa's stated want: clarity on scheduling. Her real want: to keep her job and her standing.
- Kevin's stated want: nothing. His real want: to leave on his terms before he was pushed.
- Lauren's stated want: compliance with the contract. Her real want: not to be blamed if something went wrong.

If you only respond to stated wants, you will spend your time answering questions that aren't the real questions. Daniel could have answered every scheduling question perfectly and Rosa would still have resisted, because the scheduling questions were never the point.

A useful way to find the real want is to ask: **what would this person lose if this goes badly, and what would they gain if it goes well?** Loss and gain are usually more honest than words. Rosa stood to lose a title. Kevin stood to lose a job. Lauren stood to lose her reputation. None of them said so. All of it was predictable.

Getting Inside Their Head, Not Their Heart

There is a common belief that the way to understand people is empathy: feel what they feel. Empathy is a wonderful human quality and essential in many parts of leadership. But in strategic conversations (negotiations, conflicts, decisions where interests clash), research suggests a different skill matters more.

In a set of studies published in 2008, Adam Galinsky and his colleagues compared two approaches in negotiations. Some participants were told to imagine what the other side was *thinking*: their interests, goals, and likely moves. That is perspective-taking. Others were told to imagine what the other side was *feeling*. That is empathy. A third group got neither instruction.

In one study, involving the sale of a gas station where a deal was only possible if the two sides found a creative solution, about 76 percent of the perspective-takers reached that kind of deal, compared with about 54 percent of the empathizers. In another study, involving a job negotiation with several issues on the table,

perspective-takers created more value and won more for themselves than either other group, while the empathizers sometimes gave away too much.

The lesson is not that feelings don't matter. It is that understanding what someone is trying to achieve is more useful, in a hard conversation, than simply feeling their emotions. Feelings tell you that someone is anxious. Perspective tells you why they are anxious and what would settle it. Daniel did not need to feel Rosa's fear. He needed to understand that her fear was about her role, and then address her role.

The best leaders do both, in that order. They first think through what each person wants and why, then show genuine care in how they respond. Head first, then heart.

The Four Things People Usually Want

When you strip away the details, most real wants in workplace conversations fall into four categories. Knowing them gives you a short list to check every time.

1. Security

Will I still have my job, my income, my role? When a change threatens security, people stop thinking about the company and start thinking about survival. Rosa and Kevin were both in security mode. A leader who ignores security will see people protect themselves in ways that slow everything down.

2. Status

Will I be seen as competent, important, respected? Status is often more important to people than money, and it is almost never stated directly. A senior engineer who pushes back on a junior

colleague's idea may really be protecting his standing as the expert. A manager who insists on being copied on every email may be protecting her visibility.

3. Fairness

Am I being treated the same as others? Is the process honest? People will accept a bad outcome if they believe the process was fair, and they will fight a good outcome if they believe it was rigged. Kevin's silence came partly from a belief that the decision was already made and the meeting was just theater.

4. Autonomy

Do I have some control over what happens to me? People resist changes that are done to them far more than changes they help shape. Rosa's endless questions were partly an attempt to regain some control over a process she had no say in.

There is a fifth want that shows up specifically around leaders: **safety from blame**. That was Lauren. In organizations where mistakes are punished, people spend enormous energy protecting themselves from being the one blamed. Research by Amy Edmondson on work teams found that teams where people felt safe taking interpersonal risks, like admitting mistakes or raising concerns, engaged in more learning behavior, and that learning was linked to better performance. Where that safety is missing, people like Lauren put their energy into self-protection instead of solutions.

How to Map the Room

Before any important conversation with more than one person, take ten minutes and map the room. It is simple: write down each person and answer four questions about them.

1. **What is their stated position?** What will they probably say?
2. **What is their real want?** Security, status, fairness, autonomy, or safety from blame. Often more than one.
3. **What do they stand to lose or gain?** Be specific.
4. **Who do they answer to or care about?** People rarely decide alone. Rosa cared about how her team saw her. Lauren answered to corporate HR. Kevin had a family that depended on his schedule.

Here is what Daniel's map could have looked like before his meeting:

- **Rosa** (day supervisor). Stated: questions about logistics. Real: security and status; she will want to know if she is the one who stays. Lose/gain: her title. Cares about: her team's respect.
- **Kevin** (night supervisor). Stated: probably agreement or silence. Real: security, fairness; he may assume the night shift always loses. Lose/gain: his job. Cares about: his family's schedule.
- **Lauren** (HR). Stated: contract concerns. Real: safety from blame. Lose/gain: her reputation with corporate. Cares about: corporate HR and the union relationship.

Ten minutes of mapping would have shown Daniel that a group meeting was the wrong format entirely. You do not resolve three different security and blame concerns in one room where

everyone is watching everyone else. You resolve them one person at a time.

Reading Real Wants in the Moment

Mapping ahead of time is ideal. But often you will be in a conversation and realize you have misjudged what someone wants. Here are signals that the stated want is not the real one.

The questions don't fit the stakes. When someone asks a lot of detailed questions about a small issue, the small issue is usually a stand-in for a larger worry. Rosa's dozen scheduling questions were a sign.

Agreement comes too fast. When someone agrees to a change that clearly hurts them, without asking anything, they have often already decided to resist in another way, or to leave. Quick, quiet agreement from the person with the most to lose is a warning, not a win.

The same concern keeps coming back in new forms. You answer a question, and it returns dressed differently. That means you answered the stated want and missed the real one.

Emotion that seems out of proportion. When someone gets more upset than a topic seems to justify, the topic has touched something underneath: status, fairness, or an old injury.

What they talk about versus what they avoid. Kevin never mentioned what would happen to him. That silence was the loudest thing in the room.

When you spot one of these signals, the move is simple: **name the real concern gently and invite them to talk about it.**

> *"I've noticed a lot of the questions are about how roles will shake out. That's a completely fair thing to wonder about. Can we talk about that directly?"*

You are not accusing anyone of hiding anything. You are giving them permission to say the thing they were afraid to say.

Addressing Real Wants Without Giving Everything Away

Understanding what someone wants does not mean you have to give it to them. Daniel could not keep both supervisors. Corporate's decision stood. But there is an enormous difference between a decision that ignores people's real wants and one that respects them even when it can't satisfy them.

Here is how to address each want, even when the answer is not what someone hoped.

For security: Be as clear and as early as you can. Uncertainty is often worse than bad news. "Here's what I know, here's what I don't, and here's when I'll know more."

For status: Protect dignity in how the change happens. Give people the chance to hear news privately, to have a role in shaping the transition, and to leave or move on with their reputation intact.

For fairness: Explain the process honestly, including the criteria. People can live with "we chose the supervisor whose shift covers our peak hours" far more easily than with a decision that seems to come from nowhere.

For autonomy: Give choices wherever you truly can, even small ones. "Would you rather lead the transition planning or focus on training the combined team?"

For safety from blame: Say out loud who owns the decision. "This is my call. If it goes wrong, that's on me, not on you." You would be amazed how much resistance disappears when people know they will not be the scapegoat.

A Word on Your Own Real Wants

There is one more person in every room: you. And you have real wants too.

Daniel's stated want was to combine the teams efficiently. His real wants included looking good to corporate, avoiding a fight, and getting the whole thing over with quickly. Those wants shaped how he ran the meeting. He chose a group format because it was faster, not because it was better. He moved quickly past questions because he wanted to be done. He did not ask what people really wanted because, honestly, he did not want to hear it.

Mapping the room should always include a line for yourself. What do you want from this conversation, beyond the obvious goal? What are you afraid of? What would you like to avoid? Being honest with yourself about your real wants keeps them from quietly steering the conversation.

Back to Daniel

Let's replay the merger with the room mapped.

Instead of a group meeting, Daniel meets with Lauren first. "Before I talk to Rosa and Kevin, I want to make sure we handle the contract side right, and I want to be clear that this decision is mine. If anything goes sideways, I own it." Lauren visibly relaxes and walks him through two contract provisions he would have missed. She becomes an ally instead of a roadblock.

Next, he meets with Rosa and Kevin separately, on the same morning, so neither hears it secondhand. With each, he leads with the security question instead of waiting for it. To Kevin: "I want to be straight with you about what this means for your role, because you deserve to hear it from me first." He explains the criteria honestly. He tells Kevin the decision, and offers him a real choice: a senior technician role at the same pay with a day schedule, or help and a strong reference for a supervisor job elsewhere.

Kevin is disappointed, but he says something Daniel does not expect: "I appreciate you telling me straight. I figured I'd find out from a memo." He takes the day role. Daniel keeps his best technician, avoids a stalled merger, and has the combined team running in three weeks instead of three months.

Same decision. Different conversation. The difference was understanding what each person actually wanted before he opened his mouth.

Chapter Takeaways

- **People rarely say what they really want.** The stated want is the safe version. Look for the real one.
- **Ask what each person stands to lose or gain.** Loss and gain are more honest than words.

- **In strategic conversations, perspective-taking beats empathy.** Research found perspective-takers reached creative deals about 76 percent of the time versus 54 percent for empathizers.
- **Most real wants fall into five categories:** security, status, fairness, autonomy, and safety from blame.
- **Map the room before any important multi-person conversation:** stated position, real want, what they stand to lose or gain, and who they answer to.
- **Watch for signals** that the stated want is not the real one: questions that don't fit the stakes, fast agreement, recurring concerns, outsized emotion, and silence.
- **You can respect a real want even when you can't satisfy it.**
- **Include yourself in the map.** Your real wants shape the conversation too.

Drill: The Ten-Minute Map

Before your next three important meetings, set a timer for ten minutes and map the room using the four questions. Then, after each meeting, look back at your map and score it: for each person, did you guess their real want correctly?

Most leaders get about half right on the first try. That's fine. The point is not to be a mind reader. The point is to walk into the room with hypotheses instead of assumptions, so you notice faster when someone's behavior doesn't match what they're saying. By the third map, you will start seeing real wants in conversations you didn't prepare for at all.

In the next chapter, we take this one step further. Knowing what someone wants lets you predict something even more useful: how they will react to what you say, before you say it.

CHAPTER 6

Predicting the Reaction Before You Speak

Hannah, the chief financial officer of a mid-sized software company, had to tell the vice president of sales that his team's commission plan was changing. The new plan was fairer to the company and, over a full year, roughly neutral for most of his reps. But the top three performers would earn less, and one of them was the VP's closest hire.

Hannah prepared carefully. She built a spreadsheet showing the full-year math. She practiced her explanation. She booked an hour.

She opened the meeting this way: "So, we've finished the commission review, and the top tier is going to see a reduction."

That was the whole meeting, really. Everything after that first sentence was cleanup. The VP heard "reduction" and "top tier," and his mind went straight to his best rep, the one he had personally recruited with promises about earnings. He stopped hearing the spreadsheet. He interrupted, challenged the methodology, and accused finance of not understanding sales. By the end of the hour, the plan was the same, but the relationship was worse, and the VP was already telling his team that finance was coming after their paychecks.

Hannah had prepared the content perfectly. She had not prepared for the reaction. And the reaction was entirely predictable.

In the last chapter, you learned to figure out what each person in the room really wants. This chapter takes the next step: using that knowledge to predict how someone will react to what you are about to say, and then choosing your words, order, and setting so the reaction works for you instead of against you.

Reactions Are More Predictable Than You Think

Most leaders treat other people's reactions like weather: something that happens to them, which they can only respond to. But reactions are not random. They follow from a small number of inputs, and if you know the inputs, you can make a surprisingly good forecast.

The inputs are:

1. **What the person really wants** (Chapter 5): security, status, fairness, autonomy, or safety from blame.
2. **What the news threatens or supports** among those wants.
3. **The person's history:** how they have reacted to similar news before, and what happened to them in the past.
4. **How and when they hear it:** the first words, the setting, who else is present, and whether it surprises them.

Hannah knew all four inputs. The VP cared deeply about status (being the leader who could promise his people great earnings) and about fairness to his team. The news threatened both. His history included a commission cut at a previous company that

had cost him half his team. And Hannah's first sentence delivered the most threatening part of the news first, with no context, in a way that surprised him.

Put those together, and his reaction was close to inevitable. Hannah could have predicted it in five minutes if she had asked the right question: not "What will I say?" but "What will he hear?"

How Experts Rehearse in Their Heads

There is an interesting clue about how to forecast reactions in research on how experienced people make decisions under pressure.

In the 1980s, psychologist Gary Klein and his colleagues studied fireground commanders, experienced firefighters who direct crews at emergency scenes. They expected to find the commanders carefully comparing options. Instead, they found something different. The commanders usually recognized the situation as a familiar type and came up with one course of action. Then, before acting, they ran a quick mental simulation: they imagined how the action would play out in this specific situation. If the simulation showed a problem, they adjusted the plan or switched to another. If it played out well, they acted.

That mental simulation step is the core skill of this chapter. Before an important conversation, you run the conversation in your head, from the other person's side, and watch for the moment it goes wrong. Experienced leaders do this naturally in areas they know well. The goal here is to do it deliberately, every time it matters.

The Three-Reaction Preview

Here is a simple tool for running that simulation. Before any important conversation, write down three possible reactions.

The best case: What happens if the person hears you exactly as you intend? What do they say and do?

The likely case: Given what they want, what the news threatens, and their history, what will they most probably do in the first sixty seconds?

The worst case: What is the most damaging reaction that could realistically happen? Not the fantasy disaster, but the one you would not be shocked by.

Then ask one question for each case: **What could I change about how I deliver this to move the likely case closer to the best case and make the worst case less likely?**

For Hannah, the preview might have looked like this:

- **Best case:** The VP sees that the plan is fair over a full year, appreciates the transparency, and helps design how to explain it to his team.
- **Likely case:** He hears "top tier reduction," thinks immediately of his best rep and of his old company, gets defensive, and challenges the numbers.
- **Worst case:** He takes the news to his team before the details are settled, frames it as finance attacking sales, and the top rep starts looking for another job.

Looking at that preview, Hannah would see that her biggest risk was not the plan. It was the first ninety seconds of the meeting, and what the VP did immediately afterward.

The Five Reaction Triggers

Certain features of how news is delivered reliably make reactions worse. If you know them, you can avoid most of them.

Trigger 1: Surprise

People react far more strongly to news they did not see coming. Surprise sends the brain into defense mode before the content is understood. Whenever possible, give a heads-up: "I want to talk with you Thursday about the commission review. Some of it will affect your top tier, and I want to walk through it with you before anything is final." Now the VP arrives prepared to think instead of ready to fight.

Trigger 2: Leading with loss

The first thing a person hears shapes how they hear everything after it. If you lead with the loss, the rest of the meeting becomes a fight about the loss. Lead instead with the purpose, the context, or the shared goal, then get to the loss quickly and plainly. Do not bury it. Just don't make it the opening frame.

Trigger 3: Public exposure

As Chapter 2 showed, hard news hits harder in front of others. People protect their status first and think second. Deliver anything that threatens someone's status in private, even if the broader announcement will be public later.

Trigger 4: A sense of unfairness

If the person believes the decision was made without their input, or that they are being singled out, the reaction will be much stronger. Show the process: who was consulted, what criteria

were used, and why. Where it is still possible, invite their input before the decision is final.

Trigger 5: Old wounds

Some reactions are not really about you or your news. They are about something that happened before. The VP's past commission cut was an old wound. When you know about an old wound, acknowledge it directly: "I know you went through a commission change at your last company that went badly. I want this one to go differently, and I want your help making sure it does." Naming the wound takes away much of its power.

Design the First Ninety Seconds

If you remember one thing from this chapter, make it this: **the first ninety seconds of a hard conversation determine most of what follows.** In those ninety seconds, the other person decides whether this is a threat or a problem to solve together. Once they decide it is a threat, you will spend the rest of the conversation trying to undo that decision.

So plan the first ninety seconds word for word. Here is a structure that works for most difficult news:

1. **Purpose (one sentence):** Why you are having this conversation and what you hope to accomplish together.
2. **Headline (one or two sentences):** The news itself, clearly, without hedging.
3. **Context (one or two sentences):** The most important piece of information that helps the news make sense.
4. **Invitation (one sentence):** A question that brings them into the conversation.

Here is how Hannah could have opened:

> *"I wanted to sit down with you before anything is final, because I want your help getting this right for your team. We've finished the commission review, and the new plan will lower earnings for the top three reps, while most of the team stays about even over a full year. The reason is that the current plan pays out heavily on deals that later get discounted or churn, and the new one rewards deals that stick. Before I go through the numbers, what's your first concern?"*

That opening is about forty-five seconds long. It does not hide the bad news. It puts it in the second sentence, plainly. But it frames the conversation as a collaboration, gives the VP the key reason before he can build a story of his own, and invites him to say what worries him most, which tells Hannah exactly where to focus.

Say It Out Loud as Them

One of the most effective ways to predict a reaction is also one of the simplest: read your planned opening out loud, then answer it out loud as the other person would.

This feels awkward. Do it anyway. When you hear your words from the other side, you will catch phrases that sound fine to you but land badly on them. "Reduction" sounds neutral to a CFO and like a threat to a sales leader. "We've decided" sounds efficient to the person who decided and like a closed door to the person who wasn't asked. "Unfortunately" signals that bad news is coming before you get to it, and the listener's defenses go up a sentence early.

If you can, ask a trusted colleague who knows the person to play them. Give the colleague the person's real wants and history, deliver your opening, and let them respond honestly. Five minutes of rehearsal can save months of damage.

Predicting What Happens After the Conversation

Most leaders think a hard conversation ends when the meeting ends. It doesn't. The most important reactions often happen afterward: in the hallway, in a text to a colleague, at home that night, or in a team meeting the next morning.

Hannah's worst outcome was not the tense meeting. It was the VP walking out and telling his team that finance was coming after their pay. That happened because he left the meeting with strong feelings and no plan.

When you run your preview, include one more question: **What will they do in the first hour after this conversation?** Then shape the ending of the conversation to influence that hour.

> *"I'd ask that we hold off telling the team until we've agreed on how to explain it together. Can we meet Thursday to work on that? I want you to be the one who tells them, with the full picture."*

Now the VP has a role, a timeline, and a reason to wait. You have not muzzled him. You have given him something more useful to do with his energy than vent.

When Your Prediction Is Wrong

You will not always predict correctly. People surprise you. Sometimes they take news far better than you expected, and sometimes far worse. When the reaction does not match your forecast, treat it as information, not failure.

If the reaction is worse than expected, it usually means there is a real want or an old wound you did not know about. Slow down and ask: "It sounds like this hits harder than I realized. Help me understand what's behind that."

If the reaction is suspiciously calm, remember Kevin from Chapter 5. Quiet acceptance from the person with the most to lose is often not acceptance. Check: "You've been pretty quiet. I'd really rather hear your concerns now than later."

Either way, update your mental model of the person. Every hard conversation teaches you something about how someone reacts, which makes your next prediction better. Over time, this is exactly how the pattern library from Part 4 gets built.

Back to Hannah

Let's replay the commission conversation.

Two days before, Hannah sends the VP a short message: "Want to walk you through the commission review on Thursday before anything is final. Some changes affect your top tier, and I want your input on how we roll it out."

On Thursday, she opens with the forty-five-second script. The VP's jaw tightens at "lower earnings for the top three." But the reason arrives before his counterargument does, and the question gives him somewhere to put his concern.

"My concern is Marcus," he says, naming his top rep. "I recruited him on a specific number."

Hannah has predicted this. "I figured that might be the first thing. Let's look at his numbers specifically." She shows that under the new plan, Marcus's earnings dip slightly in the first two quarters, then recover, because more of his deals are the kind that stick. "There's also room for a one-year transition bonus for anyone whose earnings drop more than ten percent. I'd like your view on whether that's enough."

The VP pushes back on the details, but the conversation is about details now, not about whether finance is the enemy. They agree to finalize the transition bonus together and to present the plan to his team side by side.

Same plan. Same numbers. A completely different outcome, because Hannah prepared for what the VP would hear, not just for what she would say.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Reactions follow predictable inputs:** real wants, what the news threatens, the person's history, and how and when they hear it.
- **Experts run mental simulations before acting.** Rehearse the conversation in your head from the other person's side.
- **Use the three-reaction preview:** best, likely, and worst case, then adjust your delivery to move the likely case toward the best.
- **Avoid the five triggers:** surprise, leading with loss, public exposure, a sense of unfairness, and old wounds.

- **Design the first ninety seconds word for word:** purpose, headline, context, invitation.
- **Say your opening out loud and answer it as them.**
- **Plan for the hour after the conversation,** not just the conversation itself.
- **When your prediction is wrong, treat it as information** and update your picture of the person.

Drill: What Will They Hear?

Before your next three difficult conversations, write your planned opening sentence at the top of a page. Below it, write what the other person will most likely *hear*, given their real wants and history. Not what you mean. What they will hear.

If the two lines are different, rewrite your opening until what they hear matches what you mean. Then say it out loud once, answer it as them, and adjust again.

After each conversation, note how the first ninety seconds actually went. Did they react the way you predicted? Within a few weeks, most leaders notice that their hard conversations start differently. There is less defending, fewer early fights, and more of the meeting spent on the actual problem.

In the next chapter, we will take prediction even further, from forecasting one reaction to mapping out an entire conversation with all its branches before it ever happens.

CHAPTER 7

What-If Mapping Before a Hard Conversation

Half One · Part 2: Ten Moves Ahead

When people say a great leader "thinks ten moves ahead," they usually imagine some kind of genius: a person who can see every possibility at once, like a chess grandmaster calculating deep into the game. That image is intimidating, and it is mostly wrong.

Leaders who seem to think ten moves ahead are rarely calculating ten moves. They have done something much simpler and much more learnable. Before the conversation, they asked a handful of what-if questions, wrote down the answers, and decided in advance what they would do at each fork in the road. When the conversation took a turn, they were not thinking faster than everyone else. They had already done the thinking.

This chapter teaches that process. It brings together the room map from Chapter 5 and the reaction preview from Chapter 6 into one tool: the what-if map. By the end, you will be able to walk into a hard conversation with a plan for its most likely branches, so that the moments that would normally freeze you instead feel familiar.

The Conversation That Went Off the Rails

Tomas ran the customer service division of an insurance company. A large corporate client had threatened to leave after a string of service failures, and Tomas had been asked to meet with the client's head of benefits, a sharp, impatient executive named Mrs. Okafor.

Tomas prepared an apology, an explanation of what went wrong, and a three-step improvement plan. It was a good plan. He walked in confident.

Five minutes in, Mrs. Okafor said, "I appreciate the plan. But I've heard plans before. What I need to know is what you'll give us if it fails again."

Tomas had not considered this. He had no authority to offer credits or penalties. He fumbled, said he would have to check, and promised to get back to her. Mrs. Okafor's face told him the meeting was over. Two weeks later, the client gave notice.

Looking back, the question was not surprising at all. Of course a frustrated client who had heard promises before would ask what happens if the promises break. If Tomas had asked himself even three what-if questions before that meeting, this would have been one of them. He could have gotten approval for a service guarantee in advance, or at least known exactly what he could and couldn't offer. Instead, the most predictable question in the conversation caught him flat.

Why Imagining Failure Works

One of the most useful findings for this kind of preparation comes from a 1989 study by Deborah Mitchell, Jay Russo, and Nancy Pennington. They found that when people imagined an event had *already happened*, rather than considering that it *might* happen, they came up with about 30 percent more reasons to explain it.

That finding later became the basis for a technique called the premortem, popularized by Gary Klein. In a premortem, before a project starts, the team imagines that it is a year later and the project has failed completely. Then everyone writes down why it failed. Because the failure is treated as a fact rather than a possibility, people stop defending the plan and start finding its weak spots.

One caution is worth noting, because it matters for how you use the idea. The original study measured how many explanations people generated, not whether those explanations were more accurate. The technique helps you see more possibilities. You still have to judge which ones are realistic. That is exactly how we will use it.

Applied to a conversation, the premortem sounds like this: **"It's an hour after the meeting, and it went badly. What happened?"** That single question would almost certainly have led Tomas to the answer: "She asked what we'd give her if the plan failed, and I had nothing."

The What-If Map in Five Steps

A what-if map is a short written plan for the main branches a conversation could take. It should fit on one page. Here is how to build it.

Step 1: Define your goal and your walk-away point

Write one sentence about what you want from the conversation, and one sentence about the point at which you would rather end the conversation than continue.

For Tomas: "Goal: keep the client by showing we've fixed the problem and earning one more chance. Walk-away point: I won't promise anything I don't have authority to deliver."

The walk-away point matters because it keeps you from making panicked commitments when the conversation turns. Remember the habit from Chapter 3: deciding too fast. A clear walk-away point protects you from it.

Step 2: Run the premortem

Imagine the conversation has already gone badly. Write down every reason why, as fast as you can, for three minutes. Don't judge or filter. Then do the same for one minute imagining it went surprisingly well. What happened that made it work?

For Tomas, the failure list might include: she didn't believe the plan; she asked for a guarantee; she brought her boss unexpectedly; she wanted to talk about price, not service; she already had a competitor lined up; I got defensive about one of the failures. The success list might include: I showed real data that things are already improving; I offered something concrete she didn't expect.

Step 3: Pick the three most likely turns

Look at your failure list and choose the three items most likely to actually happen, using what you know from your room map (Chapter 5) and reaction preview (Chapter 6). These are your branches. You cannot plan for everything, and you don't need to. Three good branches will cover most real conversations.

For Tomas:

1. She asks what happens if the plan fails.
2. She says she's heard it all before and doesn't believe it.
3. She reveals she's already talking to a competitor.

Step 4: Write a response for each branch

For each branch, write two things: **what you will say** (one or two sentences) and **what you will need** (information, authority, or materials you should have in hand before the meeting).

Branch 1: "What do we get if it fails again?"

- Say: "Fair question. If we miss the service targets in the next ninety days, we'll credit you a month of fees and you can leave without penalty."
- Need: approval from the vice president for a ninety-day guarantee and an early-exit clause.

Branch 2: "I've heard this before."

- Say: "You have, and we didn't deliver. So instead of promises, let me show you what's already changed in the last three weeks."
- Need: a one-page chart of response times since the fixes went in.

Branch 3: "We're already talking to someone else."

- Say: "I understand, and I'd do the same in your position. All I'm asking is that you compare them against where we are now, not where we were in the spring."
- Need: a short list of what switching would cost them in time and disruption, stated fairly and without exaggeration.

Notice what happened in Step 4. Branch 1 revealed something Tomas needed to *do* before the meeting, not just something to say. That is the hidden power of what-if mapping. It does not only prepare your words. It shows you what you need to go get.

Step 5: Choose your signal and your exit

Finally, decide how you will recognize that the conversation is going somewhere you didn't map, and what you will do then.

- **Signal:** a question you have no prepared answer for, a new person entering the conversation, or a sudden shift in tone.
- **Exit:** a sentence that buys time without losing ground. For example: "That's an important point, and I want to give you a real answer rather than a quick one. Can I come back to you by Friday?"

The exit is not a failure. It is part of the plan. Going in knowing you have a graceful way to pause takes enormous pressure off. You don't have to have an answer for everything. You just have to know what to do when you don't.

A What-If Map on One Page

Here is what Tomas's full map might look like, written out. In practice it fits on an index card.

- **Goal:** Keep the client; earn one more chance.
- **Walk-away:** No promises beyond my authority.
- **Branch 1:** "What if it fails?" → ninety-day guarantee, month credit, penalty-free exit. *(Get VP approval Tuesday.)*
- **Branch 2:** "Heard it before." → "You have. Let me show you what's changed." *(Bring the response-time chart.)*
- **Branch 3:** "Talking to a competitor." → "Compare them to where we are now." *(Bring the switching-cost summary.)*
- **Signal:** unprepared question, new attendee, tone shift.
- **Exit:** "I want to give you a real answer. Can I come back by Friday?"

It takes about thirty minutes to build, plus whatever time it takes to get the things on the "need" list. Compare that to the cost of losing a major client.

Mapping Two Moves Deep

For the most important conversations, you can take one branch a step further. After writing your response to a branch, ask: **"And then what will they say?"**

For Tomas's Branch 1: he offers the ninety-day guarantee. Mrs. Okafor might say, "Ninety days isn't long enough. Make it a year." Now Tomas can decide in advance whether he can extend it, what he would want in return (a contract renewal, perhaps), and where his limit is.

You do not need to go deeper than two moves on most branches. The first move prepares you for the most likely turns. The second move prepares you for the most likely pushback on your

response. Beyond that, the possibilities multiply so fast that planning stops being useful, and the skills from Part 4 (thinking quickly on your feet) take over.

This is the truth behind "ten moves ahead." It is not ten moves deep on one line. It is two moves deep on three or four lines, prepared in advance, plus a reliable exit. That adds up to roughly ten moves of preparation, and it covers far more real conversations than any genius calculation.

Mapping for the Other Side, Too

There is one more powerful use of the what-if map. Build a short version from the other person's point of view.

Ask: **What is their goal for this conversation? What is their walk-away point? What three things might they be preparing for?**

Mrs. Okafor's goal was probably not to leave. Switching insurance providers for a large company is expensive and disruptive. Her real goal was likely to be confident she would not be embarrassed again in front of her own leadership. Her walk-away point might have been "if they don't offer anything concrete." And she was probably preparing for exactly what Tomas brought: an apology and a plan, which she had already decided was not enough.

Seeing her side of the map would have told Tomas that the plan alone could never win. He needed something concrete enough to protect her in front of her own boss. That is the guarantee. Thinking through the other side's map is perspective-taking in its most practical form, the skill that, as Chapter 5 showed, research links to better negotiated outcomes.

Common Mistakes in What-If Mapping

Planning only for the good branches. It is natural to prepare for the conversation you want to have. The value of the map comes from the branches you would rather not think about.

Writing speeches instead of sentences. Each response should be one or two sentences. Long scripted answers fall apart the moment the conversation goes slightly differently. Short responses bend.

Mapping too many branches. If you try to prepare for fifteen possibilities, you will remember none of them. Three is enough. Four at most.

Forgetting the "need" column. Words without backing are just more promises. The most valuable output of a map is often an action you take before the meeting.

Treating the map as a script. The map is preparation, not a performance. In the conversation, listen first. Use the map only when a branch actually appears. If you deliver your prepared answers regardless of what the other person says, you will look rehearsed and miss what they're actually telling you.

Back to Tomas

Let's replay the meeting with a what-if map.

On Tuesday, after running his premortem, Tomas gets the vice president's approval for a ninety-day guarantee and a penalty-free exit. He prints the response-time chart and the switching summary.

In the meeting, he apologizes plainly and walks through the plan. Mrs. Okafor says, "I've heard plans before."

Branch 2. "You have, and we didn't deliver. So let me show you what's already changed." He slides the chart across. Response times have dropped every week for three weeks.

She studies it. "Better. But what do we get if it slips again?"

Branch 1. "If we miss the targets in the next ninety days, we'll credit you a month of fees and you can leave without penalty."

She pauses, and for the first time she looks interested. "Ninety days isn't long. Make it six months."

Tomas planned two moves deep on this branch. "I can do six months if you'll sign a one-year renewal with the guarantee built in."

She thinks it over. "Send me the terms."

The client stays. Tomas did not out-think Mrs. Okafor in real time. He simply arrived having already thought.

Chapter Takeaways

- **"Ten moves ahead" is preparation, not genius:** two moves deep on three or four likely branches, plus a reliable exit.
- **Imagining failure as already happened surfaces more possibilities.** Research found about 30 percent more explanations, though not necessarily more accurate ones.
- **Build a what-if map in five steps:** goal and walk-away, premortem, three likely branches, responses with "need" lists, and a signal and exit.
- **The "need" column is often the most valuable part.** It shows you what to get before the meeting.

- **For key branches, map one more move:** "And then what will they say?"
- **Map the other side's goals and walk-away point,** too.
- **Keep responses short and treat the map as preparation, not a script.**

Drill: The Index-Card Map

For the next month, before every conversation you're dreading, build a what-if map on a single index card or sticky note. Limit yourself to: goal, walk-away, three branches with one-line responses, and your exit line.

After each conversation, flip the card over and write which branches actually came up. Over a month, you will notice two things. First, at least one of your branches will come up in most conversations, which is proof the method works. Second, you will start recognizing your own blind spots: the kinds of turns you consistently fail to predict. Those blind spots are where your next round of practice should focus.

This chapter closes Part 2. You now have the tools to see conversations before they happen: map the room, predict reactions, and plan the branches. In Part 3, we put all of it to work in the specific situations that test leaders most, beginning with one of the hardest: being blamed for a result.

CHAPTER 8

When You're Blamed for a Result

Half One · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

The product launch had missed its first-quarter target by thirty percent. In the Monday executive meeting, the CEO put the sales chart on the screen, looked down the table, and said, "I want to understand why marketing didn't deliver the pipeline we were promised."

Renée, the vice president of marketing, felt every eye in the room land on her.

She knew the story was more complicated. Her team had delivered more leads than planned. Sales had been slow to follow up on many of them. The product team had pushed the launch back three weeks, which shrank the selling window. And the pricing, set by finance, had come in higher than the market expected. Marketing had made mistakes too: one campaign had targeted the wrong buyers for its first month. But marketing was not the whole story, or even most of it.

Renée had three options in that moment, and she could feel all three pulling at her.

She could defend: lay out the lead numbers and prove marketing had done its job. She could deflect: point out, politely but clearly, that sales, product, and finance all shared the blame. Or she could

absorb: accept the blame to make the moment end, and fix it later.

All three are common. All three, used alone, make things worse. This chapter is about a fourth option, and it opens Part 3 of the book, where we take everything from Parts 1 and 2 and apply it to the situations that test leaders most.

Why Blame Hits So Hard

Being blamed in front of peers is one of the most threatening experiences in professional life. It strikes at all five real wants from Chapter 5 at once: your security (could this cost me my job?), your status (do they think I'm incompetent?), fairness (this isn't all my fault), autonomy (I'm being judged on things I didn't control), and safety from blame (this is exactly what I was afraid of).

With all five threatened at once, the brain stops thinking strategically and starts protecting. That is why people say things in blame moments that they regret for years.

There is also a contagion problem. In a series of experiments, researchers Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens found that watching someone publicly blame others made people more likely to blame others for their own failures. In one experiment, people read a news story in which a governor either took responsibility for a failed election or blamed special-interest groups. Those who read the blaming version were more likely to blame others for their own shortcomings afterward.

Think about what that means for Renée's meeting. The CEO has just blamed marketing in public. Every executive at the table has been primed to protect themselves. If Renée responds by blaming

sales, the head of sales will very likely blame product, and product will blame finance. Within ten minutes, the meeting is a circle of pointing fingers, nobody is solving anything, and the CEO walks away believing the whole leadership team is defensive.

Renée's response will not only decide how she looks. It will set the tone for everyone who speaks after her.

The Three Common Responses and What They Cost

Defending

Defending means proving you were right. "Marketing delivered 112 percent of our lead target. Here's the chart."

The facts may be accurate. But in a blame moment, defending sounds like "not my problem." It also makes the CEO look wrong in front of the room, which raises the stakes for them. And as Chapter 3 warned, the more you explain, the more defensive you seem.

Deflecting

Deflecting means pointing elsewhere. "Our leads were strong. The issue is that sales didn't follow up, and the launch slipped three weeks."

This is often true, and it is almost always a mistake in public. It turns colleagues into opponents, starts the blame contagion, and makes you look like someone who throws people under the bus. Even if the CEO agrees with your analysis, they will remember who pointed fingers.

Absorbing

Absorbing means taking all the blame to end the discomfort. "You're right. We should have done better. I'll fix it."

It feels gracious, and sometimes it is the right call for a small issue. But on a big result, absorbing is dangerous. It puts the full failure on your record. It guarantees the real causes won't be fixed, because nobody looks at them. And it teaches everyone in the room that you are the safe place to put blame next time.

The Fourth Option: Precise Ownership

The response that works is what we'll call **precise ownership**. You own your part of the result clearly and specifically, without defending, deflecting, or absorbing more than is yours. Then you move the conversation from blame to the fix.

Precise ownership has four parts.

1. Acknowledge the result

Start by agreeing with the fact that cannot be argued: the result was bad. This shows you are not in denial, and it lowers the temperature instantly.

> *"The launch missed by thirty percent. That's a real miss, and I take it seriously."*

Notice that this does not say whose fault it was. It simply accepts reality.

2. Own your part specifically

Name exactly what your team got wrong. Be specific, because specific ownership is believable and vague ownership is not.

> *"Here's what marketing got wrong: our first campaign targeted the wrong buyer for four weeks. That cost us early momentum, and it's on us."*

This is the most powerful sentence in the whole response. It shows you are honest and self-aware. It also does something subtle: by owning a specific, limited piece, you implicitly mark the edges of your responsibility, without ever pointing at anyone else.

3. Widen the lens without pointing fingers

Now you can bring in the rest of the picture, but as a shared problem to solve, never as someone else's fault.

> *"I think the full picture has a few pieces, and it's worth us looking at all of them together: the targeting issue on our side, the three-week slip, how quickly leads were followed up, and how the price landed with buyers."*

No names. No departments. Just the factors, framed as "us" looking at "them" together. Anyone in the room can see that some of those factors belong to other teams, and nobody can accuse you of blaming.

4. Move to the fix

End with what you will do, and an invitation to solve the rest together.

> *"We've already fixed the targeting, and leads from the right buyers are up forty percent in the last month. I'd suggest the four of us who touch the funnel sit down this week and map where the rest of the gap is. I'm happy to set that up."*

You close by being the person who organizes the solution, which is exactly the kind of leader everyone wants in a crisis.

The whole response takes under a minute. Put together, it sounds like this:

> *"The launch missed by thirty percent. That's a real miss, and I take it seriously. Here's what marketing got wrong: our first campaign targeted the wrong buyer for four weeks, and that cost us early momentum. I think the full picture has a few other pieces worth looking at together: the three-week slip, how quickly leads were followed up, and how the price landed. We've already fixed the targeting, and qualified leads are up forty percent this month. I'd suggest those of us who touch the funnel sit down this week and map where the rest of the gap is. I'll set it up."*

Why Precise Ownership Works

It works because it satisfies everyone's real wants at once.

The CEO wants to know the problem is understood and being fixed. Precise ownership gives them both. Your peers want to avoid being blamed. Because you didn't name them, they don't need to defend themselves, and the contagion never starts. And you protect your own security and status: you look honest, specific, and solution-focused instead of defensive.

There is a deeper reason, too. Remember the twist in the Fast and Tiedens research: blame contagion disappeared when people first had a chance to affirm their own self-worth. People who felt secure did not need to protect themselves by blaming others. Precise ownership is what self-security looks like from the

outside. You are secure enough to admit a specific mistake, which signals to everyone in the room that this is a conversation about solving problems, not about protecting egos.

Renée can also prepare that inner security before high-stakes meetings. Before walking in, she can take thirty seconds to remind herself what she values in her work: building a team that tells the truth and fixes things. When the blame comes, it lands on someone who already knows who she is.

When the Blame Is Unfair

Sometimes the blame is genuinely wrong. Your team did nothing to cause the problem, or the person blaming you is using you as a scapegoat. Precise ownership still works, with an adjustment.

If you truly have no part to own, don't invent one. Instead, own something real: your commitment to the outcome.

> *"The miss matters, and I want to help solve it. From what I can see, marketing hit its targets, so I don't think the gap is on the lead side. But I'd like to help find where it is."*

Then follow the same structure: widen the lens and move to the fix. You have corrected the record without attacking anyone, and you have positioned yourself as part of the solution.

If the blame keeps coming, or you suspect someone is deliberately positioning you to take the fall, do not fight it out in the room. Have a private conversation with the person who matters most, often your boss, with facts in hand.

> *"I want to make sure we have an accurate picture of the launch. Can I walk you through the funnel numbers? I'm not trying to point at anyone. I want us to fix the right thing."*

Public calm plus private facts is almost always more effective than public fighting.

When You Are Blaming Someone Else

As a leader, you will often be on the other side of this conversation: the person who needs to hold someone accountable for a bad result. Everything in this chapter applies in reverse.

If you blame people publicly, you trigger the contagion. Your whole team will learn to protect themselves, and you will stop hearing about problems until it's too late. As Chapter 1 noted, research on employee silence found that most people have held back an important concern at work, mainly out of fear of being seen negatively. Public blame from leaders is the fastest way to grow that silence.

The researchers behind the blame contagion work suggested a practical approach for managers: acknowledge your own mistakes publicly, praise in public, and when blame genuinely needs to be assigned, do it in private.

When you do need to hold someone accountable, use the same structure you would want used on you. Start with the result, invite them to own their part specifically, widen the lens together, and move to the fix. You will get more honesty, and more problems will reach you while they are still small.

This also explains a counterintuitive move that strong leaders often make: taking public blame for their team's mistakes, then handling accountability privately. When the CEO asks why marketing missed, a strong leader does not throw a junior manager under the bus, even if the targeting mistake was that manager's call. They own it publicly as the team's mistake and handle it with the manager in private. That earns the team's loyalty and keeps the public conversation focused on the fix.

Back to Renée

Let's replay the Monday meeting.

The CEO: "I want to understand why marketing didn't deliver the pipeline we were promised."

Renée feels the surge. She takes one breath. She has prepared for this branch, because when she built her what-if map the night before, "CEO blames marketing for the miss" was the first item on her premortem.

"The launch missed by thirty percent. That's a real miss, and I take it seriously. Here's what marketing got wrong: our first campaign targeted the wrong buyer for four weeks, and that cost us early momentum. I think the full picture has a few other pieces worth looking at together: the three-week slip, how fast leads were followed up, and how the price landed. We've already fixed the targeting, and qualified leads are up forty percent this month. I'd suggest those of us who touch the funnel sit down this week and find the rest of the gap. I'll set it up."

There is a pause. Then the head of sales says something nobody expected: "Honestly, our follow-up times were too slow. We were short two reps in March." The head of product adds that the slip

compressed everything.

Nobody had to be accused. Renée's specific ownership gave everyone else permission to own their part too. The contagion ran in the other direction. Twenty minutes later, the team has a list of four fixes and owners for each one. The CEO ends the meeting by thanking Renée for organizing the review.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Blame threatens all five real wants at once,** which is why it triggers our worst reactions.
- **Blame is contagious.** Research shows that watching someone blame makes others more likely to blame. Your response sets the tone for the whole room.
- **Defending, deflecting, and absorbing all backfire** when used alone.
- **Use precise ownership:** acknowledge the result, own your part specifically, widen the lens without pointing fingers, and move to the fix.
- **Specific ownership is believable,** and it quietly marks the edges of your responsibility.
- **If the blame is unfair,** own your commitment to the outcome, correct the record calmly, and handle persistent issues privately with facts.
- **When you're the one assigning blame,** praise in public, hold people accountable in private, and own your team's mistakes publicly.

Drill: The Ownership Sentence

Think of three recent results at work that didn't go as planned. For each one, write a single precise ownership sentence: "Here's what my team got wrong: ___, and it cost us ___."

This is harder than it sounds. Most leaders' first drafts are either too vague ("we could have communicated better") or too broad ("we dropped the ball"). Keep rewriting until the sentence names one specific, real mistake and one specific, real cost.

Then write the rest of the response: the widened lens and the fix. Say the full response out loud and time it. It should take under a minute.

Blame moments are rarely announced in advance, but the same few results tend to draw blame again and again. If you have your ownership sentences ready for the likely ones, you will never have to improvise in the worst possible moment.

In the next chapter, we turn from receiving bad news to delivering it: how to tell your team, your boss, or your board something they do not want to hear.

CHAPTER 9

Delivering Bad News to Your Team or the Board

Half One · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

Gregory had run his family's metal-fabrication company for eleven years. It employed 120 people in a small town where most of them had grown up. On a Wednesday in October, his largest customer called to say they were moving their work overseas at the end of the year. That customer was about a third of the company's revenue.

Gregory had to tell two groups: his board, which met in nine days, and his employees, who would hear rumors within a week no matter what he did.

He did what many leaders do with bad news. He waited. He told himself he needed a plan first, that there was no point upsetting anyone until he knew what would happen. He spent the next week quietly calling other customers, running numbers, and sleeping badly.

By the time the board met, two directors had already heard about the loss from an industry contact. They were not upset that the customer left; customers leave. They were upset that they had heard it from someone else. The board meeting became a conversation about trust instead of a conversation about strategy.

The employees heard first from a truck driver who delivered to the customer. By the time Gregory called an all-hands meeting, the rumor had grown into "the plant is closing." Two of his best machinists had already taken interviews elsewhere. Gregory spent the meeting trying to talk people down from a disaster that wasn't real, while the real situation, serious but survivable, got lost.

Nothing about the bad news itself was Gregory's fault. Almost everything about how it landed was.

This chapter is about delivering news people don't want to hear: to your team, your boss, or your board. It applies the tools from Part 2 (real wants, reaction prediction, and what-if mapping) to one of the hardest jobs a leader has.

Bad News Ages Badly

The first and most important rule about bad news is simple: **it does not get better with time.** It gets worse.

Every day you wait, three things happen. First, the chance that people hear it from someone else goes up, and news heard secondhand is always more frightening and less accurate. Second, the gap between when you knew and when they found out grows, and that gap becomes its own story: "What else isn't she telling us?" Third, your own anxiety builds, which makes the conversation harder to have well.

Leaders wait for understandable reasons. They want a plan before they share the problem. They want to protect people from worry. They hope the problem will shrink or go away. Sometimes they simply dread the conversation.

But consider what waiting does to the people around you. Research on employee silence found that 85 percent of the people studied had at some point felt unable to raise an important concern with a supervisor. Leaders often complain about this: why don't people bring me bad news sooner? The answer is partly that people copy what they see. A leader who sits on bad news teaches everyone below them to do the same. A leader who delivers bad news promptly and calmly teaches the opposite.

You do not need a complete plan to share bad news. You need three things: the facts as you know them, what you are doing next, and when you will share more.

Know Who You're Telling and What They Need

Different audiences need different versions of the same news. Not different truths, but a different focus. Before you deliver bad news, use the room map from Chapter 5: what does each audience really want?

The board or your boss

The people above you want, above all, **to not be surprised** and **to trust your judgment**. Their real wants are usually status (they don't want to look uninformed to their own stakeholders), security (they want to know the organization will survive), and safety from blame (if this goes badly, they need to show they responded appropriately).

They need: the facts, the size of the impact in numbers, your honest assessment, and the options you are considering. They do not need reassurance. They need clarity.

Your team

The people below you want, above all, **to know what this means for them**. Their real wants are almost always security first: Is my job safe? Will my pay change? Will my hours change? Fairness and autonomy follow: Will this be handled fairly? Will I have any say?

They need: the facts in plain language, the most honest answer you can give about their security, what happens next, and when they will hear more. They do not need financial detail. They need to know where they stand.

Peers and partners

Colleagues in other departments, customers, and suppliers usually want to know how the news affects their own work and commitments. Keep it focused: what changes for them, what doesn't, and who to talk to.

Gregory's mistake was treating his news as one message. He needed at least two versions: a numbers-and-options version for the board, and a security-and-next-steps version for his team. And he needed to deliver them in the right order.

The Order Matters

When bad news affects several groups, the order you tell them shapes how it lands. A general rule:

1. **Tell the people who have to make decisions first.** For Gregory, that is the board, or at least the board chair. Nobody above you should hear it from someone else.
2. **Tell the leaders who will have to answer questions next.** Gregory's supervisors and managers should hear before the full staff, so they are not caught flat when their crews ask them

what's happening. Give them the key messages and what to say if they don't know an answer.

3. **Tell everyone affected as soon as possible after that.** Ideally the same day, before rumors outrun you.

The gap between steps should be hours or a day or two, not weeks. Gregory could have called his board chair the afternoon he got the news, held a call with the full board two days later, briefed his supervisors the next morning, and held an all-hands that afternoon. The whole sequence would have taken less than a week, and every group would have heard it from him.

The Bad News Structure

Chapter 6 introduced the idea that the first ninety seconds of a hard conversation shape most of what follows. For bad news, there is a specific structure that works with almost any audience. It has five parts.

1. The headline

Say the bad news first, plainly, in one or two sentences. Do not warm up. Do not lead with good news to soften the blow. People can tell when bad news is coming, and every sentence you spend before getting to it raises their anxiety and lowers their trust.

> *"I have hard news. Our largest customer is moving their work overseas at the end of the year. They're about a third of our revenue."*

This is different from Chapter 6's advice to lead with purpose in a negotiation-style conversation. When news is truly bad and affects people's security, the kindest and clearest thing you can

do is say it right away. A single sentence of purpose ("I want to tell you something important directly, before you hear it anywhere else") is fine. A long windup is not.

2. The cause

Explain briefly why it happened. One to three sentences. Be honest, including about anything you or the organization got wrong.

> *"This wasn't about our quality or our service. They told me that directly. It's about labor costs they can get overseas that we can't match."*

If there is something you should own, own it precisely, the way Chapter 8 describes. People will forgive a mistake far faster than they will forgive spin.

3. The impact

Say what this means, as specifically as you honestly can. For the board, that means numbers. For the team, that means what it means for them.

For the board:

> *"If we replace none of that work, we'd be operating at a loss by the second quarter next year. If we replace half of it, we break even."*

For the team:

> *"Here's what I can tell you today. Nobody is losing their job this year. We have the work through December. What happens after that depends on how much new work we can bring in, and I'll tell you honestly how that's going every two weeks."*

The hardest part of the impact is the line between honesty and promises. Never promise what you cannot guarantee. If Gregory says "nobody will lose their job" and then has to lay people off in March, he has destroyed his credibility for good. Say what you know, say what you don't, and say when you'll know more.

4. The plan

Share what you are doing about it, even if the plan is incomplete.

> *"I've already talked with four other customers about expanding work with us, and two are interested. We're also going after a type of work we've avoided before, smaller custom jobs, because we have the skills for it and the margins are good."*

A partial plan, shared honestly, is far more reassuring than no plan at all. It tells people that someone is steering.

5. The ask and the next update

End with what you need from them and when they will hear from you again.

For the board:

> *"I'd like your input on two things: whether we should invest in equipment for the custom work, and how much cash runway you're comfortable with while we rebuild. I'll send you a full update before our next meeting."*

For the team:

> *"What I need from you is to keep doing great work for the customers we have, because they're the ones who will refer us to new ones. If you hear something that worries you, come ask me directly. And I'll hold a short update every other Friday until we're through this."*

The next-update promise is critical. It tells people they don't need to fill the silence with rumors, because they know exactly when they'll hear more.

Handling the Questions

After bad news, people ask questions, and some of them will be hard. Use your what-if map from Chapter 7 to prepare for the three to five most likely ones.

For Gregory's team, the likely questions are easy to predict:

- "Are there going to be layoffs?"
- "Is the plant closing?"
- "Will our hours be cut?"
- "Why didn't you tell us sooner?"
- "Should I be looking for another job?"

Prepare a one- or two-sentence honest answer for each. For the hardest one ("Should I be looking for another job?"), the honest answer might be:

> *"That's your decision, and I'd never hold it against anyone. What I can tell you is that I'm doing everything I can to keep this company strong, I'll tell you the truth every two weeks, and if it ever looks like jobs are at risk, you'll hear it from me first, with as much notice as I can give."*

That answer respects their autonomy, tells the truth, and gives them a reason to trust you rather than a promise you can't keep.

When you don't know an answer, say so, and say when you will. Guessing at an answer during a bad-news meeting is one of the fastest ways to create a rumor you will spend weeks correcting.

What People Remember

Weeks after a bad-news meeting, most people will not remember your exact words. They will remember three things: whether you told them the truth, whether you seemed to care about them, and whether you seemed to have a handle on the situation.

This is where the work on psychological safety matters. Amy Edmondson's research on work teams found that teams where people felt safe to take interpersonal risks, like raising concerns or admitting mistakes, engaged in more learning, and that learning was linked to better performance. Bad-news moments are where that safety is either built or broken. A leader who delivers hard news honestly, invites questions, and doesn't punish people for being worried builds exactly the kind of team that will tell them the truth later, when it matters most.

A leader who hides bad news, spins it, or reacts angrily to questions teaches the opposite lesson. And the next time something goes wrong, they will be the last to know.

Delivering Bad News Upward

Sometimes the bad news is about your own area, and you have to tell your boss. This is harder in one specific way: you may be blamed for it.

Everything in this chapter still applies: headline first, cause, impact, plan, ask. Add the precise ownership from Chapter 8 if any part of the problem is yours. And add one more principle: **bring options, not just problems.**

> *"I need to flag a problem. The Henderson project is going to be six weeks late. The main cause is a supplier delay, and I should have pushed for a backup supplier in the spring. I see three options: pay a premium to expedite, reduce the first release, or accept the delay and tell the client now. My recommendation is the second one. What's your view?"*

That message takes thirty seconds. It tells your boss the news, owns your part, shows you have thought it through, and hands them a decision instead of a crisis. Bosses remember people who bring bad news this way, and they trust them with more.

Back to Gregory

Let's replay the week with everything in this chapter.

Wednesday afternoon, an hour after the customer's call, Gregory phones his board chair: "I want you to hear this from me before anyone else." He gives the headline, the cause, and a rough sense of the impact, and asks for a full board call on Friday.

Thursday night, he builds a what-if map for both meetings and writes down the five most likely questions from his team, with honest one-line answers.

Friday morning, the full board call. Headline, cause, impact with three revenue scenarios, the early plan, and two specific questions for the board. The directors push hard on cash runway, but nobody questions his candor. One director offers an introduction to a company that might need custom work.

Monday at 7 a.m., Gregory briefs his eight supervisors: the key messages, the likely questions, and what to say if they don't know an answer ("I don't know, but Gregory is holding an update this afternoon, and you can ask him directly").

Monday at 2 p.m., the all-hands. Gregory says the headline in his first two sentences. He explains the cause and what it means for jobs this year. He shares the plan, asks for their help, and commits to an update every other Friday. Then he takes questions for forty minutes and answers every one he can, honestly.

Afterward, one of his longest-serving machinists stops him in the parking lot. "It's bad news," he says. "But I'm glad we heard it from you." He doesn't take the interview he had been considering.

The customer still leaves. The company still has a hard year. But it goes through that year with its board's trust and its best people, which is what it needs to survive.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Bad news ages badly.** Every day you wait increases the chance people hear it from someone else and grows the trust gap.

- **You don't need a complete plan to share bad news.** You need the facts, your next step, and when you'll share more.
- **Different audiences need different focus:** the board needs clarity and options; your team needs to know where they stand.
- **Order matters:** decision-makers first, then the leaders who'll field questions, then everyone affected, all within days.
- **Use the five-part structure:** headline, cause, impact, plan, and ask plus next update.
- **Never promise what you can't guarantee.** Say what you know, what you don't, and when you'll know more.
- **Prepare for the five most likely questions** with honest, short answers.
- **When delivering bad news upward, bring options,** and own your part precisely.

Drill: The Five-Line Bad News Brief

Think of a piece of bad news you may have to deliver in the next few months: a missed target, a budget cut, a lost client, a delayed project. Write a five-line brief:

1. **Headline:** the news in one sentence.
2. **Cause:** why it happened, including anything you own.
3. **Impact:** what it means, in numbers or in personal terms.
4. **Plan:** what you're doing about it.
5. **Ask and next update:** what you need and when they'll hear more.

Then write two versions: one for the people above you and one for the people below you. Read both out loud. If your headline doesn't come in the first two sentences, rewrite it until it does.

Most leaders who do this drill realize something uncomfortable: the hardest part is not finding the words. It's deciding to say them early. Writing the brief now, before you need it, makes it much easier to deliver it on the day the news arrives.

In the next chapter, we take on one of the most stressful conversations a leader faces: when a top performer tells you they're thinking of leaving.

CHAPTER 10

When a Top Performer Threatens to Leave

Half One · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

Natalie was director of engineering at a fast-growing payments company. Late on a Thursday, her strongest senior engineer, Omar, asked for fifteen minutes. He closed the door, sat down, and said, "I want to be upfront with you. I've gotten an offer from another company. It's a lot more money. I haven't decided anything yet, but I wanted you to know."

Natalie's stomach dropped. Omar had built half of their core system. Two major projects depended on him. Three junior engineers learned from him every day. Losing him would set the team back months.

She reacted the way many leaders do. "What's the number? I'll talk to HR tomorrow. We can't lose you." Omar told her. She said she would do everything she could to match it.

The next two weeks went badly. HR could not approve a full match without breaking the company's pay bands. Natalie came back with a partial counteroffer. Omar felt disappointed, because she had seemed to promise more. Meanwhile, two other senior engineers heard that Omar had "gotten a raise by threatening to quit," and one of them started interviewing. In the end, Omar left

anyway. In his exit interview, he said something that stuck with Natalie for years: "It was never really about the money. I just didn't see where I was going here."

Natalie had answered the wrong question. Omar asked, in effect, "Do you see a future for me here?" She heard, "How much will you pay me to stay?"

This chapter is about one of the most stressful conversations a leader can have, and one that the Bridge chapter later in the book will replay from the employee's side of the table.

The Stakes Are Real

It is worth being clear about how much a moment like this matters.

Gallup estimates that replacing an employee costs between half and two times that person's annual salary, and describes that as a conservative estimate. For a senior specialist like Omar, the true cost is usually at the high end or beyond: recruiting, the months the role sits empty, the time it takes a replacement to get up to speed, the projects that slip, and the knowledge that walks out the door.

But the most useful findings in that same research are about prevention. Among people who left their jobs voluntarily, 52 percent said their manager or organization could have done something to keep them. And 51 percent said that in the three months before they left, no manager or leader had talked with them about their job satisfaction or their future at the company.

Read those two numbers together. Most departures that leaders call "unavoidable" were, according to the people who left, avoidable. And in most of them, nobody asked the person about

their future until it was too late. When someone like Omar walks into your office with an offer, you are often having the conversation that should have happened months earlier.

First, Don't React. Understand.

The single biggest mistake leaders make in this moment is responding to the offer instead of the person. The offer is the stated want. As Chapter 5 explained, stated wants are often the safe version of the real one.

When someone tells you they have an offer, they could be in one of four very different situations:

1. **They have decided to leave** and are telling you as a courtesy.
2. **They are undecided** and genuinely torn.
3. **They want something specific** (more money, a title, different work, a new manager) and the offer is their way of getting your attention.
4. **They are testing whether they matter** to you and the company.

Each situation calls for a different response. If you react with a number before you know which one you are in, you will often be wrong. Natalie assumed Omar was in situation 3, wanting money. He was really in situation 2, undecided, and the deciding factor was his future, not his pay.

So your first job is not to solve. It is to understand. Your first words should buy time and open the door.

> *"Thank you for telling me directly. I really appreciate that. You matter a lot to this team, and I want to understand where you are. Can you tell me what got you looking?"*

This does four things at once. It thanks him, which rewards honesty. It tells him he matters, which addresses the possible test in situation 4. It doesn't commit to anything. And it asks the question that actually matters.

The Stay Conversation

Once you have opened the door, the goal is to have what is sometimes called a stay conversation: an honest discussion of what would make this person want to stay, separate from any specific offer. Use the three-question response from Chapter 3, adapted for this moment.

Question 1: "What got you looking?"

This surfaces the real driver. Often, people did not go looking for money. They went looking because something felt stuck: no growth, a frustrating manager, work they found boring, a lack of recognition, or a life change. The offer came later.

If Omar says, "A recruiter reached out and I figured I'd see," that is different from, "I've felt stuck for a year." The first suggests the offer is the main attraction. The second suggests the problem is here, and a matching salary will not fix it.

Question 2: "What would make staying the obvious choice?"

This turns a threat into a solvable problem. Listen carefully to what comes first and what comes with the most energy. People tend to mention their real priority early, and they talk about it differently: faster, with more detail, and with more feeling.

Omar might say, "Honestly, the money matters. But what I really want is to lead the architecture work for the new platform. I've been asking for that for a year."

Now Natalie knows where to focus. She might not be able to match the salary. She might well be able to give him the architecture role.

Question 3: "Where do you see yourself in two years?"

This connects the conversation to the future, which is exactly the conversation the Gallup research says most departing employees never had. It also helps you judge whether their goals fit what your organization can realistically offer. If Omar wants to become a manager in two years and Natalie has no management roles opening, she needs to know that now.

Is the Offer Real, and Does It Matter?

Leaders often get stuck on whether the offer is real or a bluff. Sometimes it is a bluff. More often it is real but less attractive than it sounds, or real but not the main reason the person is unhappy.

Here is the uncomfortable truth: **it matters less than you think.** Whether the offer is real or not, the person has just told you they are willing to leave. That information is real. Treat the underlying

dissatisfaction as real, because it almost always is.

You can reasonably ask about the offer, as long as you ask with curiosity rather than suspicion:

> *"What's attractive about the role, beyond the pay?"*

This tells you what they value, which you can use to shape your response, and it gives a bluffer room to quietly retreat without losing face.

Don't Anchor Yourself

When money does come up, be careful about what Chapter 4 called anchoring. In negotiation research by Adam Galinsky and Thomas Mussweiler, first offers pulled final outcomes toward them. In a retention conversation, the competing offer becomes the anchor, and every counteroffer gets judged against it.

If you immediately try to match the number, you have accepted that number as the measure of the person's value. Even if you match it, you have taught them that the way to get paid is to collect outside offers.

The same research also found the antidote: the pull of a first offer weakened when negotiators focused on their own alternatives and the other side's real limits. In plain terms, bring the conversation back to the full picture.

> *"I want to look at the whole picture with you, not just the base salary: the role, the work you'd be doing, your growth path, the equity, and the pay. Let me see what I can put together, and I'll come back to you by Tuesday."*

This moves the anchor from one number to a complete package, buys you time to work with HR, and commits you to a specific date.

Never Promise What You Can't Deliver

Natalie's most expensive mistake was saying "I'll match it" before she knew whether she could. That promise set an expectation, and when she fell short, the shortfall felt like a broken promise rather than a generous effort.

The rule from Chapter 9 applies here too: say what you know, say what you don't, and say when you'll know more.

> *"I can't promise a specific number today, because I need to work within our pay structure and talk with HR. What I can promise is that I'll fight for you, and I'll give you a real answer by Tuesday."*

If you can do more than you expected, the person is pleasantly surprised. If you can't, you have not broken a promise.

The Ripple Effect

Every retention decision is watched. When one person gets a raise after bringing in an outside offer, other people notice, and some of them draw the conclusion that the way to get ahead is to threaten to leave. That is what happened on Natalie's team.

This does not mean you should never make a counteroffer. Sometimes it is exactly the right call. But think about the message it sends, and ask yourself two questions:

1. **Should we have given this person this already?** If yes, the counteroffer is really a correction, and you should ask who else on the team might be underpaid or under-recognized in the same way. Fix it for them before they have to threaten to leave.
2. **Would I give this to them if they hadn't asked?** If no, be careful. You may be rewarding the threat rather than the person.

The best retention strategy is not a great counteroffer. It is making counteroffers rarely necessary, by having stay conversations long before anyone has an offer in hand.

When They Decide to Leave

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the person decides to go. How you handle that moment matters almost as much as how you tried to keep them.

Respect the decision. Don't guilt them (Chapter 1 explained why guilt is a poor tool), don't argue, and don't treat them like a traitor for the rest of their notice period.

Plan the handoff together. Ask them to help design a transition plan. This respects their autonomy and status, and it gets you a better handoff than demanding one.

Learn from it. Ask honestly what you could have done differently, and listen without defending yourself. Their answer is some of the most useful information you will ever get about your leadership.

Leave the door open. People who leave on good terms often come back, refer others, or become customers and partners. A graceful exit is an investment.

"I'm sorry to lose you, and I understand. I'd love your help making the transition smooth for the team. And for what it's worth, if things change, the door is open."

Preventing the Conversation

The most effective way to handle a top performer threatening to leave is to have the stay conversation before the threat. Once a quarter, sit down with each of your strongest people and ask the same three questions:

- "What's been frustrating you lately?"
- "What would make your work here more rewarding?"
- "Where do you want to be in two years, and how can I help?"

It takes thirty minutes per person, four times a year. Compare that to the cost of replacing someone at half to two times their salary, and to the finding that most people who quit say nobody asked about their future. These conversations are among the highest-return hours a leader can spend.

Back to Natalie

Let's replay that Thursday.

Omar: "I've gotten an offer from another company. It's a lot more money. I haven't decided anything yet."

Natalie feels the jolt and takes a breath. "Thank you for telling me directly. You matter a lot to this team, and I want to understand where you are. What got you looking?"

Omar is quiet for a second. "Honestly, a recruiter called. But I took the call because I've felt stuck. I've asked to lead the platform architecture twice, and it went to someone else both times."

"What would make staying the obvious choice?"

"Leading that work. And the money matters, I won't pretend it doesn't. But the architecture role is the big thing."

"And where do you want to be in two years?"

"Principal engineer. Setting technical direction."

Now Natalie knows exactly what conversation she is in. "I can't promise a number today, because I need to work within our structure. But I hear that the real issue is the architecture work and a path to principal, and I should have acted on that sooner. Give me until Tuesday. I'll come back with a full picture: the role, the growth path, and the best compensation I can get approved."

On Tuesday, Natalie offers Omar the lead architect role on the new platform, a written path to principal engineer within eighteen months, and a raise that closes about two-thirds of the pay gap. Omar stays. And because Natalie realized the problem had been brewing for a year, she schedules stay conversations with her other four senior engineers that month. One of them, it turns out, had been feeling exactly the same way.

Chapter Takeaways

- **The stakes are high:** Gallup estimates replacing an employee costs half to two times their salary, conservatively.
- **Most departures are preventable.** 52 percent of people who quit said something could have kept them, and 51 percent said

no leader had talked with them about their future in their final three months.

- **Don't react to the offer. Understand the person.** The offer is the stated want; the real want is often growth, recognition, or a future.
- **Use the stay conversation:** what got you looking, what would make staying obvious, and where do you see yourself in two years.
- **Don't anchor on their number.** Bring the conversation to the full picture.
- **Never promise what you can't deliver.** Commit to a date instead.
- **Consider the ripple effect** of every counteroffer.
- **If they leave, leave well.** Respect, a joint handoff, honest learning, and an open door.
- **Have stay conversations quarterly,** long before anyone has an offer.

Drill: The Quarterly Stay Conversation

List your three most important people: the ones whose departure would hurt most. For each, answer honestly:

1. When did I last ask them about their future here?
2. What do I think frustrates them most right now?
3. What do I think they want in two years?

If you can't answer all three with confidence, schedule a thirty-minute conversation with that person in the next two weeks. Ask the three stay questions, listen more than you talk, and write down what you hear. Then compare it to what you guessed.

Most leaders who do this drill find at least one surprise, and at least one person who was closer to leaving than they realized. Better to learn that over coffee than over a resignation letter.

In the next chapter, the pressure comes from the other direction: what to do when the people above you change the goal, and you have to keep your team with you.

CHAPTER 11

When the Goal Changes on You from Above

Half One · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

In January, the CEO told Marisol that her customer success team had one job for the year: stop customers from leaving. Retention was the number. Marisol spent the first quarter rebuilding her team around it. She reorganized accounts, created an early-warning system for unhappy customers, and promised her people that this year, finally, they would be measured on keeping customers happy instead of on selling to them.

In June, at a leadership offsite, the CEO stood up and announced a new priority. Revenue growth was behind plan. Starting in July, customer success would carry an upsell target: every account manager would be expected to sell add-ons to existing customers.

Marisol felt the room tilt. Her team had been told for six months that they were not salespeople. Many of them had joined specifically because they didn't want to sell. And the new target directly conflicted with the old one: pushing add-ons on customers who were already shaky was a good way to lose them.

She raised her hand and said what she was thinking. "With respect, this contradicts everything we've told the team this year. If we push upsells on at-risk accounts, retention will drop." The

CEO's face tightened. "I understand it's a change. But the board needs revenue, and I need everyone on board." The room went quiet. Marisol had been right, and she had lost.

Worse came the following Monday. She told her team about the change by saying, "I think this is a mistake, but leadership has decided." Within a week, two of her best account managers were looking for other jobs, and the rest were doing the bare minimum on upsells. When the CEO asked why customer success was missing its new target, Marisol was in an impossible position: she had undermined the goal to her team and been overruled by her boss.

Goals change. Markets shift, boards apply pressure, strategies get rethought. Every leader in the middle of an organization will face this moment many times. The question is not whether the goal will change on you. It is how you handle the two conversations that follow: the one upward with the person who changed it, and the one downward with the people who have to live with it.

Why This Is So Hard

A goal change from above hits a leader from both sides at once.

From above, you are expected to support the decision. Pushing back too hard can make you look disloyal or unable to adapt. From below, your team looks to you to explain, protect, and make sense of the change, and they often trusted promises you made under the old goal.

You are also dealing with your own reaction. Marisol had invested six months in the old plan. The change felt like a judgment on her work, and it made her look unreliable to her team. Those feelings

are natural, but if they drive the conversation, they will make it worse.

The Upward Conversation: Understand Before You Argue

Marisol's mistake in the offsite was not disagreeing. Disagreement can be valuable, and a CEO who hears no pushback will make worse decisions. Her mistake was arguing with the decision before she understood it, in public, in a way that made the CEO defend it in front of everyone.

Remember Chapter 2: public pressure makes people dig in. And Chapter 5: the stated want is rarely the whole story. The CEO said "the board needs revenue." What did the CEO really want? Probably security (hitting numbers to keep the board's confidence), status (not looking like they had lost control of growth), and safety from blame (being able to show they acted).

When the goal changes, your first step is not to agree or disagree. It is to understand. And that conversation should usually happen in private, not in the room where the change is announced.

In the moment, a short response holds your place without committing to anything:

> *"Understood. I'd like to grab time with you this week to work through how we make this work for my team."*

That sentence does several things. It signals support for making it work, which protects your standing. It doesn't promise success. And it moves the real conversation to a private setting where the CEO doesn't have to defend the decision in front of an audience.

Five Questions to Ask Upward

In the private conversation, ask questions before you raise concerns. These five cover most goal changes.

1. "What changed?"

Understanding why the goal shifted helps you see the real problem the new goal is meant to solve. The CEO might say, "New-customer sales are thirty percent behind, and the board wants to see that we can grow revenue from the base we have." Now Marisol knows the real target is revenue from existing customers, and upselling is only one way to get it.

2. "What does success look like by the end of the year?"

Pin down the new measure precisely. A vague goal ("drive revenue") leaves you exposed to being judged on whatever someone decides later. A precise goal ("two million dollars in expansion revenue by December") gives you something to plan against.

3. "What should we stop doing?"

This is the most important question, and leaders forget to ask it. New goals are almost always added on top of old ones. If Marisol's team now has to hit both retention and upsell targets with the same people and hours, something will give. Ask directly which existing priorities can drop or shrink.

> *"If we take on the upsell target, something has to give. Should we lower the retention target, pause the early-warning project, or add people?"*

This is not a complaint. It is a request for a real decision, and it puts the trade-off where it belongs: with the person who has the authority to make it.

4. "What are you most worried about?"

This brings out the CEO's real wants. Maybe they are worried about the board meeting in September. Maybe they are worried the sales team can't carry growth alone. Knowing the worry helps you offer solutions that address it.

5. "How much room do I have in how we get there?"

The goal may be fixed while the method is flexible. Marisol might not be able to change the revenue target, but she might be able to choose how her team pursues it.

Raising Concerns So They're Heard

After you understand the change, you can raise concerns. The difference between a concern that gets heard and one that gets dismissed is mostly framing.

Research on employee silence found that the most common reason people hold back concerns from those above them is fear of being viewed negatively. Leaders in the middle feel this too. But the solution is not silence. It is to raise concerns in a way that clearly serves the boss's goal, not your own comfort.

Use perspective-taking, the skill from Chapter 5 that research links to better outcomes in negotiations: frame the concern in terms of what the other person wants.

Compare two versions.

Version 1 (Marisol's offsite version): "This contradicts everything we've told the team. Retention will drop."

Version 2:

> *"I want to hit the revenue number. My concern is that if we push add-ons on at-risk accounts, we'll lose some of them, and lost revenue from churn could cancel out the upsell gains. Can we aim the upsell effort at our healthiest accounts and keep the at-risk ones focused on retention?"*

Version 2 starts with the CEO's goal, names a specific risk to that goal, and offers a solution. It is the same concern, framed as help instead of resistance. Most bosses will take that seriously.

Bring numbers if you can. "Retention will drop" is an opinion. "Our at-risk segment is about four hundred thousand dollars in annual revenue, and historically about a third of it churns when we push sales conversations" is a business case.

Know When to Commit

Sometimes you raise your concerns well, and the answer is still "we're doing it this way." At that point, you have a choice.

If the decision is unethical, illegal, or dangerous, you have a responsibility to escalate or refuse. Those situations are rare, and they deserve more serious thought than this chapter can give.

For most goal changes, though, the right move once you have been heard is to **commit fully**. Some organizations call this "disagree and commit": you make your case, the decision-maker decides, and then you put your full effort behind the decision as if it were your own.

Committing does not mean pretending you agreed all along. It means you stop fighting the decision and start making it work. Half-hearted execution is the worst of both worlds: the new goal fails, and you get blamed for it.

> *"I've said my piece, and I understand the decision. I'm in. Here's how I plan to make it work."*

The Downward Conversation: Translating the Change

Now comes the second conversation, the one Marisol got most wrong. How do you tell your team about a goal change you didn't choose, and may not agree with?

There are three common mistakes.

Blaming leadership. "I think this is a mistake, but leadership decided." This feels honest, and it might even make your team like you more in the moment. But it tells them the goal is illegitimate, which gives them permission not to try. It also tells them you have no influence, which undermines your authority.

Pretending to love it. "This is a great opportunity!" when everyone can see it isn't how you feel. People can tell when leaders are performing enthusiasm, and it costs trust.

Hiding the change. Delaying, softening, or burying the new goal so people don't get upset. As Chapter 9 explained, bad news ages badly. Your team will find out, and they will wonder why you didn't tell them straight.

The approach that works sits in the middle: honest, owned, and focused on the path forward.

Step 1: Say what changed and why

Give the real reason, plainly. Remember the copy-machine study from Chapter 1: people respond to reasons. But for a big ask like this one, only a real reason will hold. Langer's research found that empty reasons stopped working when the request got bigger.

> *"Here's what's changed. New-customer sales are behind plan, and the company needs more revenue from the customers we already have. Starting in July, our team will carry an expansion target alongside retention."*

Step 2: Acknowledge what it costs

Name the difficulty honestly. Your team knows this is a change. Pretending otherwise insults them.

> *"I know this is different from what I told you in January. Many of you joined this team because you wanted to help customers, not sell to them. That matters to me, and I'm not going to pretend this isn't a shift."*

Step 3: Own the decision as yours to execute

You don't have to claim you made the decision. But you do have to own carrying it out.

> *"I raised concerns, and some of them shaped how we're doing this. The decision is made, and I'm committed to making it work. I'm asking you to commit with me."*

Notice the honesty: Marisol can say she raised concerns, without trashing the decision. That shows the team she represents them upward, and that she is still on board.

Step 4: Show what you protected

If you won anything in the upward conversation, tell them. This is where your private advocacy pays off.

> *"Here's what I got for us: we'll only pursue expansion with our healthy accounts. At-risk customers stay focused on retention. And the retention target is coming down slightly to make room."*

Step 5: Make the path concrete

People cope with change far better when they can see the first steps. Give them training, tools, and a clear picture of what the next month looks like.

> *"Over the next two weeks, we'll do training on how to have expansion conversations that feel like helping, not selling. I'll do the first few calls alongside each of you."*

Step 6: Invite concerns, privately and publicly

> *"I know you'll have questions and some of you will have worries. Bring them to me, in this meeting or one-on-one. I'd rather hear them now than find out later."*

Protecting Your Credibility for Next Time

One quiet cost of a goal change is to your credibility. Marisol told her team in January that they would never have to sell. In June, they did. Next time she promises something, they will remember.

Two habits help.

First, **be careful about promising stability you don't control.** Instead of "you'll never have to sell," Marisol could have said, "This year, our focus is retention." That is honest about the present without guaranteeing the future.

Second, **when a change breaks something you said, own it directly.** "I told you in January that this year was all about retention. That's changed, and I want to own that I said it." Leaders who acknowledge broken expectations keep far more trust than leaders who pretend they never set them.

Back to Marisol

Let's replay June.

At the offsite, the CEO announces the upsell target. Marisol feels the jolt and holds it. "Understood. I'd like to grab time with you this week to work through how we make this work for my team."

Two days later, in the CEO's office, she asks the five questions. She learns the real goal is two million dollars in expansion revenue by year-end, that the CEO is worried about the September board meeting, and that the method is open. She asks what should give. The CEO hadn't thought about it.

Marisol makes her case with numbers: at-risk accounts represent about four hundred thousand in revenue, and pushing sales on them historically drives churn. She proposes targeting only healthy accounts and slightly lowering the retention target. The CEO agrees to both.

On Monday, she meets with her team. She explains the change and why, acknowledges that it breaks what she told them in January and owns that, explains that she raised concerns and

what she secured, lays out the training plan, and invites questions.

One account manager says, "I'm not going to lie, I don't love this." Marisol nods. "That's fair. I'd rather you tell me than pretend. Let's do your first few calls together and see how it feels."

By September, the team is at sixty percent of its expansion target, retention has held, and nobody has quit. When the CEO presents to the board, he mentions the customer success team as an example of how the company adapted.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Goal changes hit leaders from both directions:** pressure to support from above, and a team that trusted your earlier promises below.
- **Don't argue in public.** Hold your place with a short response and move the real conversation to a private setting.
- **Ask five questions upward:** what changed, what success looks like, what should we stop, what are you most worried about, and how much room do I have.
- **"What should we stop?" is the most important question.** New goals are almost always piled on old ones.
- **Frame concerns around your boss's goal,** with a specific risk, numbers if possible, and a solution.
- **Once you've been heard, commit fully.** Half-hearted execution is the worst outcome.
- **Tell your team in six steps:** what changed and why, what it costs, that you own executing it, what you protected, the concrete path, and an open invitation for concerns.

- **Protect your credibility** by not promising stability you don't control, and owning it when change breaks something you said.

Drill: The Change Rehearsal

Think about the goal at work most likely to change on you in the next six months. Then prepare both conversations in advance.

Upward: Write your one-sentence response for the moment the change is announced, and your answers to "What should we stop?" if the change happens. Know your numbers.

Downward: Write the six-step message to your team: what changed and why, what it costs, your ownership, what you protected (imagine what you'd fight for), the first concrete steps, and your invitation for concerns.

It may feel strange to prepare for a change that hasn't happened. But goal changes almost always arrive suddenly, often in a public setting, and leaders who have already thought them through respond in a way that protects both their relationship with their boss and their trust with their team. Those who haven't usually end up where Marisol did: right, and losing on both fronts.

In the next chapter, the challenge comes from a different direction: someone on your team who tests your authority, sometimes openly and sometimes in ways that are harder to spot.

CHAPTER 12

When Someone Tests Your Authority

Half One · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

Derek was thirty-one when he was promoted to operations manager at a regional distribution center. His predecessor had run the building for fourteen years. Derek had been there four.

In his first team meeting, he announced a new process for staging outbound orders. Before he finished, Sal, a shift lead who had worked in the building for twenty-two years, leaned back in his chair. "We tried that in 2015," he said, loud enough for everyone. "Didn't work then either." A few people laughed.

Derek felt his face get hot. He said, "Well, we're going to try it again," in a voice that came out sharper than he meant. Sal shrugged and said, "You're the boss." The way he said it made clear he didn't think so.

Over the next month, the tests kept coming. Sal followed the new process only when Derek was on the floor. He went straight to the general manager, Derek's boss, with a scheduling question instead of asking Derek. In meetings, he would say, "Whatever you want," with a little smile, and the room would go quiet. Derek oscillated between ignoring it and snapping, and neither worked. By the end of the month, other shift leads had started treating Derek's instructions as suggestions.

Every leader gets tested. New leaders get tested the most, but experienced leaders get tested too: after a reorganization, when they inherit a team, when they make an unpopular decision, or when someone simply wants to see how far they can go. This chapter is about how to handle those tests without becoming either a pushover or a tyrant.

Testing Is Normal

The first thing to understand is that testing is not always hostile. It is often a natural response to a change in power. When someone new takes charge, people want to know: Is this person competent? Will they listen? Will they follow through? What happens if I push?

Think about the real wants from Chapter 5. Sal's real wants were probably status (he had been the most experienced person in the building for years, and now someone younger was in charge), security (would the new manager push him out?), and autonomy (he was used to running his shift his way). His sarcasm was a stated position. Underneath it was a question: "Do I still matter here?"

That doesn't excuse the behavior. But understanding it changes how you respond. If you treat every test as an attack, you will fight battles you don't need to fight. If you treat every test as harmless, you will lose authority you need. The skill is telling the difference and responding in proportion.

Dissent Is Not Defiance

Before going further, an important distinction. Not every challenge to your decisions is a test of your authority. Sometimes people push back because they think you are wrong, and they might be right.

Amy Edmondson's research on work teams found that teams where people felt safe to raise concerns and take interpersonal risks engaged in more learning, and that learning was linked to better performance. A leader who treats every disagreement as insubordination will get a team that stops telling them the truth. Remember from Chapter 1: in one study, 85 percent of employees had at some point felt unable to raise an important issue with a supervisor. You do not want to add to that number.

So ask yourself: is this person disagreeing with the **decision**, or challenging my **right to make it**?

- **Dissent** sounds like: "I think this process will slow us down at the end of the shift. Can I show you why?" It focuses on the work, offers information, and accepts that you will decide.
- **Defiance** sounds like: "Didn't work then either," said for an audience, followed by quiet non-compliance. It focuses on undermining you, offers no alternative, and does not accept your decision.

Welcome dissent. Address defiance. And notice that Sal's first comment contained both: real information (they tried it in 2015) wrapped in defiance (said publicly, with contempt). A skilled response separates the two.

The Six Common Tests

Authority tests tend to take a handful of recognizable forms.

1. The public challenge. A sarcastic remark, an eye roll, or an objection made for an audience. The goal is to see how you react under pressure, and to show others that you can be challenged.

2. The quiet non-compliance. Following instructions only when you're watching, or doing the minimum. This is harder to see and often more damaging, because it spreads quietly.

3. Going around you. Taking questions or complaints to your boss, or to your predecessor, instead of to you. It signals that you are not the real authority.

4. The expert block. "You don't understand how this really works." Using experience or technical knowledge to suggest you are not qualified to decide.

5. The joke. Humor at your expense that is hard to object to without looking thin-skinned. "Here comes the boss, everybody look busy."

6. The slow yes. Agreeing in the meeting, then delaying, forgetting, or finding reasons it couldn't be done.

You don't need a different strategy for each one. You need one approach, applied with judgment.

Rule 1: Don't Win the Public Moment. Don't Lose It Either.

When someone tests you in public, there is a strong pull to win right there: put them in their place, show everyone who's in charge. Derek's sharp "Well, we're going to try it again" was that

pull.

It usually backfires. Remember the research on blame from Chapter 8: when people watch someone publicly attack or blame, they become more defensive themselves. A leader who slaps down a challenger in public makes everyone in the room more cautious and more likely to resent them. And it turns the challenger into a sympathetic figure.

But the opposite, ignoring it or laughing along, tells the room that you can be pushed. The goal is a response that is calm, short, and firm, and that moves the real conversation to private.

For a public challenge that contains real information:

> *"That's useful, Sal. I want to hear what went wrong in 2015, because I don't want to repeat it. Let's talk after the meeting. For now, here's the plan for this week."*

This takes the information seriously, shows you are not threatened, signals that the decision still stands, and schedules the private conversation. It also gives Sal something he wants (to be treated as the expert) without giving him what he was testing for (to see you rattled).

For a pure jab with no content:

> *(A brief smile, then continue.)* *"Moving on."*

Not every jab deserves a response. A calm "moving on" shows that the jab didn't land, which removes its power.

If the public challenges repeat, then the private conversation becomes necessary, and more direct.

Rule 2: Have the Private Conversation Early

Most authority problems get worse because the leader waits too long to address them directly. Derek let a month of testing go by. By then, the pattern had spread to other shift leads.

The private conversation should happen within a day or two of the first clear test. Use what you have learned in earlier chapters: map Sal's real wants, predict his likely reaction, and design the first ninety seconds.

The conversation has four parts.

1. Start with respect and curiosity

> *"Thanks for making time. You've been here longer than almost anyone, and I want to understand your view of how things are going since I took over."*

This addresses status and security up front. It is not flattery; it is accurate. And it invites Sal to talk.

2. Name the behavior, specifically and calmly

After listening, describe what you've seen, without labeling his character.

> *"I want to be direct about something. In Monday's meeting, the comment about 2015 came across as undermining the plan in front of the team. And I've noticed the new staging process only happens when I'm on the floor. I'd rather talk about that openly than let it build."*

Notice that this describes actions ("the comment," "the process only happens when I'm on the floor"), not motives ("you're trying to undermine me"). Actions can be discussed. Accusations about motives start fights.

3. Separate expertise from authority

This is the key move with an experienced challenger. Make clear that you value their knowledge and want it, and that the final decisions are still yours.

> *"I need your experience. You know this building better than I do, and I want your input before I make changes. But once a decision's made, I need you to back it with your team, even if you disagreed. Can we work that way?"*

You are offering a real role: trusted advisor. In return, you are asking for a real commitment: public support for decisions once they're made. Many experienced employees, given a genuine voice, become a leader's strongest allies.

4. Agree on what happens next

End with something concrete.

> *"Here's what I'd like: before I roll out changes, I'll run them by you first. And starting this week, I need the staging process done on every shift, whether I'm there or not. If it's not working, tell me, and we'll fix it together."*

Rule 3: Close the Back Door

When someone goes around you to your boss, the problem has to be solved with your boss as well as with the employee.

First, talk to your boss. Ask them, as a request rather than a complaint, to redirect people back to you.

> *"Sal came to you about scheduling last week. I'd appreciate it if, when that happens, you send him back to me. It'll help the team see where decisions get made."*

Most bosses will agree immediately. If your boss keeps answering questions that should come to you, you have a bigger conversation to have about your role.

Then, with the employee, name it calmly in your private conversation: "I noticed you went to Linda with the scheduling question. I'd like you to bring those to me first. If you're not happy with my answer, you can always take it further, but I want the first shot."

Rule 4: Follow Through, Every Time

Authority is built less by what you say than by whether your words reliably turn into action. Every time you say something will happen and it does, your authority grows. Every time you say something will happen and it doesn't, it shrinks.

That means two things.

First, **only set expectations you are prepared to enforce.** If you tell Sal the process must happen on every shift, you have to check. If you don't, he will learn that your instructions are

optional.

Second, **if expectations are not met, respond consistently and proportionately.** A first miss gets a direct conversation. A repeated miss gets a documented conversation with clear consequences. Continued defiance after clear warnings is a performance issue, handled through your organization's normal process. The response should feel predictable, not personal. People can accept firm consequences when they knew what to expect.

Most authority tests end long before formal consequences, as long as the leader responds early, calmly, and consistently. The person testing usually wants an answer to a question, and the answer is clear: this leader listens, and this leader follows through.

When the Test Comes from a Peer or Your Boss

Authority tests do not only come from below. Peers may challenge your decisions in meetings, take over your projects, or treat you as junior. A boss may undercut your decisions in front of your team.

With a peer, the same principles apply: calm in public, direct in private, focused on behavior.

> *"In the meeting, when you told my team to hold the shipment, it put them in a tough spot because they'd heard something different from me. Next time, could you come to me first so we're aligned?"*

With a boss, it is more delicate, but the private conversation is still the right move.

> *"When you reversed the overtime decision in front of the team, it made it harder for me to lead them. If you disagree with a call I make, could we talk privately first? I'm happy to change course, but I'd like to be the one who tells them."*

Most bosses who undercut their managers don't realize the effect. Telling them, calmly and privately, usually fixes it.

Back to Derek

Let's replay that first team meeting.

Sal leans back. "We tried that in 2015. Didn't work then either." A few people laugh.

Derek feels the heat, takes a breath, and lets it pass. "That's useful, Sal. I want to hear what went wrong in 2015, because I don't want to repeat it. Let's talk after the meeting. For this week, here's the plan." He finishes his announcement. Nobody else laughs.

After the meeting, he asks Sal to stay. He starts with respect and curiosity, and Sal, slightly surprised, explains: in 2015, the staging area was too small for the new process, and orders piled up at shift change. Derek hadn't known that.

"That's exactly why I want your input," Derek says. "Can we figure out how to handle the space problem?" Then he gets direct. "I'll also be honest: the comment in front of the team made it harder to get people on board. I need your experience before decisions, and I need your backing after. Can we work that way?"

Sal is quiet for a moment. "Fair enough."

They adjust the plan to use a second staging area at shift change. Derek checks the process on every shift for the first two weeks. On the third Monday, Sal says in the team meeting, "Process is working better than I expected. The second staging area fixed it." Coming from Sal, that does more for Derek's authority than anything Derek could have said himself.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Testing is normal,** especially after a change in leadership. It often comes from real wants like status, security, and autonomy.
- **Dissent is not defiance.** Welcome disagreement about decisions; address challenges to your right to make them.
- **Six common tests:** the public challenge, quiet non-compliance, going around you, the expert block, the joke, and the slow yes.
- **Don't win or lose the public moment.** Respond calmly and briefly, take any real information seriously, and move the conversation to private.
- **Have the private conversation early,** within a day or two, in four parts: respect, specific behavior, expertise versus authority, and a concrete next step.
- **Close the back door** by asking your boss to redirect people to you.
- **Follow through every time.** Authority is built by words that reliably turn into action.

Drill: The Test Response Card

Think of the person most likely to test your authority right now. On one card, write:

1. **Their real wants:** What do they stand to lose or gain from your leadership?
2. **Your public response:** One calm sentence for their most likely public challenge.
3. **Your private opening:** One sentence of genuine respect and one sentence naming the behavior.
4. **Your offer and your ask:** What role you'll give them, and what commitment you need in return.

Keep the card until the test comes, and it will. When it does, you will notice the difference immediately: instead of feeling ambushed, you'll recognize a pattern you prepared for. That recognition is the foundation of fast thinking, which is where Part 4 begins.

But first, one more situation from Part 3: the negotiation that almost every leader faces sooner or later, when a client or partner pushes on price.

CHAPTER 13

When a Client or Partner Pushes on Price

Andrea owned a commercial cleaning company with forty employees. Her largest client, a medical office group with eleven locations, made up almost a quarter of her revenue. Three weeks before the contract renewed, the client's new procurement manager, a man named Phil, asked for a call.

"I'll be direct," Phil said. "We've gotten a quote from another provider that's eighteen percent lower than what we pay you. We like your service, but I can't justify that gap to my CFO. I need you to come down at least fifteen percent, or we'll have to make a change."

Andrea's mind raced. Fifteen percent off that contract would wipe out almost all her profit on it. But losing the contract would mean laying people off. She heard herself say, "Let me see what I can do. Could we do ten percent?"

Phil said he would think about it. Two days later, he called back. "Ten isn't enough. Meet me at thirteen and we have a deal." Andrea agreed. She kept the client and lost most of the profit. Six months later, she learned that the competitor's quote had covered fewer locations and didn't include the nightly disinfection her crews did. The real gap had been about four percent.

Andrea had negotiated against a number she never questioned, conceded before she understood the situation, and given away thirteen percent without getting anything in return. She is far from alone. Price pressure from clients and partners is one of the most common tough conversations leaders face, and one of the most expensive to get wrong.

This chapter closes Part 3 by applying everything from earlier chapters to a negotiation over money.

The First Number Wins More Than It Should

Phil opened the negotiation with two numbers: "eighteen percent lower" and "at least fifteen percent." From that moment, every number Andrea considered was judged against those anchors. Ten percent felt like a reasonable compromise between zero and fifteen. Thirteen felt like a small concession from ten. She never asked whether eighteen and fifteen were the right reference points in the first place.

That is anchoring, and it is one of the best-documented effects in negotiation research. In a series of experiments, Adam Galinsky and Thomas Mussweiler found that first offers pulled final settlements toward them: the more ambitious the opening number, the better the final outcome for the person who made it. Their research found that the effect held in both face-to-face and email negotiations.

But their research also found something more useful. The pull of the first offer disappeared when the other negotiator focused on certain information: their own alternatives to the deal, the other side's real limits, or their own target. In other words, **you can neutralize an anchor by bringing your own reference points into the conversation, deliberately and early.**

Andrea had reference points she never used. She knew what the contract actually covered. She knew what it cost her to deliver. She knew what a fair market price was for nightly disinfection across eleven medical offices. She let Phil's numbers fill the space where her own should have been.

Before the Call: Know Your Numbers

The single most important preparation for a price negotiation is knowing four numbers before the conversation starts. Write them down.

1. Your cost. What does it actually cost you to deliver this work? Not roughly. Exactly. Andrea's crews, supplies, supervision, and overhead for the contract.

2. Your walk-away price. The lowest price at which this deal is still worth doing. Below it, you are better off losing the client. This number should be set calmly, before any pressure, because under pressure everyone's walk-away price drifts lower.

3. Your alternative. What happens if this deal falls through? Could you replace the revenue? How fast? What would it cost? Negotiation researchers often call this your best alternative to a negotiated agreement. The stronger your alternative, the more confident you can be.

4. Their alternative. What happens to the client if they leave? Switching cleaning providers across eleven medical offices means onboarding new crews, retraining them on medical-grade protocols, risking mistakes in sensitive areas, and Phil's own time managing the transition. Their alternative is rarely as attractive as they make it sound.

The Galinsky and Mussweiler findings point straight at numbers 3 and 4. Focusing on your alternatives and the other side's real limits is exactly what weakened the anchor in their experiments. If Andrea had walked into that call with these four numbers on a card in front of her, Phil's eighteen percent would have had much less pull.

Understand What They Really Want

Before responding to any price demand, use the room map from Chapter 5: what does the other person really want?

Phil was a new procurement manager. His real wants likely included status (showing his new boss that he could find savings), security (proving his value early in the job), and safety from blame (if the cleaning quality dropped after switching, it would be his fault). His stated want was fifteen percent. His real want was probably "a win I can show my CFO without creating a risk I'll be blamed for."

That changes everything. Andrea did not necessarily need to give Phil fifteen percent. She needed to give him a win he could take to his CFO. Those are not the same thing.

Research on perspective-taking supports this approach. In the studies by Galinsky and colleagues described in Chapter 5, negotiators who focused on what the other side was thinking (their interests and goals) were much more likely to find creative deals than those who focused on the other side's feelings, about 76 percent versus 54 percent in one study. Perspective-taking helped people find the hidden agreements that a pure price fight would miss.

So your first move in a price conversation should not be a number. It should be questions.

The Price Conversation, Step by Step

Step 1: Acknowledge without conceding

When the demand lands, acknowledge it calmly, without agreeing to anything.

> *"I appreciate you being direct, and I want to keep working together. Let me make sure I understand the situation before we talk numbers."*

This buys time, shows you're serious about keeping the relationship, and signals that you will not be rushed into a number.

Step 2: Question the anchor

Ask about the competing quote before responding to it. Be curious, not combative.

> *"Can you tell me what the other quote covers? Same eleven locations, same nightly disinfection, same hours?"*

Most competing quotes are not apples to apples. Often they cover less, assume fewer visits, leave out supplies, or come from a provider that will raise prices after the first year. Asking calmly what the quote includes tells you how real the anchor is, and it shows Phil that you understand the details better than a simple percentage.

If Phil won't share details, that is information too.

Step 3: Find the real want

Ask what success looks like for them.

> *"What would a good outcome look like for you and your CFO? Is it a specific savings number, a lower total budget, or something else?"*

You may learn that Phil has a target of five percent savings across all vendors, not fifteen on yours. Or that the CFO cares most about total facilities spending, which might be lowered in ways other than your price. Or that Phil's real worry is the cost of a service issue last spring.

Step 4: Bring your own reference points

Now, before talking about any concession, put your own anchors on the table: what the service includes, what it would cost to switch, and what the market rate really is.

> *"Here's how I'd think about the comparison. Our price includes nightly disinfection at all eleven sites, supplies, and a supervisor on call. When we've priced quotes like the one you described, they usually cover the base cleaning only. Matched for the same scope, the gap is closer to four percent. And switching providers across eleven medical offices usually means a few months of retraining on your protocols."*

This is not a threat. It is information, offered calmly. It replaces Phil's anchor (eighteen percent) with a more accurate one (four percent), which is exactly the kind of reference point the research shows weakens a first offer's pull.

Step 5: Never concede without a trade

This is the most important rule in any price negotiation: **every concession should get something in return.**

When you give a discount for nothing, you teach the other side that pushing works, and you signal that your original price was padded. When you trade, you keep the value of your work intact and give the other side a way to win.

Use "if-then" language:

> *"If we extend the contract to three years, then I can lower the rate by four percent."*
> *"If we move two of the smaller locations to every-other-night service, then the total cost comes down about seven percent."*
> *"If you can commit to paying in fifteen days instead of forty-five, then I can take two percent off."*

Each of these gives Phil a real number to show his CFO, while protecting Andrea's margin through something she values: a longer contract, lower delivery costs, or better cash flow.

Step 6: Trade scope before you trade price

Often the best option is not a lower price for the same work, but the same price per unit for less work. If the client needs a lower total, help them find work they can live without.

> *"If the budget has to come down, I'd rather adjust the scope than cut corners on the work. Which services matter least to you?"*

This protects your quality, your margin, and your reputation. It also tends to surprise clients, who are used to vendors either refusing or caving.

Step 7: Get comfortable with silence

After you make an offer or ask a question, stop talking. The urge to fill silence, often by offering more, is one of the most expensive habits in negotiation. Remember the over-explaining habit from Chapter 3: the more you talk after making your case, the less confident you sound.

Step 8: Know when to walk

If the client insists on a price below your walk-away number, with no trade, be willing to say so.

> *"I want to keep your business. But at that price, I couldn't deliver the quality you're used to, and I'd rather be honest about that than overpromise. If the other provider can do it, I understand. If anything changes, I'd welcome the chance to work together again."*

Saying this calmly, without anger, often changes the conversation. It shows that your price is based on real costs, not padding. And sometimes it reveals that the client's alternative was weaker than they claimed.

If they do leave, you have protected your business from a contract that would have cost you money to keep.

Should You Make the First Offer?

The anchoring research suggests that whoever makes the first offer often gains an advantage, because the opening number shapes everything after it. In a renewal, the client often moves first, as Phil did. But you don't have to wait.

If you expect price pressure, consider opening the renewal conversation yourself, before the client does:

> *"Before renewal, I wanted to share where we are. Our costs for labor and supplies went up about six percent this year. We've absorbed most of that, and we're proposing a two percent increase for next year, with the option of a three-year term at this year's rate."*

Now the conversation starts from your anchor, a small increase, and the client's "win" becomes holding the rate flat by signing a longer term. Compare that to starting from the client's demand for fifteen percent off.

One caution. Research on first offers also suggests that extremely aggressive anchors can backfire by making the other side angry or ending talks. Your first offer should be ambitious but defensible, based on real numbers you can explain.

Price Pressure from Partners and Suppliers

Everything in this chapter works in reverse when you are the buyer. When a supplier raises prices, ask what's driving the increase (question the anchor), know your alternatives and theirs, find their real want (maybe they need predictable volume more than a higher price), and trade rather than simply accept or refuse. A supplier who is offered a longer commitment in exchange for a smaller increase is often happy to take it.

And when you push a vendor on price, remember what you learned from Andrea's side: a partner who loses money on your account will eventually cut corners, raise prices sharply later, or walk away. The best deals leave both sides able to keep delivering.

Back to Andrea

Let's replay Phil's call.

"We've gotten a quote eighteen percent lower. I need you to come down at least fifteen percent."

Andrea has prepared. Her card shows her cost, her walk-away price (six percent below the current rate), her alternative (two smaller prospects in the pipeline), and the client's alternative (a complex transition across eleven medical offices).

"I appreciate you being direct, and I want to keep working together. Before we talk numbers, can you tell me what the other quote covers?"

Phil isn't sure about disinfection. He'll check.

"And what would a good outcome look like for you and your CFO?"

Phil pauses. "Honestly, I've been asked to find ten percent across our facilities budget."

Now Andrea knows the real target, and it isn't fifteen percent off her contract. It's ten percent across his whole facilities spending.

She brings her reference points: what the price includes, the likely real gap, and the cost of switching. Then she offers trades. "If we move to a three-year term, I can take four percent off. And if two of the smaller locations go to every-other-night service, your total spend with us comes down about eleven percent. That gets you past your target on this line alone."

There is a long pause. Andrea doesn't fill it.

"Send me that proposal," Phil says. "I think my CFO will like the three-year number."

Andrea keeps the client and most of her margin, and Phil walks into his CFO's office with an eleven percent reduction and a three-year contract. Both sides won something real, because Andrea stopped negotiating against Phil's number and started solving Phil's problem.

Part 3 in One Page

This chapter closes Part 3. In six situations, the same tools kept appearing:

- **Blamed for a result (Chapter 8):** precise ownership: acknowledge, own your part, widen the lens, move to the fix.
- **Delivering bad news (Chapter 9):** headline first, cause, impact, plan, ask and next update.
- **A top performer threatens to leave (Chapter 10):** understand before you react; the stay conversation.
- **The goal changes from above (Chapter 11):** five questions upward, commit, then six steps downward.
- **Someone tests your authority (Chapter 12):** calm in public, direct in private, follow through.
- **A client pushes on price (Chapter 13):** know your numbers, question the anchor, find the real want, and trade, never just concede.

Underneath all six: understand what the other person really wants, predict how they will react, prepare your branches, and don't let the pressure of the moment make your decisions for you.

Chapter Takeaways

- **The first number pulls the deal toward it.** Research shows first offers anchor final outcomes.
- **You can weaken an anchor** by focusing on your alternatives, the other side's real limits, and your own target.
- **Know four numbers before the call:** your cost, your walk-away price, your alternative, and their alternative.
- **Find the real want behind the price demand.** Perspective-takers find creative deals far more often.
- **Question the anchor:** ask what a competing quote actually covers.
- **Never concede without a trade.** Use if-then language.
- **Trade scope before you trade price.**
- **Get comfortable with silence,** and be willing to walk away below your walk-away price.
- **Consider making the first offer** yourself, ambitious but defensible.

Drill: The Four-Number Card

Pick your most important client, contract, or supplier relationship. On an index card, write your four numbers: your cost, your walk-away price, your alternative, and their alternative. Then write three if-then trades you could offer if price pressure came tomorrow.

Most leaders who do this discover that they don't know at least one of the four numbers precisely, often their true cost or their real walk-away price. Find out now, while there is no pressure.

When the call comes, and it will, you'll negotiate from your numbers instead of theirs.

Part 4 now turns to the skill that ties the whole book together: thinking fast enough to use all of this in real time. It begins with the move that buys you the seconds you need: buying time without looking weak.

CHAPTER 14

Buying Time Without Looking Weak

Half One · Part 4: Thinking at Lightning Speed

Victor ran a staffing company that placed nurses and medical technicians in hospitals across three states. He was presenting his annual plan to his board when one director, a former hospital executive, interrupted.

"Before you go on, I heard last week that your biggest competitor is cutting its rates by ten percent across the region. What's your response going to be?"

Victor had not heard this. He had no idea whether it was true, how big the cut really was, or which hospitals it would affect. But six faces were watching him, and he felt that any hesitation would look like he didn't know his own market.

So he answered immediately. "We won't match it. Our quality justifies our price, and our clients know that." It sounded confident.

It was also a mistake. Two weeks later, he learned the competitor's cut was real, targeted at exactly his three largest hospital clients, and paired with a guaranteed fill rate he couldn't match. His board-meeting answer was now on the record, and it looked naive. Worse, his own team had heard about it and assumed it was the company's strategy. They had stopped preparing any response at all.

Victor did not lack intelligence or experience. He lacked one skill: the ability to buy a few seconds, or a few days, without looking unprepared. He believed that answering instantly was what strong leaders did. In reality, strong leaders know when to answer fast and when to buy time, and they know how to buy it without anyone seeing weakness.

This chapter begins Part 4, which is about thinking at lightning speed. It might seem strange to start a section on fast thinking with a chapter about slowing down. But the fastest thinkers in high-pressure jobs share a secret: they are excellent at creating the small pauses that let them think clearly.

Why Instant Answers Feel Necessary

Under pressure, a pause feels enormous. Two seconds of silence in a board meeting can feel like twenty. The brain interprets the gap as danger: they think I don't know, they think I'm weak, I'm losing them.

So we fill it. We answer before we have finished thinking, or we start talking and hope an answer will appear partway through the sentence. Chapter 2 described this: under public pressure, your brain is trying to answer the question, read the room, and protect your status all at once, and the first job suffers.

But here is what the people watching actually see. A short, deliberate pause reads as thoughtfulness. A leader who takes a breath, looks at the questioner, and then answers clearly appears more confident than one who answers instantly and then has to backtrack. The pause only looks weak if it is filled with visible panic: fidgeting, "um," apologizing, or a rambling non-answer.

The goal of this chapter is to give you a set of moves that create time while signaling control.

When Fast Thinking Works and When It Doesn't

To know when to buy time, it helps to understand how fast thinking works in the first place.

In the 1980s, Gary Klein and his colleagues studied fireground commanders, experienced firefighters who direct crews at emergencies, and found that about 80 percent of their decisions were made in under a minute. They weren't comparing options. They recognized the situation as a familiar type, and a workable response came to mind almost automatically. Then they ran a quick mental check of how it would play out, and acted. Chapter 15 will explore this kind of pattern recognition in depth.

The key word is *recognized*. Fast decisions work when the situation matches a pattern you know well. Victor's mistake was making a fast decision in a situation he had never seen: a competitor price cut he knew nothing about. There was no pattern to recognize. His instant answer was not expertise. It was a guess dressed up as confidence.

So the first question to ask in any pressured moment is simple: **Do I recognize this?** If you do, trust your experience and answer. If you don't, buy time. The rest of this chapter is about how.

Seconds: Moves for the Moment

Some situations only allow a few seconds. A question is asked, everyone is looking at you, and you need to respond now. These moves buy you two to ten seconds each, and they can be

combined.

The breath

The simplest move. Before answering, take one slow breath and look at the person who asked. It takes two seconds, and it does three things: it gives your brain a moment, it calms your body, and it signals that you are considering the question seriously.

Use the breath to rename the surge, as Chapter 2 described. Research by Alison Wood Brooks found that people who reframed their anxiety as excitement performed better under pressure than those who tried to calm down. In one study, people who said "I am excited" before a speech were rated as more persuasive and confident than those who said "I am calm." In another, people told to get excited before a hard math test scored about 8 percent higher. The breath is your moment to make that switch: this is energy, not danger.

The restate

Repeat the question back in your own words.

> *"So the question is how we'd respond if our biggest competitor cuts rates by ten percent across the region."*

This buys five seconds, confirms you heard the question correctly, and often reveals something about it. Saying it aloud, Victor might have noticed the word "heard" in the original question, which signals the information was secondhand.

The clarifying question

Ask for one more piece of information before answering.

> *"Do you know whether that's across all accounts or targeted at specific hospitals?"*

A good clarifying question buys time, gets you useful information, and makes you look careful rather than uncertain. It also gently tests the premise. If the director doesn't know, the room learns that the information is a rumor, and the pressure to answer instantly drops.

The "here's what I know" bridge

Share what you do know while making clear what you don't.

> *"Here's what I know. We haven't lost an account on price in two years, and our fill rate is above the regional average. What I don't know yet is the shape of this cut. That matters a lot to how we'd respond."*

This is one of the most valuable moves in the book. It gives the room substance, demonstrates command of your business, and honestly marks the edge of your knowledge, all while buying time to think.

The framework answer

When you can't give a specific answer, give the way you would decide.

> *"The way I'd think about it: if the cut is broad, we hold price and compete on quality. If it's targeted at our largest accounts, we'd look at contract terms and service guarantees before we touch rates."*

This shows strategic thinking without committing to a decision you aren't ready to make. Boards and bosses often find a good framework more reassuring than a confident guess.

Days: Moves for Bigger Decisions

Some questions should not be answered in the room at all. They need research, conversations, or reflection. For those, the goal is to defer the answer while showing you are on it.

The scheduled answer

Commit to a specific time when you'll respond.

> *"That deserves a real answer, not a quick one. I'll find out exactly what they're offering and come back to the board with a recommendation by next Friday."*

The key is specificity. "I'll get back to you" sounds like a dodge. "I'll come back with a recommendation by next Friday" sounds like a plan. And Chapter 1's copy-machine research applies here too: people are far more willing to accept a request when a reason is attached. "That deserves a real answer" is a reason, and a good one.

The conditional answer

Give a provisional response that depends on facts you will confirm.

> *"If the cut is what you're describing, my instinct is that we won't match it across the board, but we may need to defend our three largest accounts. I'll confirm the details and bring you a plan."*

This gives the room your current thinking, which builds confidence, while leaving room to adjust when you learn more. It is far safer than Victor's absolute "we won't match it."

The process answer

When the decision involves other people, name the process.

> *"I want to get our sales leads and our largest client managers in a room on Monday to look at exposure account by account. I'll share what we decide."*

This shows the decision is in motion and being handled seriously.

What Not to Do

Just as important as the moves that work are the habits that make buying time look weak.

Filling the silence with filler. "Um, well, that's a good question, I mean, it's kind of complicated..." Filler signals panic. A clean pause signals thought.

Apologizing. "Sorry, I don't know." There is nothing to apologize for. "I don't have that yet" is a statement of fact. "Sorry" turns it into an admission of failure.

Faking it. Making up an answer that sounds confident. This was Victor's mistake. A fake answer caught later damages your credibility far more than an honest "I'll find out."

Vague deferrals. "Let me look into it" with no time attached. This sounds like a brush-off and often is one.

Never coming back. The difference between buying time and stalling is follow-through. If you say you'll answer by Friday, answer by Friday, even if the answer is "I need until Tuesday, and here's why." Every time you deliver on a deferred answer, it becomes easier to buy time in the future, because people trust that you'll return.

Buying Time in a Negotiation

In negotiations, buying time is especially valuable, because pressure to decide quickly is often a tactic. As Chapter 1 described, false urgency is one of the most common moves people make on leaders.

The moves are the same, with one addition: **you never have to agree in the room.** No matter how a negotiation is going, you can say:

> *"This is helpful. Let me review it with my team and come back to you tomorrow morning."*

If the other side insists on an answer right now, that tells you something. Real deadlines exist, but they are rarer than people claim. A partner who won't give you a day to think is usually trying to stop you from noticing something.

Practicing the Pause

Like everything in Part 4, buying time is a skill you build through practice. It feels unnatural at first, especially for people who believe quick answers are a sign of competence.

Start small. In low-stakes conversations, like a colleague's question in the hallway or a routine meeting, practice taking one breath before answering. Notice how it feels and how people react. Most leaders find that nobody notices the pause, and their answers get better.

Then practice the restate and the clarifying question. Use them in ordinary meetings until they feel natural. When a high-stakes moment arrives, you want these moves to come out automatically, without having to remember them.

The drill at the end of this chapter will help.

Back to Victor

Let's replay the board meeting.

The director: "I heard last week that your biggest competitor is cutting rates by ten percent across the region. What's your response going to be?"

Victor doesn't recognize this situation; he hasn't heard anything. So instead of answering fast, he takes a breath. Energy, not danger.

"So the question is how we'd respond to a ten percent rate cut. Do you know whether it's across all accounts or targeted at specific hospitals?"

"I'm not sure. I heard it from a former colleague."

The room relaxes a little; it's a rumor. Victor uses the bridge. "Here's what I know. We haven't lost an account on price in two years, and our fill rate beats the regional average. What I don't know is the shape of this cut, and that matters. The way I'd think about it: if it's broad, we hold price and compete on quality. If it's targeted at our biggest accounts, we look at contract terms and service guarantees before we touch rates. I'll find out exactly what they're offering and bring you a recommendation by next Friday."

Forty seconds. The director nods. Victor looks like exactly what he is: a leader who knows his business and doesn't guess.

That afternoon, he asks his sales leads to call their contacts. By Wednesday, he knows the cut is targeted at his three largest clients and comes with a fill-rate guarantee. By Friday, the board has a plan: a matching guarantee for those three accounts, a modest rate adjustment on one of them, and longer contract terms. None of the three leaves.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Instant answers feel strong but often aren't.** A deliberate pause reads as thoughtfulness; panic is what looks weak.
- **Fast decisions work when you recognize the situation.** Research on fireground commanders found most decisions came in under a minute, built on recognized patterns. When there's no pattern, buy time.
- **Ask: Do I recognize this?** If yes, trust your experience. If no, slow down.
- **Seconds-long moves:** the breath (rename the surge as excitement), the restate, the clarifying question, the "here's

what I know" bridge, and the framework answer.

- **Days-long moves:** the scheduled answer, the conditional answer, and the process answer.
- **Avoid filler, apologies, fake answers, vague deferrals, and never coming back.**
- **In negotiations, you never have to agree in the room.**
- **Follow-through is what separates buying time from stalling.**

Drill: The Pause Ladder

For the next three weeks, climb one rung each week.

Week 1: The breath. In every meeting, take one deliberate breath before answering any question. Just that. Notice whether anyone reacts. (Almost nobody will.)

Week 2: The restate and the clarifying question. Add one restate or clarifying question to at least three conversations a day. Notice how often the clarifying question changes your answer.

Week 3: The bridge. Once a day, when you're asked something you don't fully know, use "Here's what I know... What I don't know yet is..." and then commit to a specific follow-up time. Track whether you deliver on every follow-up.

By the end of three weeks, these moves will start to feel like your natural way of answering hard questions. And that frees up the space you need for the next skill: building the pattern library that lets you recognize situations fast in the first place.

CHAPTER 15

Building Your Pattern Library

Half One · Part 4: Thinking at Lightning Speed

Linda had been director of operations for a group of restaurants for nineteen years. Her newest general manager, Jordan, was sharp, hardworking, and eight months into the job. One Tuesday, they sat in on the same meeting with a food distributor's sales rep.

The rep was friendly. He complimented the new menu, mentioned that he'd eaten at one of the restaurants with his family, and then said, almost in passing, "By the way, we're adjusting our delivery schedule next month. Most of your locations will move to three days a week instead of five. Shouldn't affect you much."

Jordan nodded and made a note. Linda put down her pen. "Before we go on, what's happening to pricing?"

The rep hesitated for just a moment. "Well, there will be a small fuel adjustment."

"And minimum order sizes?"

Another pause. "Those are going up a bit, to make the routes work."

In under a minute, Linda had uncovered what the rep's casual mention was designed to slip past: fewer deliveries meant the restaurants would need more storage and more fresh food would

spoil, higher minimums meant tying up more cash in inventory, and the "small fuel adjustment" turned out to be about four percent. Together, it was a significant price increase disguised as a scheduling note.

Afterward, Jordan asked her, "How did you know to ask about pricing? He didn't say anything about it."

Linda shrugged. "I've seen it before. When a vendor buries a change in the middle of small talk, there's always something attached. You start to smell it."

That "smell" is what this chapter is about. It isn't a gift. It is a library of patterns, built up through experience, that lets someone recognize what's happening in a conversation almost instantly. Linda thought faster than Jordan not because she was smarter, but because she had a bigger library. The good news is that pattern libraries can be built on purpose, and much faster than nineteen years.

How Experts Actually Think Fast

Chapter 14 introduced Gary Klein's research on fireground commanders. It is worth looking at more closely, because it explains exactly what Linda was doing.

Klein and his colleagues interviewed 26 experienced fireground commanders, who averaged 23 years of experience, about the decisions they had made at real fires. The researchers expected to find careful comparison of options. Instead, they found that about 80 percent of decisions were made in under a minute, and the commanders usually considered only one option.

The commanders themselves often said they hadn't made any decisions at all. They just knew what to do. What was actually happening, Klein concluded, was recognition. The commander looked at a fire, and it matched a type they had seen many times. That recognition came with three things attached: what to expect, what mattered most, and a course of action that usually worked. The commander then ran a quick mental simulation to check that the action fit this particular situation, and acted. Klein called this the Recognition-Primed Decision model.

Linda did the same thing. The rep's casual mention of a schedule change matched a pattern: "vendor buries a change in small talk." That pattern came with an expectation (there's a cost hidden somewhere), a focus (pricing and terms), and an action (ask directly). It took her seconds because she wasn't reasoning from scratch. She was recognizing.

What Chess Masters Teach Us

One of the most famous studies of expert perception comes from chess. In 1973, William Chase and Herbert Simon showed chess positions to players of different skill levels for just five seconds, then asked them to rebuild the positions from memory.

Masters were remarkably good at it. They could rebuild real game positions almost perfectly after a five-second look, far better than weaker players.

Then the researchers did something clever. They showed the players boards with the same number of pieces placed randomly, in arrangements that would never occur in a real game. On those random boards, the masters did no better than the weaker players.

That result tells us something important. The masters did not have better general memory. They had a huge store of familiar patterns, groups of pieces that commonly appear together in real games, and they recognized those patterns instantly. Chase and Simon estimated that a master might have tens of thousands of these chunks stored in memory, with 50,000 often cited as a rough figure. When the board showed real patterns, masters saw a handful of familiar chunks. When the board was random, there were no patterns to recognize, and they were back to remembering individual pieces like everyone else.

Two lessons follow for leaders.

First, fast thinking is pattern recognition, not raw intelligence. Linda wasn't processing faster than Jordan. She was seeing larger, more meaningful chunks.

Second, patterns are specific to their domain. A chess master's advantage vanished on random boards. A leader's pattern library works only for the kinds of situations they have actually learned. Linda would read a vendor negotiation instantly, but if she were dropped into a courtroom, she would be as slow as anyone. This is why Chapter 14 told you to ask, "Do I recognize this?" before trusting your instinct.

The Patterns That Matter Most

You don't need 50,000 patterns to think fast in tough conversations. You need a few dozen of the most common ones, learned well. This book has already given you many of them. Here they are gathered in one place.

Moves people make on you (Chapter 1):

- Praise right before a request

- A deadline you didn't set
- Guilt about who you are instead of reasons about the request
- Selective confusion or vague language about cost, risk, or commitment
- An empty "because"

Public pressure traps (Chapter 2):

- Borrowed authority ("The CEO mentioned it to me")
- The ambush with a number
- "Just curious"
- The yes-or-no corner
- The late-meeting drop

Signals that the stated want isn't the real one (Chapter 5):

- Questions that don't fit the stakes
- Fast agreement from the person with the most to lose
- The same concern returning in new forms
- Emotion out of proportion
- Silence about the obvious

Pitch structure (Chapter 4): rapport, frame, anchor, reason, urgency, close.

Authority tests (Chapter 12): the public challenge, quiet non-compliance, going around you, the expert block, the joke, the slow yes.

Negotiation moves (Chapter 13): the unexamined anchor, the competing quote, the demand for a concession without a trade.

That is about thirty patterns. Each one comes with what Klein's commanders had: an expectation, a focus, and a response. If you learn these thirty well enough to recognize them in the moment, you will think faster in tough conversations than most people with twice your experience.

Building the Library on Purpose

Experience builds pattern libraries naturally, but slowly and unevenly. Linda's took nineteen years, and it probably has gaps in areas she rarely encountered. You can build yours faster and more completely with four practices.

Practice 1: Name the patterns

A pattern you can name is a pattern you can recognize. When you notice something happening in a conversation, put a label on it, even if only in your head. "That was borrowed authority." "That's an anchor." "That was praise before a request."

Naming does two things. It moves the pattern from a vague feeling into something you can think about clearly. And it makes the pattern easier to retrieve next time. Linda's "vendor buries a change in small talk" is a name. Once Jordan has heard it, he will start noticing it too.

Practice 2: Review after the fact

After any significant conversation, especially one that went badly or surprised you, take five minutes to review it. Ask:

1. What happened at the key moment?
2. Which pattern was it? (Or is it a new one?)
3. What did I do?

4. What would I do next time?

This is how a single experience becomes a stored pattern. Without review, experiences blur together and teach you little. With review, each one adds a clear, retrievable entry to your library. A leader who reviews ten conversations a month builds patterns far faster than one who simply has a hundred conversations and moves on.

Practice 3: Borrow other people's patterns

You don't have to experience every pattern yourself. Some of the best learning comes from watching what happens to other people.

Ask experienced leaders about their hardest conversations: "What's a move someone made on you that you didn't see coming?" Most people love telling these stories, and each one is a pattern you can add to your library without paying for it yourself.

You can also learn from leaders who don't know they're teaching you. When you watch a colleague get blindsided in a meeting, or a business owner you know make an expensive mistake in a negotiation, ask what pattern they missed. Other people's mistakes are among the cheapest lessons available.

Practice 4: Rehearse with variation

The chess research shows that patterns are recognized in their real forms. A pattern you have seen only one way may not be recognized when it shows up looking slightly different.

So practice each pattern in several variations. Borrowed authority can sound like "The CEO asked me," "The board is wondering," "Legal flagged this," or "Your boss mentioned it." Praise before a request can be "You're the only one who gets it," "I trust your

judgment," or "I came to you first because you're the best at this." The more versions you have heard, the faster you will recognize the next one.

The drills in this book are designed for exactly this. Practicing your Pause, Frame, Answer, Close response to different questions (Chapter 2), or role-playing authority tests with a colleague (Chapter 12), exposes you to many variations of the same underlying patterns.

The Danger of False Recognition

Pattern recognition has a weakness worth knowing. Sometimes a situation looks like a familiar pattern but is actually different in an important way. Your library tells you what to do, you act quickly, and you're wrong.

Klein's research included this risk. The commanders' quick mental simulation was a check against it: before acting, they imagined how the action would play out in this specific situation. If something didn't fit, if the simulation hit a snag, they paused and looked again.

In tough conversations, watch for the signs that a familiar pattern might not fit:

- **A detail that doesn't match.** The pattern says the other person is bluffing, but their numbers are unusually specific.
- **A reaction you didn't expect.** You use your usual response and it doesn't land the way it normally does.
- **A new person or new stakes.** The pattern worked with your old boss, but your new boss is different.

When you notice one of these, slow down. Use a clarifying question from Chapter 14 to test your read. "Before I respond, can I make sure I understand..." A few seconds of checking is far cheaper than acting confidently on the wrong pattern.

There is a related trap: assuming everyone is running a play. Chapter 1 warned against paranoia, and it applies here too. Not every compliment is a setup. Not every deadline is false. A strong pattern library includes the patterns of honest behavior as well as manipulative behavior. Linda could tell the difference between a vendor hiding something and a vendor simply mentioning a change, because she had seen both many times.

How Long Does It Take?

Nobody can promise a specific timeline, and the research on expertise suggests that deep mastery in complex fields takes many years. But the patterns that matter most in tough conversations are a much smaller set than a chess master's library. With deliberate practice (naming patterns, reviewing conversations, borrowing others' stories, and rehearsing variations), most leaders notice a real difference within a few months. They start catching moves in the moment that they used to notice only afterward.

The shift often happens suddenly. One day, someone puts praise right before a request, and you hear it as clearly as if they had announced it. That moment is your library working.

Back to Linda and Jordan

After the meeting with the distributor, Linda decides to teach Jordan what she knows, on purpose.

She starts a shared document called "Vendor Patterns." The first entry: "Change buried in small talk → there's a cost attached → ask about pricing, minimums, and terms before agreeing to anything." Over the next month, she adds a dozen more from her nineteen years: the "price is going up everywhere" line that usually isn't true across the board, the free trial that converts to a long contract, the account manager who's "leaving soon" and needs you to sign this month.

She also asks Jordan to review his hardest vendor and staff conversations each week, using the four questions, and to add any new patterns to the document.

Three months later, a linen supplier calls Jordan to mention, casually, that they're "simplifying their contracts." Jordan pauses. He recognizes it. "Before we go further, what's changing in the terms?" The answer: an auto-renewal clause and a cancellation fee. Jordan negotiates both out.

He tells Linda afterward, a little amazed. "I heard it the second he said it."

Linda smiles. "That's the library."

Chapter Takeaways

- **Fast thinking is mostly recognition.** Experienced fireground commanders made about 80 percent of decisions in under a minute by matching situations to familiar patterns.
- **Recognition comes with an expectation, a focus, and a response,** checked by a quick mental simulation.
- **Chess masters rebuilt real positions after five seconds but not random ones.** Their advantage was a large store of patterns, not better memory.

- **Patterns are specific to their domain.** Trust your instinct only where you've built the library.
- **About thirty patterns from this book** cover most tough conversations.
- **Build your library on purpose:** name the patterns, review conversations afterward, borrow others' stories, and rehearse variations.
- **Watch for false recognition:** a detail that doesn't fit, an unexpected reaction, or new people and stakes. Slow down and check.
- **Include honest patterns too.** Not everyone is running a play.

Drill: Your Personal Pattern File

Start a document or notebook called your pattern file. Begin with the thirty patterns listed in this chapter. For each one, write:

1. **The name** (in your own words).
2. **What it sounds like** (two or three real-world versions).
3. **What to expect** when you see it.
4. **Your response** (one sentence).

Then, every week for the next three months, add at least one new pattern from your own conversations or from someone else's story, and review one old pattern you haven't seen recently.

At the end of three months, read through the whole file. Most leaders find that the patterns they wrote down early now feel obvious, which is exactly the point. What once required careful thought has become recognition.

In the final chapter of Half One, we'll put the whole book together into a daily and weekly training plan, so that thinking fast and saying it right becomes a habit, not a hope.

CHAPTER 16

Daily Drills to Train Your Speed

Half One · Part 4: Thinking at Lightning Speed

Rachel was promoted to vice president of operations at a home-health company the same week she finished reading a book much like this one. She agreed with nearly all of it. She highlighted pages. She told a friend it was going to change how she led.

Six weeks later, she was in a budget meeting when the chief financial officer said, "I only ask because the CEO mentioned it to me, but why are your overtime costs up twenty percent?" Rachel knew exactly what this was. She had read about borrowed authority and the ambush with a number. She remembered the Pause, Frame, Answer, Close formula.

And she still scrambled. Her answer ran three minutes, wandered through four explanations, and ended with a promise she wasn't sure she could keep. Walking out, she thought, "I knew all of this. Why couldn't I do it?"

The answer is simple, and it's the reason this chapter exists. **Knowing is not the same as being able to do.** Rachel understood the ideas. She hadn't practiced them. Under pressure, people don't rise to the level of what they know. They fall back on what they have practiced.

Think about the fireground commanders from Chapters 14 and 15. They made most of their decisions in under a minute, but they averaged 23 years of experience. Chess masters can rebuild a real board after a five-second look because of the huge store of patterns they built through years of play. Nobody gets fast by reading. They get fast through repetition.

Most leaders don't get enough repetitions of tough conversations to build that speed naturally. You might face a truly difficult conversation a few times a month. At that rate, it takes years to build the patterns a firefighter builds in a single busy season. The solution is to create extra repetitions on purpose: short, regular drills that build the skills before you need them.

This chapter closes Half One by bringing every drill in the book together into one practical training plan. It takes about ten minutes a day.

The Principles of Good Practice

Before the plan, four principles that make practice work.

1. Short and frequent beats long and rare. Ten minutes a day builds more skill than a two-hour session once a month. Patterns are built through repeated exposure over time.

2. Out loud beats in your head. Rehearsing silently feels like practice, but it skips the hardest part: getting the words out of your mouth under pressure. Say your answers out loud, even alone in your car.

3. Realistic beats comfortable. Practice with a little pressure: a timer, a colleague playing a difficult role, a question with an edge. The closer practice feels to the real thing, the more it transfers.

4. Review beats repetition alone. Doing something many times without reflecting on it teaches surprisingly little. Five minutes of honest review after a real conversation is often worth more than an hour of practice.

The Daily Ten Minutes

The core of the plan is two short routines each day: five minutes in the morning and five minutes at the end of the day.

Morning: Prepare one conversation (5 minutes)

Look at your day. Pick the one conversation most likely to be difficult: a meeting, a call, a one-on-one. Then fill out a quick card:

- **Their real want** (Chapter 5): security, status, fairness, autonomy, or safety from blame?
- **Their likely reaction** (Chapter 6): what will they hear when you open?
- **One likely branch** (Chapter 7): the turn you most need to be ready for, with a one-sentence response.
- **Your exit line** (Chapter 14): what you'll say if the conversation goes somewhere unexpected.

Then say your opening sentence out loud once.

If nothing on your calendar looks difficult, pick the conversation that matters most and prepare it anyway. Practicing on easy conversations builds the habit for hard ones.

Evening: Review and record (5 minutes)

At the end of the day, look back at your hardest conversation and answer three questions:

1. **What pattern showed up?** Name it, using your pattern file from Chapter 15.
2. **What did I do well?** One specific thing.
3. **What would I do differently?** One specific thing.

Then run the habit audit from Chapter 3: did I over-explain, decide too fast, defend instead of ask, show my cards early, or make it personal? Note any yes.

Finally, add any new pattern to your pattern file.

That's it. Ten minutes a day. Over a year, that adds up to more than 250 prepared conversations and 250 reviewed ones, far more deliberate repetitions than most leaders get in a decade.

The Weekly Workout

Once a week, set aside about thirty minutes for deeper practice. Rotate through these four drills.

Week A: The twenty-second answer (Chapter 2)

Write down three tough questions you could be asked in the coming week. For each one, answer out loud using Pause, Frame, Answer, Close, with a timer. Keep cutting until each answer fits in twenty-five seconds without rushing.

Before each answer, use the breath to rename the surge. Alison Wood Brooks's research found that people who told themselves "I am excited" before a stressful speech were rated as more persuasive and confident than those who told themselves "I am calm." Practice the switch until it becomes automatic.

Week B: The what-if map (Chapter 7)

Pick the most important conversation coming up in the next month. Build a full what-if map: goal and walk-away, a three-minute premortem, three likely branches with responses and "need" lists, and your signal and exit. Then go get whatever is on the "need" list.

Remember why the premortem works. Research by Mitchell, Russo, and Pennington found that imagining an outcome as having already happened led people to generate about 30 percent more explanations for it. More possibilities considered means fewer surprises.

Week C: Pattern variations (Chapter 15)

Pick three patterns from your file. For each, write five different ways it could sound in real life. Then write your response to each version. This builds the variation that the chess research suggests is essential: patterns are recognized in their real forms, so the more forms you know, the faster you'll recognize the next one.

Week D: The relationship check (Chapters 3 and 10)

Have one stay conversation with someone important to your work: "What's frustrating you lately? What would make your work here more rewarding? Where do you want to be in two years?" Listen more than you talk.

This drill is different from the others. It doesn't train speed directly. It reduces how often you need speed, because it surfaces problems while they are still small. Gallup's research found that 51 percent of people who quit said no leader had talked with them about their job satisfaction or future in their last three months. Regular stay conversations are the most reliable way to avoid the hardest conversations of all.

The Monthly Rehearsal

Once a month, find a trusted colleague, mentor, or friend and run a live role-play. This is the most powerful drill in the book, and the one most people skip because it feels awkward.

Give your partner a real situation you expect to face: a boss who might change your goal, an employee who might test you, a client who might push on price. Tell them the other person's real wants and history. Then let them play the role, with some edge, while you respond in real time.

Run the scenario twice. The first time, just respond. Then spend five minutes discussing what happened: where did you hesitate? What patterns did you miss? What landed well? The second time, run it again and try to improve.

Afterward, switch roles. Playing the difficult person teaches you a surprising amount about what pressure feels like from the other side, which strengthens the perspective-taking skill from Chapter 5.

The Ninety-Day Plan

If you want a structured start, here is a ninety-day plan that builds the skills in the same order as this book.

Days 1–30: Defense

Focus on recognizing moves and pressure in the moment.

- **Daily:** The five-second scan from Chapter 1 (praise, clock, guilt, fog) before every approval. The pause ladder from Chapter 14: one deliberate breath before answering any question.
- **Weekly:** The twenty-second answer drill.

- **Goal:** Catch at least one move per day as it happens, not afterward.

Days 31–60: Prediction

Focus on seeing conversations before they happen.

- **Daily:** The morning card (real wants, likely reaction, one branch, exit line).
- **Weekly:** One full what-if map. One ten-minute room map for a multi-person meeting.
- **Goal:** In at least half your prepared conversations, one of your predicted branches actually comes up.

Days 61–90: Speed

Focus on building and using your pattern library.

- **Daily:** Evening review with pattern naming.
- **Weekly:** Pattern variations. One relationship check.
- **Monthly:** A live role-play.
- **Goal:** Your pattern file has at least fifty entries, and you start recognizing patterns in conversations you didn't prepare for.

At the end of ninety days, look back at your first week's evening reviews and compare them to your last week's. Most leaders who complete the plan see a clear difference: fewer self-inflicted mistakes, shorter and calmer answers under pressure, and more conversations where they saw the turn coming.

How to Know It's Working

Progress in this skill can be hard to see, because the best outcome is a conversation that simply goes well. Here are some signs to watch for.

- **You notice moves in the moment** that you used to notice only later.
- **Your answers under pressure get shorter.** Rambling is one of the clearest signs of an unprepared mind.
- **Fewer conversations surprise you.** Your what-if maps start catching most of the real turns.
- **People bring you problems earlier.** This is a sign that your calmer, more curious responses are making it safer to talk to you.
- **You feel the surge less, or it feels more like energy.** The physical pressure of hard conversations doesn't disappear, but it stops scrambling your thinking.
- **You catch yourself mid-habit.** You hear yourself starting to over-explain, and you stop.

Track these in your evening review once a month. They're the real measure of progress.

Back to Rachel

After the budget meeting, Rachel decides to stop reading and start training. She commits to the ninety-day plan.

For the first month, she does the five-second scan and the breath before every answer. She practices the twenty-second answer each Friday in her car. For the second month, she fills out a

morning card every day. For the third, she builds her pattern file and asks a former boss to role-play the CFO with her.

In her role-play, her former boss uses borrowed authority, an ambush number, and a yes-or-no corner, one after another. Rachel stumbles the first time. The second time, she handles all three.

Four months after that first budget meeting, the CFO tries again. "The CEO was asking about your staffing costs. Are you going to come in on budget this quarter, yes or no?"

Rachel feels the surge and lets it be energy. She takes one breath. "It's not quite a yes or no. We're on budget if the two open nurse positions fill by the fifteenth, and we have strong candidates for both. If they slip, we're about three percent over for the quarter. I'll make sure the CEO has the full picture this week."

Fifteen seconds. The CFO nods and moves on. Walking out, Rachel realizes she didn't have to think about the formula at all. It just came out. That is what training does.

Half One in One Page

This chapter closes Half One. Here is the whole half in a few lines.

- **Part 1: How your mind gets used against you.** People make moves on leaders (flattery, urgency, guilt, playing dumb). Public pressure scrambles good thinking. Many wounds are self-inflicted. And every conversation is a sale of a version of events, a decision, and a feeling.
- **Part 2: Ten moves ahead.** Find what everyone really wants. Predict how they'll react. Map the branches before the conversation starts.

- **Part 3: The right thing to say.** Precise ownership when you're blamed. Headline-first bad news. Stay conversations. Five questions when the goal changes. Calm authority. Trades, not concessions, on price.
- **Part 4: Thinking at lightning speed.** Buy time without looking weak. Build your pattern library. Train daily until the right response is automatic.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Knowing is not the same as doing.** Under pressure, people fall back on what they've practiced.
- **Most leaders don't get enough natural repetitions** to build speed, so create them on purpose.
- **Good practice is short and frequent, out loud, realistic, and reviewed.**
- **The daily ten minutes:** a morning card for one conversation and an evening review with pattern naming.
- **The weekly workout:** rotate the twenty-second answer, the what-if map, pattern variations, and a relationship check.
- **The monthly rehearsal:** a live role-play with a trusted partner, then switch roles.
- **The ninety-day plan:** defense, then prediction, then speed.
- **Watch for signs of progress:** catching moves live, shorter answers, fewer surprises, and problems reaching you earlier.

Drill: Start Tomorrow Morning

The only drill for this chapter is to begin. Tomorrow morning, before you open your email, pick one conversation on your calendar and fill out the morning card. Tomorrow evening, spend five minutes on the review.

Then do it again the next day.

Don't wait until you have a perfect system, a nice notebook, or a free week. The leaders who get fast are not the ones who plan the most thoroughly. They're the ones who start, and keep going.

Next comes the Bridge: a single conversation, a raise request with an outside offer, told first from the manager's side of the table, then from the employee's, so you can see exactly how both halves of this book fit together.

THE BRIDGE

One Conversation, Both Sides of the Table

The Bridge · Between Half One and Half Two

Everything in Half One was written from the leader's chair. Everything in Half Two will be written from the chair across the desk. Before we switch, this short chapter sits in the middle and does something different. It takes a single conversation and plays it three times.

First, we watch it from the manager's side: what he sees, what he fears, and the moves he thinks the other person is making. Then we rewind and watch the exact same conversation from the employee's side. Finally, we replay it with both people using the tools from this book, thinking ten moves ahead.

The point is simple and important. In almost every tough workplace conversation, **both people believe they are the one being played.** Both are protecting real wants. Both are guessing at the other's motives. And both have the power to make the conversation go well or badly. Once you see a conversation from both sides, you never quite see it from just one side again.

Here is the situation.

Maya is a senior specialist at a medical billing company that handles claims for about forty doctors' offices. She has been there four years. She is the person everyone goes to when a claim gets

rejected for a reason nobody understands, and she trained half the current team. Her manager is Tom, the billing operations manager, who has led the department for two years.

Three weeks ago, a recruiter called Maya about a role at a larger health system. The pay is about fifteen percent higher. She hasn't applied. She isn't sure she wants to leave. But the call made her realize she hasn't had a real raise in two years.

On Tuesday afternoon, she asks Tom for fifteen minutes.

Take One: The Manager's Side

Tom is behind on a client report when Maya knocks. She closes the door, which Tom notices immediately. Closed doors usually mean problems.

"Thanks for making time," she says. "I'll be direct. I think I'm underpaid for what I do here, and I'd like to talk about a raise. And to be honest, I've been contacted about another job that pays quite a bit more."

Tom's stomach tightens. Here is what goes through his head in the next five seconds.

She has an offer. Is it real? If it is, how much? Is this a bluff to get leverage? He remembers the last time someone on his team came in with an outside offer. He matched it, and within a month two other people asked for raises too.

If she leaves, we're in trouble. Maya handles the hardest rejected claims. Two of his biggest clients ask for her by name. He has read that replacing an employee can cost half to two times their salary,

and for someone like Maya, he suspects the real cost would be worse. Months of rework, unhappy clients, and a team that loses its best teacher.

I don't control the budget. Raises above three percent need approval from the company's owner, who is in a cost-cutting mood after losing a client last quarter.

Is this fair to everyone else? Three other senior specialists do similar work. If Maya gets fifteen percent, what does he say to them?

And underneath all of that, a quieter thought: *Why didn't she come to me before she started talking to other companies? Did I miss something?*

Tom feels squeezed from every side. He reacts the way many managers do. He protects himself.

"I appreciate you telling me," he says. "But you know raises are tight right now. The owner just froze most increases. I can probably get you three percent at review time in January."

Maya's face changes. Tom sees it and adds, "And honestly, I'd be careful with these recruiter jobs. Bigger systems can be pretty rough places to work."

Maya says, "Okay. Thanks," and leaves.

Tom tells himself he handled it. He didn't cave to pressure. He didn't make promises he couldn't keep. He even gave her some friendly advice.

What he actually did, by the standards of Half One, was close to every mistake in the book. He reacted to the offer instead of understanding the person (Chapter 10). He defended instead of asking a single question (Chapter 3). He anchored the

conversation on the lowest possible number. He used a light version of a guilt and fear move about the other job (Chapter 1). And he left without a plan or a next step.

Take Two: The Employee's Side

Now rewind to Tuesday afternoon, and watch from Maya's chair.

Maya has been dreading this conversation for a week. She rehearsed it in her car twice and still isn't sure what to say. Here is what is going on in her head as she knocks.

I don't actually want to leave. She likes her team. She likes Tom, mostly. She likes being the person who solves the problems nobody else can. The bigger health system would mean a longer commute and starting over as the new person.

But I'm tired of being taken for granted. For two years, she has been training new hires on top of her own claims, with no change in title or pay. Every time she's mentioned it, Tom has said something encouraging and nothing has happened.

If I don't mention the offer, he won't take me seriously. She has watched people ask for raises politely and get nothing. The recruiter's call feels like the only leverage she has ever had.

But if I mention it, he might think I'm disloyal. Or he might call my bluff. She hasn't even applied. If Tom says, "Then take it," she'll have to either leave or look like she was bluffing.

And what number do I ask for? She doesn't know. Fifteen percent feels greedy. Five feels like nothing.

So she walks in and says what she rehearsed. "I think I'm underpaid. And I've been contacted about another job that pays quite a bit more."

Then Tom talks about frozen raises and three percent in January. And then he says that bigger systems are rough places to work.

Maya hears something very different from what Tom meant. She hears: *You're not worth fighting for. And I'll try to scare you into staying.* The friendly advice lands like a threat. The three percent lands like an insult. She thinks, *Two years of training his team, and this is what it's worth.*

She walks out and, that evening, applies for the job.

Look at the conversation from Maya's side and you see her mistakes too, the ones Half Two will help front-line employees avoid. She led with a threat before she led with her value. She never said what she actually wanted (recognition and a lead role, more than money alone). She hadn't figured out what Tom needed to make a case to the owner. She didn't name a specific, defensible number, so Tom's low number became the anchor. And she had no plan for what to say if he pushed back.

What Each One Missed

Put the two takes side by side and something striking appears. Each person was guarding exactly what the other person needed.

Tom's real wants were **security** (not losing his best specialist), **fairness** (not creating a pay problem with the rest of the team), and **safety from blame** (not asking the owner for something and getting turned down, or getting blamed if Maya left). He needed a reason he could take upstairs.

Maya's real wants were **status** (to be recognized for what she actually did), **fairness** (to be paid fairly for doing two jobs), and **security** (to be able to stay somewhere she liked without feeling foolish). She needed to feel valued, and she needed a real path.

Both were also afraid of being played. Tom suspected Maya was using a bluff for leverage. Maya suspected Tom was using fear to keep her cheap. Neither was quite right. Both were protecting themselves.

Remember the perspective-taking research from Chapter 5. In studies by Adam Galinsky and his colleagues, negotiators who focused on what the other side was thinking reached creative deals about 76 percent of the time, compared with 54 percent for those who focused on the other side's feelings. Neither Tom nor Maya did much of either. Each was focused almost entirely on their own fears.

Take Three: Both Sides Thinking Ahead

Now let's replay the conversation one last time, with both people using the tools from this book.

Maya prepares

The weekend before, Maya does the preparation Half Two will teach in detail.

She maps Tom's real wants. *He can't lose me without real damage, but he doesn't control the budget, he's worried about fairness with the others, and he needs something he can take to the owner.*

She figures out her own real want. *Honestly, the title matters as much as the money. I want to be recognized as the lead for training and hard claims.*

She gathers evidence for her case: the number of new hires she trained, the two clients who ask for her by name, and the rejection rate on the hardest claims since she started handling them.

She picks a number she can defend. Research by Galinsky and Mussweiler found that first offers tend to pull the final outcome toward them. So instead of waiting for Tom to name three percent, she'll anchor first with a number based on the market and her role: a lead title and a twelve percent raise.

And she builds a short what-if map. *If he says the budget is frozen, I'll ask what it would take and offer a timeline. If he asks about the other job, I'll be honest: I haven't decided, and I'd rather stay.*

Tom prepares

Maya asked for the meeting a day in advance and mentioned it was "about my role and pay," so Tom has time to prepare too.

He remembers what Chapter 10 taught him: don't react to the offer; understand the person. He reminds himself of the Gallup finding that most people who quit said no leader had talked with them about their future in their last three months, and he realizes he has never had that conversation with Maya.

He checks what he can actually offer: three percent without approval, more with the owner's sign-off, and a title change that he can approve himself.

And he plans his first ninety seconds: thank her, show she matters, and ask before deciding anything.

The conversation

Maya opens. "Thanks for making time. I want to talk about my role and pay. Over the last two years, I've trained six of our new hires, handled our toughest rejected claims, and two of our biggest clients ask for me by name. I'd like to be recognized as a lead specialist, with a raise that reflects that. I think twelve percent is fair based on what lead roles pay in our area. I also

want to be honest: a recruiter contacted me about another job. I haven't applied, and I'd rather stay here. But it made me realize I need this to change."

Tom feels the jolt at "recruiter" and takes a breath. He notices how differently this lands from a threat. She led with her value, named what she wanted, and said she wanted to stay.

"Thank you for being so clear, and for telling me about the recruiter instead of just leaving. You're right that you've been doing a lead's job without the title, and that's on me. Can I ask, what matters most to you here: the title, the pay, or something else?"

Maya thinks. "Both, honestly. But being recognized as the lead matters a lot."

"Here's what I can do and what I can't. I can approve the lead title myself, starting this month. For the raise, anything above three percent needs the owner's approval, and he's cautious right now. What would help me most is a short summary of what you've just told me: the training, the claim results, and the clients who ask for you. I'll take it to him this week and push for the full twelve. I'll have an answer for you by Friday."

Maya hears exactly what she needed: recognition, a real effort, and a date. "I can have that to you tomorrow."

On Thursday, Tom brings Maya's summary to the owner, along with his own estimate of what losing her would cost in client risk and rework. The owner approves ten percent now and a review in six months. On Friday, Tom tells Maya the truth: "I pushed for twelve. I got ten now, with a review in six months, and the lead title is yours. I know it's not everything you asked for."

Maya takes it. She tells the recruiter she is staying.

What Changed

The situation in Take Three was identical to the first two takes: same people, same budget, same outside offer. What changed was that both people walked in having thought about the other side.

- **Maya led with value, not threat.** The offer became information, not a weapon.
- **Maya anchored with a defensible number,** so Tom's low starting point never took hold.
- **Tom asked before he answered,** and learned that the title mattered as much as the money.
- **Tom said what he could and couldn't do,** and committed to a date.
- **Maya gave Tom what he needed to sell it upstairs:** a written case. Tom gave Maya what she needed to stay: recognition and a real effort.
- **Neither one played the other.** And both got more than they would have by protecting themselves.

The Bridge to Half Two

Half One taught leaders to see the moves people make on them, predict the reactions of the people they lead, and say the right thing under pressure. Half Two turns the table around. It is written for the Mayas: front-line employees who have less power, who often feel played by managers, and who need to protect themselves, earn trust, and push back without paying for it.

Many of the tools are the same. Real wants, reaction prediction, what-if mapping, buying time, pattern libraries: they work from any chair. But the stakes and the moves look different from below.

A manager who loses a hard conversation might lose face. An employee who loses one might lose a job, a raise, or a reputation that took years to build.

If you are a leader, read Half Two anyway. Seeing your own moves from the other side of the desk is one of the fastest ways to become a better boss. And if you are a front-line employee who skipped ahead to Half Two, the Bridge is a good reminder that your manager is usually not a villain. Most of the time, they are a person under pressure, protecting their own real wants, just like you.

Chapter Takeaways

- **In most tough conversations, both people believe they are the one being played.**
- **Each side usually guards exactly what the other side needs.** Tom needed a case he could take upstairs; Maya needed recognition and a real effort.
- **Leading with value instead of threat** changes how an outside offer lands.
- **Anchoring first with a defensible number** keeps a low counter from setting the range.
- **Asking before answering** reveals what the other person actually wants.
- **Saying what you can and can't do, with a date,** builds trust even when the answer isn't everything.
- **Thinking about the other side's wants** turns a contest into a deal both people can live with.

Drill: Play Both Chairs

Think of a tough conversation you expect to have soon, with someone above or below you. Write two short paragraphs.

1. **Your side:** What do you really want? What are you afraid of? What move do you suspect the other person will make on you?
2. **Their side:** Now write the same three things from their chair. What do they really want? What are they afraid of? What move do they suspect you will make on them?

Read both paragraphs together. Most people find at least one thing the other person needs that they could easily give, and at least one fear the other person has that they could easily put to rest. Start the conversation with one of those.

In the next chapter, Half Two begins with the moves managers make on employees, sometimes on purpose and sometimes without realizing it.

HALF TWO

For Front-Line Employees

You have less power, so the goal is to protect yourself, earn trust, and push back without paying for it.

CHAPTER 17

The Moves Managers Make, On Purpose or Not

Keisha had been a customer service representative at a regional internet provider for a year and a half. She was good at it. Her customer ratings were among the highest in the call center, and new hires were often seated next to her to learn.

On a Friday afternoon, her supervisor, Brian, stopped by her desk with a smile.

"Keisha, you're honestly one of the best people on this floor. Everybody knows it. Which is why I'm coming to you. We're short three people tomorrow, and I need someone I can count on to come in for a Saturday shift. I know it's last minute. But we're a family here, and families show up for each other. Can I put you down?"

Keisha had plans with her sister. She hesitated. Brian added, "I really need an answer in the next ten minutes so I can finish the schedule. And honestly, the team would be in a tough spot without you."

She said yes.

It was the fourth Saturday she had covered in two months. Each time, Brian thanked her warmly. Each time, she hoped it would count for something. When the team lead position opened in the

spring, it went to someone who had been there less time and had lower ratings, but who, Keisha later learned, had asked directly for the role and had a clear plan for it. When Keisha asked Brian why, he said, "I didn't know you were interested. You never said anything."

Nobody in this story is a villain. Brian was under pressure to staff the floor, and he leaned on the person most likely to say yes. He may not have thought of his words as tactics at all. But in sixty seconds, he used four of the most common moves managers make on employees: praise right before a request, a family appeal, a tight deadline, and guilt about the team. And Keisha, who was smart and capable, said yes to something she didn't want to do, again, without getting anything she did want.

This chapter begins Half Two. Half One was written for leaders. Half Two is written for front-line employees: people who have a boss, and who need to protect themselves, earn trust, and push back without paying for it. If you read Half One, you'll recognize these moves from Chapter 1. Here, we look at them from the other side of the desk, where you have less power and more to lose.

Why Employees Are Easy to Work

In Chapter 1, we saw that leaders are targets because people need things from them. Front-line employees face a different problem. You are easy to work on because **your manager has power over things you care about**: your schedule, your reviews, your raises, your promotions, and sometimes your job itself.

That power changes how requests feel. When a coworker asks you to cover a shift, you can say no fairly easily. When your boss asks, even nicely, a no feels risky. You wonder whether it will

show up in your review, whether you'll get the bad schedule next month, or whether you'll be seen as "not a team player."

Research on employee silence shows how strong that fear is. In one well-known study, 85 percent of the employees interviewed had at some point felt unable to raise an important concern with a supervisor, and the most common reason was fear of being viewed or labeled negatively. If people won't even raise important problems for fear of how they'll look, it's not surprising that saying no to a direct request feels even harder.

Managers know this, sometimes consciously and sometimes not. And it means that the moves in this chapter work on employees even when they're used gently and without bad intent.

Move 1: Praise as a Down Payment

"You're one of the best people on this floor." "I only trust you with this." "You're a rock star." "I don't know what we'd do without you."

Praise feels good, and it should. Good managers recognize good work. But notice when praise arrives right before a request, especially a request for extra work, a favor, or a sacrifice.

Chapter 1 described research by James Westphal and Ithai Stern on flattery among corporate executives. They found that subtle flattery was remarkably effective at winning favors, but only when the target didn't recognize it as a tactic. The same is true at every level of an organization. Praise works best when it doesn't feel like part of a deal.

For employees, praise before a request does something extra. It quietly substitutes for payment. Brian gave Keisha a compliment instead of overtime pay, a schedule trade, or a step toward the

team lead role. Each time she accepted the compliment as enough, she taught him that praise was all it took.

What to do

Accept the praise sincerely, then connect it to something real.

> *"Thank you, I really appreciate that. Since you see me that way, I'd love to talk about what it would take for me to move into the team lead role."*

This is not rude. You are simply taking your manager's words seriously. If they believe you're one of the best, the next step is to treat you that way.

Move 2: "We're a Family"

Few phrases at work are more loaded. "We're a family here" can be sincere; many workplaces genuinely care about their people. But when it shows up as a reason to do something you don't want to do, listen carefully.

Family language asks for family-level loyalty: show up no matter what, sacrifice without asking for anything back, and don't make a fuss. But a workplace is not a family in one important way. A family doesn't let you go when the budget is cut. A workplace can.

That doesn't mean you should be cold or transactional. Caring about your coworkers is a good thing. It means you should notice when warmth is being used to ask for something that would normally be paid for, scheduled, or negotiated.

What to do

You can honor the sentiment while keeping a boundary.

> *"I do care about this team. I can't do Saturday this time, but I can stay an hour late on Monday to help catch up."*

You've shown commitment, offered something real, and kept your plans. And you've quietly shown that your yes is a choice, not an automatic response to a word.

Move 3: The Ten-Minute Deadline

"I need an answer in the next ten minutes." "I have to finish the schedule now." "Can you just let me know right away?"

As Chapter 1 explained, urgency changes how people think. When you feel rushed, you stop considering options and go with whatever is in front of you. You don't think about your plans, your pattern of covering shifts, or what you might ask for in return.

Sometimes the deadline is real. Schedules do have to be finished. But even a real deadline usually has a few minutes of room, and a short pause can make a big difference.

What to do

Buy a little time. Chapter 14 covered this from the leader's side, and the same moves work for you.

> *"Let me check one thing and get back to you in five minutes."*

Five minutes is enough to look at your calendar, think about whether you really want to say yes, and decide whether to ask for something in return. If your manager won't give you five minutes, that tells you something about the request.

Move 4: Guilt About the Team

"The team would be in a tough spot without you." "Everyone else is already stretched." "I'd hate to have to tell them we couldn't cover it."

Guilt is especially effective on good employees, because good employees care about their coworkers. That's exactly why it's worth noticing. Guilt moves the decision from "Do I want to do this?" to "Am I a good teammate?" And nobody wants to answer no to that question.

But look at what guilt does to the real problem. If the team is regularly short-staffed, that's a staffing problem, and it belongs to management. When you cover the gap again and again, you make the problem invisible. Leadership never sees how short the team really is, because you keep filling the hole.

What to do

Separate your care for the team from the request itself.

> *"I don't want the team stuck either. I've covered four Saturdays in two months, though, and I can't keep doing that. Can we talk about a longer-term fix for weekend coverage?"*

This is one of the most valuable things a front-line employee can learn to say. It's warm, honest, and specific. It names the pattern (four Saturdays in two months). And it moves the conversation from "Will you cover this one?" to "How do we fix this?"

Move 5: The Growth Opportunity

"This would be a great opportunity for you." "It'll look good when promotions come up." "Think of it as a stretch assignment."

Sometimes extra responsibility really is an opportunity. Taking on a project, leading a training, or covering for your manager can build skills and visibility. But "opportunity" is also a common way to ask for extra work without extra pay or recognition.

The test is simple: **an opportunity has a path attached.** If taking on more work will lead to something specific (a title, a raise, a review conversation, a new skill that's recognized), it's an opportunity. If the only promise is that it will "look good," it's just more work.

What to do

Ask what the opportunity leads to.

> *"I'm interested. Can you help me understand how this connects to the team lead role, or to my next review?"*

If your manager can answer clearly, great. If they can't, you've learned something important, and you can decide how much of the extra work to take on.

Move 6: The Empty "Because"

Chapter 1 described Ellen Langer's copy-machine study. People let a stranger cut in line about 60 percent of the time with no reason, but about 93 percent of the time when the stranger said "because I have to make copies," a reason that wasn't really a reason at all.

Managers use empty reasons too, usually without realizing it. "We need you to stay late because we're busy." "We can't do raises because of the budget." "You have to use the new system because that's the policy."

The word "because" switches on the brain's autopilot. You hear a reason-shaped sentence and stop asking whether it actually explains anything. But Langer's study also showed a limit: when the request got bigger, empty reasons stopped working, and only real reasons moved people.

For anything that matters to you (your pay, your schedule, your future), make sure the reason is real.

What to do

Ask one follow-up question about the reason.

> *"When you say the budget is tight, is that for all raises this year, or is there a process for exceptions?"*

That question often uncovers that "the budget" has more room than it sounded like, or at least what you'd need to do to get through it.

Most Managers Aren't Villains

Before you go back to work suspecting everything your boss says, an important caution.

Most managers are not running deliberate plays on their employees. They're under pressure from above, short on people, and trying to keep things running. Many learned these moves from their own bosses and have never thought about how they

land. Brian probably believed every word he said to Keisha. He did think she was one of the best. He did think of the team as a kind of family. He did need an answer fast.

That's why every response in this chapter is designed to work whether your manager is being manipulative or simply busy. Connecting praise to a path, keeping a warm boundary, buying five minutes, naming a pattern, asking what an opportunity leads to, and asking about a reason: none of these insult a good manager. A good manager will usually respect you more for them. Only a manager who is truly trying to take advantage of you will be frustrated.

You also have a role in how your manager treats you. Remember what Brian said: "I didn't know you were interested. You never said anything." Managers are not mind readers. If you never say what you want, they will assume you're content with what you have. Saying yes to everything, quietly hoping to be noticed, rarely works. Asking clearly almost always works better.

Back to Keisha

Let's replay that Friday afternoon.

Brian: "You're honestly one of the best people on this floor. We're short three people tomorrow, and I need someone I can count on. We're a family here. I need an answer in ten minutes. And the team would be in a tough spot without you."

Keisha notices the pattern: praise, family, deadline, guilt, all in one breath. She takes a moment.

"Thank you, I really appreciate that. Let me check my calendar and get back to you in five minutes."

Five minutes later, she walks to Brian's desk. "I can't do tomorrow. I have plans with my sister. But I want to be honest with you: this would have been my fifth Saturday in two months, and I don't want the team stuck either. Can we find a longer-term fix for weekend coverage? I'm happy to help think it through."

Brian looks surprised, then a little embarrassed. "Five? I didn't realize it was that many."

"And since you said I'm one of the best on the floor," Keisha adds, "I'd love to talk about the team lead role when it opens. I'm interested, and I have some ideas for training new hires."

Brian finds someone else for Saturday. The following week, he sets up a rotating weekend schedule so no one carries it alone. And when the team lead role opens in the spring, Brian remembers the conversation. Keisha gets the interview, and the job.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Your manager's power over your schedule, pay, and future makes their requests hard to refuse,** even when they're made gently.
- **Praise before a request can substitute for payment.** Accept it, then connect it to something real.
- **"We're a family" can be sincere,** but notice when warmth is used to ask for unpaid sacrifice. Honor it with a boundary.
- **Buy five minutes against tight deadlines.** It's enough to think clearly.
- **Guilt about the team hides staffing problems.** Name the pattern and ask for a longer-term fix.

- **An opportunity has a path attached.** Ask what it leads to.
- **Check whether a "because" is a real reason,** especially for decisions about your pay and future.
- **Most managers aren't villains,** and every response here works with good managers too.
- **Say what you want.** Managers who don't hear it assume you're content.

Drill: The Request Log

For the next two weeks, keep a short log of every request your manager makes that goes beyond your normal job: extra shifts, extra tasks, favors, "quick" projects. For each one, write:

1. **The request.**
2. **The moves that came with it:** praise, family, deadline, guilt, opportunity, or an empty "because."
3. **Your answer.**
4. **What you got in return,** if anything.

At the end of two weeks, look at the log. Many employees discover a clear pattern: they say yes to most requests, the same moves come with them, and they rarely get anything they asked for in return, often because they never asked. Pick one upcoming request and try a different response from this chapter. Notice how your manager reacts.

In the next chapter, the pressure goes public: what to do when your manager calls you out in front of your coworkers.

CHAPTER 18

Called Out in Front of Coworkers

Tyrell had been a technician at an auto repair shop for three years. Every morning at 7:30, the service manager, Ron, held a ten-minute huddle with the eight technicians before the bays opened.

On a Monday, Ron opened the huddle with a clipboard and a frown. "Before we start, Tyrell, the Hendersons' SUV came back Saturday with the same brake noise you supposedly fixed Thursday. That's a comeback, and comebacks cost us money and customers. What happened?"

Seven heads turned toward Tyrell.

Tyrell knew what happened. He had replaced the brake pads exactly as the work order said. The noise came from a warped rotor that the customer had declined to replace, to save money. It was written on the work order. But in that moment, with everyone watching, he felt his face burn. He heard himself say, "That's not on me, man. The customer turned down the rotors. If the front desk explained it better, this wouldn't happen."

The service advisor who wrote up the job was standing in the doorway. Her face tightened. Ron's did too. "Okay," Ron said. "Sounds like nobody's fault, as usual." A couple of technicians smirked. The huddle moved on, but the damage was done. Ron

now thought Tyrell made excuses. The service advisor thought Tyrell had thrown her under the bus. And the other techs had watched the whole thing.

Tyrell had been right on the facts and lost everything else.

Being called out in front of coworkers is one of the hardest moments in any job. Chapter 2 covered public pressure from a leader's point of view. This chapter looks at it from the front line, where the person calling you out is usually your boss, where you have less power to push back, and where the audience is the people you work beside every day.

Why It Hits So Hard

A public call-out threatens almost everything you care about at work, all at once. Your status with your coworkers. Your standing with your boss. Your sense of fairness, especially if the criticism is wrong. And sometimes your security, if you wonder whether this is the start of something worse.

Your body responds as if you are in danger. Your heart races, your face gets hot, and your thinking narrows. In that state, people say things they would never say calmly: excuses, counter-accusations, sarcasm, or a flood of explanation.

And there is an audience. Research on employee silence found that the most common reason people hold back at work is fear of being viewed or labeled negatively. A public call-out is exactly the situation where that label gets attached: "the guy who makes excuses," "the one who can't take feedback," "the one who blames others." Labels formed in public moments can follow you for years.

Blame Spreads in Both Directions

Tyrell's biggest mistake was pointing at the front desk. It felt like simply telling the truth. But it triggered something powerful.

In a series of experiments, Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens found that blame is contagious: when people watch someone blame others, they become more likely to blame others for their own failures. Ron blamed Tyrell publicly. Tyrell immediately blamed the service advisor. If the huddle had kept going, the service advisor probably would have blamed the customer, or the parts supplier, or the schedule. Each blame makes the next one more likely.

The experiments also found something hopeful. When participants first had a chance to affirm their own values and self-worth, the contagion disappeared. People who felt secure didn't need to protect themselves by blaming someone else.

That is the key to handling a public call-out well. You need to feel secure enough, for about thirty seconds, not to protect yourself by fighting back. The rest of this chapter shows you how.

The Five Wrong Responses

Most people respond to a public call-out in one of five ways. All five make things worse.

1. Blame someone else. Tyrell's response. Even when it's true, it makes you look like you're dodging, starts the blame contagion, and damages your relationship with whoever you pointed at.

2. Argue with your boss. "That's not what happened, and you know it." Now your boss has to defend their authority in front of the whole team. You might win the argument and still lose,

because you made your boss look bad publicly.

3. Over-explain. A three-minute account of everything that happened, every detail, every reason. As Chapter 3 described, long explanations sound defensive. The room stops listening after twenty seconds.

4. Collapse. "You're right, I'm sorry, it's my fault, it won't happen again." Absorbing all the blame, even when it isn't yours. It ends the moment, but it puts the mistake on your record and teaches your boss that you're a safe target.

5. Go silent and seethe. Saying nothing, then complaining about it for weeks. Silence in the moment can be fine; Chapter 2 noted that not every jab deserves a response. But silence followed by resentment, with no private conversation, lets the false impression stand.

The Right Response: Calm, Short, and Private

The response that works has three parts, and it usually takes under twenty seconds.

1. Pause and reset

Take one breath before you speak. Chapter 2 introduced the research by Alison Wood Brooks at Harvard, who found that trying to calm down under pressure works less well than relabeling anxiety as excitement. In her studies, people who told themselves "I am excited" before a stressful speech were rated as more persuasive, competent, and confident than those who told themselves "I am calm."

You don't need to feel excited about being called out. But you can tell yourself, in that one breath, "This is energy, not danger. I can handle this." That small switch helps keep your thinking clear.

This is also the moment for a quick self-affirmation, the kind that removed the blame contagion in the Fast and Tiedens experiments. Remind yourself of one thing you know about yourself: "I'm a careful tech. I do good work." You don't have to prove it right now. You just have to remember it.

2. Acknowledge without accepting or arguing

Say something short that shows you heard the concern, takes it seriously, and doesn't argue or collapse.

> *"I hear you. A comeback is a real problem."*

This does a lot. It agrees with the part nobody can argue with (comebacks are bad), lowers the temperature, and shows the room you're not defensive. It doesn't admit fault, and it doesn't blame anyone.

If there is a piece you genuinely own, own it precisely, the way Chapter 8 described for leaders.

> *"I should have flagged the rotor issue to you directly on Thursday, not just on the work order."*

Precise ownership of a small, real piece is powerful. It shows you're honest and self-aware, and it quietly marks the limits of your responsibility without pointing at anyone else.

3. Move the details to private

Offer to go over it after the meeting.

> *"Can I walk you through the work order after the huddle? There's some context I want to make sure you have."*

This is the heart of the response. It signals that there's more to the story without telling the story in public. It gives your boss a way to move on without losing face. And it moves the real conversation to a setting where you can explain fully without an audience.

Put together, Tyrell's response might sound like this:

> *"I hear you, a comeback is a real problem. I should have flagged the rotor issue to you directly on Thursday. Can I walk you through the work order after the huddle? There's some context you'll want."*

Fifteen seconds. No blame, no argument, no collapse. And every person in the room sees someone who can take pressure calmly.

The Private Conversation

The public response only works if you follow it with a private conversation, ideally within an hour. That's where you correct the record.

Bring facts, not feelings. Show the work order where the customer declined the rotors. Keep it short and focused on the problem, not on who was wrong.

> *"Here's the work order from Thursday. I replaced the pads as written. The noise is from the rotors, and the customer declined those. You can see it here. I should have made sure you knew, so you weren't caught off guard. Going forward, I'll flag any declined safety items to you before the car leaves."*

Notice what this does. It corrects the record clearly, owns a small real improvement, and offers a fix that helps your boss. It doesn't attack the service advisor or say "you embarrassed me." It solves the problem.

Most reasonable bosses respond well to this. Some will even correct the record publicly at the next huddle. If yours does, that's a win far bigger than anything you could have gotten by arguing in front of everyone.

You can also, carefully, mention the public part, especially if it's a pattern.

> *"One more thing. When something like this comes up, I'd really appreciate hearing it from you privately first. I'm always glad to fix things, and it's easier to get the full picture one-on-one."*

This is a reasonable request, phrased as making things work better rather than as a complaint. Many managers call people out publicly without thinking about how it lands, and a calm request is often all it takes to change the habit.

When the Criticism Is Fair

Sometimes you get called out because you really did make a mistake. The same structure still works, with one change: own it fully and move straight to the fix.

> *"You're right, I missed the torque spec on the lug nuts. That's on me. I've already rechecked my other two jobs from that day, and I'll use the checklist on every job from now on."*

This kind of response actually raises your standing. Coworkers respect people who own mistakes cleanly. Bosses trust them more. And because you stated a specific fix, you've shown that the problem is solved.

What to avoid, even when you're at fault: over-apologizing, putting yourself down, or making promises you can't keep ("It'll never happen again"). Own it, fix it, and move on. Chapter 19 will look more closely at how over-apologizing hurts front-line employees.

When It's a Pattern

If your boss calls you out publicly once, it's probably a bad habit or a bad day. If it happens again and again, especially if it's more harsh with you than with others, it may be something more serious.

Keep a simple record: the date, what was said, who was there, and what the actual facts were. Not to build a lawsuit, but so you can describe the pattern clearly and calmly if you need to.

If the private conversation doesn't change things, you have other options: talking with your boss's manager, or with human resources if your workplace has it. When you do, bring the facts and focus on the impact on the work:

> *"I want to raise something that's making it harder to do my job well. Over the last two months, I've been criticized in team meetings four times, and in three of those cases, the facts were different from what was said. I've tried raising it privately. I'd like help finding a better way to handle issues like this."*

Public humiliation, personal insults, or criticism based on who you are rather than what you did are not normal management. They are reasons to escalate, and no technique in this book should be used to put up with them.

When a Coworker Calls You Out

Sometimes the person calling you out isn't your boss but a coworker. "Well, if Tyrell had finished his job on time, we wouldn't be behind."

The same principles apply: pause, acknowledge the shared problem without blaming back, and move the details to private.

> *"Being behind is a problem for all of us. Let's figure out what happened after the meeting."*

Then, in private, talk to the coworker directly and calmly. Peers who call each other out in public are often frustrated about something else, like workload, fairness, or a past conflict. A private conversation that starts with "What's going on?" often uncovers the real issue.

Back to Tyrell

Let's replay Monday's huddle.

Ron: "Tyrell, the Hendersons' SUV came back Saturday with the same brake noise you supposedly fixed Thursday. That's a comeback. What happened?"

Seven heads turn. Tyrell feels the heat rise. He takes one breath. *Energy, not danger. I'm a careful tech.*

"I hear you, a comeback is a real problem. I should have flagged it to you directly on Thursday. Can I walk you through the work order after the huddle? There's some context you'll want."

Ron pauses. He was braced for an argument and didn't get one. "Okay. Find me after."

Twenty minutes later, Tyrell shows Ron the work order. The customer declined the rotors; it's written right there. Tyrell offers to flag declined safety items directly to Ron from now on. Ron nods. "Good catch. And yeah, I should've checked the work order before I brought it up."

The next morning, Ron opens the huddle differently. "Quick note on the Henderson SUV: that wasn't a comeback. Customer declined the rotors. Tyrell's going to start flagging declined safety items to me directly, and I want everybody doing that."

The service advisor gives Tyrell a small nod. The other techs heard the correction from Ron himself, which counts for far more than anything Tyrell could have said in his own defense. And Ron now thinks of Tyrell as the tech who stays calm and fixes problems.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Public call-outs threaten status, standing, fairness, and security all at once,** which is why they provoke bad reactions.

- **Blame is contagious.** Blaming someone else, even truthfully, makes the room more defensive and damages relationships.
- **Feeling secure stops the contagion.** Research found self-affirmation removed the urge to blame.
- **Avoid the five wrong responses:** blaming others, arguing with your boss, over-explaining, collapsing, and silent seething.
- **Use the three-part response:** pause and reset, acknowledge without accepting or arguing, and move the details to private.
- **Follow up privately within an hour** with facts, a small real ownership, and a fix that helps your boss.
- **When the criticism is fair, own it fully** and state the fix.
- **If it's a pattern, keep a record** and escalate calmly with facts.

Drill: The Fifteen-Second Response

Think of the three most likely things you could be called out for at work. For each one, write a fifteen-second public response using the three parts: one acknowledging sentence, one sentence of precise ownership (if any piece is genuinely yours), and one sentence moving the details to private.

Then write a short private follow-up for each: the facts, a small real ownership, and a fix.

Say the public responses out loud until you can deliver each one calmly in fifteen seconds. Most front-line employees who do this drill find that the next time they're called out, the words are already there. The heat still rises, but it doesn't take over.

In the next chapter, we look at the quiet ways front-line employees hurt themselves, often without realizing it: over-apologizing, saying yes to everything, and venting to the wrong

person.

CHAPTER 19

How You Hurt Yourself

Half Two · Part 1: How Your Mind Gets Used Against You

Ana worked the front desk at a busy dental practice with four dentists and two locations. She was organized, warm with patients, and could untangle an insurance problem faster than anyone in the office. Patients asked for her by name. By any fair measure, she was one of the practice's most valuable employees.

She was also, quietly, her own worst enemy.

She said "sorry" constantly. "Sorry, do you have a second?" "Sorry, I just had a quick question." "Sorry, I think there might be a scheduling problem." When the office manager, Denise, asked her to take on billing follow-ups in addition to the front desk, Ana said yes, even though she was already staying late. When Denise later asked her to train a new hire too, she said yes again. And when she felt overwhelmed, she didn't tell Denise. She told her coworker Kayla, over lunch, in detail, including a few sharp comments about Denise.

Six months later, two things happened in the same week. Kayla, in a moment of frustration of her own, repeated some of Ana's comments to Denise. And Ana, exhausted, made a billing error that cost the practice money. In her review, Denise described Ana as "a hard worker who struggles with workload and sometimes has a negative attitude." There was no raise.

Ana was stunned. She had worked harder than anyone. She had never said no. She had always been polite. How had it come to this?

The moves that managers make, which Chapter 17 described, can certainly hurt front-line employees. But just as Chapter 3 showed for leaders, some of the deepest damage is self-inflicted. It comes from habits that feel like virtues: politeness, helpfulness, honesty with a friend. This chapter is about those habits, and how to replace them.

Habit 1: Over-Apologizing

"Sorry" is one of the most common words in the workplace, and front-line employees use it more than almost anyone. It often isn't really an apology. It's a way of softening a request, avoiding conflict, or showing respect to someone with more power.

But constant apologizing sends a message you don't intend. Every "sorry" quietly says: *I'm in the way. My question is an imposition. I've done something wrong.* Say it often enough, and people start to believe it. Your requests start to seem less important. Your concerns start to sound like complaints. And when you genuinely need to apologize for a real mistake, the word has lost its weight.

There is a deeper cost, too. Research on employee silence found that most employees had at some point held back an important concern from a supervisor, mainly because they feared being seen negatively. Over-apologizing is a cousin of that silence. It's a way of raising something while trying to make it as small as possible. And concerns raised that way are easy to dismiss.

What to do instead

Replace "sorry" with something more accurate.

- Instead of "**Sorry, do you have a second?**" say "**Do you have a minute? I have a quick question about the schedule.**"
- Instead of "**Sorry to bother you**" say "**Thanks for making time.**"
- Instead of "**Sorry, I think there might be a problem**" say "**I noticed a problem I want to flag.**"
- Instead of "**Sorry I'm late**" (when you are) say "**Thank you for waiting.**"

Save "I'm sorry" for when you've actually made a mistake. Then say it once, clearly, and move straight to the fix: "I'm sorry, I entered the wrong code on that claim. I've already resubmitted it, and I'll double-check codes on every claim going forward."

This small change in wording has a surprisingly big effect on how you're seen. You sound more confident and more professional, and your concerns get taken more seriously.

Habit 2: Saying Yes to Everything

Ana said yes to the billing follow-ups and yes to training the new hire. She thought she was being a team player. In a sense she was. But saying yes to everything had three costs she didn't see.

First, it made her overload invisible. Each yes told Denise that Ana had room. Denise never saw that Ana was staying late every day, because Ana never said so. As far as Denise could tell, the extra work was going fine, right up until the billing error.

Second, it lowered the quality of everything. Nobody can do three jobs as well as one. When Ana made the billing mistake, Denise didn't think, "She has too much to do." She thought, "She

made a mistake." Overload turns into a performance problem, and the employee gets the blame.

Third, it cost her leverage. Chapter 17 described how praise and "growth opportunities" can substitute for real rewards. Each time Ana took on more work without asking for anything, she taught Denise that more work was free. By review time, Ana's extra responsibilities had become part of her normal job, without the raise or title to match.

What to do instead

You don't have to say no to everything. You need to make your yes visible and your trade-offs clear.

Name what you're already carrying.

> *"I'm happy to help with billing follow-ups. Right now I'm handling the front desk and insurance verifications, and I'm staying about an hour late most days. If I take this on, what should I drop or push back?"*

This is one of the most important sentences a front-line employee can learn. Chapter 11 taught leaders to ask "What should we stop?" when the goal changes from above. This is the same question, asked from below. It's not a refusal. It's a request for a decision, and it puts the trade-off where it belongs: with the person who has the authority to make it.

Connect extra work to something real.

> *"I'm glad to train the new hire. Can we talk about how that fits into my review, or whether it could lead to a lead role?"*

Give real reasons when you do say no. Remember Ellen Langer's copy-machine study from Chapter 1: people respond much better to requests that come with a reason. The same goes for refusals. "I can't" sounds like unwillingness. "I can't take that on this week because the end-of-month insurance deadline is Friday and I want to get it right" sounds like responsibility.

Habit 3: Venting to the Wrong Person

Everyone needs to blow off steam at work. Having a coworker you can be honest with is valuable. But venting has risks that front-line employees often underestimate.

Ana told Kayla, in detail, how frustrated she was with Denise, including some sharp personal comments. She trusted Kayla. And Kayla probably didn't mean to cause harm. But workplace relationships change. People get frustrated, compete for the same promotion, or simply repeat things carelessly. Anything you say about your boss to a coworker can reach your boss, often without the context that made it understandable.

Venting has a second cost that's less obvious. It releases the pressure that might have pushed you to fix the problem. After a satisfying lunch complaining to Kayla, Ana felt better, and didn't talk to Denise. The problem stayed exactly where it was, and grew.

There's also the blame effect. Research by Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens found that blaming is contagious: when people hear others blame, they become more likely to blame too. A lunch table that turns into a complaint session about the boss can quietly shift a whole team toward blaming instead of solving.

What to do instead

Vent outside work. Friends, family, a partner, or a mentor outside your company are much safer places to let off steam. They can listen without any chance of it getting back to your boss.

At work, talk about problems, not people. "I'm drowning in billing follow-ups" is a problem you can discuss safely with a coworker. "Denise has no idea what she's doing" is a comment about a person that can follow you for years.

Take the real problem to the person who can fix it. If you're frustrated with your boss, the most useful conversation is usually with your boss, privately and calmly. The rest of Half Two will give you the tools to do that well.

A simple test before you vent at work: **Would I be comfortable if this were repeated word for word to the person I'm talking about?** If not, save it for outside work.

Habit 4: Staying Silent Until You Explode

Ana never told Denise she was overwhelmed. She held it in for six months, until a mistake and a repeated comment told the story for her, in the worst possible way.

This is one of the most common and costly patterns among front-line employees. Small problems get swallowed instead of raised. Frustration builds. And eventually it comes out all at once: in a mistake, an angry outburst, a sudden resignation, or a negative review that seems to come from nowhere.

The silence research helps explain why. When people fear being labeled as complainers or troublemakers, they hold back. But the irony is that silence often leads to exactly the label they feared.

Ana avoided raising her workload because she didn't want to seem negative. She ended up being described as having a negative attitude anyway.

There's evidence on the other side of the desk, too. Gallup has found that 51 percent of people who quit their jobs said that in the three months before they left, no manager or leader had talked with them about their job satisfaction or their future. Many managers simply don't ask. If you wait for your manager to notice you're struggling, you may wait until it's too late.

What to do instead

Raise small problems while they're small, calmly and with a suggestion.

> *"Can I flag something? Since I took on billing follow-ups, I've been staying about an hour late most days, and I'm worried about mistakes. Could we look at either moving some front-desk tasks to Kayla or setting aside a quiet hour each morning for billing?"*

Notice the structure: the problem, the impact, and a suggestion. That combination makes you sound like someone solving problems, not complaining about them. Chapter 28 will go deeper into how to report a problem without becoming the problem.

Habit 5: Over-Explaining and Under-Asking

The last habit mirrors one from Chapter 3. When front-line employees feel challenged, they often respond with long explanations. When their manager questions a decision, they

defend it in detail instead of asking what the manager is concerned about.

Long explanations sound defensive, as Chapter 3 described. They also eat up the limited time you have with your manager, often without finding out what your manager actually wanted to know.

Try the one-reason rule from Chapter 3: give your strongest reason in a sentence or two, then ask a question.

> *"I moved the Johnson appointment because the hygienist was double-booked. Is there something about that change that's a problem?"*

The question often reveals that your manager wasn't criticizing you at all. They just needed to know something.

Back to Ana

Let's replay Ana's six months with different habits.

When Denise asks Ana to take on billing follow-ups, Ana says, "I'm happy to help. Right now I'm handling the front desk and insurance verifications. If I add this, what should I drop or push back?" Denise thinks about it and moves insurance verifications to Kayla.

When Denise asks Ana to train the new hire, Ana says yes, and adds, "Could we talk about how training fits into my review? I'd like to work toward a lead role." Denise writes it down.

Ana stops opening every question with "sorry." She notices that Denise starts responding to her requests faster.

When she's frustrated, she talks to her sister on the phone in the evening, not to Kayla at lunch. With Kayla, she talks about the workload, not about Denise.

And when billing starts to feel overwhelming in month four, she raises it right away: the problem, the impact, and a suggestion for a quiet hour each morning. Denise agrees.

At her review, Denise describes Ana as "one of the strongest members of the team, with clear leadership potential." She gets a raise and a new title: front office lead.

Same person. Same skills. Same workload, at first. Different habits.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Some of the worst damage to front-line employees is self-inflicted,** through habits that feel like virtues.
- **Over-apologizing makes your requests seem small.** Replace "sorry" with accurate language, and save real apologies for real mistakes.
- **Saying yes to everything hides your overload,** lowers your quality, and costs you leverage. Name what you're carrying and ask what to drop.
- **Venting at work can reach your boss** and drains the energy to fix problems. Vent outside work; at work, talk about problems, not people.
- **Staying silent until you explode** often creates the label you feared. Raise small problems early with a suggestion.
- **Use the one-reason rule,** then ask what your manager is concerned about.

Drill: The Habit Swap

For the next two weeks, pick one habit from this chapter and track it every day.

- If you pick **over-apologizing**, count how many times you say "sorry" at work each day, then replace each unnecessary one with a better phrase.
- If you pick **saying yes to everything**, use "What should I drop or push back?" at least once.
- If you pick **venting**, apply the repeat test before every complaint about a person at work.
- If you pick **staying silent**, raise one small problem with your manager each week, using problem, impact, and suggestion.

At the end of two weeks, notice what changed in how your manager and coworkers respond to you. Most people find that one small habit swap shifts how they're seen more than months of extra effort did.

In the next chapter, we close Part 1 of Half Two with an idea that changes how you see every conversation with your boss: every one of them is a sale.

CHAPTER 20

Every Conversation with Your Boss Is a Sale

Half Two · Part 1: How Your Mind Gets Used Against You

Jenny was a staff accountant at a mid-sized accounting firm, two years out of school. She had an idea she was excited about. The firm still prepared client tax organizers by hand, a tedious process that ate dozens of hours every January. Jenny had built a spreadsheet template on her own time that could cut that work roughly in half.

She caught her manager, Paul, in the hallway on a Thursday afternoon in early December, the busiest stretch before year-end.

"Hey, Paul, do you have a sec? So I've been working on this thing, it's kind of a spreadsheet, it pulls last year's client data and sort of fills in the organizers automatically, and I think it could maybe save some time? I don't know, it's probably not perfect, but I was thinking maybe we could try it?"

Paul was distracted. He had a partner meeting in five minutes. "Sounds interesting. Send me something and I'll take a look after tax season."

After tax season was four months away. Jenny sent the spreadsheet. Paul never opened it. In March, a senior accountant on another team presented a similar idea to the partners, with a

one-page summary showing hours saved and dollars recovered. The partners loved it. It became the firm's new standard, credited to him.

Jenny's idea was just as good, maybe better. What she lacked was not a good product. It was a good pitch.

Chapter 4 told leaders that every conversation where someone needs something from them is a sale. This chapter turns that idea around. As a front-line employee, almost every important conversation you have with your boss is a sale too, in both directions. You are selling your boss on your ideas, your requests, and your value. And your boss is selling you on decisions, expectations, and explanations. Learning to sell well, and buy well, is one of the most useful skills you can have.

Why Employees Don't Think of It as Selling

Most front-line employees don't like the idea of "selling" to their boss. It sounds manipulative, or like sucking up. Many believe good work should speak for itself.

It doesn't. Not because bosses are unfair, but because bosses are busy. Your manager is juggling their own boss, their own deadlines, and the needs of everyone on the team. They do not have time to discover the value in your work on their own. If you don't make the case clearly, they will often miss it, the way Paul missed Jenny's spreadsheet.

Selling, in the sense this chapter means, is not manipulation. It is helping a busy person quickly understand why something matters to them. That is a service to your boss as much as to you.

The Three Products You're Selling

Chapter 4 explained that every pitch involves three products: a version of events, a decision, and a feeling. The same is true when you pitch upward.

A version of events. When you raise a problem, ask for something, or propose an idea, you're telling a story about what's happening. "We waste forty hours every January on organizers" is a version of events. So is "I've been carrying extra work for six months." The version of events you present shapes what solutions make sense.

A decision. What do you want your boss to do? Approve a pilot, give you a raise, move a deadline, assign you to a project. Many employees never state the decision clearly. Jenny's "maybe we could try it?" didn't actually ask for anything specific.

A feeling. How do you want your boss to feel? Confident in you. Relieved that a problem has a solution. Excited about an opportunity. Jenny's pitch, full of "kind of" and "probably not perfect," left Paul feeling unsure, which made it easy to postpone.

When you prepare to ask your boss for something, think through all three. What story am I telling, what exactly am I asking for, and how do I want them to feel when I'm done?

Selling Upward: The Six Steps

Chapter 4 described the six-step structure of a pitch: rapport, frame, anchor, reason, urgency, and close. Here's how each one works when you're selling to your boss, honestly.

Step 1: Pick the right moment (rapport)

Rapport with your boss is built over time, through reliability and good work. But in any single pitch, the most important form of rapport is timing. Jenny caught Paul in a hallway five minutes before a partner meeting, during the busiest month of the year. Almost any pitch would have failed in that moment.

Ask for time instead.

> *"I have an idea that could save us time during tax season. Could I get fifteen minutes with you this week to walk you through it?"*

This does three things: it signals the idea is worth hearing, it connects it to something your boss cares about, and it lets your boss choose a moment when they can actually pay attention.

A note on flattery. Chapter 1 described research by James Westphal and Ithai Stern showing that subtle flattery, like compliments framed as asking for advice, can be surprisingly effective, at least when the target doesn't see it as a tactic. That may be true, but it's a risky strategy for an employee. If your boss senses insincerity, your credibility drops. Genuine respect works better: asking real questions because you actually want the answers.

Step 2: Frame it in your boss's terms (frame)

Your boss doesn't care about your spreadsheet. Your boss cares about their own problems: deadlines, budgets, client satisfaction, their own boss's expectations. Frame your idea as a solution to one of those.

Use what Chapter 5 called perspective-taking: thinking about what the other person wants and is worried about. Paul's real wants in December were probably surviving tax season, keeping the team from burning out, and looking good to the partners.

> *"Every January we spend about forty hours filling out client organizers by hand. I built a template that cuts that roughly in half. That's twenty hours back during our busiest month."*

Notice how much stronger that sounds than "I've been working on this thing."

Step 3: Name the number first (anchor)

As Chapter 13 explained, research by Adam Galinsky and Thomas Mussweiler found that first offers tend to pull final outcomes toward them. Whoever names a number first often shapes the whole conversation.

For an idea, the number might be hours saved, money saved, or errors reduced. For a raise, it's the amount you're asking for. For a project, it's the timeline or resources you need. Name it clearly and early, with a reason behind it.

> *"Based on last year's client count, the template would save about twenty hours, which at our billing rate is roughly four thousand dollars in time we could use on billable work."*

If you don't name the number, your boss will, and their number will usually be smaller than yours.

Step 4: Give a real reason (reason)

Ellen Langer's copy-machine study showed that people agree much more often when a request comes with a reason, even a weak one, for small favors. But for bigger requests, only a real reason worked.

Anything you're pitching to your boss that matters, like an idea, a raise, or a change in your role, is a big request. It needs a real reason: evidence, results, or a clear benefit.

> *"I tested it on twenty of last year's clients. It filled in about ninety percent of the fields correctly, and the rest took a minute each to check."*

This is proof, and it turns your idea from a maybe into a sure thing.

Step 5: Explain why now (urgency)

Chapter 1 warned leaders about false urgency. As an employee, you should never invent a deadline. But real timing often matters, and you should say so.

> *"If we want to use it this January, we'd need to set it up in the next few weeks, before organizers go out."*

Honest urgency gives your boss a reason to act now instead of "after tax season."

Step 6: Ask for something specific (close)

End with a clear, small, easy-to-approve request.

> *"Could we try it with my twenty clients this year? If it works, we can roll it out to the whole team next year."*

A small pilot is much easier to say yes to than a big change. And it lets you prove the idea with low risk to your boss.

Put it all together, and Jenny's fifteen-minute pitch takes about two minutes to deliver, leaves time for questions, and ends with a decision.

Your Boss Is Selling to You, Too

Selling goes both ways. Your boss sells you things constantly: explanations for decisions, reasons you can't have what you asked for, and visions of what your role could become.

Some of this is perfectly honest. Some of it is shaped, intentionally or not, to get you to accept something you might otherwise question. Chapter 17 described the moves managers commonly make: praise before a request, "we're a family," tight deadlines, guilt, growth opportunities, and empty reasons. Each one is part of a pitch.

To be a good buyer, use the same three-product test from Chapter 4.

The version of events: Is there another way to tell this story? "The budget is frozen" might mean there's no money at all, or it might mean raises need extra approval. "The promotion went to someone with more experience" might be true, or it might mean you never formally asked.

The decision: What exactly is being asked of me, and what would I need to believe for it to be fair? If you're asked to take on a new responsibility, would it be fair with no change in pay or title? What would need to be true?

The feeling: Would I accept this without the feeling attached? If the praise, the guilt, or the excitement were removed, would the request still make sense?

Ask one clarifying question about anything that matters to you. "When you say the budget is frozen, does that apply to all raises, or is there a process for exceptions?" You'll be surprised how often the honest answer gives you a path forward.

Selling Honestly

A warning that matters even more for employees than for leaders: don't oversell.

If you exaggerate your results, invent urgency, or promise more than you can deliver, you might win one conversation. But your boss will remember. Credibility is one of the most valuable things a front-line employee has, and it's easy to lose. Once your boss learns that your numbers need to be double-checked, every future pitch gets harder.

So test your pitch the same way you'd test your boss's: Would my version of events hold up if someone told it differently? Would my request make sense without the emotional push? Would my reason survive the question "Why does that matter?"

If you're not sure about a number, say so. "I estimate about twenty hours, though it could be closer to fifteen" is more persuasive over time than a confident number that turns out to be wrong.

Back to Jenny

Let's replay December.

Instead of catching Paul in the hallway, Jenny sends a short message: "I have an idea that could save us time during tax season. Could I get fifteen minutes this week to walk you through it?" Paul offers Monday morning.

On Monday, Jenny gets right to it. "Every January we spend about forty hours filling out client organizers by hand. I built a template that cuts that roughly in half. I tested it on twenty of last year's clients, and it filled in about ninety percent of fields correctly. That's about twenty hours back during our busiest month, which at our billing rate is roughly four thousand dollars of time we could put toward billable work. If we want to use it this January, we'd need to set it up in the next few weeks. Could we try it with my twenty clients this year? If it works, we can roll it out to everyone next year."

Paul is quiet for a moment, then leans forward. "Show me."

He approves the pilot that day. In January, Jenny's clients' organizers go out a week early. In March, Paul brings Jenny to the partner meeting to present the results herself. The template becomes the firm's new standard, with her name on it.

Half Two, Part 1, in One Page

This chapter closes Part 1 of Half Two. In four chapters, we've looked at how front-line employees get worked on, and how they work against themselves.

- **Managers make moves, on purpose or not** (Chapter 17): praise before a request, "we're a family," tight deadlines, guilt, growth

opportunities, and empty reasons.

- **Public call-outs hit hard** (Chapter 18): pause and reset, acknowledge without accepting or arguing, and move the details to private.
- **Many wounds are self-inflicted** (Chapter 19): over-apologizing, saying yes to everything, venting to the wrong person, staying silent until you explode, and over-explaining.
- **Every conversation with your boss is a sale** (Chapter 20): know the three products, pitch in six honest steps, and be a careful buyer of your boss's pitches.

Part 2 shifts from defense to offense. You'll learn to understand what your manager really needs, read the pressures above your manager, and map a conversation before you walk in to ask for something.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Good work doesn't always speak for itself,** because bosses are busy. Make the case clearly.
- **Selling to your boss means helping a busy person see why something matters to them.**
- **Every pitch has three products:** a version of events, a decision, and a feeling.
- **Pitch in six honest steps:** pick the right moment, frame it in your boss's terms, name the number first, give a real reason, explain why now, and ask for something specific.
- **Small pilots are easier to approve** than big changes.
- **Your boss sells to you too.** Test their version of events, the decision, and the feeling, and ask one clarifying question.

- **Never oversell.** Credibility is hard to rebuild.

Drill: The Two-Minute Pitch

Think of one idea, request, or change you'd like to propose to your boss. Write a two-minute pitch using the six steps:

1. **The ask for time:** a one-sentence message requesting fifteen minutes.
2. **The frame:** the problem in your boss's terms.
3. **The number:** hours, dollars, errors, or the amount you're asking for.
4. **The reason:** your evidence or proof.
5. **The timing:** why now, honestly.
6. **The close:** a specific, small, easy-to-approve request.

Say it out loud with a timer until it fits in two minutes. Then send the request for time this week.

Most front-line employees who do this drill find that the pitch itself takes far less time than they feared, and that bosses respond much more positively to a clear, short pitch than to a long, uncertain one.

In the next chapter, Part 2 begins with the question that sets up every good pitch: what does your manager really need from you?

CHAPTER 21

What Your Manager Really Needs from You

Half Two · Part 2: Ten Moves Ahead

Elijah was the best maintenance technician at a property management company that ran six apartment complexes. He could fix almost anything: a broken boiler, a leaking roof, an electrical problem nobody else could trace. Tenants loved him. His work orders got closed faster than anyone's.

And his manager, Stacy, found him exhausting.

Elijah couldn't understand it. He did more work than anyone and did it well. But from Stacy's side, the picture looked different. Elijah rarely updated her on what he was working on, so when a tenant or the owner called her asking about a repair, she often didn't know. Twice, he had made expensive repair decisions without checking with her, and both times the owner had called Stacy, not Elijah, to ask why the budget was over. And when a big job ran late, Stacy usually found out from an angry tenant instead of from Elijah.

When the senior technician role opened up, Stacy gave it to a technician with less skill. Elijah was hurt and confused. "I'm better at the work," he told a friend. "Everyone knows it."

He was right. But he had misunderstood what Stacy needed. She didn't need the most skilled technician. She needed someone she could rely on to keep her informed, protect her budget, and never

let her be surprised by her own boss. The technician who got the job did all three.

This chapter begins Part 2 of Half Two, where we move from defense to offense. In Part 1, you learned to recognize the moves managers make and the habits that hurt you. Now you'll learn to see conversations before they happen, and it all starts with the same question Chapter 5 asked leaders, flipped around: **what does your manager really need?**

Your Manager Has a Boss Too

The most important thing to understand about your manager is that they are also managed. Stacy answered to the property owners. Your manager probably answers to someone too: a director, an owner, a regional manager, a board, or customers. That person sets their goals, judges their performance, and decides their future.

This changes everything about how you see your manager's behavior. When a manager seems controlling, it is often because their own boss is holding them accountable for things they can't see. When they ask for constant updates, it's often because they've been embarrassed by not knowing something. When they focus on budget over quality, it's usually because budget is what they're judged on.

Chapter 5 described five real wants that drive people at work: security, status, fairness, autonomy, and safety from blame. Managers have all five, and they're shaped heavily by the pressure from above.

- **Security:** Will I keep my job? Will I hit my numbers?

- **Status:** Do I look competent to my boss? Does my team make me look good?
- **Fairness:** Am I being judged on things I actually control?
- **Autonomy:** Do I have enough control over my area to get results?
- **Safety from blame:** If something goes wrong, will I be the one blamed?

Stacy's biggest real want was safety from blame. Every time Elijah surprised her, he exposed her to blame from the owners. His excellent repairs didn't matter if she got called about a budget overrun she didn't know about.

The Six Things Most Managers Need

Every manager is different. But across almost every workplace, managers need a few of the same things from the people who report to them. If you consistently provide these, you will be seen as one of the most valuable people on the team, often more valuable than people with better technical skills.

1. No surprises

This is the big one. Managers hate being surprised, especially by their own boss. If something is going wrong, they want to know before anyone else does.

Recall the research from Chapter 1: in one study, 85 percent of employees had at some point held back an important concern from a supervisor, mostly out of fear of being seen negatively. That means most managers are working with incomplete information. When you are the person who tells them about problems early, you become extremely valuable.

> *"Heads up: the boiler repair at Oakview is going to take two more days because the part is back-ordered. I've told the tenants. Wanted you to know in case the owner asks."*

That message takes thirty seconds to send. It protects your manager from being blindsided, shows you're on top of things, and builds trust.

2. Reliability

Managers need to know that when you say something will be done, it will be done, on time and as promised. Reliability is often worth more than brilliance. A manager can plan around a reliable person. They can't plan around someone who is great but unpredictable.

3. Bad news early, with a plan

Nobody wants bad news. But managers want late bad news even less. When you bring a problem, bring it early and, if possible, with a suggested solution or a few options.

> *"The roof at Building C needs more than a patch. I see two options: a full section replacement now for about eight thousand dollars, or a patch for fifteen hundred that buys us about a year. I'd recommend the replacement, but I wanted your call before going over budget."*

This is what Chapter 9 recommended for leaders delivering bad news upward: bring options, not just problems. It turns a problem into a decision your manager can make quickly.

4. Protecting their budget and their decisions

Managers are often judged on spending, schedules, and decisions they've committed to. When you make choices that affect those, especially expensive ones, check first. Elijah's biggest mistakes weren't his repairs. They were making budget decisions that belonged to Stacy.

A simple rule: **if a decision affects your manager's numbers or commitments, ask before you act.** If it's an emergency and you can't reach them, act, then tell them immediately.

5. Making them look good

This isn't about flattery. It's about doing work that reflects well on your manager in front of their boss: work that's done right, documented clearly, and easy for them to report on.

When your manager has to present results to their boss, give them something easy to present. A short summary of what you accomplished, with numbers, is a gift to a busy manager.

> *"Here's a quick summary of last month: forty-two work orders closed, average response time under a day, and the Oakview boiler replaced under budget."*

6. Low maintenance

Managers have limited time and attention. The people they value most are the ones who solve problems on their own, ask good questions when they're stuck, and don't need constant direction or reassurance. Low maintenance doesn't mean never asking for help. It means asking clearly, at the right time, and bringing what you've already tried.

Perspective-Taking, from Below

Chapter 5 described research by Adam Galinsky and his colleagues showing that negotiators who focused on what the other side was thinking (their interests and goals) reached creative deals about 76 percent of the time, compared with 54 percent for those who focused on the other side's feelings.

That skill is just as valuable for front-line employees. When you understand what your manager is trying to achieve and what they're worried about, you can shape your work and your requests to fit. You stop fighting your manager and start helping them, which almost always makes them more willing to help you.

This isn't about becoming a yes-person. It's about understanding the game your manager is playing, so you can play on their team. Once you know that Stacy's biggest worry is being blamed by the owners, you know that keeping her informed is worth more than closing one extra work order.

How to Find Out What Your Manager Needs

You can learn a lot by watching. But the fastest way is to ask directly. Most managers are glad to be asked, and few employees ever do it.

Here are some questions that work well, in a one-on-one or a quiet moment:

- **"What does a great month look like for you?"** This reveals what your manager is judged on.
- **"What's the thing you most need from me?"** This often surfaces something you didn't expect, like updates, or checking before spending.

- **"What's keeping you up at night right now?"** This shows you their biggest pressures.
- **"How do you like to get updates: a quick message, an email, or in person?"** Some managers want a text; others want a weekly summary.
- **"When something goes wrong, how early do you want to hear about it?"** Most will say "immediately."

Notice that these questions are not about you. They're about your manager. That's the point. Asking them shows maturity and makes you stand out, and the answers tell you exactly how to become indispensable.

Mapping Your Manager

Chapter 5 taught leaders to map the room before an important conversation. You can do the same for your manager, once, and update it as you learn more. Take ten minutes and answer four questions:

1. **Who does my manager answer to,** and what is that person most focused on?
2. **What is my manager judged on?** Budget, deadlines, customer satisfaction, team turnover?
3. **What are my manager's biggest real wants?** Security, status, fairness, autonomy, or safety from blame?
4. **What does my manager need most from me?** Updates, reliability, budget discipline, early warnings, something else?

Here's what Elijah's map might have looked like:

- **Answers to:** the property owners, who focus on budget and tenant complaints.

- **Judged on:** staying within budget and keeping tenants happy.
- **Biggest real wants:** safety from blame (owners call her about every problem) and status (looking competent to the owners).
- **Needs most from me:** no surprises about repairs, checking before going over budget, and quick updates when jobs run late.

With that map, Elijah would have seen immediately that his technical skill was only half of what Stacy needed.

What You Get in Return

You might wonder: why should I do all this extra work to make my manager's life easier?

Because it's one of the most reliable ways to get what you want. Managers give the best assignments, the strongest reviews, and the promotions to the people who make their jobs easier. They go to bat for those people with their own bosses. They give them more freedom, because they trust them.

And when you need something, like a raise, a schedule change, or support in a conflict, you'll be asking from a position of trust. Chapter 25 will cover how to ask for a raise or promotion. The single best preparation for that conversation is months of being the person your manager relies on.

There's a limit, of course. Understanding what your manager needs does not mean accepting unfair treatment, unsafe work, or requests that cross ethical lines. Part 3 will cover how to push back when you need to. But most of the time, the path to getting what you want runs through giving your manager what they need.

Back to Elijah

Let's replay Elijah's year with this chapter in mind.

In January, during a one-on-one, Elijah asks Stacy, "What's the thing you most need from me?"

Stacy is surprised by the question. She thinks for a moment. "Honestly? I need to know what's going on. The owners call me about everything, and when I don't know about a repair, I look bad. And I need you to check with me before anything over five hundred dollars."

Elijah starts sending Stacy a short message at the end of each day: what he finished, what's in progress, and anything running late. Before any repair over five hundred dollars, he texts her the options and a recommendation. When the Building C roof turns out to need a full replacement, Stacy knows before the owners do, and she presents the recommendation as her own decision, with Elijah's numbers behind it.

By summer, Stacy is telling the owners that Elijah is her most reliable technician. When the senior technician role opens, she doesn't even post it. She offers it to him.

Elijah's skills didn't change. What changed was that he started providing what Stacy actually needed.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Your manager has a boss too.** Much of their behavior comes from pressure you can't see.
- **Managers have the same five real wants as everyone:** security, status, fairness, autonomy, and safety from blame.

- **Six things most managers need:** no surprises, reliability, bad news early with a plan, protection of their budget and decisions, making them look good, and low maintenance.
- **Perspective-taking works from below.** Understanding your manager's goals helps you shape your work and requests to fit.
- **Ask your manager directly** what they need, what a great month looks like, and how they like updates.
- **Map your manager once,** and update it as you learn.
- **Giving your manager what they need** is one of the most reliable ways to get what you want.

Drill: The Manager Map and One Question

This week, do two things.

First, take ten minutes and fill out the four-question manager map: who they answer to, what they're judged on, their biggest real wants, and what they need most from you.

Second, in your next one-on-one or quiet moment with your manager, ask one question from this chapter. "What's the thing you most need from me?" is a good place to start.

Compare their answer to your map. Most people discover at least one need they had completely missed. Start providing it the next day, and watch how your manager's attitude toward you shifts over the following month.

In the next chapter, we look one level higher: how to read the pressures above your manager, so you can see changes coming before they reach you.

CHAPTER 22

Reading the Room Above Your Manager

Half Two · Part 2: Ten Moves Ahead

Hector had sold furniture at the same store for six years. He was one of the top three salespeople in a chain of twelve locations, and he was used to doing things his way: building long relationships with customers, spending an hour with a couple choosing a sofa, and following up with handwritten notes.

In March, a few things changed. The chain hired a new regional director. Hector's store manager, Carol, started spending more time in her office with the door closed. The weekly sales meeting began opening with a new number nobody had talked about before: "sales per hour on the floor." And Carol, normally relaxed, seemed tense.

Hector noticed all of it, and dismissed it. He kept selling the way he always had.

In June, the chain announced a new commission plan. It rewarded fast, high-volume sales and cut commissions on long, slow ones. Salespeople would now be ranked by sales per hour. Hector's numbers, built on long consultations, dropped him from the top three to the middle of the pack. He was furious. "Nobody warned us," he said.

But he had been warned, many times, just not in words. The new director, the closed door, the new metric, and Carol's stress were all signals that the priorities above his store were changing. A salesperson who had read those signals in March would have had three months to adjust.

Chapter 21 asked what your manager really needs. This chapter looks one level higher: the pressures on your manager from their own boss and the organization above. Most of the changes that affect your job don't start with your manager. They start above them and flow down. If you can read the room above your manager, you can see changes coming before they arrive, and adjust while others are still being surprised.

Why Change Comes from Above

Front-line employees often experience workplace changes as sudden: a new policy, a new metric, a new schedule, a reorganization. But for the people higher up, these changes rarely come out of nowhere. They usually follow months of pressure: missed targets, a new owner or executive, competition, a budget problem, or a shift in strategy.

Your manager often knows about these pressures long before you do. Sometimes they're not allowed to share. Sometimes they're not sure yet what will happen. Sometimes, as Chapter 9 described, they simply wait too long to deliver bad news, hoping things will settle. Either way, by the time a change is announced to the front line, the decision was usually made weeks or months earlier.

That gap is your opportunity. The signals that a change is coming usually leak out long before the announcement. You just have to know what to watch for.

The Signals Worth Watching

These are the most common signs that pressure above your manager is shifting.

1. New people at the top

A new owner, executive, regional director, or department head almost always means change. New leaders want to make their mark, and they often bring different priorities. When someone new arrives above your manager, assume that what was valued before may not be valued the same way after.

2. New numbers

When meetings start featuring a measure nobody tracked before, pay attention. "Sales per hour" was the clearest signal in Hector's story. What gets measured is usually what's about to get rewarded, or punished. New numbers tell you what the people above your manager now care about.

3. Changes in your manager's behavior

Managers under pressure act differently. They may become more tense, close their door more often, check details they used to leave alone, ask for more reports, or become less available. These changes usually reflect pressure from above, not anything about you. But they tell you that something is happening.

4. Budget tightening

Delayed purchases, frozen hiring, cancelled events, stricter approval for expenses, or "let's hold off on that for now." Budget pressure is one of the most common reasons for changes in policy, staffing, and pay.

5. Changes in language

Listen for new words in announcements, emails, and meetings: "efficiency," "restructuring," "alignment," "focus," "right-sizing." These words often signal changes before anyone states them directly.

6. What's suddenly not discussed

Sometimes the signal is silence. A project that was talked about constantly suddenly disappears from meetings. A promotion process goes quiet. A question gets an unusually vague answer. As Chapter 5 noted, what people avoid saying often tells you more than what they say.

None of these signals alone means a big change is coming. But when several show up together, as they did for Hector, it's time to pay attention.

How to Ask Your Manager About It

Once you notice signals, the best next step is usually to ask your manager, carefully. Most managers can't share everything, but many will share more than you'd expect if you ask the right way.

The key is to ask in a way that helps your manager, rather than in a way that puts them on the spot or sounds like you're gathering gossip. Use perspective-taking: show that you want to understand their pressures so you can help with them.

Good questions:

"I noticed we've started tracking sales per hour in our meetings. Is that something the new director is focused on? I want to make sure I'm working on what matters most."
"It seems like things have been busy for you lately. Is there anything coming down from above that I should know about, or that I can help with?"
"What do you think the company's biggest priority is going to be this year?"

Notice the pattern. Each question connects to something you've observed, frames your interest as wanting to help or do the right work, and gives your manager room to answer only as much as they can.

Questions to avoid:

- **"Are there going to be layoffs?"** This puts your manager in a very difficult position, and they often can't answer honestly even if they want to.
- **"What's going on? Everyone's saying..."** This signals you're spreading rumors.
- **"Why does the new director want to change everything?"** This sounds like resistance, and your manager may feel they need to defend their boss.

If your manager says they can't share details, respect it. "I understand. If there's anything I can do to help, let me know." That response builds trust, and makes it more likely they'll tell you more when they can.

Adjusting Early

Once you have a sense of where things are going, the next step is to adjust your work to fit, before you're asked.

This isn't about abandoning your values or doing poor work. It's about understanding what the organization is now trying to achieve, and finding ways to deliver it while still doing your job well.

For Hector, adjusting early might have meant tracking his own sales per hour starting in March, finding ways to shorten consultations without losing quality, and talking with Carol about how to balance his relationship-building approach with the new focus on efficiency. He could have proposed a hybrid: quick consultations for simple purchases, longer ones for big ones. By June, he would have been the salesperson who had already figured out the new system, instead of the one who was blindsided by it.

Adjusting early has three big benefits.

First, you avoid the drop. People who adjust after a change is announced usually take a hit while they catch up. People who adjust before it barely notice.

Second, you help your manager. When pressure comes from above, managers need people who move in the new direction quickly. Being one of the first to adapt makes you extremely valuable during a hard time for your manager.

Third, you gain influence. When you engage with a new priority early, you often get a voice in how it's carried out. Hector, as a top salesperson, could have helped shape the new commission plan if he had raised his ideas in March instead of complaining in June.

Helping Your Manager When the Goal Changes

Chapter 11 described, from the leader's side, how hard it is when the goal changes from above. Your manager gets squeezed between their boss's new demands and their team's resistance. Now you can see that same moment from below.

When your manager is carrying a change they didn't choose, the most valuable thing you can do is to be the person on the team who makes it easier, not harder. That doesn't mean pretending to love every change. It means:

- **Asking questions to understand,** rather than complaining.
- **Raising real concerns privately,** with suggestions, rather than publicly.
- **Trying the new approach in good faith** before deciding it doesn't work.
- **Avoiding the rumor mill** among your coworkers.

Managers remember who helped them through hard changes. Those are the people who get trusted with more later.

Don't Feed the Rumor Mill

When front-line employees sense changes coming, the natural response is to talk about it with each other. That's understandable; people want to make sense of uncertainty. But rumors cause real damage.

They spread fear faster than facts. They often turn a moderate change into an imagined disaster, as happened in Chapter 9 when "we lost a big customer" became "the plant is closing." They can also attach labels to the people spreading them. And they tend to turn frustration toward blaming.

That last point matters. Research by Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens found that blame is contagious: when people hear others blame, they become more likely to blame too. A break room full of rumors about the new director can quickly turn into a culture of finger-pointing, which makes the change harder for everyone, including you.

So when coworkers start speculating, you can listen without adding fuel. And you can redirect: "I don't know what's coming. I'm going to ask Carol what she can tell us." That makes you a calm presence, which is valuable to your coworkers and your manager alike.

When the Signals Point to Something Serious

Sometimes the signals point toward something more serious than a new metric: layoffs, a sale of the business, closure of a location, or the end of your role. In those cases, adjusting your work may not be enough.

If several strong signals point that way, it is reasonable to quietly prepare: update your resume, strengthen relationships with people in your industry, and make sure your finances can handle a gap. This isn't disloyalty. It's prudence. Preparing for a possible change doesn't mean you have to leave, and it often makes you calmer and more effective in the meantime.

At the same time, avoid assuming the worst too quickly. Many changes that look threatening turn out to be manageable, especially for people who adjust early.

Back to Hector

Let's replay March.

Hector notices the new regional director, Carol's closed door, the new "sales per hour" number, and her stress. Four signals at once. He doesn't panic, but he pays attention.

After a sales meeting, he catches Carol in a quiet moment. "I noticed we've started tracking sales per hour. Is that something the new director is focused on? I want to make sure I'm working on what matters most."

Carol hesitates, then nods. "Yes. He's looking hard at efficiency across all twelve stores. I can't say much more yet, but it's going to matter."

Hector starts tracking his own sales per hour that week. He experiments with shorter consultations for smaller purchases and keeps longer ones for big furniture sets. He shares what's working with Carol: "I've cut my average consultation time by about twenty percent on smaller sales without losing conversions."

Carol asks him to present his approach at the next regional meeting. The new director is impressed and asks Hector to help design training for other salespeople on balancing speed and service.

In June, when the new commission plan is announced, Hector is still in the top three. And this time, the plan includes a provision he suggested: higher commission rates on large furniture sets, which take longer to sell.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Most changes that affect your job start above your manager** and flow down, often weeks or months after the pressure begins.
- **Six signals to watch:** new people at the top, new numbers, changes in your manager's behavior, budget tightening, changes in language, and what's suddenly not discussed.
- **When several signals appear together, pay attention.**
- **Ask your manager carefully,** connecting your question to what you've observed and framing it as wanting to help.
- **Respect what your manager can't share,** and offer help instead.
- **Adjust early.** You avoid the drop, help your manager, and gain influence.
- **Help your manager carry changes** by asking questions, raising concerns privately, and trying new approaches in good faith.
- **Don't feed the rumor mill.** Rumors spread fear and blame.
- **If signals point to something serious, prepare quietly** without assuming the worst.

Drill: The Signal Scan

Once a month, take five minutes and scan for the six signals. Write down anything you've noticed:

1. Any new people above my manager?
2. Any new numbers in meetings or reports?
3. Any changes in my manager's behavior?
4. Any budget tightening?

5. Any new language in announcements or meetings?
6. Anything that's suddenly stopped being discussed?

If you notice two or more signals, ask your manager one careful question from this chapter. Then write down one way you could adjust your work to fit the direction things seem to be heading.

Most front-line employees who do this monthly scan find that changes stop feeling sudden. They start seeing them coming, and acting while others are still guessing.

In the next chapter, we close Part 2 with a tool for one of the most important moments in any employee's career: preparing for the conversation where you ask for something.

CHAPTER 23

What-If Mapping Before You Ask for Something

Half Two · Part 2: Ten Moves Ahead

Destiny had worked the overnight shift as a pharmacy technician at a 24-hour drugstore for two years. She was dependable, accurate, and the person the night pharmacist trusted most. But the overnight schedule was wearing her down. She wanted to move to days.

She finally worked up the courage to ask her pharmacy manager, Gary, on a Tuesday when he stopped in during her shift.

"Hey, Gary, I was wondering if I could maybe move to the day shift?"

Gary frowned. "Days are full right now. And if I move you, who covers nights? You're my best overnight tech."

Destiny had no answer. She hadn't thought about who would cover nights. "Oh. Okay. I understand."

"Let me know if anything changes," Gary said, and left.

Nothing changed. Destiny stayed on nights for another year, growing more tired and more frustrated, until she took a day-shift job at a competitor across town. In her exit conversation, Gary was surprised. "I didn't realize it was that important to you. We could have worked something out."

Destiny's request was reasonable. Gary was willing, it turns out. What went wrong was that Destiny walked into a conversation she had dreaded for months with no preparation at all. The first objection Gary raised, the most predictable objection possible, ended the conversation.

Chapter 7 introduced what-if mapping for leaders. This chapter adapts it for front-line employees, for the moments when you have to ask for something: a schedule change, a raise, time off, a new role, a different assignment, or help with a problem. These are some of the most important conversations of your working life, and most people walk into them with nothing but hope.

Why Asks Fail

When front-line employees ask for something and get turned down, they usually assume the answer was simply no. But often the answer was "not like this" or "not yet" or "I need to know how this would work." The ask failed not because it was unreasonable, but because it ran into an objection the employee wasn't ready for.

Most objections are completely predictable. Destiny's manager raised the single most obvious concern: who covers nights? Others you'll hear again and again:

- "There's no budget right now."
- "If I do it for you, I'll have to do it for everyone."
- "The timing isn't good."
- "Let me think about it."
- "You're not ready yet."
- "That's not up to me."

If you prepare for these in advance, you can respond calmly and keep the conversation moving toward a yes. If you don't, the first objection often ends the conversation.

Imagining the No

The most powerful part of what-if mapping is the premortem, described in Chapter 7. Research by Deborah Mitchell, Jay Russo, and Nancy Pennington found that when people imagined an outcome had already happened, rather than imagining that it might happen, they generated about 30 percent more reasons to explain it. That idea became the basis for the premortem technique: imagine your plan has already failed, then list why.

One caution from Chapter 7 is worth repeating: the study measured how many reasons people came up with, not whether those reasons were more accurate. The premortem helps you see more possibilities. You still have to judge which ones are realistic.

For an employee, the premortem sounds like this: **"It's an hour after I asked, and my manager said no. Why?"**

If Destiny had spent three minutes on that question, she almost certainly would have written: "He said there's no one to cover nights." And she could have prepared an answer.

The Employee's What-If Map

Here's the five-step what-if map from Chapter 7, adapted for asking your manager for something. It fits on one page, or an index card.

Step 1: Your goal and your minimum

Write one sentence about what you want, and one sentence about the least you'd accept.

For Destiny:

- **Goal:** Move to the day shift within two months.
- **Minimum:** A firm date for moving to days within six months, or at least a split schedule with some day shifts.

Knowing your minimum keeps you from walking away with nothing when your full ask isn't possible. It also keeps you from accepting a vague "we'll see" that never turns into anything.

Step 2: Run the premortem

Set a timer for three minutes. Imagine you asked and the answer was no. Write down every reason why, as fast as you can.

Destiny's list might include: no one to cover nights; days are fully staffed; Gary thinks I'm more valuable on nights; bad timing during flu season; he'll worry other techs will want to switch too; he doesn't have the authority; he just doesn't think it's important.

Then spend one minute imagining the answer was yes. What made it work? Maybe: "I brought a plan for covering nights." "I offered a timeline that worked for him."

Step 3: Pick the three most likely objections

Using what you know about your manager from Chapter 21's manager map, choose the three objections most likely to come up.

For Destiny:

1. Who covers nights?

2. Days are full.
3. If I switch you, others will want to switch too.

Step 4: Write a response and a "need" for each

For each objection, write what you'll say (one or two sentences) and what you need to have ready before the conversation.

Objection 1: "Who covers nights?"

- **Say:** "I've thought about that. Marcus has told me he'd like more hours, and he's trained on nights. I'd also be glad to train a new overnight tech before I switch."
- **Need:** Confirm with Marcus that he's actually interested.

Objection 2: "Days are full."

- **Say:** "I understand. Is anyone on days planning to leave or cut hours? I'd be happy to wait for the next opening if we can set a target date."
- **Need:** Find out, quietly, whether any day techs have mentioned leaving, going part-time, or wanting nights.

Objection 3: "Others will want to switch."

- **Say:** "That makes sense. Maybe we could set up a fair process, like seniority or a rotation, so everyone has a shot. I've been on nights two years, longer than anyone else on the team."
- **Need:** Check how long each overnight tech has been on nights.

Notice what Step 4 reveals. Two of Destiny's three responses depend on information she doesn't have yet. The map tells her exactly what to find out before she asks. That's often the most valuable part of the whole exercise.

Step 5: Signal and exit

Decide how you'll recognize that the conversation is going somewhere you didn't plan for, and what you'll say then.

- **Signal:** An objection you have no answer for, your manager seeming rushed or distracted, or a surprisingly emotional reaction.
- **Exit:** "That's a fair point. Can I think about it and come back to you with a plan next week?"

The exit protects you from the trap Destiny fell into: hearing one objection and giving up. It keeps the door open and puts a specific follow-up on the calendar.

Map Your Manager's Side Too

Chapter 7 recommended building a short map from the other person's side. For an employee, this means asking: **What does my manager want from this conversation? What are they worried about? What would make saying yes easy for them?**

Gary's real wants, from Chapter 21's framework, were probably security (keeping the overnight shift covered), safety from blame (not getting in trouble with the district manager if nights fell apart), and fairness (not creating resentment among other techs). He wasn't against Destiny moving. He was against a problem he'd have to solve on his own.

That changes how Destiny should frame her ask. Instead of "Can I move to days?" which hands Gary a problem, she can say, "I'd like to move to days, and I've worked out a plan so nights stay covered." Now she's handing him a solution.

Remember the perspective-taking research from Chapter 5: people who focused on what the other side was thinking reached creative agreements far more often, about 76 percent of the time compared with 54 percent for those who focused on feelings. Your manager's side of the map is where those creative agreements come from.

Timing Your Ask

A what-if map should also include when to ask. Destiny asked when Gary stopped by during her shift, an unplanned moment when he was busy and she had no time to make her case.

Timing matters more than most people realize. A few guidelines:

- **Ask for a meeting rather than catching your manager in passing.** "Could I get fifteen minutes this week to talk about my schedule?" signals that this matters and lets your manager choose a good moment.
- **Avoid your manager's worst times:** right before a deadline, during a crisis, after bad news from their boss.
- **Look for natural openings:** a review, the start of a new schedule period, after a success, or when a related change is already happening.
- **Give enough lead time.** Asking for a schedule change two months ahead is much easier to say yes to than asking for next week.

Going Two Moves Deep

For your most likely objection, take one more step: "**And then what will my manager say?**"

Destiny offers Marcus to cover nights. Gary might say, "Marcus is good, but he's part-time and can't cover all five nights." Now Destiny can prepare: "What if Marcus covers three nights and we hire a part-time tech for the other two? I'd be glad to help train them."

Two moves deep on your top objection, plus one-move responses to the others, plus a reliable exit, will cover the vast majority of real conversations. That's what "thinking ten moves ahead" really looks like, as Chapter 7 explained: not genius calculation, but a few minutes of honest preparation.

Don't Read from a Script

A warning: the map is preparation, not a script. In the actual conversation, listen first. Respond to what your manager actually says, not what you expected them to say. If your manager raises an objection you mapped, use your prepared response. If they surprise you, use your exit.

If you recite your prepared answers no matter what your manager says, you'll sound rehearsed and miss what they're actually telling you. Sometimes the most important information in the conversation is the objection you didn't predict.

Back to Destiny

Let's replay her ask.

On Sunday evening, Destiny spends thirty minutes building a what-if map. Her premortem reveals that "Who covers nights?" is the obvious first objection. Her "need" list tells her to check with

Marcus and to find out whether any day techs are planning changes.

On Monday, she asks Marcus. He says he'd love more hours. She also learns that one of the day techs is going back to school in the spring and wants to cut to part-time.

On Tuesday, she messages Gary: "Could I get fifteen minutes this week to talk about my schedule?" He offers Thursday morning.

On Thursday, she opens by framing it around his needs. "I'd like to move to the day shift, and I've worked out a plan so nights stay covered. Marcus wants more hours and is already trained on nights. And I heard Kim wants to cut back to part-time in the spring, which would open a day slot."

Gary leans back. "Marcus is part-time. He can't cover all five nights."

Two moves deep. "What if Marcus covers three nights and we hire a part-timer for the other two? I'd train them before I switch."

Gary thinks. "If others ask to switch too, I need to be fair."

Objection 3. "That makes sense. I've been on nights two years, longer than anyone. Maybe seniority could decide the next openings."

Gary nods slowly. "Okay. Let's plan for you to move to days in March, when Kim cuts back. In the meantime, start training Marcus on the extra nights."

Destiny walks out with a firm date, which beats her minimum, and she never takes the job across town.

Half Two, Part 2, in One Page

This chapter closes Part 2 of Half Two. Three tools to see conversations before they happen:

- **What your manager really needs** (Chapter 21): no surprises, reliability, early bad news with a plan, protecting their budget, making them look good, and low maintenance.
- **Reading the room above your manager** (Chapter 22): watch for signals of change, ask carefully, and adjust early.
- **What-if mapping before you ask** (Chapter 23): goal and minimum, premortem, three objections with responses and needs, two moves deep, and a signal and exit.

Part 3 puts these tools to work in six of the hardest situations front-line employees face.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Most asks fail on a predictable objection,** not because the request was unreasonable.
- **Imagining the no surfaces more objections.** Research found prospective hindsight produced about 30 percent more explanations, though not necessarily more accurate ones.
- **Build a five-step map:** your goal and minimum, a premortem, three likely objections, responses with "need" lists, and a signal and exit.
- **The "need" list often matters most.** It tells you what to find out before you ask.
- **Map your manager's side** and frame your ask as a solution to their problem, not a new problem for them.

- **Time your ask:** request a meeting, avoid bad moments, and give lead time.
- **Go two moves deep on your top objection.**
- **Use the map as preparation, not a script.**

Drill: Your Next Ask

Think of something you'd like to ask your manager for in the next few months: a schedule change, a raise, a new responsibility, time off, training, or help with a problem. Build a what-if map on one index card:

1. **Goal and minimum.**
2. **Three most likely objections** (from a three-minute premortem).
3. **One-sentence response to each,** plus what you need to find out.
4. **Two moves deep** on the top objection.
5. **Your exit line.**

Then go get everything on your "need" list. When you have it, ask for fifteen minutes.

Most front-line employees who do this are surprised by two things: how predictable their manager's objections turn out to be, and how much more often the answer is yes when they walk in prepared.

In the next chapter, Part 3 begins with one of the most painful situations at work: being blamed for something you didn't do.

CHAPTER 24

When You're Blamed for Something You Didn't Do

Half Two · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

Camila worked the front desk at a busy downtown hotel. One Monday morning, the front office manager, Steve, called her into his office and closed the door.

"A guest who booked our biggest suite for a wedding weekend showed up Friday night and found out their reservation had been cancelled. They were furious. They posted about it online, and the general manager is on me about it. The system shows the cancellation happened Thursday night, during your shift. What happened?"

Camila's stomach dropped. She had no memory of cancelling anything. She was sure she hadn't. But the system said it happened on her shift.

She felt the heat rise in her face. "I didn't cancel that. I would never do that. It must have been Jason. He was helping at the desk Thursday too, and he's always messing things up in the system."

Steve's expression hardened. "So it's Jason's fault."

"I'm just saying it wasn't me."

"The system says it was during your shift. I need people who own their mistakes, Camila."

She left the office shaking. Steve wrote her up. A week later, the reservations team discovered the real cause: a software glitch that had cancelled several reservations that night when a group booking was modified. No one at the desk had done anything wrong. Steve removed the write-up and apologized, but the damage was done. Camila had pointed at a coworker who was also innocent, Jason had heard about it, and Steve now remembered her as someone who got defensive and blamed others under pressure.

Being blamed for something you didn't do is one of the most infuriating experiences at work. It triggers a strong urge to defend yourself and find the real culprit. But as Camila learned, that urge can make things much worse. This chapter begins Part 3 of Half Two, where we apply everything from Parts 1 and 2 to the hardest situations front-line employees face, starting with this one.

Why False Blame Is So Hard to Handle

Chapter 8 covered being blamed from a leader's point of view, and Chapter 18 covered being called out publicly. False blame adds something extra: a sense of injustice. You know you didn't do it, and that certainty makes it very hard to stay calm. It feels like the truth should be obvious, and anyone who doesn't see it must be unfair.

Front-line employees also face higher stakes. A write-up, a bad review, or a reputation for mistakes can affect your raises, your schedule, and even your job. And you often have less access to the information that could prove you right: the system logs, the full story, what the manager has already heard.

That combination of injustice, high stakes, and limited information leads to the most common mistake: fighting back fast and hard, often by pointing at someone else.

The Blame Trap

Recall the research from Chapter 8. Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens found that blame is contagious: when people see someone blame others, they become more likely to blame others too. When Steve blamed Camila, she immediately blamed Jason. If the conversation had continued, Jason would very likely have blamed someone else.

But there's a deeper problem. When you respond to blame by blaming someone else, you look exactly like someone guilty would look. People who actually made mistakes often deflect. So even when you're telling the truth, pointing at someone else makes you seem less believable.

The research offers a way out. In the fourth experiment, people who first had a chance to affirm their own values and self-worth didn't catch the blame contagion. They felt secure enough not to protect themselves by blaming others.

That's your goal in a false-blame conversation: feel secure enough in what you know to stay calm, curious, and focused on facts.

Step 1: Pause and Steady Yourself

When you're blamed for something you didn't do, take a breath before you speak. Remind yourself of something true about who you are: "I'm careful with reservations. I know I didn't do this. I can figure this out calmly."

That thirty-second reset is the self-affirmation that removed blame contagion in the research. It won't make the injustice go away, but it will keep the injustice from taking over your words.

Step 2: Ask Before You Answer

Your first words should be a question, not a defense. You need to understand what your manager is seeing and why they believe you're responsible.

> *"That's a serious problem, and I want to help figure out what happened. Can you show me what the system shows?"*

This does several things at once. It acknowledges the problem, which shows you take it seriously. It shows you want to solve it, not just protect yourself. And it gets you information you need, often information that reveals the blame is based on something incomplete.

Follow-up questions can help:

- "What time did the cancellation happen?"
- "Does it show which login was used?"
- "Were there any other changes to reservations around the same time?"
- "Who else has mentioned this?"

If Camila had asked these questions, she might have noticed right away that the cancellation happened at the exact moment a group booking was being modified, a clue that pointed toward the system instead of a person.

Step 3: State What You Know, Calmly

After you understand the situation, say clearly what you know, without accusing anyone.

> *"I don't remember cancelling any reservations Thursday night, and I wouldn't cancel a suite booking without a guest request. I'd like to help figure out where it came from."*

Notice what this does and doesn't do. It clearly denies responsibility. It gives a reason (you wouldn't cancel without a request). And it doesn't point at anyone else. It keeps the conversation on finding the cause, not on finding someone to blame.

If there's any part of the situation you do own, own it precisely, the way Chapter 8 described.

> *"I did notice the system was running slow that night, and I should have reported it to IT."*

Precise ownership of a small real thing makes your denial of the big thing far more believable. It shows you're honest about your mistakes, so your manager has more reason to trust you when you say you didn't make this one.

Step 4: Separate Finding the Cause from Finding the Culprit

Camila's mistake was jumping straight to a culprit: Jason. Even if she had been right about Jason, pointing at him was the wrong move, for three reasons.

First, as we've seen, it makes you look defensive and less believable. Second, if you're wrong, you've damaged a coworker's reputation and your relationship with them. Third, it turns a problem-solving conversation into a blame contest, which rarely ends well for the person with less power.

Instead, focus on the cause.

> *"Could we check whether anything else happened in the system around that time? If a reservation can be cancelled without anyone meaning to, that's something we'd want to fix for everyone."*

This invites investigation without accusing anyone. If someone else did make a mistake, the investigation will show it, and you won't have been the one to point fingers. If it's a system problem, as it was in Camila's case, you'll have helped find it.

Step 5: Propose a Way Forward

End the conversation with something constructive. This shows your manager that you're on their side and focused on solutions.

> *"Would it help if I asked IT to pull the full log for that night? And going forward, I could double-check large reservations at the start of each shift, so we catch anything like this early."*

Remember Chapter 21: managers need people who make their jobs easier, especially when they're under pressure from their own boss. Steve was being pressured by the general manager. Offering to help find the real cause and prevent it from happening again turns you from a suspect into an ally.

Step 6: Follow Up in Writing

After a conversation where you've been blamed, send a short, calm follow-up message. This creates a record of what you said, which protects you if the situation comes up again.

> *"Thanks for talking with me this morning about the cancelled suite reservation. As I mentioned, I don't remember cancelling it and wouldn't cancel a booking without a guest request. I've asked IT to pull the system log for Thursday night and will share what they find. I'll also start checking large reservations at the beginning of each shift."*

Keep it factual and friendly. Don't argue or repeat your frustration. The goal is simply a clear, dated record of your position and your offer to help.

When the Facts Come Out

Often, the truth emerges within days or weeks, as it did for Camila. When it does, resist the urge to say "I told you so." A gracious response builds far more trust.

> *"I'm glad IT found the glitch. Thanks for looking into it. Is there anything I can do to help make sure it doesn't happen again?"*

If you were written up or penalized, it's reasonable to ask calmly that the record be corrected.

> *"Since the cancellation turned out to be a system issue, could we remove the write-up from my file?"*

Most fair managers will do this willingly, and many will respect you more for how you handled the situation.

When It's a Pattern: Scapegoating

Sometimes false blame isn't an honest mistake. In some workplaces, a particular employee becomes the default target, the person blamed whenever something goes wrong. Sometimes a manager blames employees to protect themselves from their own boss.

Signs that you may be a scapegoat:

- You're blamed repeatedly, often for things outside your control.
- Others make similar mistakes without consequences.
- Evidence that clears you is ignored or dismissed.
- Your manager seems to need someone to blame when their own boss is unhappy.

If you see this pattern, three steps help.

Document everything. Keep a simple, private record: dates, what you were blamed for, what the facts were, and who was involved. Save the follow-up messages you send.

Address it directly, once, privately. Use calm, factual language focused on the pattern.

> *"I want to raise something. Three times in the last two months, I've been held responsible for issues that turned out to have other causes. I want to do good work here, and I'd like to understand how we can handle these situations better."*

Escalate if needed. If the pattern continues, take your documentation to your manager's manager or to human resources. Focus on facts and on how the pattern affects your work, not on attacking your manager's character.

Research on psychological safety by Amy Edmondson found that teams where people felt safe to take interpersonal risks, like admitting mistakes, learned more and performed better. A workplace where one person is routinely blamed is the opposite of that, and good leaders above your manager usually want to know.

When a Coworker Really Is Responsible

Sometimes you know a coworker caused the problem you're being blamed for. You still shouldn't lead by pointing at them. Instead:

1. **Deny your responsibility calmly**, and suggest checking the facts (system logs, schedules, records) that will show what happened.
2. **If appropriate, talk to the coworker privately first.** "Steve thinks I cancelled that reservation. Do you know anything about it?" Often, they'll own it themselves.
3. **If they don't, let the facts speak.** Point your manager toward the evidence, not toward the person.

This protects your relationships, your credibility, and your reputation as someone who doesn't throw coworkers under the bus.

Back to Camila

Let's replay that Monday morning.

Steve: "The system shows the cancellation happened Thursday night, during your shift. What happened?"

Camila feels the heat rise and takes a breath. *I'm careful with reservations. I know I didn't do this.*

"That's a serious problem, and I want to help figure it out. Can you show me what the system shows?"

Steve turns his screen. The cancellation is logged at 10:42 p.m.

"Does it show which login was used? And were there any other changes around that time?"

Steve scrolls. "Huh. There are four other cancellations at 10:42. All different guests."

Camila nods. "I don't remember cancelling anything Thursday, and I wouldn't cancel a suite without a guest request. Four at the same minute seems strange. Could it be connected to the group booking that was being changed that night? Would it help if I asked IT to pull the full log?"

Steve looks at the screen for a long moment. "Yeah. Do that."

That afternoon, Camila sends Steve a short follow-up summarizing the conversation. Two days later, IT confirms the glitch. Steve thanks Camila for catching the pattern and asks her to help write a procedure for double-checking large reservations. Jason never hears his name mentioned.

Chapter Takeaways

- **False blame triggers injustice,** high stakes, and limited information, which leads to the urge to fight back fast.
- **Blame is contagious,** and blaming someone else makes you look guilty, even when you're right.
- **Feeling secure stops the contagion.** Take a breath and remind yourself of something true about yourself.
- **Ask before you answer.** Understand what your manager is seeing.
- **State what you know calmly,** and own precisely any small part that's genuinely yours.
- **Focus on finding the cause, not the culprit.**
- **Propose a way forward,** and follow up in writing.
- **When the facts come out, be gracious,** and ask calmly for any record to be corrected.
- **If it's a pattern, document, address it once directly, and escalate if needed.**

Drill: The False-Blame Script

Think of a mistake at your job that could easily be blamed on the wrong person, maybe you. Write a short script for the conversation:

1. **Your steadying thought:** one true sentence about yourself.
2. **Your opening question:** asking to see what your manager sees.
3. **Your calm statement:** what you know, without blaming anyone.

4. **Your cause-focused suggestion:** how to find out what really happened.
5. **Your way forward:** an offer to help prevent it.

Say it out loud twice. Then write a three-sentence follow-up message you could send afterward.

Most people find that having these words ready changes how they feel in the moment. The injustice still stings, but you're no longer at its mercy.

In the next chapter, we turn to one of the most important asks of your career: how to ask for a raise or promotion.

CHAPTER 25

Asking for a Raise or Promotion

Half Two · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

Darius had worked on the help desk at a managed IT services company for two and a half years. He answered calls from the small businesses the company supported, fixed their computers and networks remotely, and escalated the hard problems to the more senior Tier 2 technicians.

Except lately, he wasn't escalating much. He had taught himself most of what the Tier 2 techs knew. Clients asked for him by name. He had trained the last three help desk hires. He was doing a Tier 2 job on a Tier 1 salary.

At his annual review, his manager, Lisa, said nice things and offered a three percent raise. Darius felt his chest tighten. He wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come. He said, "Thanks," and signed the form.

That night he was angry, mostly at himself. Over the next month, he started looking at job postings. When a recruiter offered him a Tier 2 role at another company with a twenty percent raise, he took it. In his exit conversation, Lisa said, "I wish you'd told me you wanted Tier 2. I've been trying to get a position approved for months, and you'd have been my first choice."

Darius had been ready for a promotion. His manager was ready to give him one. What was missing was a single conversation he didn't know how to have.

The Bridge chapter showed a raise conversation from both sides of the table: Maya, the billing specialist, and her manager, Tom. Maya's story ended well because she prepared, led with her value, named a number, and gave her manager what he needed to make the case upstairs. This chapter walks you through how to do the same thing yourself, step by step.

Why People Don't Ask

Most front-line employees wait to be offered a raise or promotion. They believe good work will be noticed and rewarded. Sometimes it is. Often it isn't, not because managers are unfair, but because they're busy, they assume you're content, or they don't know how to argue for you without your help.

Remember the research on employee silence from Chapter 1: 85 percent of employees had at some point felt unable to raise an important concern with a supervisor, mainly out of fear of being seen negatively. Asking for more money or a bigger role triggers exactly that fear. Will I seem greedy? Ungrateful? Overconfident? What if they say no and now think less of me?

Those fears are understandable, but they're usually exaggerated. Most managers expect employees to ask for raises and promotions at some point, and many respect people who do it well. What damages your standing is not asking. It's asking badly: with threats, without evidence, or at the wrong time.

And consider the cost of not asking. Gallup has found that replacing an employee costs between half and two times their annual salary. Your manager has a strong reason to keep you, often stronger than you realize. But they can only act on that reason if they know you want something.

The Preparation Starts Months Before

The best preparation for asking for a raise isn't something you do the week before. It's how you work for the months leading up to it.

Chapter 21 described what managers need from their people: no surprises, reliability, bad news early with a plan, protection of their budget and decisions, making them look good, and low maintenance. If you've been providing those consistently, you'll be asking from a position of trust. Your manager will already see you as someone valuable, and they'll be more willing to go to bat for you.

If you haven't been, start now, and plan to ask in a few months. A raise conversation goes much better when your manager is already thinking, "This is one of my most reliable people."

Step 1: Build Your Evidence File

You can't rely on your manager to remember everything you've done. Keep a running record of your accomplishments, ideally with numbers.

For Darius, that file might include:

- Average ticket resolution time compared to the team.
- Number of tickets resolved without escalation.

- Clients who asked for him by name, with any positive feedback they sent.
- New hires he trained, and how quickly they got up to speed.
- Tier 2 skills he learned on his own, with any certifications.
- Problems he solved that saved the company money or kept a client happy.

The point isn't to bury your manager in data. It's to have specific, believable examples ready. Ellen Langer's copy-machine research, from Chapter 1, showed that people agree much more often when given a reason. But for bigger requests, only real reasons worked. A raise is a big request. Your evidence is your real reason.

Step 2: Know Your Number

Before you ask, decide exactly what you want, based on what your work is actually worth.

Look at what similar roles pay in your area and industry: job postings, salary surveys, and conversations with people in similar roles. Consider the responsibilities you've taken on. If you're asking for a promotion, find out what the next role pays at your company, if you can.

Then decide on two numbers:

- **Your ask:** an ambitious but defensible figure, based on the market and your evidence.
- **Your minimum:** the least you'd accept before considering other options.

This matters because of anchoring. Research by Adam Galinsky and Thomas Mussweiler found that first offers tend to pull the final outcome toward them. In a raise conversation, if you don't

name a number, your manager will, and their number will usually be lower. Darius let Lisa anchor at three percent. If he had named a figure first, based on what Tier 2 roles paid, the conversation would have started from his number instead.

The same research has a caution worth remembering: an extreme anchor can backfire if it seems unreasonable. Your number should be ambitious, but you should be able to explain exactly why it's fair.

Step 3: Figure Out What Your Manager Needs to Say Yes

In most organizations, your manager can't approve a significant raise or promotion alone. They need approval from their boss, HR, or the owner. That means your manager will have to sell your case to someone else.

This was the key insight in the Bridge chapter. Tom needed something he could take to the owner. When Maya gave him a written summary of her accomplishments, she made it easy for him to argue for her.

Ask yourself:

- Who does my manager need to convince?
- What does that person care about? (Budget, results, retention, fairness across the team?)
- What would make my case easy for my manager to present?

Then prepare a short written summary, one page at most, that your manager can use. Include your key accomplishments with numbers, the responsibilities you've taken on, your ask, and why it's fair.

Step 4: Pick Your Moment

Timing can make the difference between yes and no.

Good times to ask:

- A few weeks before formal reviews or budget planning, when decisions about raises are being made, not after they've been finalized.
- Right after a clear success: a big project delivered, a client won, a problem solved.
- When your responsibilities have clearly grown.
- When a relevant position opens up.

Bad times to ask:

- During a crisis or a busy period for your manager.
- Right after bad news for the company or your team.
- In passing, in the hallway, or at the end of a meeting about something else.

Ask for a dedicated meeting: "Could I get thirty minutes next week to talk about my role and my growth here?"

Darius waited until his review, when the raise had already been decided. By then, Lisa's budget was set. If he had asked a month earlier, Lisa could have included a promotion in her plans.

Step 5: Build Your What-If Map

Use the what-if map from Chapter 23. Run a premortem: imagine you asked and the answer was no. Why? The most common objections to raises and promotions are predictable:

- "There's no budget right now."

- "You're not quite ready."
- "I have to be fair to everyone else."
- "That's above my authority."
- "Let me think about it."

Prepare a response for each, along with anything you need to find out first.

The Conversation

Here's a structure that works well, adapted from the Bridge and from Chapter 9's approach to important conversations.

1. Open with your commitment

Start by making clear that you want to stay and grow. This addresses your manager's security concern before it comes up.

> *"Thanks for making time. I really like working here, and I want to talk about how I can keep growing."*

2. Lead with your value

Share your strongest two or three accomplishments, briefly and with numbers.

> *"Over the past year, I've resolved about eighty percent of my tickets without escalating, compared to about sixty for the team. Three clients have asked for me by name. I've trained our last three new hires, and I've learned most of the Tier 2 work on my own, including the network certification I finished in the spring."*

3. Make your ask, with a number

Be clear and specific.

> *"I'd like to be promoted to Tier 2. Based on what Tier 2 roles pay in our area and the work I'm already doing, I think a salary of around fifty-eight thousand would be fair."*

Then stop talking. Chapter 13 warned leaders about filling silence in negotiations, and the same applies here. Let your manager respond.

4. Ask what they need

Once your manager responds, turn the conversation toward how they can make it happen.

> *"What would you need from me to make the case?"*

Then offer your written summary.

5. Agree on a next step and a date

Don't leave without a clear next step.

> *"When do you think we could have an answer?"*

Handling the Common Objections

"There's no budget right now."

> *"I understand. When does the budget get set for next year? Could we plan for the promotion then, and put that in writing?"*

Budget objections often mean "not now," not "never." Turn them into a specific future date.

"You're not quite ready."

> *"I appreciate the honest feedback. What would 'ready' look like? If I can show you those things in the next three to six months, could we revisit then?"*

This turns a vague no into a clear plan. Ask for the criteria in writing, and check back on your progress regularly.

"I have to be fair to everyone."

> *"That makes sense. I'm not asking for special treatment. I'm asking to be paid for the work I'm already doing. Is there a fair process I could go through?"*

"Let me think about it."

> *"Of course. Would it help if I sent you a short summary? And could we talk again by next Friday?"*

What About an Outside Offer?

In the Bridge, Maya mentioned a recruiter's call. That can be a legitimate part of a raise conversation, if it's true and handled carefully.

The key lesson from the Bridge is to lead with your value, not with the threat. When Maya first mentioned the recruiter as her opening move, it landed as a threat. When she mentioned it after

laying out her value, and added that she wanted to stay, it landed as honest information.

Two rules matter here. First, **never invent or exaggerate an offer.** If your manager calls your bluff, you'll either have to leave or lose credibility, and Chapter 20 explained how hard credibility is to rebuild. Second, **only mention an offer if you'd actually consider taking it.** An outside offer is real leverage, and real leverage should be used honestly.

Remember, too, that Gallup found 52 percent of people who quit said their manager or organization could have done something to keep them. Many managers would much rather hear about your situation before you have another offer than after.

If the Answer Is No

Sometimes, despite good preparation, the answer is no. That's not the end of the conversation.

Ask for a path:

> *"I understand. Can we agree on what I'd need to do to get there, and a time to revisit, maybe in six months?"*

Then get it in writing, even just in a follow-up message:

> *"Thanks for talking with me today. As we discussed, I'll focus on leading the server migration project and completing the advanced certification over the next six months, and we'll revisit the Tier 2 promotion in May."*

A clear path with a date is far better than a vague "maybe someday." And if the path keeps moving, or the date keeps slipping, that tells you something important about your future at the company.

Back to Darius

Let's replay the months before his review.

In September, Darius starts an evidence file. He tracks his escalation rate, saves client compliments, and notes every new hire he trains. He finishes his network certification.

In October, about six weeks before reviews, he messages Lisa: "Could I get thirty minutes next week to talk about my role and growth here?"

In the meeting, he opens with his commitment, then lays out his value: eighty percent of tickets resolved without escalation, three clients who ask for him by name, three new hires trained, and the certification. Then he makes his ask. "I'd like to be promoted to Tier 2, at around fifty-eight thousand, based on what Tier 2 roles pay in our area."

He stops talking.

Lisa smiles. "I've actually been trying to get a Tier 2 position approved. The owner keeps pushing back on budget."

"What would you need from me to make the case?"

"Honestly, exactly what you just said, on one page."

Darius sends it that afternoon. Two weeks later, Lisa calls him into her office. The promotion is approved, at fifty-six thousand, with a review in six months. Darius never looks at another job posting.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Most employees wait to be offered a raise.** Many managers assume you're content unless you ask.
- **Not asking is riskier than asking well.** Replacing an employee costs half to two times their salary, so your manager often has strong reasons to keep you.
- **Preparation starts months before:** be the person your manager relies on.
- **Build an evidence file** with specific accomplishments and numbers.
- **Know your number,** ambitious but defensible, and name it first. First offers anchor outcomes.
- **Give your manager what they need to make the case upstairs,** usually a one-page summary.
- **Pick your moment:** before budgets are set, after a success, in a dedicated meeting.
- **Structure the conversation:** commitment, value, ask with a number, what they need, and a next step with a date.
- **Turn objections into paths with dates.**
- **Use outside offers only if they're real,** and lead with value, not threat.
- **If the answer is no, get a written path and a date to revisit.**

Drill: The One-Page Case

Whether or not you plan to ask for a raise soon, write your one-page case this week:

1. **Your role and how it has grown.**

2. **Your top three to five accomplishments,** with numbers.
3. **Your ask:** the raise or role you want, and why it's fair.

Then build a what-if map for the three most likely objections.

Put the page somewhere you'll see it, and update it every month. When the right moment comes, you'll be ready in an afternoon instead of scrambling. And many people find that simply writing the page shows them how much more they've been doing than they realized.

In the next chapter, we take on the opposite kind of conversation: how to say no to extra work without damaging your reputation.

CHAPTER 26

Saying No to Extra Work

Half Two · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

Grace was a paralegal at a small law firm with four attorneys. She worked mainly for the senior partner, Mr. Whitman, but all four attorneys sent her work. She was fast, careful, and almost never said no.

On a Wednesday afternoon in April, Mr. Whitman stopped at her desk. "Grace, I need you to pull together the exhibits for the Morrison trial by Friday. Should be straightforward."

Grace already had three deadlines that week: a filing for another attorney due Thursday, document review for a client meeting Friday morning, and a stack of discovery responses Mr. Whitman himself had asked for on Monday. The Morrison exhibits were not straightforward. They would take at least two full days.

She said, "Sure, no problem."

She worked until eleven on Wednesday and Thursday nights. On Friday morning, exhausted, she made an error in the discovery responses: a wrong date on a document sent to opposing counsel. It took a week and an embarrassing correction to fix. Mr. Whitman was not pleased. "How did this happen?" he asked. Grace didn't feel she could say, "Because you gave me four days of work to do in two."

Grace's yes felt like the safe answer. It was the most dangerous one. Saying yes to work she couldn't do well led to a mistake that hurt her reputation far more than a well-handled no ever would have.

Chapters 17 and 19 touched on the habit of saying yes to everything. This chapter goes deeper into the actual skill: how to say no, or "not like this," to extra work in a way that protects your quality, your health, and your standing with your manager.

Why No Is So Hard

For front-line employees, saying no to a manager feels risky. Your manager controls your schedule, your reviews, and your future. You worry that saying no will make you seem lazy, uncommitted, or difficult.

The research on employee silence from Chapter 1 shows how strong that fear is. Most employees in one study had held back an important concern from a supervisor at some point, mostly because they feared being labeled negatively. A no can feel like it carries the same risk.

But here's what many employees miss: **your manager often doesn't know how much you already have.** Mr. Whitman didn't know about the other attorney's Thursday filing. He had forgotten about the discovery responses he'd asked for on Monday. In his mind, the Morrison exhibits were a reasonable request. Grace's yes confirmed that impression.

A well-handled no isn't defiance. It's information your manager needs to make good decisions about their own work.

No Is Rarely Just No

Most people think of saying no as a single, blunt act: "No, I can't." But there are actually several different kinds of no, and most of them don't sound like no at all. Choosing the right one is the key skill.

1. The priority no: "Which should I drop?"

This is the most useful response for front-line employees, and it was introduced in Chapter 19. Instead of refusing, you lay out what you're already doing and ask your manager to choose.

> *"I can take on the Morrison exhibits. Right now I have the Hendricks filing due Thursday, the document review for Friday's client meeting, and the discovery responses you asked for Monday. I can't do all four well by Friday. Which should I push back?"*

This is powerful because it puts the decision where it belongs. You're not saying you won't do it. You're showing your manager the real trade-off and letting them decide. Most managers, faced with this, either push back a deadline, reassign something, or realize the request can wait.

2. The timing no: "Not by then, but by this date."

Sometimes you can do the work, just not on the timeline requested.

> *"I can have the Morrison exhibits done by Tuesday. Friday would mean rushing the discovery responses, and I don't want to risk errors on those."*

This offers a real alternative and explains the reason.

3. The scope no: "Not all of it, but this part."

Sometimes you can do part of the work.

> *"I can pull the first twenty exhibits by Friday, the ones you'll need for opening statements. The rest I can finish by Tuesday."*

This is similar to the advice in Chapter 13 for leaders negotiating price: trade scope before you trade quality. Doing less work well is almost always better than doing more work badly.

4. The trade no: "Yes, if..."

Sometimes you can take on extra work if something else changes.

> *"I can do it if someone else can take the Hendricks filing, or if I can come in Saturday morning and take Monday afternoon off."*

Chapter 13 called this the if-then trade: never give a concession without getting something in return. The same idea applies to your time. Extra work that comes with a trade is a fair exchange. Extra work with nothing in return sets an expectation that your time is free.

5. The clear no

Sometimes the right answer is simply no: when a request is unsafe, unethical, outside your role in a way that could harm you, or truly impossible. In those cases, be clear and calm.

> *"I'm not able to sign that on the attorney's behalf. That needs to come from him."*

You don't need to apologize at length or over-explain. A short, clear reason is enough. These situations are less common, but knowing you can say a clear no when needed makes the softer forms easier.

How to Say It: Five Principles

Whichever kind of no you choose, these principles help it land well.

Give a real reason

Ellen Langer's copy-machine study, described in Chapter 1, found that people agreed far more often when a request came with a reason. The same is true in reverse: a no with a real reason is far better received than a no without one.

"I can't" sounds like unwillingness. "I can't do all four by Friday without risking errors on the discovery responses" sounds like responsibility. Remember the limit in Langer's study, though: for bigger requests, only real reasons worked. So make sure your reason is genuine and specific, not vague.

Lead with willingness

Start by showing you want to help, before you get to the limit.

> *"I want to help with Morrison. Here's my situation..."*

This signals that you're a team player whose no is about capacity, not attitude.

Don't over-apologize or over-explain

Chapter 19 described how constant apologizing makes your concerns sound smaller. Saying no doesn't require "I'm so sorry, I feel terrible, I wish I could..." A short acknowledgment is enough. Chapter 3's one-reason rule applies too: one clear reason is more persuasive than a long list of excuses.

Offer an alternative

Almost every good no comes with something you can do: a later date, part of the work, a trade, or a suggestion of who else might help. An alternative turns a closed door into a negotiation.

Confirm in writing

After you agree on a new priority, deadline, or scope, send a short message confirming it.

> *"Thanks, Mr. Whitman. Confirming: I'll have the first twenty Morrison exhibits by Friday and the rest by Tuesday. The discovery responses will be done Thursday as planned."*

This protects you if expectations change later and makes sure everyone remembers the same agreement.

When You Have More Than One Boss

Grace had four attorneys sending her work. Many front-line employees are in similar situations: several supervisors, a manager plus a team lead, or a boss plus internal clients. Each person sees only their own request. Nobody sees the whole load.

When requests from different people conflict, don't try to decide on your own whose work matters more. That puts you in the middle of a priority fight you have no authority to resolve, and whoever loses will blame you.

Instead, make the conflict visible and ask someone with authority to decide.

> *"Mr. Whitman, Ms. Patel needs the Hendricks filing Thursday, and you need the Morrison exhibits Friday. I can't do both well in that time. Could the two of you decide which comes first, or would you like me to ask her?"*

This keeps you out of the middle and makes sure the decision is made by people who can weigh the real stakes.

Saying No Without Freezing Up

Even with good words ready, saying no to a manager can make your heart race. Remember the research from Chapter 2 by Alison Wood Brooks: people who relabeled their anxiety as excitement, by telling themselves "I am excited," performed better under pressure than those who tried to calm down. The physical feeling of nervousness is energy you can use.

It also helps to buy a little time, as Chapter 17 suggested. You don't have to answer instantly.

> *"Let me look at my schedule and get back to you in ten minutes."*

Ten minutes is enough to list what you're already carrying, decide which kind of no fits, and walk back with a clear, calm answer.

What Happens After You Say No

Many front-line employees fear that a no will hurt their relationship with their manager. Usually the opposite happens, as long as the no is handled well.

Managers generally respect employees who understand their own capacity and protect the quality of their work. A well-handled no tells your manager: "I take my commitments seriously. When I say yes, I mean it." That makes your yeses more valuable.

In contrast, an employee who says yes to everything and then misses deadlines or makes mistakes loses credibility fast. Chapter 21 noted that reliability is one of the six things managers need most. You can't be reliable if you've agreed to more than you can do.

That said, if your manager consistently reacts badly to reasonable, well-explained limits, punishes you for raising capacity concerns, or expects you to work unsustainable hours as a matter of routine, that's important information. Keep a record, and consider whether this is a situation to raise with someone above your manager or with HR, as Chapter 24 described for patterns of unfair treatment.

Back to Grace

Let's replay that Wednesday afternoon.

Mr. Whitman: "I need you to pull together the exhibits for the Morrison trial by Friday. Should be straightforward."

Grace feels the familiar urge to say yes. Instead she says, "Let me look at my week and come right back to you."

Five minutes later, she walks into his office. "I want to help with Morrison. Right now I have the Hendricks filing for Ms. Patel due Thursday, document review for Friday's client meeting, and the discovery responses you asked for Monday. The Morrison exhibits will take about two full days. I can't do all four well by Friday. Which should I push back?"

Mr. Whitman blinks. "I forgot about the discovery responses." He thinks. "What do I actually need by Friday for Morrison?"

"Probably the first twenty exhibits, for opening statements. I could have those by Friday and the rest by Tuesday."

"Do that. And I'll ask Ms. Patel if Hendricks can wait until Monday."

Grace sends a short confirmation email. She leaves at six on Wednesday and Thursday. The discovery responses go out correct. The first twenty exhibits are on Mr. Whitman's desk Friday morning.

The following month, Mr. Whitman starts checking with Grace before assigning big projects: "What's on your plate this week?"

Chapter Takeaways

- **A yes to work you can't do well is riskier than a well-handled no.** Overload turns into mistakes, and mistakes damage your reputation.
- **Your manager often doesn't know how much you already have.** A no is information they need.
- **There are five kinds of no:** the priority no, the timing no, the scope no, the trade no, and the clear no.
- **"Which should I drop?" is often the most useful response.** It shows the trade-off and lets your manager decide.

- **Give a real, specific reason,** lead with willingness, don't over-apologize, and offer an alternative.
- **Confirm new agreements in writing.**
- **With multiple bosses, make conflicts visible** and ask someone with authority to decide.
- **Buy a few minutes** before answering, and treat nervousness as energy.
- **A well-handled no makes your yeses more valuable.**

Drill: The Capacity List

At the start of each week for the next month, write a short list of everything you're responsible for that week, with deadlines. Keep it somewhere you can see it quickly.

Then, the next time you're asked to take on extra work, pull out the list and use it:

1. Decide which kind of no fits: priority, timing, scope, trade, or clear.
2. Write one sentence of willingness and one sentence with your real reason.
3. Add an alternative.
4. After agreeing, send a one-line confirmation.

Most people find that simply having the list makes saying no much easier. You're no longer arguing from a feeling of being overwhelmed. You're showing facts. And most managers respond to facts far better than they expect.

In the next chapter, we take on one of the most frustrating situations at work: when your manager takes credit for your work.

CHAPTER 27

When Your Manager Takes Credit for Your Work

Naomi was a scheduling coordinator at a home-health agency that sent nurses and aides to patients' homes. For years, the agency had struggled with missed visits: caregivers double-booked, patients forgotten, last-minute scrambles. Naomi spent three months of evenings building a new scheduling system in a shared spreadsheet, with color codes, automatic conflict warnings, and a daily checklist. Missed visits dropped by more than half.

At the quarterly leadership meeting, her manager, Rick, presented the results to the agency's director. Naomi wasn't there, but a coworker who was told her afterward. "Rick talked about 'the new system I put in place.' He didn't mention you once."

Naomi felt sick. Then angry. The next morning, in the team huddle, when Rick mentioned the director's praise for "our new scheduling approach," Naomi said, loud enough for everyone, "You mean the system I built?"

The room went quiet. Rick's face turned red. "Of course. We all worked on it." For the next several months, Rick was noticeably colder toward Naomi. He stopped asking for her ideas. When a scheduling supervisor position opened, he recommended someone else.

Naomi had been completely right about who built the system. Her public correction cost her far more than the stolen credit had.

Having your work taken by your manager is one of the most frustrating experiences at work. It feels like theft, and in some ways it is. But how you respond determines whether you get the recognition you deserve or make things worse. This chapter shows you how to protect your credit without starting a war you can't win.

Is It Really Theft?

Before deciding how to respond, it helps to understand what actually happened. Not every case of a manager presenting your work is the same.

Normal team credit. Managers often present their team's work as "ours" or "the team's." This is part of their job. When a manager says "my team built a new scheduling system," they're usually not trying to erase you. They're representing the team to their own boss.

Careless credit. Sometimes managers say "I" when they should say "we," without thinking about how it sounds. They may be nervous, rushed, or used to speaking for the team. They may not realize they've left you out.

Deliberate credit-taking. Sometimes managers knowingly present their employees' work as their own, to look better to their boss. This is less common than it feels, but it does happen.

Remember Chapter 21: your manager has a boss too, and their real wants include status, looking competent to the people above them. A manager presenting results to their boss is under

pressure to look good. That doesn't excuse leaving you out, but it helps explain it.

The response that works best is the same for all three cases. That's useful, because you often can't tell which one you're dealing with.

What Not to Do

Naomi's response was the most common mistake: correcting her manager publicly. It's the most emotionally satisfying response and almost always the most damaging.

Public correction makes your manager look bad in front of their team. Even if they were wrong, they now have to defend themselves, and most people defend themselves by digging in. Chapter 18 explained how public call-outs trigger defensiveness. That works in both directions. When you call your manager out publicly, you put them in exactly the position you'd hate to be in.

It also triggers the blame dynamic described in Chapter 24. Research by Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens found that blame is contagious: when people see someone blamed publicly, they become more defensive and more likely to blame others. Naomi's public accusation turned a quiet credit problem into an open conflict that everyone on the team witnessed.

Other responses to avoid:

- **Going straight to your manager's boss** without talking to your manager first. This is likely to be seen as going around them, which Chapter 12 described from the leader's side as one of the most damaging authority tests.

- **Venting to coworkers.** As Chapter 19 explained, complaints about your boss tend to travel back to your boss.
- **Silently stewing and withdrawing effort.** This hurts you more than your manager, and the credit problem stays exactly where it is.

The Better Approach: Visibility Before, Conversation After

The most effective way to deal with stolen credit is to make it hard for credit to be stolen in the first place, and when it happens anyway, to address it privately and calmly.

Before: Make your work visible

The best protection against credit-taking is visibility. When your work is clearly connected to your name before anyone presents it, it's much harder for anyone to claim it, and much easier for your manager to give you credit without thinking about it.

Send short progress updates. Chapter 21 recommended regular updates as one of the things managers need. Those updates also create a record. When Naomi finished the scheduling system, a short message to Rick would have tied it to her name:

> *"The new scheduling system is live as of Monday. In the first two weeks, missed visits are down from fourteen to six. Happy to walk you through how it works."*

Offer to present. When your work is going to be shared with leadership, ask if you can be part of it.

> *"I'd love the chance to present the scheduling results at the leadership meeting, if that would be helpful. I know the details, and it would be a great experience for me."*

Many managers are glad to say yes. It takes work off their plate, shows they develop their people, and makes them look good as a leader.

Write it down. Keep the evidence file described in Chapter 25: your accomplishments, with dates and numbers. This protects you in reviews and promotion conversations, no matter who presented what in a meeting.

Remember Jenny's story from Chapter 20. Her spreadsheet idea was taken up by someone else partly because she pitched it so vaguely that it never got connected to her name. When she pitched it clearly, with numbers, it stayed hers.

After: The private conversation

If your manager takes credit for your work anyway, talk to them privately, soon, and calmly. The goal is not to make them admit wrongdoing. It's to make sure your contribution is recognized going forward.

Start with something positive and true.

> *"I heard the director was really happy with the scheduling results. That's great news."*

Ask for what you want, without accusing.

> *"I put a lot of evenings into building that system, and I'd really like leadership to know I was part of it, especially since I'm interested in growing into a scheduling supervisor role. Next time we share results like that, could I present them, or could you mention my part?"*

Notice what this does. It doesn't say "You stole my credit." It says "I'd like to be recognized, here's why it matters, and here's a specific way to do it." It also connects your request to your career goals, which gives your manager a reason to help that has nothing to do with admitting fault.

Give your manager a way to fix it.

> *"If it's helpful, I could send the director a short summary of how the system works and what we've learned."*

Many managers, given an easy way to correct the record without losing face, will take it. Some will mention you to their boss themselves. Some will start inviting you to present.

Thinking About Your Manager's Side

Use perspective-taking, the skill from Chapter 5. Research by Adam Galinsky and colleagues found that people who focused on what the other side was thinking reached creative solutions far more often than those focused on feelings: about 76 percent versus 54 percent in one study.

What was Rick thinking when he presented the system? Probably something like: *The director has been on me about missed visits for a year. Finally I have good news.* He was focused on his own boss's

pressure, and possibly worried about looking like he hadn't solved the problem himself.

If Naomi had seen that, she might have framed her request in a way that served Rick's real wants:

> *"I know the director has been focused on missed visits for a long time. If I present the details next quarter, it shows you've built a team that solves problems, and it gives me some development experience."*

Now recognizing Naomi helps Rick look good, instead of costing him.

Building Visibility Beyond Your Manager

Over time, it helps for people above your manager to know your work directly, not only through your manager. This isn't about going around your boss. It's about being a known, trusted contributor in the wider organization.

Some ways to build that visibility honestly:

- **Volunteer for cross-team projects** where you work with people outside your immediate group.
- **Offer to present or train** on things you know well.
- **Be helpful to other departments,** so people across the organization know your name and your work.
- **When leaders ask you questions directly, answer clearly and give credit to others too.**

Research by James Westphal and Ithai Stern, described in Chapter 1, found that relationships and social connections strongly influence who gets ahead in organizations, sometimes more than track record alone. You don't have to use flattery to benefit from that finding. Simply being known and respected beyond your immediate manager makes it much harder for your work to disappear.

When It's a Pattern

If your manager repeatedly takes credit for your work, even after a private conversation, the situation is more serious.

First, **keep a careful record**: what you produced, when, with what results, and how it was presented. Save your progress updates and emails.

Second, **have a second, more direct private conversation.**

> *"I want to bring something up honestly. A few of my projects have been presented without my name, and I'm worried it's affecting how leadership sees my work. It matters to me because I want to grow here. Can we agree on how my work will be credited going forward?"*

Third, if the pattern continues, **consider raising it with your manager's manager or HR.** Bring facts, not accusations, and focus on your career and your contributions:

> *"I've led several projects this year, including the scheduling system, and I'm not sure leadership is aware of my role. I'd like to make sure my contributions are visible as I work toward the supervisor role."*

This framing keeps the focus on your growth, not on attacking your manager, which makes it much easier for others to help you.

Finally, if the pattern doesn't change, it may be worth considering whether this is the right place for you. Gallup research has found that most people who leave their jobs say their manager or organization could have done something to keep them. A manager who consistently erases your contributions is giving you important information about your future there.

When You Share Credit

A final note: recognition works best when it flows in every direction. When you present work that others helped with, name them. When coworkers contribute to your success, thank them publicly.

This isn't just fairness. It also builds the kind of reputation that protects your own credit. People who generously credit others are seen as trustworthy, and others are more likely to make sure they get credit in return.

Back to Naomi

Let's replay the months around the scheduling system.

When the system goes live, Naomi sends Rick a short message: "The new scheduling system is live. In the first two weeks, missed visits are down from fourteen to six. Happy to walk you through how it works."

As the quarterly meeting approaches, she adds: "I'd love the chance to present the scheduling results to the director, if that would help. It would be great experience for me."

Rick says he'll present this time. At the meeting, he talks about "the new system I put in place." A coworker tells Naomi afterward.

Naomi feels the anger rise, and doesn't say anything at the next morning's huddle. Instead, she asks Rick for ten minutes that afternoon.

"I heard the director was really happy with the scheduling results. That's great. I put a lot of evenings into building it, and I'd love for leadership to know I was part of it, especially since I'm hoping to grow into a supervisor role. Next quarter, could I present the follow-up results? It would show you're building a team that solves problems."

Rick pauses, then nods slowly. "That's fair. I probably should have mentioned you. Let's have you present next quarter."

The following week, Rick forwards Naomi an email from the director: "Rick tells me you built the new scheduling system. Great work." Next quarter, Naomi presents the six-month results. When the supervisor position opens, the director asks Rick whether Naomi has applied.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Not all credit-taking is theft.** Managers often present team work as "ours," sometimes carelessly say "I," and occasionally take credit deliberately.
- **Public correction almost always backfires.** It forces your manager to defend themselves and triggers blame and defensiveness.
- **Avoid going around your manager, venting to coworkers, or silent withdrawal.**

- **Prevent credit-taking with visibility:** progress updates, offering to present, and keeping an evidence file.
- **If it happens, talk privately, soon, and calmly:** start positive, ask for recognition without accusing, connect it to your goals, and offer an easy fix.
- **Use perspective-taking.** Frame recognizing you as something that helps your manager look good.
- **Build visibility beyond your manager** through cross-team work, presenting, and helping others.
- **If it's a pattern, document it, talk directly, and escalate with a focus on your growth.**
- **Share credit generously yourself.**

Drill: The Visibility Audit

Look at your three most important accomplishments from the past six months. For each one, ask:

1. **Does my manager clearly know I did this?** Is there a message or record connecting it to me?
2. **Does anyone above my manager know?**
3. **Did I offer to present or share it?**

For any accomplishment where the answer to the first question is no, send your manager a short summary this week: what you did, the results, and an offer to share more. For your most important accomplishment, ask whether you could present it the next time results are shared with leadership.

Most front-line employees find that their work is far less visible than they assumed. A few short messages can change that, and make it much harder for anyone, including a well-meaning but

careless manager, to leave you out.

In the next chapter, we look at another delicate situation: reporting a problem at work without becoming the problem yourself.

CHAPTER 28

Reporting a Problem Without Becoming the Problem

Half Two · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

Jamal was a prep cook at a catering company that served weddings, corporate events, and a few hospital cafeterias. He was careful about food safety; his mother had once gotten seriously ill from a bad restaurant meal, and he never forgot it.

Over a few weeks, Jamal noticed two problems. The walk-in cooler had started running warm in the afternoons, sometimes creeping above safe temperatures before anyone noticed. And one of the senior cooks, Victor, regularly skipped the temperature logs, filling them in at the end of the shift with numbers that looked right but that Jamal was fairly sure he never actually checked.

Jamal didn't know what to do. Victor had been there twelve years and was close with the kitchen manager, Denise. Jamal had been there eight months. He worried that if he said something, he'd be seen as a snitch, or as a new guy trying to make trouble. So he said nothing for three weeks.

Finally, after a particularly warm afternoon, he blurted it out to Denise in the middle of a busy lunch rush: "The cooler's broken and Victor's been faking the temp logs. Somebody's going to get sick."

Denise looked at him sharply. "That's a serious accusation. Victor's been here twelve years." She was in the middle of plating for a hundred guests. She told Jamal she'd look into it, and seemed annoyed. Victor found out within a day that Jamal had "gone after him," and the kitchen turned cold toward Jamal for weeks. The cooler got repaired, eventually. Nothing changed about the logs.

Jamal was right about both problems. But the way he reported them made him look like the problem.

Reporting problems at work is one of the most valuable things a front-line employee can do. You see things managers don't. But reporting badly can damage your relationships, your reputation, and even the chance that the problem gets fixed. This chapter shows how to raise problems so they're taken seriously and you're seen as someone who helps, not someone who causes trouble.

Why People Stay Silent

If you've ever noticed a problem at work and said nothing, you're far from alone. Research by Frances Milliken, Elizabeth Morrison, and Patricia Hewlin found that 85 percent of the employees they studied had at some point felt unable to raise an important issue with a supervisor. The most common reason was fear of being viewed or labeled negatively and damaging valued relationships. Other reasons included believing it wouldn't make a difference and fear of retaliation.

The same research found something else important: silence is often shared. Of the employees who felt uncomfortable raising an issue, most said that coworkers who knew about the problem also

felt uncomfortable speaking up. Everyone knows. Nobody says anything. Each person waits for someone else to go first.

That's exactly what happened in Jamal's kitchen. Other cooks had almost certainly noticed the cooler and the logs. Nobody wanted to be the one to say it.

Understanding this helps in two ways. First, it means your hesitation is normal, not a personal weakness. Second, it means that when you do speak up well, you're doing something valuable that most people won't, and good managers recognize that.

Why Good Managers Want to Know

Amy Edmondson's research on work teams found that teams where people felt safe to take interpersonal risks, like raising concerns and admitting mistakes, engaged in more learning, and that learning was linked to better performance. Good managers understand this. They know that problems they don't hear about are problems they can't fix.

Remember Chapter 21: one of the things managers need most is no surprises. A problem reported early is a problem your manager can handle quietly. A problem that explodes, like a food-poisoning incident at a wedding, is a crisis that lands on your manager's desk with their boss watching.

So when you report a problem well, you're not making trouble for your manager. You're protecting them.

Four Kinds of Problems

Different problems need different approaches.

1. Process or equipment problems. A broken cooler, a confusing procedure, a recurring scheduling conflict. These are the easiest to raise, because no one is being accused.

2. Problems involving a coworker. Someone cutting corners, not doing their share, or behaving badly. These are harder because they involve another person's reputation.

3. Problems involving your manager. A decision that's causing trouble, a policy that isn't working, or behavior that affects the team. These are delicate because the person you'd normally report to is the subject.

4. Serious problems. Safety hazards, legal or ethical violations, harassment, discrimination, or anything that could seriously harm people. These often require specific channels and sometimes can't wait.

Jamal had a type 1 problem (the cooler) and a type 2 problem (the logs). By blurting them out together, he made the easy one harder and the hard one explosive.

The Core Structure: Problem, Impact, Suggestion

Chapter 19 introduced a simple structure for raising problems: describe the problem, explain the impact, and offer a suggestion. It works for almost any situation.

Problem: What you've observed, stated as facts, not conclusions.

Impact: Why it matters, in terms your manager cares about (safety, customers, money, the team).

Suggestion: One possible solution, or an offer to help find one.

For the cooler:

> *"I wanted to flag something. The walk-in has been running warm in the afternoons. Yesterday it was at 44 degrees around 3 p.m. If we don't catch it, we could have food safety issues, especially with the hospital accounts. Could we get it serviced? In the meantime, I could check it every hour after lunch and log it."*

That's about twenty seconds. It's factual, it connects to what Denise cares about, and it offers a fix. It's very hard to dismiss.

Five Principles for Reporting Well

1. Pick the right time and place

Jamal raised a serious issue during a lunch rush, when Denise was stressed and busy. Almost any report would have gone badly in that moment.

Ask for a few minutes in private, at a calmer time.

> *"Do you have five minutes after lunch? There's something I want to flag."*

The exception is a true emergency: something dangerous happening right now. Then speak up immediately.

2. Lead with facts, not conclusions

"Victor's been faking the temp logs" is a conclusion, and an accusation. It invites a defense: "That's a serious accusation."

Facts are harder to argue with:

> *"I've noticed the temperature logs for the afternoon checks are often filled in at the end of the shift. On Tuesday, the log showed 38 degrees at 3 p.m., but when I checked the cooler at 3:15, it was at 44."*

This describes what you saw, without claiming to know why it happened. Maybe Victor is careless, maybe he's overwhelmed, maybe he doesn't understand the procedure, maybe he's faking it. You don't need to know. Your job is to report the facts, and your manager's job is to figure out the rest.

3. Focus on the problem, not the person

Remember the blame research from Chapters 8 and 24. Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens found that blame is contagious, and that when people feel blamed, they become defensive. When you frame a report as an accusation against a person, you trigger exactly that reaction, in your manager, who may feel loyal to that person, and in the person themselves.

Instead, frame it as a process problem that needs fixing:

> *"I think we have a gap in how the temperature checks are getting done. Could we look at how we're doing them, maybe with a set time and someone assigned?"*

This invites a fix without putting anyone on trial. If Victor really is faking the logs, a better process will reveal it. And Jamal won't have been the one who pointed the finger.

4. Separate different problems

Jamal's two problems had very different levels of sensitivity. Raising them together made the cooler issue feel like part of an attack on Victor.

Raise the easier problem first. Once your manager has seen that you raise issues calmly and constructively, they'll be more receptive when you raise something harder.

5. Follow up in writing

After you report a problem, send a short message summarizing it.

> *"Thanks for talking with me about the walk-in. Just to confirm, it's been reaching 44 degrees in the afternoons. I'll check it hourly after lunch until it's serviced."*

This creates a record that you raised the issue, which protects you if problems happen later. It also makes it more likely the issue gets addressed, because it's now in writing.

Reporting a Problem About a Coworker

Problems involving coworkers deserve extra care. Here are a few additional guidelines.

Consider talking to the coworker first. For many issues, especially minor ones, a direct, friendly conversation is the fairest first step.

> *"Hey, I noticed the afternoon temp checks have been getting filled in at the end of the shift. The cooler's been running warm, so I've been worried about it. Want to split them so we catch any problems?"*

This gives your coworker a chance to fix it without involving your manager, and it often works.

Go to your manager when it's serious or doesn't change. If the issue involves safety, ethics, or significant harm, or if a direct conversation doesn't change anything, it's appropriate to go to your manager. You don't need permission from your coworker to report a real problem.

Don't gossip about it. As Chapter 19 explained, venting to coworkers spreads blame and tends to travel back to the people you're talking about. Report to the person who can fix it, not to everyone else.

Reporting a Problem About Your Manager

When your manager is the source of a problem, talk to them directly first in most cases, using the same structure.

> *"Can I share something I've noticed? Since the new prep schedule started, we're running out of time before events about once a week. Last Saturday we plated twenty minutes late. Could we look at starting prep an hour earlier on event days?"*

Notice that this focuses on the schedule, not on your manager's judgment. Most managers can hear feedback about a decision far more easily than feedback about themselves.

If the problem is serious, like unsafe practices, harassment, or something unethical, or if your manager doesn't respond to a direct conversation, it may be appropriate to go to their manager or to HR. Chapter 24 covered how to do this with facts and documentation.

Serious Problems: Safety, Legal, and Ethical Issues

Some problems are too important for the gentle approaches in this chapter. If you see something that could seriously harm people, like a safety hazard, a legal violation, harassment, or discrimination, the priority is getting it addressed, not managing relationships.

In these cases:

- **Act quickly.** Don't wait for the perfect moment if people are at risk.
- **Use official channels** if your workplace has them: HR, a safety officer, a compliance hotline, or a designated reporting process.
- **Document what you observed:** dates, times, details, and who was involved.
- **Know that outside options may exist.** Many industries have regulators or agencies that handle safety and legal complaints, and in many places employees have legal protections for reporting certain problems in good faith. If you're unsure, it can be worth getting advice from someone you trust or a qualified professional.

No technique for being likable should stop you from reporting something that could hurt someone.

When Nothing Happens

Sometimes you report a problem well, and nothing changes. Before concluding that nobody cares, follow up.

> *"I wanted to check in on the walk-in cooler. It hit 45 degrees again yesterday. Is the service visit scheduled?"*

If repeated follow-ups don't work and the problem is significant, consider going one level up, with your documentation and a focus on the impact. Remember from the silence research that one common reason people stay quiet is believing it won't make a difference. Sometimes that belief is wrong, and persistence pays off. Sometimes it's right, and the lack of response tells you something important about the workplace.

Back to Jamal

Let's replay those weeks.

The first time the cooler runs warm, Jamal waits until after lunch and asks Denise for five minutes. "The walk-in has been running warm in the afternoons. Yesterday it was at 44 degrees around three. With the hospital accounts, that worries me. Could we get it serviced? I could check it hourly after lunch in the meantime."

Denise nods. "Good catch. I'll call the repair company." Jamal sends her a short follow-up message.

A week later, Jamal talks to Victor directly. "Hey, the cooler's been running warm, so I've been worried about the afternoon temp checks. Want to split them? I'll take three o'clock, you take five?" Victor shrugs. "Sure, whatever." But the logs keep getting filled in at the end of the shift.

So Jamal goes back to Denise, privately. "I wanted to raise something about the temperature checks. I've noticed the afternoon entries are often filled in at the end of the shift. On Tuesday, the log showed 38 degrees at three, but I checked at 3:15 and it was 44. I think we have a gap in how the checks get done. Could we set specific times and assign someone to each one?"

Denise is quiet for a moment. "Thanks for telling me. I'll handle it." The next week, she introduces a new system: assigned check times and initials on every entry. She never mentions where the idea came from. Victor grumbles but follows it.

Three months later, Denise asks Jamal to help write the kitchen's new food-safety checklist.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Most employees have stayed silent about an important problem.** Research found 85 percent had felt unable to raise an issue, mostly out of fear of being labeled negatively.
- **Silence is often shared.** Everyone knows; nobody says anything.
- **Good managers want to know,** because problems they don't hear about can't be fixed.
- **Four kinds of problems:** process or equipment, a coworker, your manager, and serious issues.
- **Use problem, impact, suggestion.**

- **Pick the right time and place,** lead with facts not conclusions, focus on the problem not the person, separate different problems, and follow up in writing.
- **For coworker issues, consider talking to them first,** and don't gossip.
- **For serious problems, act quickly** and use official channels.
- **When nothing happens, follow up,** and escalate with documentation if needed.

Drill: The Problem Report Card

Think of a problem at work that you've noticed but haven't raised. On an index card, write:

1. **The facts:** what you observed, with specific dates, times, or numbers.
2. **The impact:** why it matters, in terms your manager cares about.
3. **One suggestion:** a possible fix, or an offer to help.
4. **The right moment:** when and where you'll raise it.

Read your facts line out loud. If any part sounds like an accusation against a person, rewrite it as an observation about what happened.

Then ask for five minutes and raise it. Most front-line employees find that a calm, factual report gets a far better response than they feared, and that being known as someone who raises problems well becomes one of their strongest assets.

In the next chapter, we close Part 3 with a situation many front-line employees face alone: when a customer pushes you and your manager isn't there.

CHAPTER 29

When a Customer Pushes You and Your Manager Isn't There

Half Two · Part 3: The Right Thing to Say

Sofia was the evening shift lead at a home-improvement store. On a Sunday night, with her store manager off for the weekend, a customer walked up to the service desk with a large box.

"I need to return this pressure washer. It doesn't work."

Sofia checked the receipt. The pressure washer had been bought four months earlier. The store's return policy was ninety days. The box was battered, and several parts were missing.

"I'm sorry, sir, this is past our return window. You'd need to go through the manufacturer's warranty."

The customer's face hardened. "I've been shopping here for fifteen years. I spend thousands of dollars here every year. I want a full refund, right now, or I want to talk to your manager."

"My manager isn't here tonight."

"Then call them. Because if I don't get my money back, I'm leaving a review telling everyone how this store treats loyal customers, and I'll take my business to your competitor down the road."

A line was forming behind him. Other customers were watching. Sofia felt her pulse speed up. She didn't want a bad review. She didn't want to lose a customer who said he spent thousands. And she didn't want to call her manager on a Sunday night.

So she gave him the full refund.

On Monday, her manager, Craig, saw the transaction. He was not happy. "That's three hundred dollars on an item we can't resell, way outside policy. Why didn't you offer store credit, or call me?" Sofia tried to explain the pressure. Craig said, "I get it. But you can't give away the store every time someone yells."

Sofia felt like she'd lost twice: once to the customer and once to her boss.

This chapter closes Part 3 of Half Two with a situation many front-line employees face constantly: a customer, client, or member of the public pushing hard, while the person with real authority isn't around. You're the face of the business. You have limited power. And you have to decide fast.

Why Customer Pressure Works

A pushy customer uses many of the same moves Chapter 1 described for people pressuring leaders, and Chapter 17 described for managers pressuring employees.

Status and loyalty claims. "I've been shopping here for fifteen years." This is a version of flattery and guilt: it suggests that saying no would be disrespectful to a valued relationship.

Urgency. "Right now." The line forming behind the customer added even more pressure.

Threats. "I'll leave a bad review." "I'll take my business elsewhere."

Anchoring. "I want a full refund." Chapter 13 explained research by Adam Galinsky and Thomas Mussweiler showing that first offers pull final outcomes toward them. The customer's opening demand of a full refund set the range for the whole conversation. Any lesser offer felt like a loss.

An audience. Other customers watching made Sofia feel like she was being judged publicly, the same pressure Chapter 18 described when you're called out in front of coworkers.

And you face all of this with less authority than the person you're dealing with expects you to have. That gap between what the customer demands and what you're allowed to give is exactly what makes these moments so stressful.

Before It Happens: Know Your Authority

The single most useful thing you can do to handle a pushy customer happens long before they walk in. **Find out exactly what you're allowed to do.**

Ask your manager, in a calm moment:

- "If a customer wants a return outside the policy, what can I offer? Store credit? An exchange? A partial refund?"
- "Up to what dollar amount can I make an exception without calling you?"
- "When should I call you, even on your day off?"
- "If a customer is threatening or abusive, what should I do?"

This connects to Chapter 21. One of the things managers need most is protection of their budget and decisions. Asking ahead of time shows your manager you take that seriously, and it gives you clear limits to work within.

If Sofia had asked Craig these questions in advance, she might have learned that she could offer store credit for returns up to six months, or a manufacturer warranty claim with the store's help, and that she should call him for anything over a hundred dollars outside policy. With that knowledge, Sunday night would have felt completely different.

In the Moment: A Five-Step Approach

When a customer starts pushing, this structure helps you stay calm and in control.

Step 1: Steady yourself

Take one breath. Chapter 2 described research by Alison Wood Brooks, who found that telling yourself "I am excited" before a stressful performance worked better than trying to calm down. People who reframed anxiety as excitement were rated as more persuasive, confident, and competent. The racing heart you feel when a customer starts yelling is energy you can use.

Step 2: Acknowledge the person

Most upset customers want, first, to feel heard. Before you say anything about policy, show them you understand their frustration.

> *"I'm sorry this hasn't worked out. Fifteen years is a long time, and I can see why you're frustrated that it stopped working."*

This doesn't agree to anything. It simply lowers the temperature. Many customers soften noticeably once they feel heard.

Step 3: Find the real want

Chapter 5 explained that stated wants often hide real ones. Research by Adam Galinsky and colleagues found that negotiators who focused on what the other side was thinking reached creative agreements about 76 percent of the time, compared with 54 percent for those who focused on feelings.

The customer's stated want was a full refund. His real want might have been a working pressure washer, or not feeling cheated, or not wasting his weekend. Ask:

> *"What would make this right for you? Are you looking to get a working pressure washer, or would you rather have your money back?"*

If he says, "I just need one that works. I have a deck to clean next weekend," then a replacement or exchange might solve his problem completely, at much lower cost to the store.

Step 4: Offer what you can, with real reasons

Now lay out the options you're actually allowed to offer. Present them as choices, which gives the customer some control.

> *"Here's what I can do tonight. I can exchange it for a new one if you pay the difference for the missing parts, or I can give you store credit for the full amount. I can also help you start a warranty claim with the manufacturer, which would get you a free replacement or repair."*

When you can't give what they asked for, explain why with a real reason. Ellen Langer's copy-machine research, described in Chapter 1, found that people respond much better to requests

and refusals that come with reasons, and that for bigger requests, only real reasons work.

> *"I'm not able to give a cash refund this far past the return window. That's a store policy I don't have the authority to change. But store credit for the full amount is something I can do right now."*

Notice that this doesn't blame the store or your manager, and doesn't apologize at length. It states the limit, gives the reason, and immediately moves to what you can do.

Step 5: If they won't accept, buy time and escalate properly

Sometimes the customer refuses every option and insists on what you can't give. This is when you use the moves from Chapter 14 for buying time without looking weak.

> *"I understand you want a full cash refund, and that's above what I can approve. What I can do is take down your information, and I'll make sure my manager calls you tomorrow by noon to discuss it."*

This does several things. It keeps you within your authority. It gives the customer a specific next step and time. And it hands the decision to someone who can actually make it, without you making a costly promise.

Then, important: **follow through.** Leave your manager a clear note with the customer's name, number, the situation, and what you offered. Chapter 21 explained that managers hate surprises. A clear handoff protects you and helps your manager make a good decision quickly.

What Not to Do

Don't give in just to end the pressure. That was Sofia's mistake. It feels like solving the problem, but it creates a new one with your manager, and it teaches some customers that pushing hard works.

Don't promise what you can't deliver. "I'm sure my manager will give you a full refund" sets an expectation your manager may not meet, which makes the customer angrier later and puts your manager in a bad spot.

Don't blame your manager, the company, or coworkers. "I'd love to help, but my manager is so strict about this" might feel like it builds rapport with the customer, but it undermines your manager and makes the business look disorganized. Research by Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens found that blaming tends to spread. A customer who hears you blame others will often take their frustration further.

Don't argue about who's right. Whether the pressure washer broke because of a defect or because the customer misused it, arguing about it rarely helps. Focus on what you can do.

Don't take it personally. The customer is upset at the situation, not at you, even when it sounds personal. Remembering this helps you stay steady.

When a Customer Becomes Abusive or Threatening

Most pushy customers are frustrated, not dangerous. But sometimes a customer crosses a line: screaming, personal insults, threats of violence, or physical intimidation.

In those moments, your safety matters more than the sale, the review, or the policy.

- **Set a calm boundary:** "I want to help you, but I can't continue if you're going to yell at me."
- **Get help:** Call a coworker, security, or another manager on duty. Don't handle a threatening situation alone.
- **Disengage if needed:** "I'm going to step away and get someone else to help you."
- **Call for emergency help** if anyone is in danger.
- **Document it afterward:** what happened, what was said, and who saw it. Tell your manager as soon as possible.

No technique in this book is meant to help you tolerate abuse. A good manager will back you up for protecting yourself.

After the Customer Leaves

When a hard customer interaction is over, take two minutes to do three things.

Write it down. What the customer wanted, what you offered, what happened. If there was an exception or a refusal, note why.

Tell your manager. Even if it went well, a short message prevents surprises.

> *"Heads up: a customer wanted a cash refund on a pressure washer bought four months ago. I offered store credit or an exchange, and he took the store credit. Wanted you to know in case he calls."*

Review it for yourself. What pattern was it? What worked? What would you do differently? Chapter 31 will explain how this kind of review builds a pattern library that makes future customer conflicts much easier.

Back to Sofia

Let's replay that Sunday night, with Sofia having asked Craig about her authority the month before. She knows she can offer store credit or an exchange for returns up to six months, help with warranty claims, and should call Craig for any cash exception over a hundred dollars.

The customer: "I want a full refund, right now, or I want to talk to your manager."

Sofia takes a breath. Energy, not danger.

"I'm sorry this stopped working. Fifteen years is a long time, and I can see why you're frustrated. What would make this right for you? Do you need a working pressure washer, or would you rather have your money back?"

The customer pauses. "I need one that works. I have a deck to clean next weekend."

"Here's what I can do tonight. I can give you store credit for the full amount, and you can pick out a new one right now. Or I can help you start a warranty claim, which would get you a free replacement from the manufacturer, though that could take a couple of weeks."

"What about cash?"

"Cash refunds this far past the return window are above what I can approve. If you'd prefer cash, I can have my manager call you tomorrow by noon. But if you need it for next weekend, the store credit gets you a new one tonight."

The customer thinks for a moment. "Fine. Store credit." He walks to aisle twelve, picks out a slightly better model, pays the difference, and leaves, still a little grumpy, but with a working pressure washer.

Sofia sends Craig a short message. On Monday, Craig replies: "Perfect. That's exactly how I'd want it handled."

Half Two, Part 3, in One Page

This chapter closes Part 3 of Half Two. In six situations, the same tools kept appearing:

- **Blamed for something you didn't do** (Chapter 24): steady yourself, ask before you answer, state what you know, focus on the cause not the culprit, propose a way forward, and follow up in writing.
- **Asking for a raise or promotion** (Chapter 25): build your evidence, know your number and name it first, give your manager what they need to make the case, and turn objections into paths with dates.
- **Saying no to extra work** (Chapter 26): use the priority, timing, scope, trade, or clear no, with real reasons and an alternative.
- **When your manager takes credit** (Chapter 27): build visibility before, talk privately after, and frame recognition as something that helps your manager.
- **Reporting a problem** (Chapter 28): problem, impact, suggestion; facts not conclusions; problems not people.

- **When a customer pushes and your manager isn't there** (Chapter 29): know your authority in advance, acknowledge, find the real want, offer what you can with real reasons, and escalate properly.

Underneath all six: understand what the other person really wants, prepare for the predictable turns, stay calm enough not to let the pressure decide for you, and protect your relationship with your manager.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Customers use the same pressure moves as anyone:** loyalty claims, urgency, threats, anchoring, and an audience.
- **Know your authority before you need it.** Ask your manager what you can offer and when to call.
- **Use five steps:** steady yourself, acknowledge the person, find the real want, offer what you can with real reasons, and buy time and escalate if needed.
- **The real want is often different from the demand.** A working product may matter more than a refund.
- **Don't give in just to end the pressure,** promise what you can't deliver, blame others, argue, or take it personally.
- **Your safety comes first** if a customer becomes abusive or threatening.
- **After the interaction, write it down, tell your manager, and review it.**

Drill: The Authority Card

This week, ask your manager the four authority questions from this chapter. Write the answers on a small card you can keep at your station or in your phone:

1. What can I offer when a customer wants something outside policy?
2. Up to what amount can I make exceptions without calling you?
3. When should I call you, even on your day off?
4. What should I do if a customer becomes abusive?

Then think of the three most common customer complaints at your job. For each, write one acknowledgment sentence, one question to find the real want, and the options you can offer.

Most front-line employees find that knowing their limits ahead of time makes difficult customers far less stressful. You're no longer improvising under pressure. You're choosing from options you already know you have.

Part 4 now turns to the skill that ties all of Half Two together: thinking fast enough to use these tools in real time, starting with how to buy time without looking unsure.

CHAPTER 30

Buying Time Without Looking Unsure

Half Two · Part 4: Thinking at Lightning Speed

Kenji had been a dispatcher at a regional trucking company for a year and a half. He handled about thirty routes, matching drivers to loads and solving the daily problems that came with them: breakdowns, weather, late pickups.

Once a month, the regional director, a no-nonsense woman named Ms. Delgado, sat in on the dispatch team's meeting. Most months, she listened to the supervisor and left. This month, partway through, she turned directly to Kenji.

"Kenji, on-time deliveries on your routes dropped about eight percent last month. What's going on?"

Kenji froze. He hadn't seen that number. He didn't know whether it was right. But Ms. Delgado was looking at him, his supervisor was looking at him, and everyone at the table was waiting.

So he guessed. "Probably the weather. We had a lot of rain."

Ms. Delgado frowned. "The other dispatchers had the same weather. Their numbers held." She moved on, but Kenji could feel the impression he had just made. Later, when he finally dug into the data, he found the real cause: a single customer warehouse had changed its receiving hours, and three of his biggest routes

had been arriving to closed doors. It was fixable, and it had nothing to do with weather. But Ms. Delgado had already formed her view: Kenji didn't know his own routes.

Kenji's real problem wasn't the number. It was believing he had to answer instantly. If he had bought just a few seconds, or a day, he could have given an answer that made him look sharp instead of uncertain.

This chapter begins Part 4 of Half Two, on thinking at lightning speed. Chapter 14 covered buying time from a leader's point of view. Front-line employees face the same pressure, often with more at stake. When a leader hesitates, people may wonder if they're prepared. When a front-line employee hesitates in front of a boss's boss, they worry it will look like they're not competent, or too new, or not ready for more. That fear pushes people into fast, bad answers. This chapter shows you how to buy the time you need while looking calm and capable.

Why Front-Line Employees Rush

Front-line employees often feel they have to prove themselves every time someone above them asks a question. You may feel you have less credibility to spend, so any hesitation feels risky.

The research on employee silence, discussed throughout Half Two, shows how deeply people fear being viewed negatively at work. In one study, 85 percent of employees had at some point held back an important concern, mostly for that reason. The same fear drives the opposite behavior in a pressured moment: instead of staying silent, people rush to say something, anything, so they don't look clueless.

But the people watching don't see what you think they see. A short, calm pause followed by a clear answer looks like thoughtfulness. A fast guess that turns out to be wrong looks like you don't know your job. Kenji's instant "probably the weather" did far more damage than five seconds of silence would have.

Do I Recognize This?

Chapter 14 introduced research by Gary Klein and his colleagues on fireground commanders, experienced firefighters who made about 80 percent of their decisions in under a minute. They could decide that fast because they recognized the situation as a familiar type, with a workable response already attached.

The key insight is that fast answers work when you recognize the situation, and fail when you don't. Kenji had never seen the eight percent number. He had no pattern to match. His fast answer was a guess dressed up as knowledge.

So in any pressured moment, ask yourself one question: **Do I recognize this?** If you know the answer, give it with confidence. If you don't, buy time. That single question will save you from most of the bad answers you'd otherwise give.

Seconds: Moves for the Moment

When someone above you asks a question and everyone is waiting, these moves buy you a few seconds each while showing you're on top of things.

The breath

Take one slow breath and look at the person who asked. It feels long to you. To them, it looks like you're taking the question seriously.

Use that breath to reset. Research by Alison Wood Brooks found that people who reframed their anxiety as excitement performed better under pressure than those who tried to calm down. In one study, people who said "I am excited" before a stressful speech were rated as more persuasive and confident than those who said "I am calm." In another, people told to get excited before a difficult math test scored about 8 percent higher. Your racing heart is energy. Use it.

The restate

Repeat the question in your own words.

> *"So on-time deliveries on my routes were down about eight percent last month."*

This buys a few seconds, confirms you heard correctly, and helps you think. It also signals that you're engaging with the question rather than reacting to it.

The clarifying question

Ask one question that helps you understand.

> *"Is that across all my routes, or concentrated on a few?"*

A good clarifying question makes you look careful and analytical. It also often gives you the clue you need. If Ms. Delgado had said, "Mostly your three biggest routes," Kenji might have immediately

thought of the warehouse that had been giving him trouble.

The "here's what I know" bridge

Share what you do know, and be honest about what you don't.

> *"Here's what I know: my drivers' departure times have been steady, and we haven't had more breakdowns than usual. What I don't know yet is where the delays are happening. That's what I'd want to look at."*

This is one of the most useful sentences in the whole book. It shows you know your work, it's honest, and it buys time without sounding like an excuse.

The conditional answer

If you have a guess, share it as a possibility, not a conclusion.

> *"My first thought is that it might be something at the receiving end, since departures have been on time. But I'd want to check the data before I say for sure."*

This is much safer than "probably the weather." It shows you're thinking, without locking you into an answer that might be wrong.

Days: Moves for Bigger Questions

Some questions deserve a real answer that takes time to find. For those, defer the answer while showing you're on it.

The scheduled answer

Commit to a specific time when you'll follow up.

> *"I want to give you a real answer, not a guess. I'll dig into the delivery data today and send you what I find by tomorrow morning."*

The specificity is what makes this work. "I'll look into it" sounds like a dodge. "I'll send you what I find by tomorrow morning" sounds like a plan. And remember Ellen Langer's copy-machine research: people accept requests far more readily when a reason is attached. "I want to give you a real answer, not a guess" is a reason, and a good one.

The process answer

If finding the answer involves others, say who.

> *"I'll check with the drivers on those routes this afternoon and look at the delivery timestamps. I'll have something for you by end of day."*

When Your Boss Asks You to Decide Something on the Spot

Sometimes the pressure isn't a question about performance. It's a request for a decision. Your manager asks you to take on a new responsibility, switch shifts, join a project, or accept a change to your role, and they want an answer now.

As Chapters 17 and 26 explained, you rarely have to decide in the room. You can buy time politely.

> *"That sounds interesting. Can I think about it overnight and give you an answer tomorrow?"*

For bigger decisions, like a new role, a schedule change, or a different team, it's completely reasonable to ask for a day or two. Most managers will respect that. If a manager insists on an immediate answer for something significant, that's worth noticing, and it's often a sign of the false urgency Chapter 1 described.

What Not to Do

Some habits make buying time look like weakness. Avoid them.

Filler words. "Um, well, I mean, it's kind of hard to say..." Filler signals panic. A clean pause signals thought.

Apologizing. "Sorry, I don't know." Chapter 19 explained how over-apologizing makes you look smaller. "I don't have that yet" is a fact, not a failure.

Guessing as if you know. This was Kenji's mistake. A confident wrong answer is far worse than an honest "Let me check."

Vague deferrals. "I'll look into it," with no time attached, sounds like you're hoping the question goes away.

Never following up. This is the most damaging of all. Buying time only works if you actually come back with the answer, on time. Every time you deliver on a follow-up, you build credibility. Every time you don't, you lose it.

Following Up Builds Your Reputation

For front-line employees, the follow-up is often more important than the original answer. When someone above you asks a question and you say, "I'll have an answer by tomorrow morning,"

then deliver a clear, useful answer at 8 a.m., you create a strong impression: this person is reliable, thorough, and honest.

That impression matters. Chapter 21 explained that reliability is one of the six things managers value most. Delivering on small promises, like a follow-up answer, is one of the fastest ways to build it, and the people above your manager notice it too.

A good follow-up has three parts:

1. **The answer:** what you found.
2. **The cause or context:** why it happened.
3. **The next step:** what you're doing about it.

> *"Following up on the on-time numbers: the drop is almost entirely on three routes delivering to the Fairview warehouse. They moved their receiving hours from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. last month, and our drivers were arriving early to closed doors. I've adjusted the departure times on those routes, and this week's deliveries are back on schedule."*

That message turns a moment of uncertainty into proof that you know your work and solve problems.

Back to Kenji

Let's replay the meeting.

Ms. Delgado: "Kenji, on-time deliveries on your routes dropped about eight percent last month. What's going on?"

Kenji doesn't recognize the number. Instead of guessing, he takes a breath. *Energy, not danger.*

"So on-time deliveries on my routes were down about eight percent. Is that across all my routes, or concentrated on a few?"

Ms. Delgado glances at her report. "Mostly three of them."

"Here's what I know: my drivers' departure times have been steady, and we haven't had extra breakdowns. My first thought is that it might be something on the receiving end, since departures are on time. I want to give you a real answer, not a guess. I'll dig into the data today and send you what I find by tomorrow morning."

Ms. Delgado nods. "Good."

That afternoon, Kenji finds the warehouse that changed its receiving hours. He adjusts the routes and, at 8 a.m. the next day, sends Ms. Delgado a three-part follow-up: the answer, the cause, and the fix.

She replies within the hour: "Nice work. Thanks for the quick turnaround." A few months later, when a dispatch lead position opens, Ms. Delgado mentions Kenji's name to his supervisor.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Front-line employees often rush to answer** because they fear looking incompetent, especially in front of someone senior.
- **A calm pause looks thoughtful.** A confident wrong answer looks like you don't know your job.
- **Ask: Do I recognize this?** Fast answers work when you recognize the situation. When you don't, buy time.
- **Seconds-long moves:** the breath (reframe anxiety as excitement), the restate, the clarifying question, the "here's what I know" bridge, and the conditional answer.

- **Days-long moves:** the scheduled answer and the process answer.
- **You rarely have to decide on the spot.** Ask for a day for significant decisions.
- **Avoid filler, apologies, guessing, vague deferrals, and never following up.**
- **Follow-up builds your reputation:** answer, cause, and next step, delivered on time.

Drill: The Follow-Up Habit

For the next three weeks, practice one move each week.

Week 1: The breath and the restate. Before answering any question from your manager or anyone senior, take one breath and restate the question. Notice how often it improves your answer.

Week 2: The "here's what I know" bridge. At least once a day, when asked something you don't fully know, use "Here's what I know... What I don't know yet is..." and commit to a specific follow-up time.

Week 3: The perfect follow-up. Every time you promise a follow-up, deliver it on time using the three parts: answer, cause, next step. Keep a list and check off each one.

By the end of three weeks, most people find that pressured questions feel very different. Instead of a moment to survive, they become a chance to show how thorough and reliable you are.

In the next chapter, we look at how to build the pattern library that lets you recognize situations faster, so you need to buy time less often.

CHAPTER 31

Building Your Pattern Library

Half Two · Part 4: Thinking at Lightning Speed

Gloria had worked the service desk at a car dealership for fifteen years. Devin had been there four months. They sat side by side, checking in customers, scheduling repairs, and handling whatever walked through the door.

One Friday afternoon, the service manager, Mr. Carter, stopped at Devin's station. "Devin, you've been doing great. Honestly, you're picking this up faster than anyone I've hired. The night porter called out, and I need someone to stay until eight to hand keys to customers picking up late. You're the only one I'd trust with it. Can you do it?"

Devin said yes before Mr. Carter finished the sentence. It was the third time that month.

After Mr. Carter walked away, Gloria leaned over. "You know what that was, right?"

Devin looked confused. "He was being nice?"

"He was being nice right before asking for something. Every time. Praise, then the ask, then 'you're the only one.' He did it to me for years, until I figured it out." She smiled. "He's not a bad guy. He's just short-staffed, and he knows it works. Next time, say you'd love to help but you'll need to leave early Monday to make up for it. Watch what happens."

The next time it happened, Devin tried it. Mr. Carter paused, then said, "Sure, that's fair." Devin was amazed. "How did you know he'd say that?"

Gloria shrugged. "I've seen it a hundred times. After a while, you just recognize it."

That recognition is what this chapter is about. Gloria wasn't smarter than Devin. She had a larger collection of patterns: situations she had seen so often that she recognized them instantly, along with a response that worked. Chapter 15 explored pattern libraries from a leader's perspective. This chapter builds the version front-line employees need, and shows you how to build it in months instead of fifteen years.

How Recognition Makes You Fast

Chapter 30 mentioned research by Gary Klein and his colleagues on fireground commanders. It's worth looking at a little more closely, because it explains exactly what Gloria was doing.

Klein's team interviewed 26 experienced fireground commanders, who averaged 23 years of experience, about decisions they had made at real fires. They found that about 80 percent of decisions were made in under a minute, and that the commanders usually considered just one option. They didn't compare alternatives. They recognized the situation as a familiar type, and that recognition came with an expectation of what would happen next, a sense of what mattered most, and a course of action that usually worked. Before acting, they ran a quick mental check of how it would play out. If something didn't fit, they adjusted.

Gloria did the same thing. Mr. Carter's words matched a pattern: praise right before a request. That pattern came with an expectation (an ask is coming), a focus (what's he asking for, and what can I get in return?), and a response (offer help with a fair trade). She didn't have to think it through. She recognized it.

Why Experts Only Seem Smarter

Another classic study explains why recognition matters so much. In 1973, William Chase and Herbert Simon showed chess positions to players of different skill levels for five seconds, then asked them to rebuild the positions from memory.

Chess masters were remarkably good at rebuilding positions from real games, much better than weaker players. But when the researchers showed boards with pieces placed randomly, in arrangements that would never happen in a real game, the masters did no better than anyone else.

The masters didn't have better memories. They had a huge store of familiar patterns from real games, groups of pieces they'd seen together many times. Chase and Simon estimated that masters had tens of thousands of these patterns stored, with 50,000 often cited as a rough figure. On real boards, they saw a few familiar patterns instead of many separate pieces. On random boards, there were no patterns to see.

Two lessons for front-line employees:

First, your experienced coworkers aren't necessarily smarter than you. They've just seen more patterns. That gap can be closed.

Second, patterns are specific. Gloria's pattern library worked at a dealership service desk. If she moved to a hospital, she would have to build new patterns. That's why Chapter 30 asked you to check "Do I recognize this?" before trusting your instinct.

The Patterns That Matter Most for Front-Line Employees

You don't need 50,000 patterns. You need a few dozen of the most common situations front-line employees face, learned well. Half Two has given you most of them. Here they are in one place.

Moves managers make (Chapter 17):

- Praise right before a request
- "We're a family"
- The tight deadline ("I need an answer in ten minutes")
- Guilt about the team
- The "growth opportunity" with no path attached
- The empty "because"

Public pressure (Chapter 18):

- Your manager calls you out in front of coworkers
- A coworker blames you in a meeting

Your own self-defeating habits (Chapter 19):

- The urge to apologize for asking
- The automatic yes
- The urge to vent about your boss to a coworker
- Holding a problem in until it explodes

- Over-explaining when questioned

Signals of change above your manager (Chapter 22):

- New people at the top
- New numbers in meetings
- Your manager acting differently
- Budget tightening
- New language like "efficiency" or "restructuring"
- A topic that's suddenly not discussed

Objections when you ask for something (Chapters 23 and 25):

- "There's no budget right now"
- "If I do it for you, I have to do it for everyone"
- "You're not quite ready"
- "The timing isn't good"
- "Let me think about it"

Credit and blame (Chapters 24 and 27):

- Being blamed based on incomplete information
- The signs of a scapegoating pattern
- Your work presented without your name

Customer pressure (Chapter 29):

- The loyalty claim ("I've been coming here for years")
- The threat of a bad review
- The "I want to talk to your manager" demand
- The opening demand that sets an anchor

That's about thirty-five patterns. Each one comes with what Klein's commanders had: an expectation, a focus, and a response. If you can recognize these in the moment, you'll handle most tough situations at work faster and better than people with years more experience.

Building Your Library on Purpose

Gloria built her library over fifteen years, mostly by accident. You can build yours much faster with four practices.

Practice 1: Name what you see

A pattern you can name is a pattern you can recognize. When something happens at work, put a label on it in your head. "That was praise before a request." "That's an anchor." "That's the 'no budget' objection."

Naming moves a pattern from a vague feeling to something you can think about clearly. It also makes it easier to spot the next time. Once Gloria named Mr. Carter's habit for Devin, Devin started seeing it everywhere.

Practice 2: Review your hard moments

After any difficult conversation at work, take five minutes and ask four questions:

1. **What happened at the key moment?**
2. **Which pattern was it?** (Or is it a new one?)
3. **What did I do?**
4. **What would I do next time?**

This turns a single experience into a lasting pattern. Without review, experiences blur together and teach you surprisingly little. With review, each one adds a clear entry to your library.

Practice 3: Borrow other people's patterns

You don't have to live through every situation yourself. Some of the fastest learning comes from other people's experiences.

Ask experienced coworkers. "What's the trickiest thing a manager ever asked you to do?" "How do you handle customers who threaten to leave a bad review?" Most people enjoy sharing what they've learned, and each story gives you a pattern without the cost.

Watch what happens to others. When a coworker gets called out, blamed, or talked into something, notice the pattern. What worked? What didn't? Other people's mistakes are among the cheapest lessons you'll ever get.

Find a mentor, even an informal one. Gloria became Devin's mentor without either of them calling it that. A trusted person who's been through more than you can name patterns you haven't learned to see yet.

Practice 4: Rehearse the variations

The chess research shows that patterns are recognized in their real forms. If you've only seen a pattern one way, you might not recognize it when it looks a little different.

So practice each pattern in several versions. Praise before a request can sound like "You're one of my best people," "I only trust you with this," "You're a natural at this," or "I knew I could

count on you." The "no budget" objection can sound like "Money's tight right now," "We're watching costs this quarter," or "That would need approval I don't think we'll get."

The more versions you've heard, the faster you'll recognize the next one. The drills throughout Half Two, like practicing your fifteen-second response to being called out (Chapter 18) or your objection responses (Chapter 23), build exactly this kind of variation.

The Danger of Seeing Patterns That Aren't There

Pattern recognition has a weakness. Sometimes a situation looks like a familiar pattern but is actually different, and acting on the wrong pattern can cause real problems.

Klein's commanders protected themselves against this with their quick mental check: before acting, they imagined how their response would play out. If something didn't fit, they paused and looked again.

Watch for signs that a pattern might not fit:

- **A detail that doesn't match.** The pattern says your manager is using praise to get something, but this time they're genuinely just complimenting you, with no request.
- **A reaction you didn't expect.** You use your usual response, and it lands differently than it normally does.
- **A new person or new stakes.** A response that works with one manager might not work with another.

When something doesn't fit, slow down. Use a clarifying question from Chapter 30: "Can I make sure I understand what you're asking?"

There's a related trap: seeing manipulation everywhere. Chapter 17 warned that most managers aren't villains, and Gloria said the same about Mr. Carter: "He's not a bad guy. He's just short-staffed." A good pattern library includes patterns of honest behavior too. Sometimes praise is just praise. Sometimes a deadline is real. Sometimes your manager really can't share more. The goal isn't suspicion. It's clear sight.

How Long It Takes

Nobody can promise an exact timeline, and deep expertise in any complex field takes years. But the patterns that matter most in tough workplace situations are a much smaller set than a chess master's library. With deliberate practice (naming patterns, reviewing hard moments, borrowing others' stories, and rehearsing variations), many front-line employees notice a real difference within a few months.

The change often arrives suddenly. One day, your manager starts a sentence with a compliment, and you can hear the request coming before they get there. Or a customer opens with "I've been coming here for years," and instead of feeling cornered, you think, *I know this one.* That moment is your library working.

Back to Devin

After that Friday, Devin asks Gloria if she'd be willing to share more of what she's learned. She laughs. "Pull up a chair."

Over the next few months, during slow moments at the desk, Gloria tells Devin her patterns: the customer who claims the dealership "always" overcharges them, which usually means they want a small discount and to feel heard; the manager's "quick favor" that's never quick; the warranty question that sounds simple but can create a commitment the dealership doesn't want to make; the regular who gets louder the longer you make him wait.

Devin starts a note on his phone called "Desk Patterns." Every time something tricky happens, he writes it down: what happened, what pattern it was, what worked. Once a week, he reads through it.

Six months later, a customer storms up to Devin's station. "I've been bringing my cars here for twenty years, and this is the worst service I've ever had. I want my bill cut in half or I'm writing a review."

Devin hears three patterns at once: the loyalty claim, the threat of a review, and an anchor. He takes a breath. "Twenty years is a long time, and I'm sorry today didn't go well. What would make this right for you?"

The customer pauses. "Honestly, I just want to know why it took three hours longer than I was told."

Devin explains the parts delay, apologizes for not calling, and offers a free oil change on his next visit, which is within his authority. The customer leaves satisfied. Gloria, watching from the next station, gives Devin a small nod.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Fast thinking is mostly recognition.** Experienced fireground commanders made about 80 percent of decisions in under a minute by matching situations to familiar patterns.
- **Recognition comes with an expectation, a focus, and a response,** checked with a quick mental simulation.
- **Experts aren't necessarily smarter.** Chess masters rebuilt real positions after five seconds but not random ones. Their edge was patterns.
- **Patterns are specific to their setting.** Trust your instinct where you've built your library.
- **About thirty-five patterns from Half Two** cover most tough situations front-line employees face.
- **Build your library on purpose:** name what you see, review hard moments, borrow other people's patterns, and rehearse variations.
- **Watch for false recognition,** and include honest patterns in your library too.

Drill: Your Pattern Notebook

Start a note on your phone or a small notebook. Begin with the patterns in this chapter. For each one, write:

1. **The name,** in your own words.
2. **Two or three ways it might sound** at your job.
3. **What to expect** when you see it.
4. **Your response,** in one sentence.

Then, every week for the next three months:

- Add at least one new pattern from your own experience or a coworker's story.
- Ask one experienced coworker about a tricky situation they've handled.
- Read through your notebook once.

At the end of three months, read the whole thing. Most people find that patterns that once caught them off guard now feel obvious, which is exactly the goal.

In the final chapter of the book, we'll turn all of Half Two's tools into a simple daily and weekly training plan, so that thinking fast and saying it right becomes something you do without having to think about it.

CHAPTER 32

Daily Drills to Train Your Speed

Half Two · Part 4: Thinking at Lightning Speed

Remember Keisha from Chapter 17, the customer service representative who kept saying yes to Saturday shifts until she learned to name the pattern and ask for what she wanted? A year later, she was the team lead on her floor.

Her first new hire as team lead was a young man named Andre. He was bright and eager, and within his first month, Keisha watched him make every mistake she used to make. He said yes to every extra shift. He apologized before every question. When the floor supervisor called him out in a huddle for a customer complaint that wasn't his fault, he argued back in front of everyone.

Keisha gave him a copy of a book much like this one. Andre read it in a weekend and came back excited. "This is exactly what I needed. I get it now."

Two weeks later, the supervisor stopped at Andre's desk. "Andre, you're doing great. I need someone I can count on to stay late tonight. You're the only one I'd trust with it." Andre said yes before the supervisor finished the sentence.

Afterward, he came to Keisha, frustrated. "I knew exactly what he was doing. I read the whole chapter about it. And I still just said yes. Why?"

Keisha smiled, because she remembered asking herself the same question. "Because reading about it isn't the same as practicing it. Under pressure, you don't do what you know. You do what you've practiced."

This final chapter is about closing that gap between knowing and doing. It brings together the drills from Half Two into one simple training plan that takes about ten minutes a day. And it ends the book by tying both halves together.

Why Practice Matters More Than Reading

Think back to the research that runs through Part 4. Gary Klein's fireground commanders made most decisions in under a minute, but they averaged 23 years of experience. Chess masters could rebuild a real board after a five-second look because of the vast store of patterns they built through years of play. Nobody gets fast by reading about firefighting or chess. They get fast through repetition.

Most front-line employees face truly tough conversations only a few times a month: a pushy customer, a manager's request, a public call-out, a raise conversation. At that rate, it takes years to build the patterns and responses that make those moments feel manageable. The way to speed that up is to create extra repetitions on purpose, with short, regular practice.

Four Principles of Good Practice

Chapter 16 described four principles for leaders. They apply just as much to you.

1. Short and frequent beats long and rare. Ten minutes a day builds more skill than an occasional long session. Patterns form through repeated exposure.

2. Out loud beats in your head. Silently rehearsing feels like practice, but it skips the hardest part: actually getting the words out under pressure. Say your responses out loud, even alone in your car or on a walk.

3. Realistic beats comfortable. Practice with a little pressure: a timer, a friend playing your manager, a scenario that makes you a bit nervous. The closer practice feels to the real thing, the more it carries over.

4. Review beats repetition alone. Doing something many times without reflecting teaches surprisingly little. Five minutes of honest review after a real moment is worth more than an hour of practice.

The Daily Ten Minutes

The heart of the plan is two short routines: five minutes at the start of your day and five minutes at the end.

Start of day: Prepare for one moment (5 minutes)

Think about your day ahead. What's the one situation most likely to be tough? A meeting with your manager, a request you need to make, a difficult customer you're expecting, a conversation you've been putting off. Fill out a quick card:

- **What does the other person really want?** (Chapter 21's manager needs, or a customer's real want from Chapter 29.)
- **What's the most likely tough moment?** A request, an objection, a call-out, a push.

- **My one-sentence response.**
- **My exit line** if it goes somewhere unexpected (Chapter 30): "Let me check and get back to you by..."

Then say your response out loud once.

If nothing tough is coming, prepare for the most common pressure you face: your manager's next extra request, or a customer's most common complaint. Practicing on ordinary moments builds the habit for hard ones.

End of day: Review and record (5 minutes)

Look back at the toughest moment of your day and answer three questions:

1. **What pattern was it?** Name it using your pattern notebook from Chapter 31.
2. **What did I do well?** One specific thing.
3. **What would I do differently?** One specific thing.

Then run a quick habit check from Chapter 19: Did I over-apologize? Say yes automatically? Vent about my boss to a coworker? Hold in a problem I should have raised? Over-explain?

Add any new pattern to your notebook. That's it.

Ten minutes a day adds up to hundreds of prepared moments and hundreds of reviewed ones over a year, far more deliberate practice than most people get in a whole career.

The Weekly Workout

Once a week, spend about twenty minutes on one deeper drill. Rotate through these four.

Week A: The fifteen-second response (Chapter 18)

Write down the three things you're most likely to be called out or questioned about at work. For each, practice a fifteen-second response out loud with a timer: acknowledge, own any real piece precisely, and move the details to private.

Before each one, take a breath and reframe your nerves as energy. Alison Wood Brooks's research found that people who told themselves "I am excited" before a stressful task performed better than those who tried to calm down. Practice that switch until it's automatic.

Week B: The what-if map for your next ask (Chapter 23)

Pick something you want to ask your manager for in the next month: a schedule change, a raise, training, a new responsibility, or help with a problem. Build a what-if map: your goal and minimum, a three-minute premortem, three likely objections with responses, and your exit line. Then go find whatever is on your "need" list.

Remember why the premortem works. Research by Mitchell, Russo, and Pennington found that imagining an outcome had already happened led people to come up with about 30 percent more explanations for it. More possibilities considered means fewer surprises.

Week C: Pattern variations (Chapter 31)

Pick three patterns from your notebook. For each, write four or five different ways it might sound at your job, and your response to each. This builds the variety that helps you recognize a pattern even when it shows up in a new form.

Week D: Visibility and relationship (Chapters 21 and 27)

Do two things this week. First, send your manager a short update on something you've accomplished, with a number if you can. Second, ask your manager one question about what they need: "What's the most helpful thing I could focus on this month?" or "How do you like to get updates?"

This drill is different from the others. It doesn't train speed directly. It builds the trust and visibility that make every tough conversation easier. Gallup's research found that most people who quit their jobs said no leader had talked with them about their satisfaction or future in their last three months. You don't have to wait for your manager to start that conversation. You can start it yourself.

The Monthly Rehearsal

Once a month, practice with another person. This is the most powerful drill in the book, and the one most people skip because it feels awkward.

Ask a trusted friend, family member, or coworker to help. Give them a real situation you expect to face: your manager asking you to take on extra work, a customer demanding a refund, a raise conversation, being blamed for something you didn't do. Tell them what the other person is like and what they'll probably say. Then let them play the role, with a little edge, while you respond out loud.

Run it twice. After the first time, talk for five minutes: where did you hesitate? What did you miss? What worked? Then run it again and try to improve.

If you can, switch roles afterward. Playing your manager or a pushy customer teaches you a surprising amount about the pressures on the other side, which strengthens the perspective-taking skill that runs through this whole book.

The Ninety-Day Plan

If you want a structured start, here's a ninety-day plan that follows the order of Half Two.

Days 1–30: Defense

Focus on recognizing the moves and stopping your own self-defeating habits.

- **Daily:** Keep the request log from Chapter 17. Before saying yes to any extra request, buy five minutes. Replace unnecessary "sorry"s (Chapter 19).
- **Weekly:** The fifteen-second response drill.
- **Goal:** Catch at least one manager move or self-defeating habit each day as it happens.

Days 31–60: Prediction

Focus on seeing conversations before they happen.

- **Daily:** The start-of-day card.
- **Weekly:** Build your manager map (Chapter 21) once, then update it. Do one signal scan (Chapter 22). Build one what-if map for an upcoming ask.
- **Goal:** In at least half your prepared conversations, one of your predicted moments actually comes up.

Days 61–90: Speed

Focus on building and using your pattern library.

- **Daily:** End-of-day review with pattern naming.
- **Weekly:** Pattern variations, and one visibility and relationship step.
- **Monthly:** A live role-play.
- **Goal:** Your pattern notebook has at least forty entries, and you start recognizing patterns in moments you didn't prepare for.

At the end of ninety days, compare your first week of reviews to your last. Most people see a clear difference: fewer automatic yeses, calmer responses under pressure, and more conversations where they saw the turn coming.

How to Know It's Working

Progress here can be hard to notice, because success often looks like nothing dramatic happening. Watch for these signs:

- **You notice moves in the moment** that you used to notice only afterward.
- **You say "Let me check and get back to you"** without feeling anxious about it.
- **Your answers under pressure get shorter and calmer.**
- **Fewer conversations catch you off guard.**
- **Your manager starts checking with you before assigning work,** or asks your opinion more often.
- **You raise problems early,** and they get fixed.
- **You catch yourself mid-habit:** about to apologize, about to say yes, about to vent, and you stop.

Check these in your end-of-day review once a month. They're the real measure of progress.

Back to Andre

After that conversation, Keisha shows Andre the ninety-day plan. He starts the next day.

For the first month, he keeps a request log and buys five minutes before every yes. He counts his "sorry"s and replaces them. For the second month, he fills out a start-of-day card every morning and builds a what-if map before asking his supervisor for a schedule change. For the third, he builds his pattern notebook, and Keisha plays the supervisor in a role-play, using every move she can think of: praise before a request, "we're a team," a ten-minute deadline, guilt about coworkers.

Andre stumbles the first time through. The second time, he handles all four.

Three weeks later, the supervisor stops at Andre's desk. "Andre, you're one of the best on the floor. I need someone to stay late tonight. You're the only one I'd trust with it."

Andre feels the familiar pull to say yes. He recognizes it. He takes a breath.

"Thanks, I appreciate that. I can't tonight, but I can stay late Thursday if that helps. And I've stayed late three times this month already. Could we find a longer-term fix for evening coverage?"

The supervisor pauses, then nods. "Thursday works. And yeah, let's figure out the coverage."

Walking out that evening, Andre realizes he didn't have to think about the words. They were just there. That's what practice does.

The Whole Book in One Page

This chapter closes Half Two, and the book. Here's everything in a few lines.

Half One: For managers and executives.

- **Part 1:** People make moves on leaders (flattery, urgency, guilt, playing dumb). Public pressure scrambles good thinking. Many wounds are self-inflicted. And every conversation is a sale of a version of events, a decision, and a feeling.
- **Part 2:** Find what everyone really wants. Predict how they'll react. Map the branches before the conversation starts.
- **Part 3:** Precise ownership when blamed. Headline-first bad news. Stay conversations with top performers. Five questions when the goal changes. Calm authority. Trades, not concessions, on price.
- **Part 4:** Buy time without looking weak. Build your pattern library. Train daily.

The Bridge: In almost every tough conversation, both people believe they're the one being played. Each side usually guards exactly what the other side needs. Thinking about the other chair turns a contest into a deal.

Half Two: For front-line employees.

- **Part 1:** Managers make moves, on purpose or not. Public call-outs hit hard. Many wounds are self-inflicted. And every conversation with your boss is a sale.
- **Part 2:** Learn what your manager really needs. Read the pressures above them. Map your ask before you make it.
- **Part 3:** Handle false blame calmly. Ask for raises with evidence and a number. Say no with options. Protect your credit

through visibility. Report problems as facts, not accusations. Know your authority with customers.

- **Part 4:** Buy time without looking unsure. Build your pattern library. Train daily.

And underneath it all, from either chair: understand what the other person really wants, prepare for the predictable turns, don't let the pressure of the moment make your decisions for you, and practice until the right words come on their own.

A Final Word

This book began with a simple idea: in tough workplace conversations, your own mind can be used against you, often without you realizing it. Flattery, urgency, guilt, public pressure, and your own habits can push you into decisions you wouldn't make with a clear head.

But the same mind can be trained. You can learn to see the moves as they happen, predict the turns before they come, say the right thing under pressure, and think faster than the situation demands. None of it requires being a genius. It requires understanding, preparation, and practice.

Whichever chair you sit in today, managing people or being managed, you'll probably sit in the other one someday. The skills are the same from both sides. And the people who learn them don't just avoid getting played. They become the ones others trust in the hardest moments: the leader who stays calm, the employee who speaks up well, the person who can think fast and say it right.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Under pressure, you do what you've practiced, not what you know.**
- **Most people don't get enough natural repetitions,** so create them on purpose.
- **Good practice is short and frequent, out loud, realistic, and reviewed.**
- **The daily ten minutes:** a start-of-day card for one tough moment, and an end-of-day review with pattern naming and a habit check.
- **The weekly workout:** rotate the fifteen-second response, the what-if map, pattern variations, and visibility and relationship.
- **The monthly rehearsal:** a live role-play with someone you trust, then switch roles.
- **The ninety-day plan:** defense, then prediction, then speed.
- **Watch for signs of progress:** catching moves live, calmer answers, fewer surprises, and catching yourself mid-habit.

Drill: Start Tomorrow

The only drill for this final chapter is to begin.

Tomorrow morning, before you start work, fill out one start-of-day card. Tomorrow evening, spend five minutes on the review. Then do it again the next day.

Don't wait for a perfect notebook, a quiet week, or a better time. The people who get good at tough conversations aren't the ones who plan the most carefully. They're the ones who start, and keep going.

Think fast. Say it right. And don't get played at work.

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