

DARRYL SHOEMAKER



WHAT'S YOUR NEXT CAREER STEP?

Field notes on
finding your story



“

“Darryl Shoemaker blends powerful personal stories with practical tools to create a perfect guide for anyone navigating their career.”

WENDY SMITH, PhD, DANA J. JOHNSON PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT,
UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE, AUTHOR OF *BOTH/AND THINKING*

“One of those books we all wish we had by our computer as we progressed through our careers.”

ERIC KEEN, BOARD CHAIR, HDR

“Darryl’s book does not offer a portal to the finish line, but rather coaching points for the journey along the way.”

CADEN GIGLIOTTI, PE, DAM SAFETY ENGINEER

“A game-changer for anyone navigating a career transition.”

PATRICK LO, PRESIDENT, CANAAN GROUP

“It sounded like you were sitting here talking with me.”

JOSLYN HON, DIRECTOR OF LEARNING AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, HDR

“A valuable tool for both practitioners and managers alike.”

JACK GRAUMAN, VP, HDR

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This Guide is humbly drawn from a wide range of career experiences and lessons learned—often the hard way!



I am thankful to have served as the Chief Talent Development officer for an employee-owned firm with over 200 offices globally. That vantage point created countless opportunities to gather insights from colleagues as well as industry leaders, academics, and family and good friends who can tell it like it is.

I owe a particular thanks to the thousands of young people I've worked with—including those who attended a recent summit of early career professionals, where they asked excellent questions and engaged in a two-way dialogue that has informed the seven career journey questions in this Guide.

Wherever possible, I have referred to these colleagues and friends by their first names.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Why Questions?</u>	05
<u>CH. 1 Place: Where Am I?</u>	13
<u>CH. 2 Possibility: What Am I Looking For?</u>	30
<u>CH. 3 Tension: Can I Handle This?</u>	46
<u>CH. 4 Team: Do It Myself?</u>	63
<u>CH. 5 Owner: Give And Take?</u>	77
<u>CH. 6 Focus: Do I Have Time?</u>	92
<u>CH. 7 Share: What's the Story?</u>	107
<u>Guide Reminder & My Story</u>	122
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	128
<u>Appendix: Workbook</u>	129



WHY QUESTIONS?

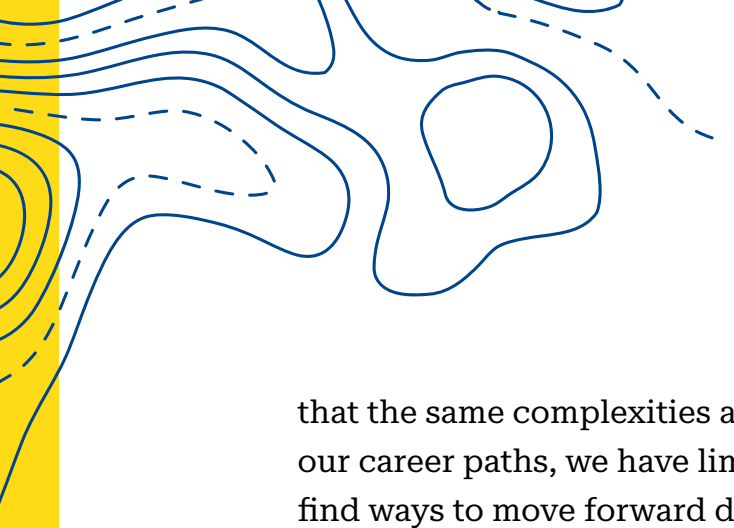
When I was a child, I wanted to be a meteorologist. I would sit by my family's front window and watch a lightning storm—captivated by its awe-inspiring power, wondering how humans learned to anticipate its next move.

Weather is a beautiful contradiction. Its patterns can be tracked and predicted, yet each storm challenges our illusion of control. Weather is part of our daily conversation as a shared experience, yet it is always unique to the coordinates where you stand.



This complexity drew me in, but as my education progressed, I struggled with physics—a cornerstone of meteorology—and I followed a different career path. I joined my mom and dad in their drywall supply business and spent several years hauling construction materials through wild Canadian weather. Later, I joined a global infrastructure firm, HDR, as a technical resource and project manager. I took on more and greater responsibilities, and after 27 years at the firm, I became its Chief Talent Development Officer.

By then, my journey had veered far from meteorology, but I found



that the same complexities are part of our professional lives. In our career paths, we have limited data and visibility. We need to find ways to move forward despite risk. And often, we just want someone to tell us what to do!

Indeed, we are flooded with advice and opinions about our careers. And when others ask us for advice, we're tempted to do the same—to give our opinion long before we pause to ask questions and consider a situation with a critical eye. But while opinions grant us a temporary sense of security, they can also send us marching confidently down the wrong path.


Opinions often cling to the past, while life is lived forward into an unpredictable future that, like unfamiliar terrain or inclement weather, challenges our illusion of control.

That's where questions come in.

Opinions flatten our world. Questions help us break down the world to make sense of it, but they also help us put it back together.

That's why the most valuable career asset is a wise mentor who asks good questions—who acts more as a guide than a director. Like maps or forecasts, true mentors don't give answers; instead, they suggest places to explore and how to prepare—and how to keep asking questions along the way.

This Guide aims to play a role similar to that of a mentor: asking insightful questions that will help you uncover new opportunities, develop skills to face challenges, and take the first steps into a journey that's truly led by you.



“The missing ingredients in most conversations are curiosity and willingness to ask questions to which we do not already know the answer ... We are biased toward telling instead of asking because we live in a pragmatic, problem-solving culture in which knowing things and telling others what we know is valued.”

~EDGAR SCHEIN, HUMBLE INQUIRY


Ultimately, this Guide’s purpose is to help you find your career story. Together, we’ll take a look at where you’ve been, digging into your unique experiences and circumstances. We’ll also ask questions to fully discover who you are becoming, which helps clarify your next steps.

“Our knowledge—far from requiring antiseptic distance between the knower and the known—would not be possible if we were not in the intimate relationship with the things we seek to know.”

~PARKER PALMER, THE PROMISE OF PARADOX

“Knowing” who you are becoming, using Palmer’s definition, involves both your heart and mind. Therefore, this Guide addresses your whole self: both what you do and how you do it. **We often ask someone “what” they do for a living. But the element that defines any career is “how.”**

While your competency may make the initial impression, your character—who you are becoming—often shapes someone’s lasting perception. In a time of growing automation, relational skills will play a bigger role at work. Those skills, or lack thereof, become weightier throughout your career.



“In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if you don’t have the first, the other two will kill you. You’re better off hiring someone with integrity and intelligence but no energy than someone with energy and intelligence but no integrity. The last one is the most dangerous of all.”

~WARREN BUFFET, INVESTOR CONFERENCE

This Guide is not a ‘how to’ book or manual with answers that assume I already know what’s best for you. It’s not a collection of career hacks, and it’s not seven easy steps to success. It’s a field guide to a road less traveled—a lifelong journey within a bigger purpose.

If you’re looking for clarity on your personal career journey, whether it’s the immediate next step or a birds-eye view, this guide is for you. It may also help you if you’re a supervisor who wants to better support others in discovering their path.



THIS IS A GUIDE WITH **SEVEN** **QUESTIONS** FOR YOUR BACKPACK

We begin with **two questions**: first, a prompt for you to pause and look around at your surroundings:

01. **PLACE**



Where are you in your journey and how do you show up?

Second, a question reminding us that what we see depends on what we are looking for:



02. **POSSIBILITY**

Where do you find meaning in work, and how can you plan strategically?

Journeys are rarely linear, and I have not seen any two people use the same route. This Guide includes **five additional questions** that serve as signposts, where you can take stock of where you are and consider your next steps:



03. TENSION

How do I unravel a challenge that is stopping me from taking my next step?

04. TEAM

Who can I trust to help me along the way, and how do we learn to hear each other?

05. OWNER

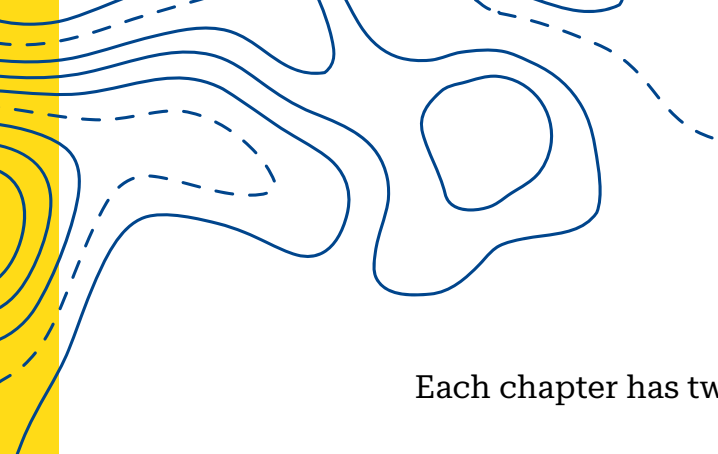
Am I part of something transformative?

06. FOCUS

What does balance mean to me?

07. SHARE

Who have been valuable mentors in my life, and can I do the same for others?



Each chapter has two sections, with four parts each:

01

PREPARATION

For every big question we cover in this Guide, there are many more questions waiting downstream. The Preparation section introduces you to them and invites you to meditate on one question or quote in silence, a learning skill that helps you sit with tension and fuels action.

02

JOURNEY STORY

A Journey Story details a relevant situation that I experienced or witnessed along my own path.

03

OBSERVATIONS

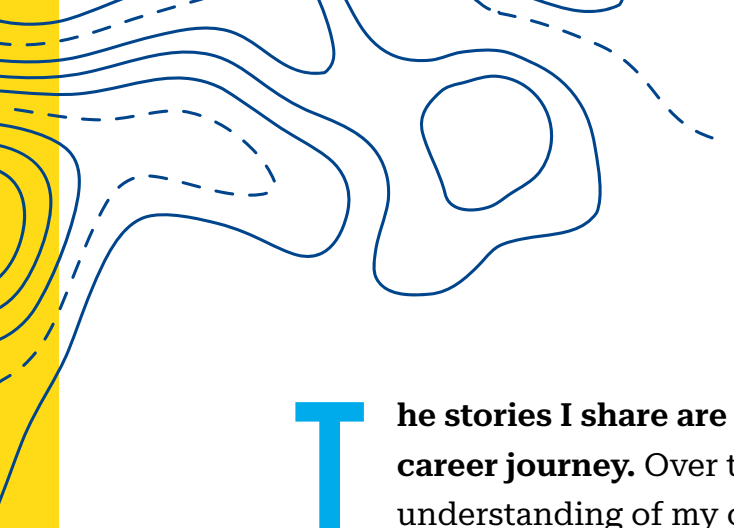
The “Observations” reflect on how the question at hand might shape our choices.

04

QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Now that you’ve immersed yourself in a few real-world examples and insights, it’s your turn to reflect on your own life experiences and the patterns you find.

Finally, if a particular question captures your interest, you can go further with the **Further Resources** section at the end of each chapter.



The stories I share are field notes drawn from my own career journey. Over the years, I've learned that an honest understanding of my own story puts me in a better place to hear and appreciate others' stories. The same is true for you. When we know our own stories, we come to a place of assurance, but also openness, knowing that others can help fill in a picture much bigger than we could ever see on our own.

The seven core questions in this Guide are not set in stone, and each question opens the door to many more. You can engage with all of the questions in order, or you can jump to the questions that are most relevant to you right now. This flexibility is important: career questions that arise when you're starting your journey in your twenties are different from those you encounter in your forties or fifties as you look to make a big change or help others map out their own careers. You can also skip the Guide and go straight to the Workbook in the Appendix.

This Guide is compact enough to fit in your backpack, but filled with enough substance to sustain a journey of discovery throughout your entire career.

I hope that reflecting on these questions will help you better understand your story—shedding light on your path so far, and illuminating your imagination for the adventures ahead.

Every journey is unique, and what you seek will shape where you go. **What will you share when someone says, “Tell me your career story”?**



PLACE WHERE AM I?

In order to decide where
you're going, you have to
know where you are.



PREPARATION

We can only make a thoughtful change when we first pause, look around, and reflect. Take an honest assessment of where you are. Where am I right now? How well am I equipped to deal with the situations facing me today?

How do I show up?

Stop and take a deep breath. How am I feeling?

Find a place to listen. What am I hearing from the people and circumstances around me?

“For this voice from eternity whispers and breathes right through everything that exists in the world, all intramundane values; and, without depriving the things of this world of their meaning and value, it lends them a bottomless dimension, exploding whatever is closed, relativizing whatever seems ultimate, revealing hidden depths in what seems simple, sweetening pain and bringing reconciliation to what is tragic.”

~HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, PRAYER

“All of humanity’s problems stem from [our] inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

~BLAISE PASCAL, PENSÉES



Consider sitting with one of the **Place** questions for five minutes in silence.

TIP: Set a timer.

TIP: Pick a key word from the question and come back to it when your thoughts wander.

TIP: If you’re new to quiet reflection, start with a minute or two and work your way up to five.

JOURNEY STORY

WHAT DO YOU HEAR?


During my time as the head of talent development at a global business, HDR, my team ran into a challenge. Across the company, employees were often engaged in projects that evolved from their original job descriptions. Responsibilities became murky, and matrix organizations, remote teams, and hybrid work policies added to the confusion.

Seeing this problem, we set out to update our annual performance evaluation process. We chose to start there because the root of many conflicts is a difference in expectations (“I thought you understood...”) or a lack of clarity (who, what, and by when). Where expectations are misaligned, it’s easy for an employee and their



supervisor to get off track—which erodes trust, smothers growth, and creates confusion about how to move forward. That was happening at HDR, and we needed to get our teams back on the same track.

To update our evaluation process, my co-workers Joslyn, Bill and many others built a collaborative team with technical backgrounds in recruiting, human resources and learning. We agreed that there was no perfect evaluation process and that we could all benefit from learning to give or receive feedback better. **Indeed, there is always a gap between our skills and what it would take to fully flourish in a role. If we as the receiver of feedback no longer see a gap, that’s when we’re in trouble.**




“Between giver and receiver, it’s the receiver’s skills that have the most impact. We need to equip receivers to create pull—to drive their own learning ... as each receiver becomes more skilled at receiving ... the organization gets better at it too.”

~DOUGLAS STONE AND SHEILA HEEN, THANKS FOR THE FEEDBACK

Our goal was to drive more meaningful evaluations through three changes:

1. Employees, not managers, would first identify our primary job responsibilities. As employees, we have the best view of our present situation. There is a better chance of surfacing misalignment when employees fill out the evaluation form first and let our manager respond by confirming or flagging different expectations for success and growth.
2. Evaluations would then seek to reach agreement on which skills and levels of competency we needed to thrive in our primary responsibilities.
3. The evaluations process would now include space to list a mentor or advisor and any feedback that the employee wanted to include from them (each employee would curate that feedback to protect the confidentiality of those relationships).

As organizations become flatter and more hybrid, supervisors are stretched thinner. At HDR, we learned that it is more important for employees to take initiative with their career paths—to seek input from others on their goals and skills. As a result, we put as much emphasis on the evaluation as we did on developing additional



channels for an employee to hear meaningful feedback. These sources, like advisors or mentors, better reflected the reality of a team environment and made us less dependent on the supervisor as a singular point of feedback. 360 reviews take this even further, helping an employee hear from supervisors, peers, and direct reports for a well-rounded view of their performance.


We also learned the value of documentation. The new process involved an in-person meeting, and during a trial run, we received feedback asking whether it was still necessary to fill out an evaluation form. This insight led us to further refine our approach. We clarified that not every aspect of the discussion needed to be recorded, but that the manager and employee had to document a meaningful conversation that could serve as a reference point for regular check-ins. Documentation also helped the manager follow up with resources to help the employee build new skills. Finally, the documentation provided a record to share with a third party if the manager and employee couldn't come to an agreement.

OBSERVATIONS

TOUGH CHOICES

John, an accomplished therapist and university professor, notes that we typically don't have experience with tough conversations. How do we learn and teach these skills?

Annual reviews are a place where tough conversations can arise. What does a challenging situation or a change reveal about you? When facing uncertainty, how do you respond?



One of my annual market presentations that received the most supportive feedback was one where I said I was wrong about an initiative—that things could have been better. So often, even plans backed by reams of data and hours of thinking do not match the complexity they face. That pattern became easier to manage when I started exploring my blind spots and reflecting on them with others.

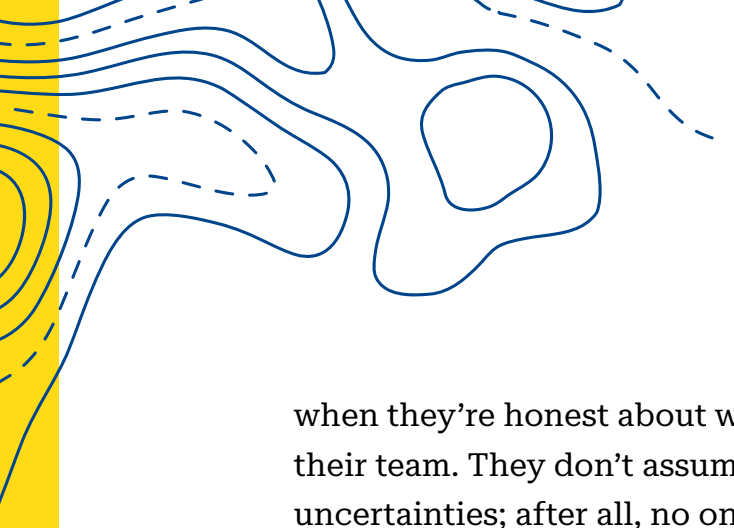
We all have blind spots, but many supervisors are hesitant to be honest for fear of offending us. Could you list any of your own blind spots?

“A puzzling limitation of our mind: our excessive confidence in what we believe we know, and our apparent inability to acknowledge the full extent of our ignorance and the uncertainty of the world we live in. We are prone to overestimate how much we understand about the world and to underestimate the role of chance in events.”

~DANIEL KAHNEMAN, THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

Indeed, feedback can also be difficult to give. Many leaders want to gain control and diagnose a situation immediately. The alternative is vulnerability, which can be quite uncomfortable. Ed Catmull, the CEO of Pixar, noted that when his staff faced uncertainty, it “bred suspicion”—but when leaders were themselves vulnerable, they created space for growth and creativity.

Creativity and mistrust can be two sides of the same coin. Which one wins? It comes down to a competition between an open, flexible posture of learning, and a more closed, tense posture of instructing and directing. In my experience, leaders are stronger



when they're honest about what they could learn alongside their team. They don't assume that their position is without uncertainties; after all, no one has all the answers.

Regardless of whether you're in a position that primarily gives feedback, receives it, or both, we can all be aware of how our position shapes our perspective. Our current role, past experiences, and future expectations all affect what we see and what we miss. Someone working fully remotely will likely experience the same information differently (e.g., why an organizational change occurred) than someone with a strong in-person network. Odds are that someone good at operations will see financial information differently than someone with strong marketing skills.

Given these nuances, it helps for the feedback giver to avoid general statements like, "You need to pay more attention to details" and for the receiver to dig into the data—"Can you provide an example?" or "What do you see as the primary risk?" before sharing a different perspective. With humility and flexibility, these questions help the giver and receiver get closer to the heart of the matter, and at the same time, they forge a relationship. It's hard to hear each other unless you trust each other, and in the end, there is no shortcut to trust.



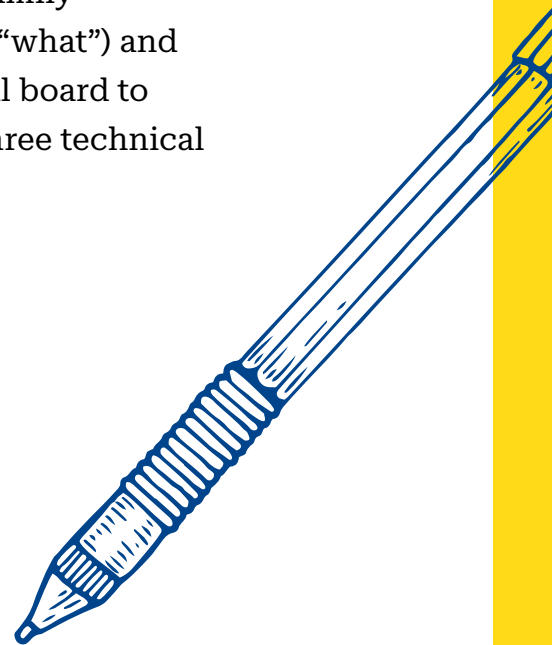
QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Who do you have on your “personal board” or focus group to provide honest and diverse perspectives?

EXERCISE: List the individuals who currently offer you support and feedback. If that personal board feels incomplete, identify gaps and think about who could speak into your life and provide the perspectives you’re missing. Who lets you know when you’re off track? Who will give you the final 10% in honest feedback that most people would hesitate to offer?

How would others describe you?

EXERCISE: In one or two paragraphs, write down how you believe different people in your life—colleagues, friends, family—would describe your top three technical skills (the “what”) and characteristics (the “how”). Then, ask your personal board to independently develop their own list of your top three technical skills and characteristics. Compare your results.





PREPARATION

Consider these quotes as you get ready for another angle on the question, “Where am I?”

“When we cling to the results of our actions as our only way of self-identification, then we become possessive and defensive...”

~HENRI NOUWEN, *THE DANCE OF LIFE*


“Consider what we mean by ‘identity.’ It is ‘who’ we are, ‘where we’re coming from.’ As such it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense. If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person I love, then she becomes internal to my identity ... Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter.”

~CHARLES TAYLOR, *THE ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY*

JOURNEY STORY

HOW DOES A ROLE SHAPE YOU?

In my career journey, I’ve worked with over 13,000 experts in architecture, engineering, science, and other technical disciplines. Some of them literally wrote the book on design solutions for improving communities. They gained their expertise by constantly undergoing review and critique of their work, refining their skills through feedback. However, a curious pattern emerges over time. As each of us gains expertise and




confidence, we can become too comfortable with our opinion. We start to hold on more tightly to our beliefs; we overlook unknowns; we simplify what is complex. When that occurs, it's harder to embrace feedback, mentor others, and collaborate.

I remember one incident where two leading industry experts were debating an electrical design solution for an energy facility. **In a professional disagreement, there are two ditches you can drive into: letting it get personal or going underground and not talking to each other.** These experts did both, in that order, and lost the opportunity to find the best solution for the project at hand. When I shared this story with several CEOs at an industry meeting, they echoed similar experiences and agreed: no one likes the “brilliant jerk.”

In another case that eventually landed on my desk, an industry expert was becoming frustrated with his client; he felt that their questions about his proposed solution betrayed poor understanding and poor judgment. He voiced that displeasure in a private chat to another colleague—except it wasn't private. The client saw it and fired the industry expert in question. If he had responded to their questions by offering caveats about his approach, starting a conversation about risk and nuance, he could have bolstered his credibility and made his client more comfortable offering feedback. Instead, he lost their trust and their business.

In his book, *Think Again*, Adam Grant says,

“If you want to get better at conveying complexity, it's worth taking a close look at how scientists communicate. One key step is to include caveats. It's rare that a single study or even a series of studies is conclusive.”



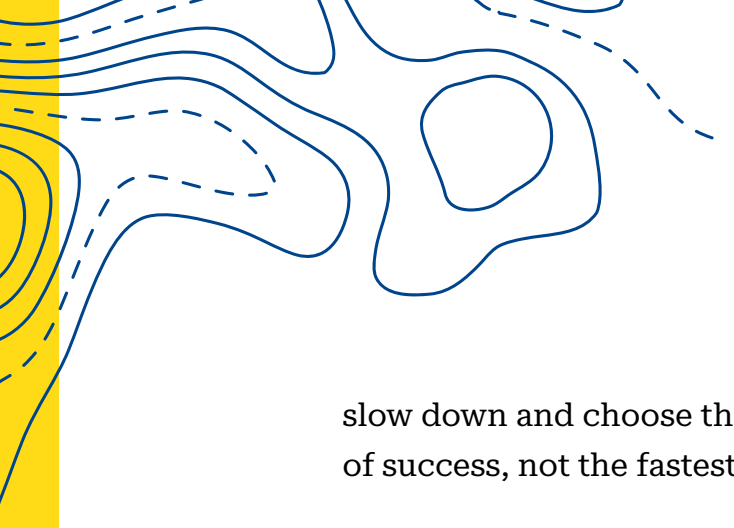
As a firm, we adopted several strategies to resist becoming entrenched in our expertise:

First, we used annual reviews to create more self-awareness and appreciate other perspectives. For example, during reviews, I asked employees how well they balanced independence as they managed diverging or even dissenting opinions.

Second, we created recognition programs to celebrate our top performers. Initially, it sounds counterintuitive—wouldn't recognition just inflate the egos of “brilliant jerks” in the making? In fact, intentional recognition programs harnessed that sense of accomplishment in a more generative way. As the firm celebrated our top experts, we emphasized the responsibilities of their stature and suggested ways that they could support the ongoing growth of their peers and their profession.

Finally, we emphasized practical ways to communicate well in tough conversations. Here are some of those strategies:

- Step away from your screen and clear your head. If you can, hit the “pause” button for 24 hours.
- Never type an important email with the recipient listed until you have reread it several times.
- Remind yourself of what the bigger purpose is and ask yourself if you can reframe your words to point toward that purpose.
- Whenever you type something—email, text, chat, etc.—you should assume it will become public and let that shape your words accordingly.
- If you're working through a sensitive issue that could create conflict, ask yourself if you can communicate by phone, video call, or best of all, in person. In our fast-paced world, we need to



slow down and choose the medium that gives us the best chance of success, not the fastest way to cross it off our to-do lists.

OBSERVATIONS


HOW YOU SHOW UP

I am slowly learning to appreciate that authenticity doesn't mean I offer a façade of a finished product; it means that I show up as a person, still in progress, who can offer a window into my journey. This sense of ongoing learning provides points of connection, builds trust, and tells a story rich with meaning. The Chinese word for business, *shēng yì*, brings together the characters for life and intention, reflecting that the process of growth takes both hard work and time.



Over three decades at HDR, I built a reputation for getting things done. From the beginning, I was competitive, learned how to deal with lots of pressure, and developed the skill to stay very focused for long periods of time. That work ethic set the table for success, but there is always a shadow side to any strength. At times, my hard work resulted in titles or positions that ended up trapping and disorienting me because I had let results define my worth.

The Enneagram test opened my eyes to this familiar achievement trap (for those familiar with the assessment, I am a 3). I am at my worst when using achievements to prop up my self-worth and at my best when working alongside others and looking ahead with



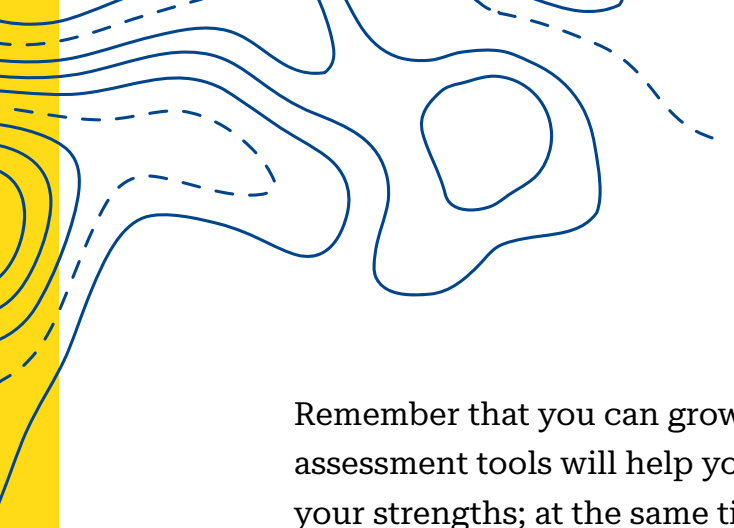
a hopeful perspective. That difference is hard to see on my own, and it's why I've needed friends and mentors throughout my journey. In fact, I needed both a personal guide (thanks Pete!) and a professional coach (thanks Dana!) at different times to challenge my thinking and help set new patterns.

With their help, I made conscious and lasting changes. I stopped making things about me and started painting pictures about what was possible for my team. I stopped being a gatekeeper and started supporting others as they moved toward their goals. These transformations can sound abstract and philosophical, but they got practical in a real hurry when I worked through challenging leadership issues like career changes for myself and others. At the end of the day, what tends to leave a lasting impression is not beliefs or credentials, but how each of us shows up to work during a challenging time. Character is central, and all of our efforts can be exercises in self-righteousness if they don't come from a place of humility.

“Without genuine transformation—my attempts at self-improvement just generate more sophisticated ways to blame others and/or frustration with those who make their mistakes differently than I do.”

~OBSERVATION ON GROWTH FROM A CONVERSATION WITH JAY

If you really want to dig deep, consider taking the assessment tools under “Further Resources.” These diagnostics will give you a good idea of your strengths, preferences, and patterns to look for. **As one of my friends put it, each person needs to know their typical “operating model.”** From there, we can acquire the skills and confidence to operate differently when a situation calls for a new approach.



Remember that you can grow in multiple directions. At their best, assessment tools will help you explore new roles that align with your strengths; at the same time, they help you deepen existing skills right where you are. For instance, I have known engineers who built the first part of their career as a strong designer. They first developed credibility with their teams and clients by developing quality technical solutions. However, in parallel, they deepened their interpersonal and marketing skills as they began to work more closely with clients. As a result, their next career step was to move into a business development role. They stayed rooted in their technical skills, but learned to leverage them in a new way.

Jennifer, an IBM client executive and Strengths coach, helped me see how assessment tools can also help identify how your strengths align with unexpected career paths. You can share your results with your personal board to find out if they see the same possibilities. Identify a potential coach (e.g., a StrengthsFinder Certified professional) who can walk you through the results and help you map out a path forward. Remember that what you record has a greater chance of having an impact. Consider using the results as part of a SWOT analysis or a career plan that includes practical elements like objectives (gaining a new skill or experience), resources (where to connect with training or apprenticeship), key performance indicators (to identify progress), and check-ins (ongoing help for the journey!).



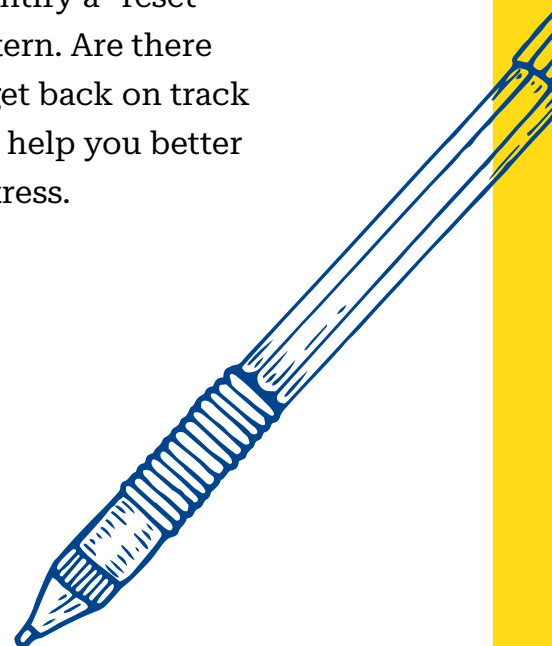
QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Are you prepared to speak authentically in interview questions like, “What did you learn working through a difficult situation?” or “Describe a strength and a weakness”?

EXERCISE: Write down two specific situations where you faced conflict or challenges and what you learned. Did the resolution also create space for others to grow? Practice articulating these stories in a clear, authentic way that highlights growth and self-awareness.

How do you know when you are off track?

EXERCISE: Identify two patterns—emotional, mental, or physical—that are reliable signs you’re drifting off course. Identify a “reset action” that helps you step away and break the pattern. Are there passions in your personal life that could help you get back on track at work? Consider using some of the tools below to help you better understand how you show up when you’re under stress.



FURTHER RESOURCES FOR PLACE



- [CliftonStrengths](#)
- [Enneagram](#)
- [Stanford Meaningful Work Kit](#)
- [VIA Character Strengths Survey](#)
- [“Assembling Your Personal Board of Advisors,”](#)
MIT SLOAN MANAGEMENT REVIEW





POSSIBILITY **WHAT AM I** **LOOKING FOR?**

Strategic planning isn't just for big companies. Each of us can apply the principles of strategic planning to our own careers.

PREPARATION

We can't predict the future, but I've seen good evidence that we can prepare for different scenarios. Does the future reward clarity and punish certainty?

Market and cultural complexities create uncertainty, but I've also found deeper sources of confidence and endurance for the career journey. Where do you find purpose and meaning in work?

"We all go into professions for many reasons: money, status, security. But some people have experiences that turn a career into a calling. These experiences quiet the self. All that matters is living up to the standard of excellence inherent in their craft."

~DAVID BROOKS, NYT

"...but nothing can be proved, although one can become convinced."

~FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV



Consider sitting with one of the **Possibility** questions for five minutes in silence.



JOURNEY STORY

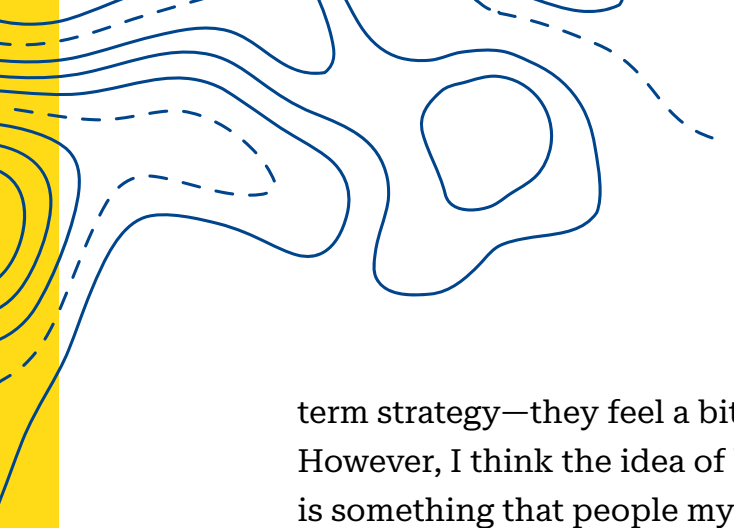
RESILIENT STRATEGIC PLANNING

According to Yale's Richard Foster, the average lifespan of S&P 500 public firms has shrunk to 15 years. I worked at an employee-owned firm that defies this trend. HDR was founded in 1917, and over 100 years later, it's still growing. HDR's practice of strategic planning set the foundation for that thriving culture. **Strategic planning relies on a company's capacity for resilience rather than its powers of prediction.** Although we still developed scenarios and contingencies, HDR's planning process considered that the firm would need the ability to adjust to all the things we couldn't see or control.

As HDR's head of strategy, David noted that their strategic planning has served them well, not because they've always predicted the future, but because they stayed true to their core intent. The 2020 market downturn illustrated the value of resilient planning. HDR's plan didn't anticipate a global pandemic, but the plan still held up. It wasn't based on a particular set of outcomes, but on a sense of clarity about the kind of firm they wanted to be. HDR paid attention to what was changing, why it was changing, and where they fit into that picture.

Those principles are just as true for any career plan. How can you stay true to your core intent? What does clarity look like in your career? What is changing in your work and why?

Brooke, a younger career professional, observed in a discussion of HDR's planning that, "From an early career perspective, I think it is harder to see the big picture of the firm's success and long-

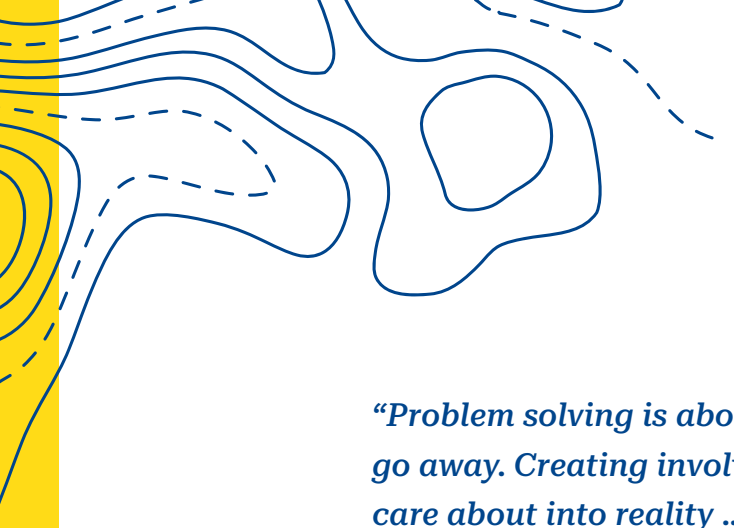


term strategy—they feel a bit disconnected from my day-to-day. However, I think the idea of being prepared for changes or trends is something that people my age have a strong understanding of—given we all started our careers during COVID. I like the idea of focusing on what skills you can add to your portfolio to allow you to adapt, rather than trying to predict every outcome.”

Indeed, challenges will always come. HDR has survived numerous large recessions by being patient and rooted. Recessions are a natural part of the economy, and while they can be painful, they also create space for renewal. Dennis, a principal economist who supported our strategic planning, shared that thriving companies act differently, both before and during recessions. Tom Holland and Jeff Katzin offer a helpful metaphor for these behavior changes:

“Think of a recession as a sharp curve on an auto racetrack—the best place to pass competitors but requiring more skill than straightaways. The best drivers apply the brakes just ahead of the curve (they take out excess costs), turn hard toward the apex of the curve (identify the short list of projects that will form the next business model), and accelerate hard out of the curve (spend and hire before markets have rebounded).”

Looking back, I can see how HDR’s team managed to keep their car on the road. Despite all the twists and turns, they’ve always looked for both personal and company-wide opportunities to accelerate into new markets or technical skill sets. They stay focused on who they are becoming and where it can take them.



“Problem solving is about making what you don’t want go away. Creating involves bringing something you care about into reality ... [and the] creative process is inescapably a learning process, which means venturing forth into difficult and uncharted territory with openness and humility, continually discovering our shortfalls.”

~PETER SENGE, THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE

OBSERVATIONS TRENDS

A solid strategic plan does not mean you get to bypass hard choices. In fact, **a long-term plan often reveals hard choices, providing accountability to help you stay on course.** As your career progresses or your company grows, making choices or dealing with tradeoffs only gets harder, because your range of options grow and their potential impact increases. How would you describe your decision-making skills? Have they changed over time and why? What choices are the hardest to make?

At one point in my career, I had the chance to lead a company division. Our team of market and technical experts developed a long list of great opportunities to pursue. That made it tough to pick our priorities. Our technical and market expertise was complemented by operational experts, like my colleague Tim, who would challenge us to balance short-term realities with long-term plans and trends. A market, like mining, was down—but would it come back soon, or did we need to shift our focus? In each market, we had moments when we had to fight to win enough work and


wrestled to keep staff busy—up until around 2018. Then, a curious switch started to happen. We started seeing greater labor demand than supply. Was this a short-term trend or something to plan for?

Thanks to our strategic planning, demographic analysis showed us why it had been hard to find the right hires. There was a widening shortage of expertise in some markets, and data suggested that it would get harder as the gap grew between labor demand and supply. Turns out it's a common issue that occurs in most mature economies due to an aging population. Once we recognized that ongoing trend, we doubled down on efforts to build HDR's own talent development programs to accelerate internal career growth.



appcast

What trends are impacting your career? When a career opportunity knocks, it often looks like a problem. Sun Tzu, in the Art of War, suggests that, amid chaos, there is also opportunity.



To look for trends and opportunities, we have to sort through the noise. At one point, having a corner on information gave you an advantage. But the Internet showed us that having an abundance of information at our fingertips can be overwhelming and distracting. And increasingly, AI is showing us the importance of asking the right questions: the answers we receive are only as good as the prompts we offer. In our age, the issue is not finding information but knowing which sources to trust, how to validate it, and what to do with it. **Careers will thrive when you know how to ask good questions and use the answers to act with clarity.**



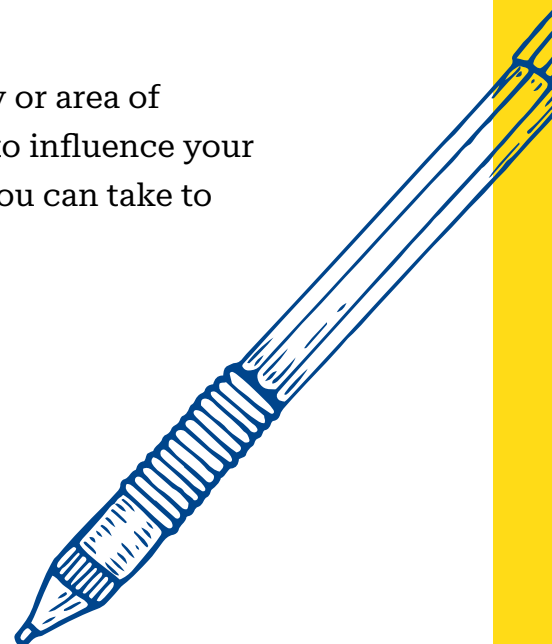
QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

How would you describe your core intent in your career? Knowing our limited perspective looking forward, what are you confident about even today?

EXERCISE: List what you pay most attention to or what you trust in today. Cognitive research has shown that your answer will play a big part in what you see and will shape who you become. Now write a short journal entry from the viewpoint of who you are 5 or 10 years from now. What are the key differences from today? Is your goal a specific place, the journey, or both?

What trends could have the biggest impact on your journey?

EXERCISE: Research current trends in your industry or area of interest. Make a list of those that seem most likely to influence your career. Then, identify one or two specific actions you can take to better understand or adapt to these trends.





PREPARATION

Consider this quote as you get ready for another angle on the question, “What am I looking for?”

“It will be an adventure, for which he [or she] for his part has ultimately and basically no qualifications on his own ... All this is because he has an ‘understanding’ with the source from which everything derives ... But how the decision is reached, and in what form everything will come as it proceeds from this source, he is as tense and curious as a child, always open and surprised in face of what comes ... ultimately and basically he will always be thankful, and in light of this thankfulness he will look forward to what has still to come.”

~KARL BARTH, DOGMATICS

JOURNEY STORY

WHAT'S THE NEXT MOVE?

In 2023, I attended a national rock climbing event with my daughter, an experienced climber. The event would determine who would be invited to join the U.S. World Cup Team, so many of the nation’s top climbers were there to compete. It also attracted the top route setters—the small team that creates a gym wall route for the climbers. As my daughter patiently explained to me, routes are called “problems,” and setters purposefully design problems to teach different styles of movements to climbers of all levels. In other words, climbing is as much about strategy as it is about strength.



After the first round, the two strongest and most experienced climbers claimed the top two places. They had seen a lot of problems in their climbing careers, so they found ways to get around some difficult holds. However, the route setters knew how to challenge them. For the next round, they created several routes that tempted the strongest climbers to take on a well-known move that was just beyond their strength. Meanwhile, the ideal solution to the problem was a completely different approach that required more finesse. Despite repeated attempts, both of the top climbers failed to make even one move off the floor. The winner was a 15-year-old, who had not seen the problem before and therefore was not tempted by the setters' trap. Openness made it possible to see a different path.

At HDR, I saw leaders look for new ways to grow and stay engaged. They took the time to step back and look at a challenge with fresh eyes before they jumped in. Likewise, we can make a strategic move when we embrace a process that's less about the endpoint and more about who we could become, what we could focus on, and what experience we could gain. **In this perspective, we see patterns but also learn to recognize that each opportunity is unique.**



HDR summarized skills development under “three C’s” that are relevant for everyone:

1. **Craft.** Technical or trade skills – what you do.
2. **Character.** Delivery or relational skills – how you get things done.
3. **Culture.** Community resilience skills – how you seek help and give back.

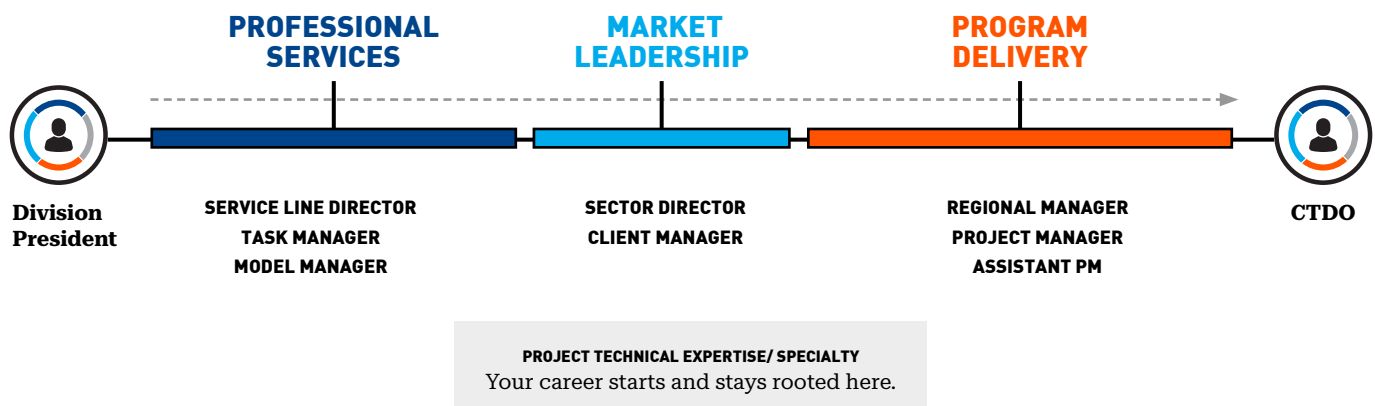
OBSERVATIONS STEP-BY-STEP

At first glance, my career might seem steady and predictable; after all, I was at one firm for close to 30 years! But in fact, it was a windy path. I had 14 different roles at HDR, and several of them weren’t on an organization chart beforehand. **Given market changes, the same will be true for many young professionals today—the jobs they’ll have in 10 years likely don’t exist yet.**

Along the way, I wasn’t fixed on a single endpoint; instead, I focused on the personal goal of making the most of each situation and adding skills that would prepare me for what might show up next.

So why did I stay at HDR? HDR gave me enough autonomy to feel like I was running my own firm, and enough resources to help me take on increasingly challenging and interesting problems. It was a training facility full of new ideas, and teammates who kept things fresh so that I didn’t get complacent and fall prey to a clever route setter! It was not the title, but


flexibility in how I got the job done and willingness to try new approaches that brought ongoing meaning and impact. **It wasn't about getting set in a position, but developing a portfolio of skills and experiences that prepared me for what was next.**



In fact, as career paths become less linear and roles become more of a portfolio or toolbox, it becomes more important to identify ongoing interests and technology that help us grow and work well together (Horn and Moesta, HBR, 2024). Even in a small practice, with a handful of names on an organizational chart or when contributing as a freelancer, collaboration is what positions you for the next right opportunity. **Each small action adds up—especially when we learn from failure.** Just ask any sole business proprietor who has to cover a lot of different bases!

Giannis Antetokounmpo is one of the world's top basketball players. In the 2022-2023 season, his team had the best record in the NBA. However, they lost in the first round of the playoffs and in a post-game press briefing, he was asked if the season was a failure. He responded,

*"Do you get a promotion every year at your job? No, right?
So every year, your work is a failure? No. Every year, you*



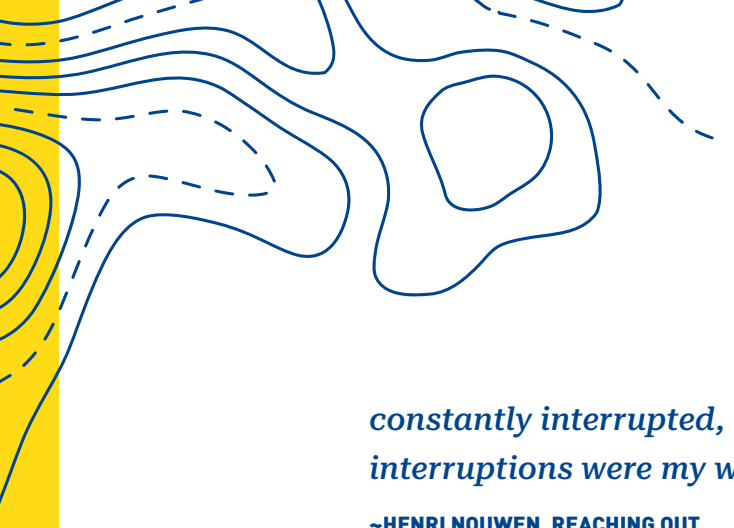
work towards something, which is a goal: It's to get a promotion, to be able to take care of your family, provide a house for them, or take care of your parents. It's not a failure, it's steps to success. There's always steps to it... There's good days, bad days, some days you are able to be successful, some days you're not, some days it's your turn, some days it's not your turn."

I distinctly remember the moment I realized that you never arrive. It happened when I faced enough challenges in a row that it finally sunk in: no matter how hard I tried to make it all work together, there would always be an issue or barrier that was not in the plan. There is no perfect place. Rather than discouraging me, this realization was a big stress release. I began to focus on how I was taking each step, knowing some would be a lot harder than others.

At a company leadership forum, my colleague Amy, who oversees corporate risk, shared an old proverb: "Calm seas don't make skilled captains." We can savor those occasional times of calm and beauty, but also recognize that choppy seas are not an interruption; they are the force that builds a stronger outcome.

The priest Henri Nouwen, a former Harvard professor and non-profit volunteer who was both brilliant and willingly immersed in the hard stuff of life, captures this idea well:

"A few years ago, I met an old professor at the University of Notre Dame. Looking back on his long life of teaching, he said with a funny twinkle in his eyes, 'I have always been complaining that my work was



constantly interrupted, until I slowly discovered that my interruptions were my work.”

~HENRI NOUWEN, REACHING OUT

Even when we know that it’s about the journey, not the destination, turbulence can prompt us to seek a change. When my colleagues faced those moments, they would often ask, “How do you know when to change career direction?”—like going back to school—or “How do you navigate a big change?”—like moving to a new place. Sometimes, I would remind them that a change doesn’t have to involve a new place; just as importantly, it could be creating more out of the place you’re in. Gratitude leads to patience and patience helps prepare us. Are we ready for what’s next? Could we learn more in our present situation?



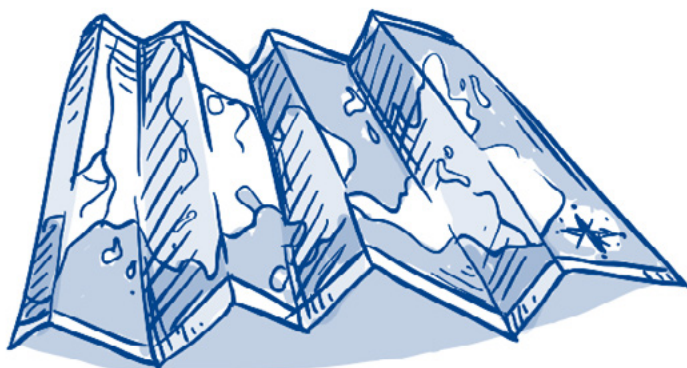
QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

What skills and experiences would you like to add to your portfolio?

EXERCISE: Create a “skills roadmap” by listing current skills and identifying gaps in your abilities or experiences that you’d like to fill. Note interpersonal and emerging digital skills (like AI or modeling) that might become critical to your area of interest. Set specific, time-bound goals for acquiring these new skills, whether through courses, mentorship, or hands-on experiences.

Has a problem ever created an opportunity or change in direction for you?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a time when you faced a significant problem, either personally or professionally. Write down how that problem, even if painful, led to an unexpected opportunity or change in direction. What skills did you use to make your decision? If you struggle to find an example, brainstorm a fictional current or future challenge.



FURTHER RESOURCES FOR POSSIBILITY

- Good to Great
BY JIM COLLINS
- Any great journey stories (from grandparents, classic books, etc.)
- 10 Must Reads for New Managers
HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW
- Use AI Large Language Models to search suggested skills for a given job or opportunity





03

TENSION CAN I HANDLE THIS?

Challenges become more manageable when we learn to embrace paradox and reframe situations.



PREPARATION

have a plan for where I'm headed, but there is a big challenge ahead. How do I deal with something bigger or more complex than I have dealt with before?


Complex issues often involve two important but contradictory viewpoints, a paradox or creative tension where two things that seem to be opposites also reinforce or rely on each other. Are the best answers questions?

Paradoxes are all around us and shape our world. They provide depth and meaning and are a normal part of our journey. Is picking sides the best path forward?

A paradox can be as lofty as mercy and justice or as practical as growth and profit. Other examples: change is constant, balancing rights and responsibilities, direction vs. delegation, learning something new vs. accepting who we are, the contradictions of life and death, or how risk and reward go hand-in-hand. How do I unravel a challenge that's stopping me from taking my next step?

*"I live each day to kill death;
I die each day to beget life;
and in this dying unto death,
I die a thousand times and
am reborn another thousand
through that love."*

~JULIA ESQUIVEL, "I AM NOT AFRAID OF DEATH"



“The promise of paradox is the promise that apparent opposites—like order and disorder—can cohere in our lives, the promise that if we replace either-or with both-and, our life will become larger and more filled with light.”

~PARKER PALMER, THE PROMISE OF PARADOX

“...the whole crux of economic life—and indeed of life in general—is that it constantly requires the living reconciliation of opposites which, in strict logic, are irreconcilable.”

~E.F. SCHUMACHER, SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL




Consider sitting with one of the **Tension** questions for five minutes in silence.

JOURNEY STORY

RISK AND REWARD

Paradox is at the center of any approach to strategic planning. I cannot change the market, but I can take a risk-informed assessment of competing demands. For example, how do I manage the inherent business paradox of increasing profit while investing for growth?

This was the kind of question that I had to ask myself as I sat down to participate in HDR's annual planning process. Like most firms, we identified the best market opportunities by geography. We




ranked opportunities using the strategic plan as their reference, before developing a budget to capture investments. As Neil, HDR's COO, would always coach us, the value of the budget was to keep you focused on your top priorities—but it was just a budget, so you could adjust your spending as the year played out. **A strategic**



plan is not a problem to solve once, but a creative tension to track and calibrate to all year. If you were growing faster than planned, then you would have room for additional hires that weren't originally in the budget. It's not unlike the balance you need to ride a bike—but the faster you go, the quicker you better be able to steer or brake!

I encountered a similar paradox when negotiating contracts with clients. A good contract captures the expected risk split between the client and the supplier. We saw this all the time in infrastructure projects: there's always a chance that a project will take longer and cost more than expected. But if they want a workable contract, neither the client nor the supplier can push all of the risk onto the other party (i.e., “If there's an unexpected expense, you foot the bill”). In the end, their fates are tied—they will succeed or fail together.

In one case, HDR's energy division was developing a contract with one of the largest electric utilities in the United States. During negotiations, the utility included a clause allowing them to audit the supplier's cybersecurity system for gaps that could create a data vulnerability. The cybersecurity team pointed out that this was itself a risk: if we let the utility audit their system, we would compromise the very system that they said no one should be able to get into. This became a contentious either/or situation, and the



utility told us that if we didn't agree to the clause, we wouldn't get the contract.

With some persistence, we arranged a meeting with their lead legal counsel to better understand the utility's risk perspective. We proposed a different approach that used a third-party security expert to audit our system structure and validate that the right cyber measures were in place, which avoided compromising security details between clients. We were awarded the contract, and the utility thanked us for working toward an agreement that protected their interests. They noted that how we handled this issue boded well for the value we would bring throughout our working relationship.

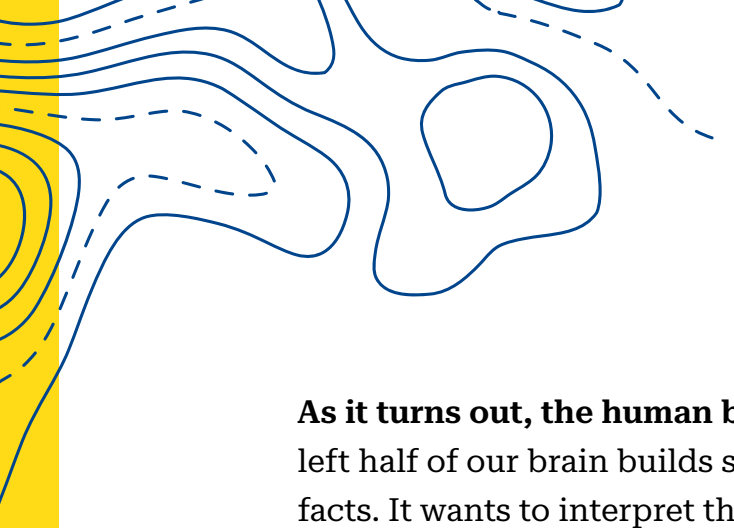
OBSERVATIONS

HOW DO I PIN THIS DOWN?

From weather to relationships, reality is in motion. **We will spend a lifetime learning how to handle fluid situations;** something new will always come up and force a choice.

How do you decide between competing demands or opportunities? What if I can't pin down the answer?

Anyone who has spent significant time exploring or working in the natural environment could reflect on how, at first glance, nature appears to have permanent features. For example, a mountain looks solid and unchanging as you plan to climb it. But as you broaden the timeline to a scale of weeks, years, and decades, nature is in motion—think snow or rockslides—and those changes could impact your expedition.



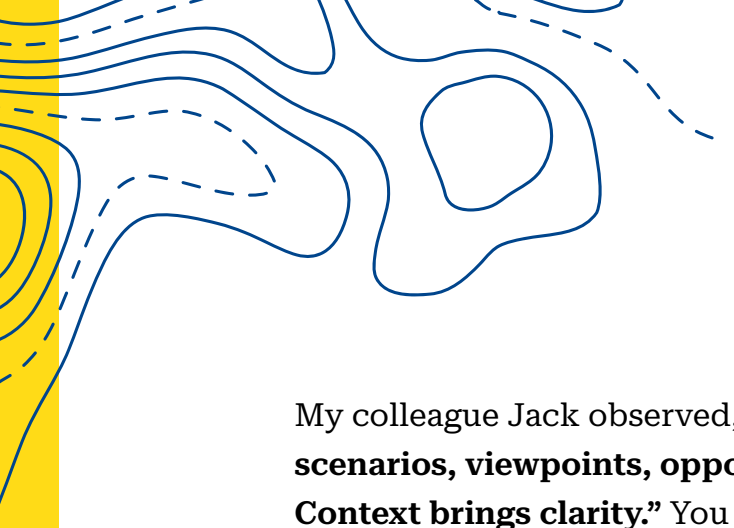
As it turns out, the human brain is wired for this complexity. The left half of our brain builds systems that process reality based on facts. It wants to interpret the world as set and certain. The right is more like a picture coming into focus. It plays with the world in an ongoing relationship of discovery; as something that is never finished.

“The right hemisphere’s view is inclusive, ‘both/and’, synthetic, integrative; it realises the need for both. The left hemisphere’s view is exclusive, ‘either/or’, analytic and fragmentary—but, crucially, unaware of what it is missing. It therefore thinks it can go it alone.”

~IAIN MCGILCHRIST, THE MASTER AND HIS EMISSARY

Because of those different perspectives, we need both sides of our brains to process reality. Thankfully, that happens on its own! However, we still need to keep some best practices in mind:

- When we share insights, remember that it’s far easier to share black-and-white, left-brained opinions than to render holistic pictures. Social media is a great example of this: short, strongly-worded opinions tend to crowd out nuanced reflections.
- It requires time, patience, and endurance to resist quick fixes and apply holistic experiences of reality to enduring situations.
- Finally, we can’t do it alone: we need the healthy tension of diverse perspectives to capture the complexity of a situation and make finely calibrated responses. Should a given key decision be made locally or at the head office? Is that the right question?



My colleague Jack observed, **“I often seek out contrasting scenarios, viewpoints, opportunities. Contrast brings context. Context brings clarity.”** You likely have friends or colleagues who manage complexity and change better than others. Who does that well?

No matter what, it’s still tempting to use simple either/or categories to drive a decision forward. But does the answer provide an honest understanding of the complex options?

“Tensions pull us in opposite directions. In doing so, they create discomfort and anxiety. We often experience these tensions as dilemmas between alternative options, and we feel forced to make a choice. But the paradoxes underlying these dilemmas are not just oppositional. They are also interdependent. The opposing forces of paradoxes define and reinforce one another. Consider the paradox between focusing on ourselves and focusing on others. The healthier we are, the more effectively we can engage with and support others. The more we are supported by others, the healthier we are. Similarly, organizations with a strong centralized core can better empower distinct decentralized units, and vice versa. These competing demands reinforce one another.”

~WENDY K. SMITH & MARIANNE W. LEWIS, BOTH/AND THINKING



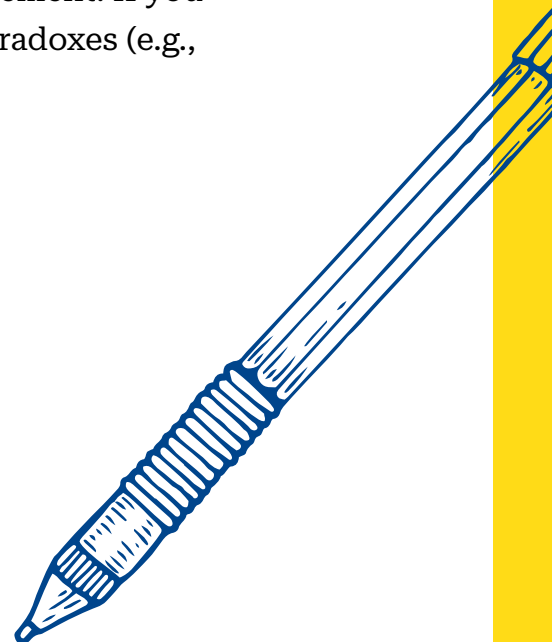
QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Has anyone shut down when you tried to give simple advice for a complex problem?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a situation in the past when you provided a simple fix to someone facing a tough issue (e.g., serious illness) that did not go well, or where your “help” was not welcomed. Why wasn’t your contribution received well? When you are in a tough spot, dealing with something complex, what kind of help do you most appreciate from friends?

Can you provide an example of a paradox?

EXERCISE: Make a list of challenges you currently face. For each challenge, identify whether it’s a problem that can be solved or a set of truths in tension that require ongoing management. If you can’t think of an example, consider well-known paradoxes (e.g., work-life balance).





PREPARATION

Consider these quotes as you get ready for another angle on the question, “Can I handle this?”

“The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. The opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth.”

~ATTRIBUTED TO NIELS BOHR

“Where the crest of one wave overlaps with the crest of the other, you get constructive interference and a patch of light.”

~ANIL ANANTHASWAMY, NATURE


JOURNEY STORY REFRAMING

“Being able to flip the perspective, shift the viewpoint, find a new angle, widen the lens, notice the details just outside the current cropping—all of this is the work of reframing. Reframing is the ability to see the same thing, different.”

~LANCE ODEGARD, UNSTUCKING NEWSLETTER

I sat in a training session, listening closely as a new operations manager raised a tough question to the instructor. Their voice carried the weight of someone facing a difficult challenge.

“When do you reach a tipping point with an employee who’s not living up to expectations?” they asked. “How hard should you try to make the fit work?”

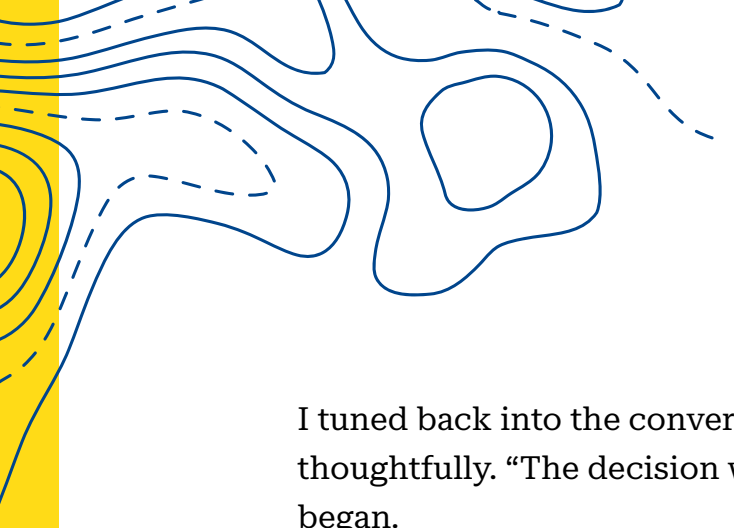


It wasn't just a theoretical question. They were grappling with real pressures: a shift in the market had tightened their budget for the coming year, forcing them to make hard decisions. With limited room on the team, they had to decide who would stay and who wouldn't—a decision no manager takes lightly.

I could relate to their struggle. Even with careful planning and the best of intentions, I've faced similar moments over the years. I learned the painful truth that trying to make something work often made things worse. Each breakdown was a complicated mix of factors: my own blind spots, someone else's resistance, sometimes both.

I also learned that the more intense a disagreement is, the harder it becomes to have an open conversation. **We have more options when we address conflict early.** Misunderstanding, complexity, and pressure often grow with time, so it feels riskier to leave options open—especially in a business setting, where we often speak for a larger team and have responsibilities to our organization. For example, when two parties establish a project contract, they typically agree on a formal process for resolving a conflict if they can't reach consensus independently. That “due process”—which often involves mediators and lawyers—provides a clear but narrow path toward resolution; it offers a way out of gridlock, but the two parties rarely feel as satisfied with the end result.

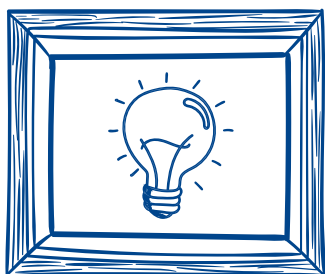
Of course, conflict is inevitable. While I've been fortunate to build many rich relationships in my career, I also carry the weight of broken ones—ones that probably didn't need to be.



I tuned back into the conversation as the instructor responded thoughtfully. “The decision won’t get any easier with time,” they began.

“First,” they said, “ask yourself: Have the fundamentals been in place? Was the manager clear about what the role required? Was the employee aware of where they stood and given access to resources to build the necessary skills? If the role isn’t a fit, have you explored alternative career paths that might align better?”

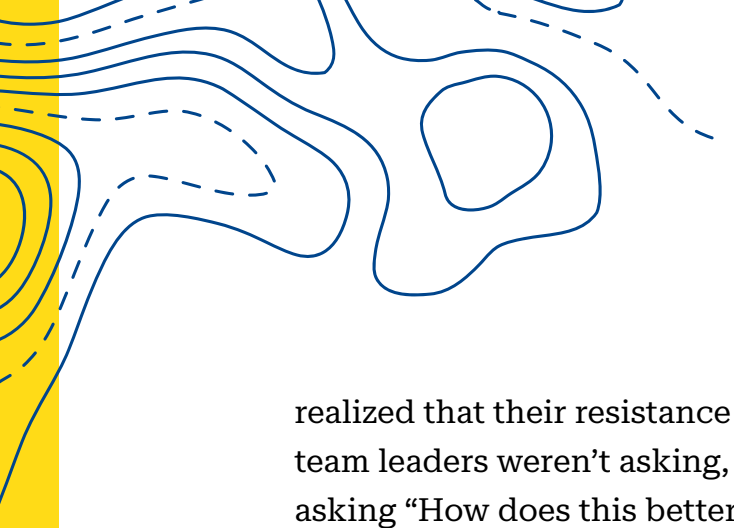
The instructor paused for a moment and then reframed the conversation. “You should also think beyond the individual. Where do you envision the practice or team in the future? Who then best helps you get there? Those questions can help clarify both this decision and other difficult choices you may face in the future.”



I sat back, reflecting on their words. **I’d seen how this ability to reframe—to step back and see the same situation in a new light or from a different angle—could transform an intractable challenge into an opportunity for growth.**

One vivid example came to mind. Pratibha’s applied technology group had been tasked with finding state-of-the-art tools and helping HDR’s team leaders adopt them as part of the firm’s workflow. At first, her group—a cast of technology gurus—had seen their role as more or less instrumental: if team leaders knew how to use better tools, they would. But that wasn’t happening.

Instead of writing off those team leaders as stubborn and set in their ways, Prathiba’s group reframed the task at hand. They

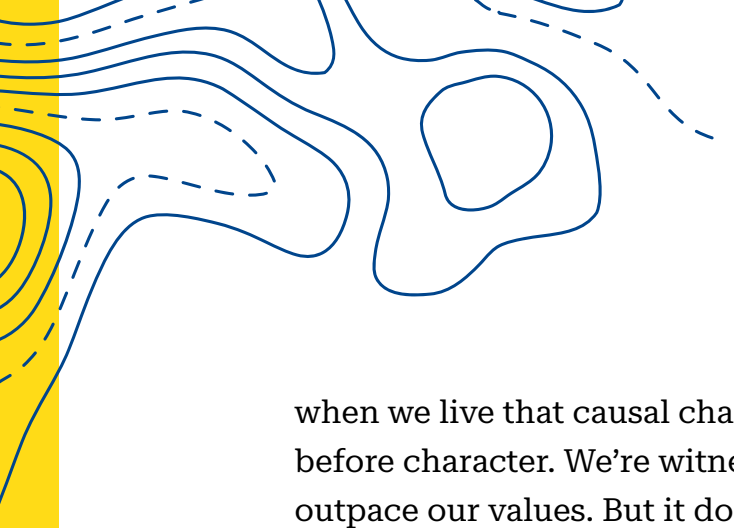


realized that their resistance didn't come from confusion. HDR's team leaders weren't asking, "How does this work?"—they were asking "How does this better serve my client?" That reframe helped Prathiba's group connect with the team leaders, convey the value of the new tools, and succeed in their mission of helping team leaders adopt new technology. One group member shared a takeaway from that experience that stuck with me:

"I've realized in the past year the benefits to taking a step back and listening and gaining others' perspectives and insight before charging ahead on my path. Being able to gain perspective and drilling deep to answer the 'Why' has allowed me to learn new technology solutions and applications (i.e., parametric design, automation outside of design apps, etc.) and become more open-minded and agreeable. I've also learned the power of [reframing] and how sometimes that's all that's needed for others to thrive and flourish."

And isn't that the truth? Whether we're charting our next steps, deciding someone's future role, or helping others adopt new tools, it all comes down to people. This truth is reflected in the word "technology" itself. As engineer and pastor David Sayson writes, "the word 'Technology' comes from the Greek words *techne* and *logos*. In ancient Greece, *techne* referred to the skill and knowledge to make or do things, while *logos* referred to the rational sustaining principle by which it was done (Sayson, 2025)."

In other words, what we do in our careers (craft), including the technology we use, is best realized through our character—how we get things done in serving humanity. We see the shadow side



when we live that causal chain in reverse—when craft comes before character. We’re witnessing this right now, as we allow AI to outpace our values. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

OBSERVATIONS

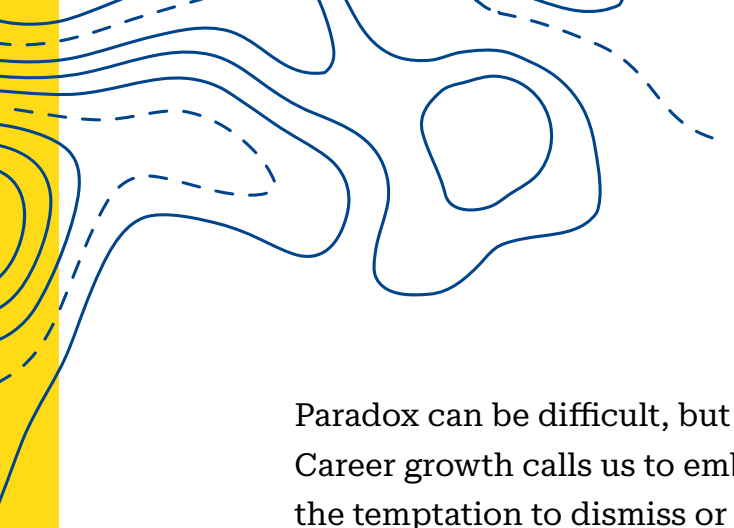
HOW TO LIVE IN IT

I’ve found that the best workplace connectors—the glue in a culture—are those who are good at living with paradox and managing conflict. They don’t try to reduce complexity to a single motivation (e.g., “they must be lazy because they’re entitled”). They learn to widen their aperture so they can see something bigger and more authentic than simple either/or categories. They make sure people see their efforts contributing to the broader mission—to what matters most.

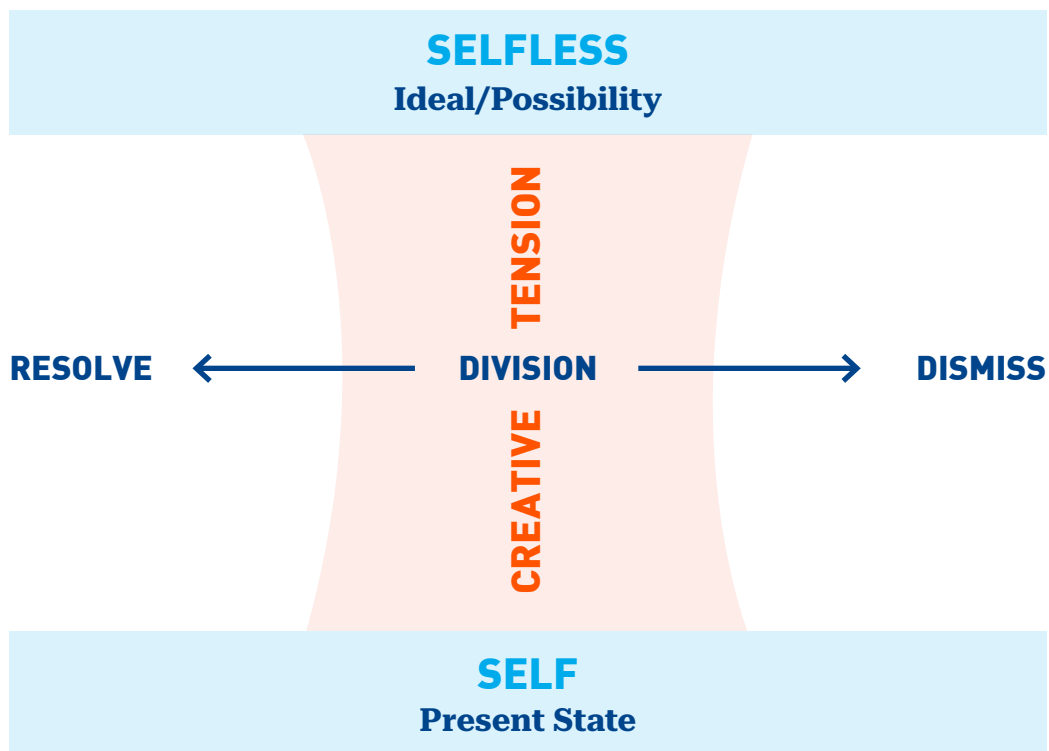
These workplace connectors don’t dismiss an issue; they recognize that there’s more to it. To find the best solutions, they understand the tradeoffs between control and discovery, efficiency and entrepreneurialism. They work on listening, recognizing challenging contradictions, and finding holistic solutions that address the complexity at hand.

“It is in the tension that occurs between the operational system pushing for administrative efficiency (e.g. schedule, budget, results), and the entrepreneurial system pushing for creativity, learning and growth, that innovation and adaptability are enabled.”

~MARY UHL-BIEN AND MICHAEL ARENA, LEADERSHIP FOR ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTABILITY




Paradox can be difficult, but it's an essential part of our journey. Career growth calls us to embrace these tensions and avoid the temptation to dismiss or resolve them decisively. The most profound paradox may be the pairing of self-sacrifice and transformation, as captured by many faith traditions, including in the Bible.



*“...unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies,
it remains alone; but if dies, it produces much grain.”*

~JOHN 12:24

Listening is one form of sacrifice. When we listen, we set aside our interests and seek to understand those of others. The ability to really hear may depend on our ability to hold two realities at the same time: what is and what could be.



“Most leaders are to some extent idealists. They have a desire for things to be different, to be better. Thus, the leader lives all the time with a discrepancy between the world that she wants (and wants others) to inhabit and the world she (and others) actually do inhabit. Psychologists call this condition “cognitive dissonance”—there is a discord between the reality and the ideal ... Most people deal with the cognitive dissonance fairly effectively simply by choosing to look away from the ideal. They come to tolerate the reality by avoiding the evidence, by filtering the data they receive. They fabricate a world in which the discrepancy is less. The leader, however, is motivated by a desire to hold on to the ideal—indeed, it is the ideal that drives her. Accordingly, she commits herself to a journey that will inevitably lead her into a dissonance between the reality and the ideal...”

~SIMON WALKER, LEADING OUT OF WHO YOU ARE

My co-worker Brent has managed some of the largest infrastructure projects in the US. He shared that, “It seems the more someone manages, the more they need the ability to manage in the grey zone, the less black and white there is in all that they do. It increases the need for compromise and creativity while emphasizing the value of listening well, understanding others’ perspectives and finding the best solutions.”

When we reframe a challenge around a more encompassing mission, we create space to see a path forward. As we’ll see in the next chapter, we also create space for others to join us.



QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

What would be an example of reframing?

EXERCISE: Go back to the previous section of Questions for Deeper Reflection and pick one of the challenges that you currently face. Now, brainstorm alternative ways to view the same issue. For example, how might it be an opportunity to grow a skill or build resilience? Reflect on how this shift in perspective could change your actions or feelings about the situation.

Can you get good at reframing if you are focused on yourself?

EXERCISE: Revisit one of the challenges from the prior question and attempt to see it from the viewpoint of a colleague, friend, or even from the perspective of an organization. Alternatively, see [Framing for Learning](#) by Amy Edmondson to learn how doctors used reframing to improve procedures and how their expertise sometimes hindered that process. Consider how focusing beyond yourself might lead to more creative or compassionate solutions.

Have you ever made a sacrifice that was worth it?

EXERCISE: Write down an example of a sacrifice you made in your personal or professional life. Reflect on the long-term outcomes of that decision. Did it lead to growth, opportunities, or fulfillment that made the sacrifice worthwhile? If possible, note a situation where a sacrifice didn't pay off and what you learned from it.

FURTHER RESOURCES FOR TENSION

- Both/And Thinking
BY WENDY K. SMITH & MARIANNE W. LEWIS
- Getting to Yes
BY FISHER, URY, ET AL.
- Crucial Conversations
BY JOSEPH GRENNY, ET AL.





04

TEAM DO IT MYSELF?

Until we learn to hear and be heard, collaboration can seem like more work than it's worth.

PREPARATION

Sometimes it is easier to get something done myself, but I know that rarely provides a lasting solution. How strong is my network to find the right expertise? Who can I trust to help me along the way?

Rather, my career has benefited from complementary and diverse teams. If a team is so valuable, then why do I struggle to delegate or ask for help? Why is it hard at times to communicate consistently across several groups?

A person becomes a person through other people.

~FILIPINO PROVERB



Consider sitting with one of the Team questions for five minutes in silence.

JOURNEY STORY TABLE MANNERS

When I worked at my family's business, Shoemaker Drywall Supplies, our deliveries were planned out weeks in advance. On one project, we had spent the entire day setting up our supplies and getting ready to make a delivery, when the construction site superintendent told us there

was no way—the cement trucks had priority in accessing the high-rise’s overhead crane.

So there we were, parked at the job site gate with tons of heavy equipment and nowhere to take it.



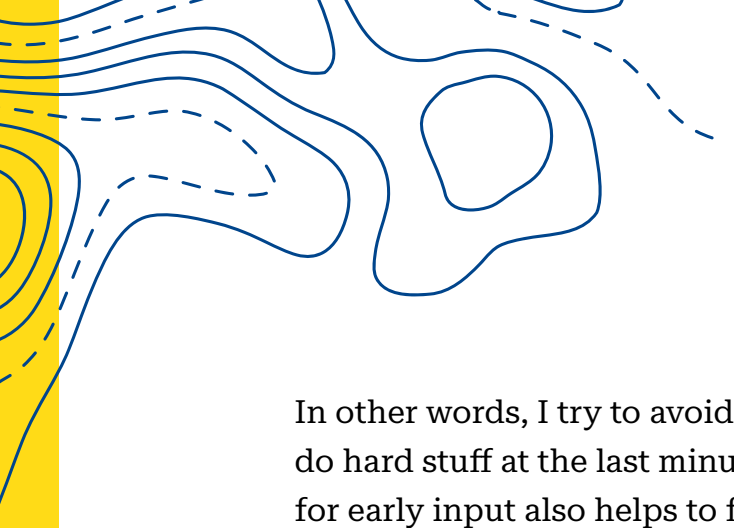
Still talking to the superintendent, someone on our crew acknowledged how much he had to juggle on such a large project. That seemed to soften his tone. Then we asked about the schedule for the building’s construction elevator. We had access to several industrial carts we could use instead—a workaround

that would also free up his overhead crane. The superintendent called my dad later that day: “Hang onto your crew,” he said. “They know their \$%&#.”

It turns out that table manners, like we learn at home, matter at work. A lot of them boil down to being proactive; for example, letting someone know about an upcoming event that could disrupt your timeline, or bringing the right stakeholders to the table early in a discussion so they aren’t surprised later. They add up over time and lead to long-term benefits for your career growth. For example, when you create space for others in the initial stages of a process, they may give you the benefit of the doubt if challenges arise. **As the stakes get higher, it becomes more and more important to limit surprise for others.**

“Don’t bring me in for the landing if I haven’t been involved in the takeoff.”

~KAUSIK RAJGOPAL, FORMER EXECUTIVE VP, PEOPLE AND SOURCING, PAYPAL



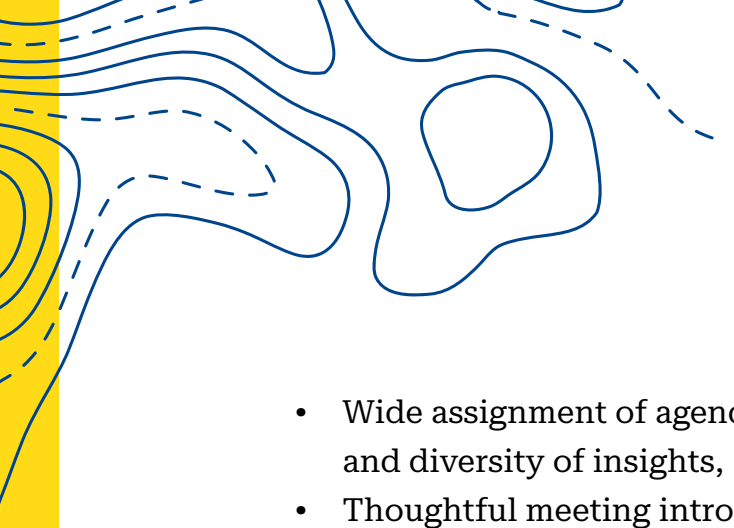
In other words, I try to avoid bringing someone in to clean up or do hard stuff at the last minute. Giving them a heads-up or asking for early input also helps to fill in information potholes. If I don't fill an information void, I risk missing something I shouldn't have missed—or worse, someone else might fill in the blanks with the worst-case scenario. Bringing someone into the loop can fill in some of the gaps and build trust; at a minimum, they will appreciate my intent. Leaving them in the dark and then asking for last minute help... well, you get the picture. Good luck with that.

To help us grow individually and culturally at HDR, we developed the following **TABLE MANNERS:**

- No surprises
- Offer to help
- Don't go into the corner if it's not going your way
- It's ok to make mistakes, it's not ok to hide it
- Do the right thing even when no one is watching
- Be curious—no one likes a know-it-all
- Recognize others: provide space for everyone at the table to speak
- If you can't agree, then jointly elevate the issue—don't work your side behind the scenes
- Keep it real: be humble, honest and authentic
- Once we agree, we are in this together

A practical way we lived out 'Table Manners' is through skills for **MEETING MANAGEMENT:**

- Clear agendas with a focus on issues to walk through together,
- Use briefs as pre-reads for information sharing (also helps level-set all participants),

- 
- Wide assignment of agenda items for leadership development and diversity of insights,
 - Thoughtful meeting introductions to settle everyone from their busy day and build trust,
 - Curb comments about “my clients” and note that there are only company clients,
 - Chair sets expectations that they will limit individual talking time (“let’s hear from others”),
 - A ground rule is set around intellectual honesty (hard on issues and not people),
 - End meetings with everyone providing a closing thought,
 - Capture clear follow-up actions, and
 - Set meeting invite defaults to 25- or 50-minute blocks.

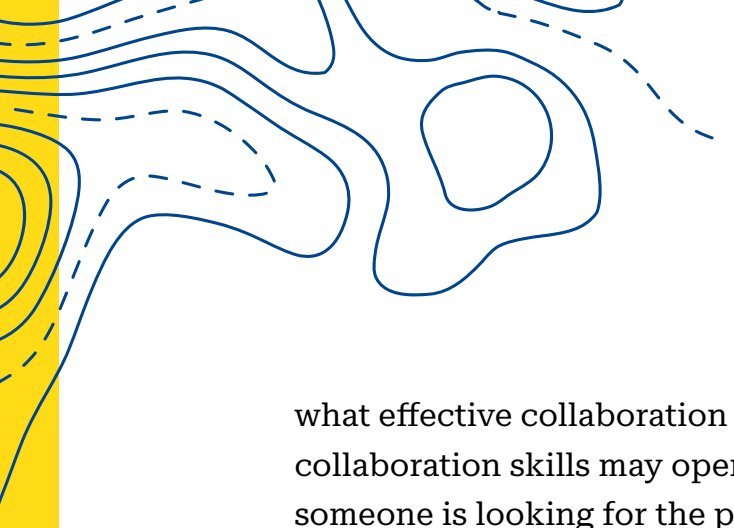
OBSERVATIONS

NETWORKS, HONESTY, AND TRUST

NETWORKS

Over the years, I’ve come to realize that our networks determine the depth of what we see and the corresponding solutions that we can offer. This often plays out in the recruiting process. In an environment where recruiters are buried under a mountain of increasingly automated resumes, a personal connection—a referral, a conversation—becomes incredibly valuable. A network connection not only helps validate your skills, it sets you apart from other candidates who remain just a name on paper.

Within an organization, the depth of your network is just as important—if not more so. With a strong network, you can learn from peers with a wide range of titles and positions. You can learn



what effective collaboration looks like in different contexts. Those collaboration skills may open doors to career opportunities. When someone is looking for the perfect person to take on an exciting new project, someone in your network might mention your name. Other times, you might hear about a lead from a colleague and have a head start to proactively express interest. I've seen firsthand how these network-based opportunities can change the course of someone's trajectory at a company.

HONESTY

Each of us must learn to recognize and admit the gaps in our skill sets. Managers often struggle with this; often, they want to look like they have every base covered. I've certainly benefited from teammates with strengths that I lacked. For example, I typically try to team up with others who can handle calculations or editing with ease—something I've always struggled with. Their strengths helped me to grow, and in turn, I contributed big-picture planning approaches that complemented their attention to detail. Some firms use a matrix-like organizational structure to fill these gaps; even though they can be more complicated, they help bring the right team together.

TRUST

Yet even with the right people around the table, one thing remains true: teamwork only works if everyone has a level of trust in one another. MIT Sloan Management Review published an article, "Why Innovation Depends on Intellectual Honesty," that has stayed with me. The authors found that managers must foster psychological safety and create the conditions for debate (another paradox!):

“We found that many teams prioritize psychological safety without realizing that the social cohesion it promotes, though beneficial to learning, can sometimes undermine intellectual honesty rather than encourage it. However, when people are brutally honest (Steve Jobs would tell people at Apple that they were “full of s – – –”), they can undermine others’ feelings of acceptance and respect—which are the cornerstones of feeling secure to challenge one’s colleagues. If leaders can balance psychological safety and intellectual honesty, they gain the benefits of both.”

~JEFF DYER ET AL., MIT SLOAN MANAGEMENT REVIEW



PHOTO BY KEITH CORRIGAN

We find trust at the intersection of safe spaces and honest conversations. Without a foundation of safety, it’s hard to be honest. But we also need honesty in order to build true safety—where we can rely on our teammates to act in service of our shared purpose, even when their feedback is hard to hear.

Charlie, an experienced executive at HDR, used to remind us, “don’t just share the sunshine.” He was creating a safe and honest space to work through challenges together. Another leader summed it up well:

“Trust is the coin of the realm. When trust was in the room ... good things happened. When trust was not in the room, good things did not happen. Everything else is details.”

~GEORGE SHULTZ, FORMER SECRETARY OF TREASURY AND PRESIDENT OF BECHTEL

QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

What does your network look like?

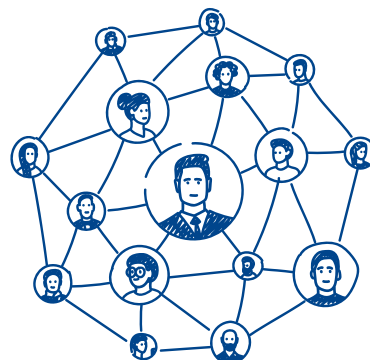
EXERCISE: Sketch out a “network map” of your professional and personal connections. Note areas where your network is strong and where it might be lacking (e.g., in certain industries, skill sets, or levels of influence). Set a goal to actively strengthen or expand your network in one specific area over the next month.

Describe a recent change that impacted you. Were you included in the process?

EXERCISE: Identify a change at work or in your personal life where you were either included in the decision-making process or informed after the fact. Write down your feelings about both experiences and reflect on how your involvement (or lack thereof) influenced your reaction and support for the change. How could you factor that into your approach to driving change?

What does a good meeting look like?

EXERCISE: After your next meeting, jot down what worked well and what didn't. Which elements built trust? Pay attention to factors like agenda, pre-reads, participation, timing, and follow-up. Compare this to past meetings and use the insights to set guidelines for improving future meetings that you lead or attend.





PREPARATION

Consider these quotes as you get ready for another angle on the question, “Should I do it myself?”

“The issue is hardly ever the issue.”

~ATTRIBUTED TO RICHARD ROHR

“Language was just difference. A thousand different ways of seeing, of moving through the world. No; a thousand worlds within one ... You can translate the word or encounter the word.”

~R.F. KUANG, BABEL


JOURNEY STORY

WHO MOVED THE BUTTON?

Joslyn, the Director of Learning and Development, and her team had spent years developing training resources, but they were hard to find: our internal company website had become a grab-bag of hundreds of colorful buttons and links competing for attention. Do you know where to find the best career development resources? Who could you ask?

A cross-functional team was formed to update the website. We invested a lot of consideration into the home page, building the update around a question: What can a career journey look like?

We piloted the site with several user groups who managed the existing links before launching, made several rounds of



adjustments, and sent out a memo explaining the layout changes so that no key stakeholders were surprised (Table Manners).

The launch went well, but it was not without one strong critique. An employee who relied on the website for an important form noticed that the button had been moved and its color had changed. The title of their post on an internal chat page was “dumbest management decision ever.”


We reached out on the discussion thread and learned more about their concern regarding ease of access. Here, the issue wasn’t really the issue: they had thought the change was arbitrary. When we explained our intent, as well as the limitations of our software vendor, we reached a better understanding.

We also learned a couple of important things from this exchange: First, emails about a new change should be succinct, highlighting the essential points and intent behind any decision. Second, **not everyone will be happy with change—even a small one—but how we work through it as a team can be a sign of a healthy culture.** Does staying curious fuel career growth?

OBSERVATIONS

BAD NEWS

Whenever we leave gaps in our communication, people will fill them in—often with worst-case scenarios. Even though many people swim in an endless stream of work emails, updates, and data, they often expect the worst if they see a gap in information. In these cases, I’ve seen rumors



start, critiques bubble up, and thoughtful questions replaced by predictions of bad news.

I see this tendency in myself, too: I tend to assume that no news is bad news, and information gaps set me on edge. (That's also why my colleagues Elisa and Brent, who worked on claims and legal negotiations, reminded me that silence is a great negotiating tactic—others feel compelled to fill the void.)

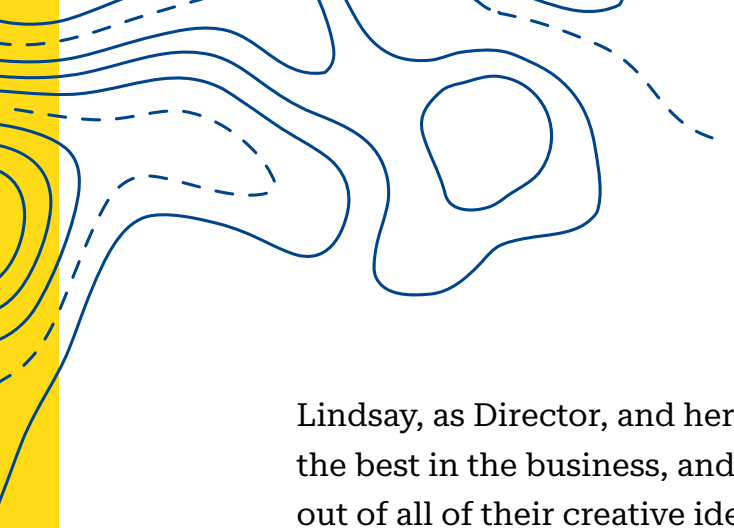
This phenomenon is so common that it has a name: negativity bias.

“The brain evolved a built-in negativity bias ... Your brain has a hair-trigger readiness to go negative to help you survive.”

~RICK HANSON, *HARDWIRING HAPPINESS*

The best leaders cut through the noise of negativity bias. They don't just react to challenges; they seek to understand the intent behind actions, dig deeper into issues, and focus on bridging gaps instead of widening them. They aren't trying to hand out rose-colored glasses, but they find creative ways to resist our natural tendency to “go negative.”

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when we were looking for ways to stay connected, our communications team came up with a remarkably simple but powerful form of positive communication. Every Monday morning, a short email would land in inboxes, sharing a two-paragraph leadership insight—reflecting on something we'd learned, something to keep in mind for the week ahead related to our common purpose—all written in a casual and honest tone.



Lindsay, as Director, and her communications team were some of the best in the business, and they created a lot of great tools. But out of all of their creative ideas, our colleagues voiced the most appreciation for the Monday morning email. This small habit became much more than a passing pandemic series. It dug into practical career development skills, built trust through honest reflection on current issues, and helped everyone feel like they were a part of a shared journey.

Looking back, it was a powerful lesson in how small, consistent, authentic communication can challenge negativity bias. It also reminded me that while we might not eliminate our cognitive biases, we can at least resist them with honesty, clarity, and connection. In doing so, we build a workplace where everyone feels like they're truly in the loop and where team members focus on how they get things done. We create a gravitational pull that holds a team together, even in turbulent times.



QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

If someone is slow getting back to you, what do you assume?

EXERCISE: Next time you face a situation where someone hasn't responded to you, pause and write down your immediate assumptions. Then, challenge yourself to come up with three alternative explanations (e.g., unclear question). Reflect on how shifting assumptions might change your reaction to similar situations and how you can contribute to breaking down these barriers (e.g., information gaps) in your own workplace or social circles.

How effectively do your emails convey your intended message?

EXERCISE: Find a recent email. Borrowing a few tips from Smart Brevity, does it have a clear subject line of less than six words that catches the reader's attention? Does it then have one sentence that states "why it matters"? Does it then include a succinct list with only the necessary detail (e.g., dates, changes, next steps, etc.)? Closed out with a "bottom line" or requested action from audience? Does the email have the right tone for the intended audience? Rewrite the email and share the before and after with a mentor or colleague for feedback.



FURTHER RESOURCES FOR TEAM

- **Team of Teams**
BY STANLEY McCHRYSTAL & TEAM
- **Smarter Collaboration**
BY HEIDI GARDNER (WITH IVAN MATVIAK)
- **Smart Brevity**
BY JIM VANDEHEI, MIKE ALLEN, AND ROY SCHWARTZ
- **4 Stages of Psychological Safety**
BY TIMOTHY R. CLARK





05

OWNER GIVE AND TAKE?

Thinking like an owner can change
us and create the right conditions
for growth.



PREPARATION

For me, ownership does not mean that I grasp something to squeeze out every possible benefit for myself. Do you take better care of something you rent or own? Are you less engaged when it feels like a basic transaction?

Rather, ownership means that I fully engage with and enjoy something that's held in trust. That's why this Guide is shared through free access. How does creating involve both taking and giving?

Ownership means that I walk alongside others for the long run, supporting the unique conditions for their growth. Ownership takes a different mindset—it takes patience and hard work—but it transforms us. Is my work personally meaningful or is it just a transaction to pay the bills? Am I part of something transformative?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Dignity of Difference*, clarifies that a contract is a transaction, whereas a covenant is a relationship. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'us'. That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform.



Consider sitting with one of the Owner questions for five minutes in silence.



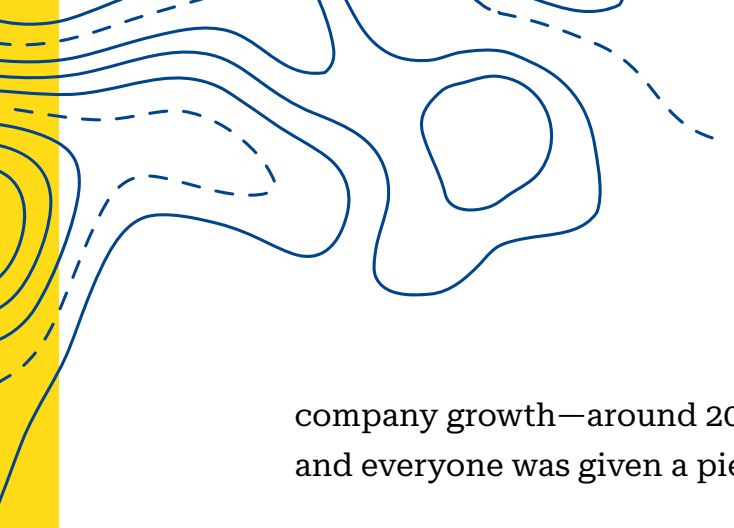
JOURNEY STORY

OWNERS SEE DIFFERENTLY

After I worked for my father's business, I joined a team in a reputable regional firm. After a couple of years, we learned that the primary owner was retiring. Our practice was not central to the ongoing core business, so our director Michelle wisely gathered us, and together, we concluded that selling our small practice of 20 people to a bigger firm would provide a stronger platform for growth. The sale revenue would also help the firm we were leaving buy out its retiring owner. The asset sale approach didn't burn any bridges; in fact, it honored all of the relationships we had built with our colleagues and our clients.

So, then the question was: where should we go? There were several public corporations who were very interested and offered attractive opportunities. However, we chose an employee-owned firm. Why? **Growing up in a family-owned business, I saw that when you play with your own money, you take a harder look at how to use it wisely.** When you own your own business, you see that every decision either enhances or detracts from your brand, and that it pays off to take care of yourself and your employees. We personally experienced what research has validated: employee-owned firms tend to perform better during hard times, and have lower turnover and higher engagement (Employee-Owned S Corporations of America).

Our team's move paid off: our small practice grew into a global technical service line of the firm. We were able to contribute to



company growth—around 20% each year for more than 20 years—and everyone was given a piece of the company.

With employee ownership comes responsibility. Once we were established at the new firm, my new colleague Angela and I discussed whether employee-owned firms expected us to give more of ourselves. Together, we wondered if the employee-owner mindset required us to put down career roots that are necessary for deep relationships, whereas gig workers risk falling into environments that turn over frequently, with short-term gains and weak personal networks.

“Being a giver [vs. taker] is not good for a 100-yard dash, but it’s valuable in a marathon.”

~CHIP CONLEY, IN ADAM GRANT’S *GIVE AND TAKE*


We also had a say in where the company focused its portfolio, and while there was a short-term cost to invest in training and development, it helped us build our career and our workplace for the long run. And it was a long run: I ended up spending three decades—the majority of my career—at the employee-owned company, HDR.

OBSERVATIONS

WHAT DOES OWNERSHIP LOOK LIKE?

Does maximizing short-term value come at the expense of long-term interests? (Roger Martin, 2011)

The answer to that question has prompted the United




States, the United Kingdom and more recently, Canada, to enact laws encouraging employee ownership. Research has shown that employee-owned companies see increased engagement and successfully pass a company from one generation to the next.

Because employee-owned firms are not beholden to maximizing shareholder value in the traditional sense, they can take a more patient approach in developing careers over time. In many ways, employee ownership captures the same spirit of home ownership: having a place to call your own, to settle and put down roots. In other words, it's a stewardship mindset: caring well for something before passing it on to others.

Not everyone will have access to employee-owned workplaces, but there are many ways to find a shared endeavor with a similar spirit of ownership, whether that's a team, project, or charitable cause.

Think of a successful soccer league, a school play, or a volunteer event. When everyone has a personal stake in the outcome, and a piece of it that they're responsible for, they tend to invest more time and care. They take pride in the outcome and want to see it thrive—and so it does.

By contrast, consider a situation where you have little say and minimal recognition—or others take credit entirely. **Where responsibility is diluted, the whole team feels less engaged.** Indeed, having a personal stake in a project is paramount to our identity and happiness, in work and in life. A sense of ownership encourages personal investment and accountability, which ultimately benefits the entire group. When others grow, you grow—another paradox. As you look around, you'll know the ownership



mindset when you see it in thriving teams, cultures, and causes.

Adopting an ownership mindset has quietly shaped my career path. It encouraged me to build skills beyond what was required in my current roles and to connect with others, learn from their experiences, and contribute where I could. One example that stands out is my last role at HDR as the Chief Talent Development Officer. The role didn't formally exist at the time—though it was mentioned in HDR's strategic plan and on the COO's mind, there was no job posting or job description. By showing interest and sharing the work I was already doing in talent development, even beyond my responsibilities, I was invited into the conversation. With a lot of support (especially from Charlie, who took a chance on me), we shaped the role together, and I was fortunate to step into it.

As I moved into the new role and established development goals for the company as a whole, I found myself thinking about how to honor an individual's core identity while simultaneously considering more than 13,000 different experiences and perspectives. I learned to take things seriously but not personally. At the end of the day, it wasn't about me—it was about creating the right conditions for growth.

Think like a farmer: Don't blame the crops for not growing fast enough. Rotate your crops for the soils and ecosystem. Prepare the soil. Don't stick your hands into rotating equipment. Remove weeds and pests. You can't control the weather, but you can prepare for it. Learn from your mistakes or starve. Celebrate the harvest.

~PARAPHRASE OF COMMON FOLKLORE



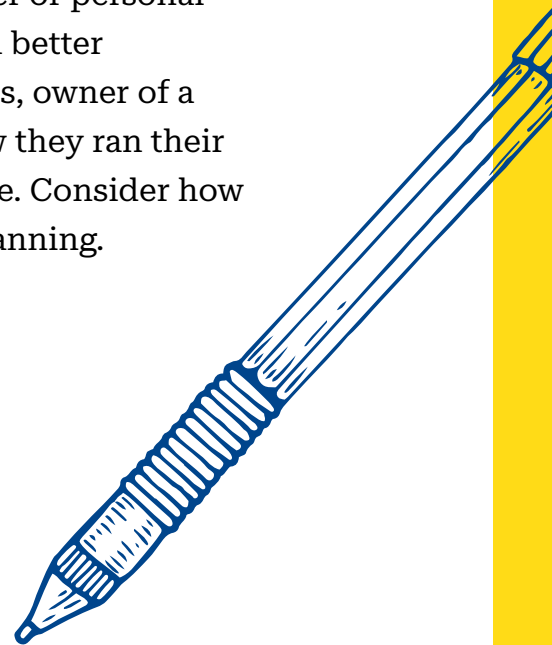
QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

When you're personally invested in something, do you treat it differently?

EXERCISE: Think of a situation that is a pure transaction, where you buy or rent something that has little personal meaning (e.g., paying bills and taxes for services). Then think of something you own or join that's invaluable (e.g., a close-knit team, a one-of-a-kind gift, a piece of art, a pet, a personal cause, etc.), where you would be gutted if something happened to it. Write down how your feelings and responsibilities differ between the two. What stands out?

Have you seen an example of a situation where ownership benefits growth?

EXERCISE: Identify a specific instance in your career or personal life where you have witnessed ownership provide a better experience (e.g., a coach, leader of a family business, owner of a non-profit, etc.). Write down what it was about how they ran their team, business, or non-profit that made a difference. Consider how you can apply this approach to your own career planning.





PREPARATION

Consider this reflection as you get ready for another angle on the “Give and Take?” question.

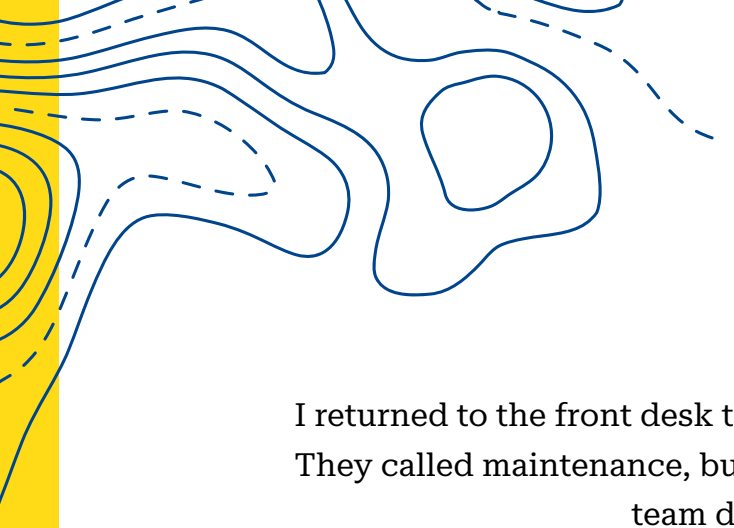
A construction industry magazine had a feature on insurance underwriting. Exciting stuff. What caught my attention was the author’s comment that they assess risk based on a company’s capital, capacity and character.

The first two criteria, capital and capacity, made sense: it’s common to make assessments based on worth and what a company can handle. Character, however, was an unusual metric for a financial analysis. “While assessing capital is driven mostly by math ... character is in many ways the most important of the three” (Darrel Lamb, 2019). He went on to add that character is an important part of building industry partnerships. The author’s insurance firm preferred to underwrite companies with a strong culture of ownership, rooted in character: “I have little doubt that they would step up and resolve any dispute because simply it is the right thing to do—even if there wasn’t a contract ... compelling them to do so.”

JOURNEY STORY

WHAT WOULD AN OWNER DO?

After a long day on a work trip, I returned to my room, ready to relax, only to find that my key fob wouldn’t work. The electronic access panel on the door was completely unresponsive. It didn’t take long to realize that the issue wasn’t my fob—the battery in the door panel itself had died.




I returned to the front desk to let them know about the problem. They called maintenance, but to my surprise, the maintenance



team didn't have a master key to override the electronic lock. It was a new hotel, and this was uncharted territory for them. I accompanied the maintenance staff back to the front desk, where they contacted the manager and eventually brought in a locksmith. They assured me it wouldn't take long and invited me to wait on the couches in the lobby. An hour passed. When the locksmith finally arrived, they tried to bypass the electronic lock, but their efforts failed. The problem was handed back to the hotel maintenance team. At this point, I was baffled.

My confusion turned into outright surprise when I saw maintenance bring out a reciprocating saw. Instead of attempting to drill out the lock, they decided to cut through the solid core door itself—an expensive solution, to say the least. As the saw whined and bits of wood scattered, I wondered: Did they even have a replacement door? What about the cost of this one? The room was now completely unusable. Throughout this ordeal, the hotel manager never once left their office to assess the situation or speak to me, the customer caught in the middle of this comedy. Later, I shared this story with our leadership team. I posed the question: As employee-owners, how would we have handled this differently? What lessons could we take away from this situation?

Growing up, I always admired my dad's owner mindset. He had a remarkable ability to spot areas for improvement and effectively



engage others with few words. Most impressively, he never hesitated to take responsibility for any mistakes, no matter how big or small. His attitude helped build a base of loyal clients that paid off when times got tough. One moment stands out as a perfect example of his approach to life and work.


I was on a job delivering drywall for a good customer, and the site was hours away—deep in the middle of nowhere. Normally, our team would deliver drywall to a house after the framing was done, but before the windows were installed. This setup made it easy for us to use large cranes to lift bundles of drywall up to the open window frames, where we'd manually unload each sheet and stack it inside. Over the years, we had received a lot of hands-on training on a wide variety of building types.



But that day, when we pulled up to the site, we were met with an unexpected problem: all of the windows had already been installed by a different contractor. There was no clear pathway to get the drywall inside the house. Frustrated, I got on the truck's radio and called back to the shop. My dad answered. "There's no way we can deliver this load," I told him. "The windows are all in. We can't use the cranes like we normally do.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then, in his calm and thoughtful way, my dad finally replied, "Well, should we call the competition to come figure it out for us?" That was all the inspiration we needed. It wasn't easy, but we got the drywall inside that house.

With the benefit of hindsight, I realized that I was initially focused



on my interests (“not my problem”), not on the fact that if we left our delivery incomplete, our customer wouldn’t have the building material they needed. My dad’s response reminded me that instead of handing the problem to someone else, I could take ownership of the situation and embrace the challenge before me.

OBSERVATIONS

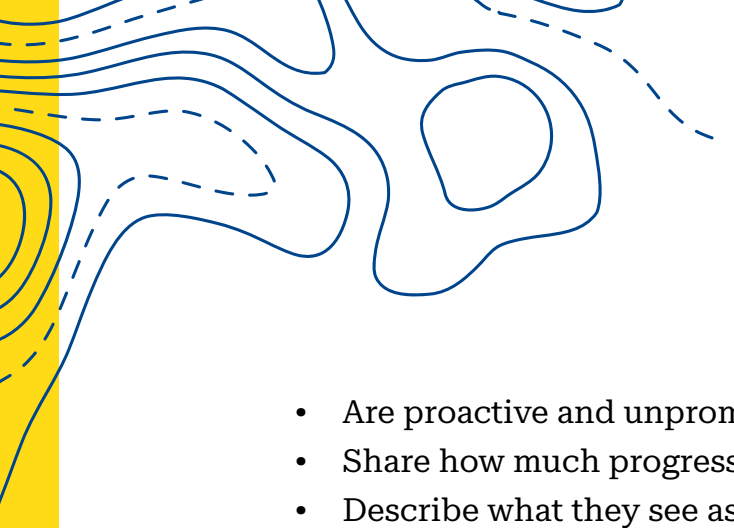
HOW DO OWNERS GET THINGS DONE?

Owners or stewards make sure there are thoughtful processes in place to appraise opportunities—and the right culture to execute a decision.

Many firms have a matrix of authority that determines who needs to review a key decision. The greater the risk, the further you reach to get the right decisionmakers around the table. At HDR, we used risk reviews to pause and consider an opportunity as a team. **Eric, our CEO at the time, would regularly challenge us not just to ask, “Could we take this on?” but “Should we”?** He taught us, as employee-owners, how to manage risk by asking good questions.

Even if the opportunity is approved, owners understand that any big project will have bumps in the road, whether they’re issues with systems or teams. They are proactively ready to address a dispute, knowing that emerging problems only get harder with time. They set a responsive and calm tone, owning their issues and resisting attempts to shift risk onto others.

An owner mindset also helps with execution; an owner has a bias toward action. **That’s why team members stand out when they act like owners.** When I’ve assigned tasks, my favorite updates:

- 
- Are proactive and unprompted
 - Share how much progress has been made
 - Describe what they see as the next steps toward completion
 - Identify any new wrinkles or challenges that caused a course adjustment, and decisions or guidance they would like from me or others
 - Never complain about others, but focus on solutions that can draw others in
 - Are succinct


Employees who consistently hit these marks are among the strongest team members. For them, a project isn't just a way to transact business, it's a way to develop a relationship, which builds resilience and sets them up for career growth.

When a manager lets someone run with a challenge, it helps the employee grow and gives the manager space to grow, too. By contrast, both the manager and employee stagnate when the manager's desk becomes a dumping ground for the employee's leftover problems. There's a difference between venting and dwelling! If you're running into this problem as a manager, listen first, and then try asking, "So what have you done about it?" How can you develop your or your team's project management skills?

"The competitive advantage of an owner's mentality is based in part on a bias to action—the ability to identify immediate actions to speed up their ability to serve customers."

~CHRIS ZOOK AND JAMES ALLEN, THE FOUNDER'S MENTALITY

In sum, what's the difference between a doer and an owner? The former diligently goes through steps to get the job done. The latter



goes further. An owner asks whether the current approach makes sense for a broad group of stakeholders and over a long-term perspective. An owner wonders if a task could be done better and looks out for risks that could get them off track. An owner is always aware, always learning from their mistakes, and always seeking to do the right thing, even when no one is watching.



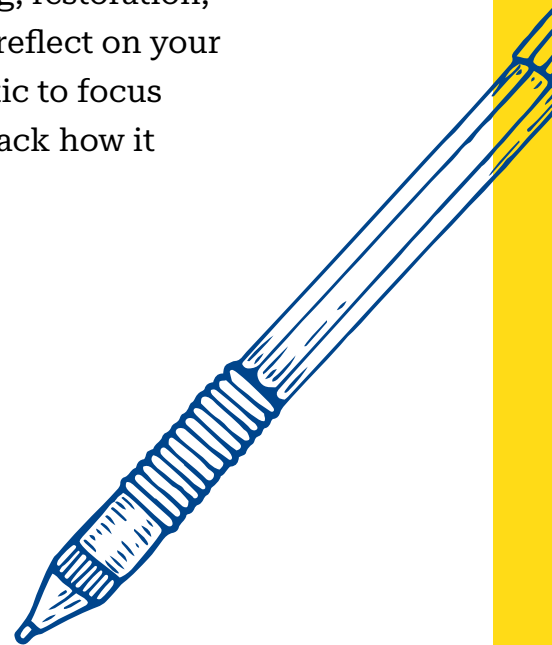
QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

How does an owner deal with problems differently?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a recent work problem you faced, or a service you received, and consider how you reacted. Now, imagine the buck stopped with you—and that how you handled the situation would be made public. Would you have approached it differently? Write down the differences and brainstorm ways that a proactive, solutions-oriented “owner mindset” might change the situation.

What are some key characteristics of an owner mindset?

EXERCISE: List the qualities you associate with an owner mindset, such as accountability, long-term thinking, restoration, resourcefulness, openness, or commitment. Then, reflect on your current approach to work. Choose one characteristic to focus on and develop over the next month. If possible, track how it influences your decision making and results.



FURTHER RESOURCES FOR OWNER

- Give and Take

BY ADAM GRANT



- What We Know From Recent Research

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY AND THE ASPEN INSTITUTE



- Employee Ownership Canada

EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP TRUST





06

FOCUS **DO I HAVE TIME?**

We often worry about how we'll navigate a day, a year, or a new career step before we even get started. When we first train our focus on what's most important, we naturally prune away the overgrowth.

PREPARATION

I have found that career growth can bring more options but also forces more choices. Is there such a thing as balance?

As my options grow, so do the tradeoffs due to limited time. How can I find more time?

Yet time resists control; worry or impatience won't add any minutes or depth to my day. Will what I am focused on impact my perception of having enough time?

"Inside of me there are two dogs. One is mean and evil and the other is good and they fight each other all the time. When asked which one wins, I answer, the one I feed the most."

~ATTRIBUTED TO CHEROKEE TRADITION




Consider sitting with one of the **Focus** questions for five minutes in silence.

JOURNEY STORY

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

One day, I sat in on a panel hosted by a young professionals' group at HDR. Autumn, Caden, and Lauren hosted regular sessions on hot topics for employees early in their career.



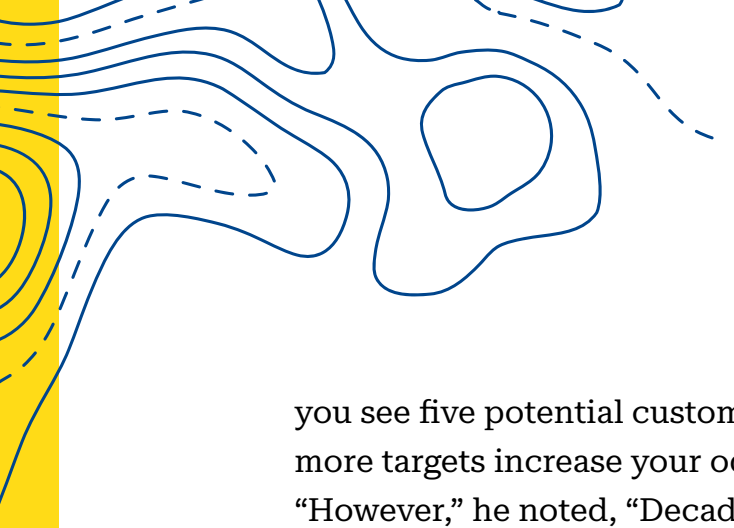
In this conversation, they asked an executive leadership panel how they handled “work-life balance.” This is a question we ask throughout our lives, but young people often find it especially weighty as they try to jumpstart their careers and even start a family at the same time.

“Balance may not exist,” our new CEO, John Henderson, said right off the bat. “Rather, the opportunity is to integrate work and life. **Instead of competing, work and life ebb and flow; each brings meaning that informs the other.**”

I nodded. John lived out that reflection with as much integrity as any leader I have ever worked with. Work and life ebb and flow by season and by roles. Sometimes work and life are very integrated (e.g., living on a military base as a family) and other times are more distinct (e.g., taking vacation or family leave). That balance can also significantly change with life events (e.g., moving for a new job or starting a family). People thrive not when they choose a particular formula, but when they walk through these choices with a sense of meaning in their work and a personal community that helps them along the way.

Erin jumped in. “The ebb and flow isn’t easy,” she acknowledged. “Instead of a balance, we each face daily tradeoffs as we make choices based on new circumstances and life events. **You can’t avoid the hard choices, but you can be fully present. And once you do choose, you need to focus and finish strong.**” Her reflection reminded me of one of our HDR “Table Manners”—“Once we agree, we are in this together.” Focus and development go hand in hand.

A few minutes later, Tom shared a simple marketing example. “If



you see five potential customers, it's tempting to pursue all five—more targets increase your odds of winning at least one, right?”

“However,” he noted, “Decades of company data show that the more targets you chase, the lower your win rate. But if you focus on your top couple of opportunities—the ones where you’ve built the best relationships—that concentrated energy increases your percentage win rate and subsequent growth. Tradeoffs end up making more of your time and give you more to work with. The same could be said of your career choices.”

All of the leaders agreed that while focus can be achieved in a busy life, choices are easier when you travel light. Pick your battles wisely and delegate. Focus helps us naturally prune our responsibilities, but the reverse is also true: where there is less to juggle, it's easier to see what is essential and focus accordingly.

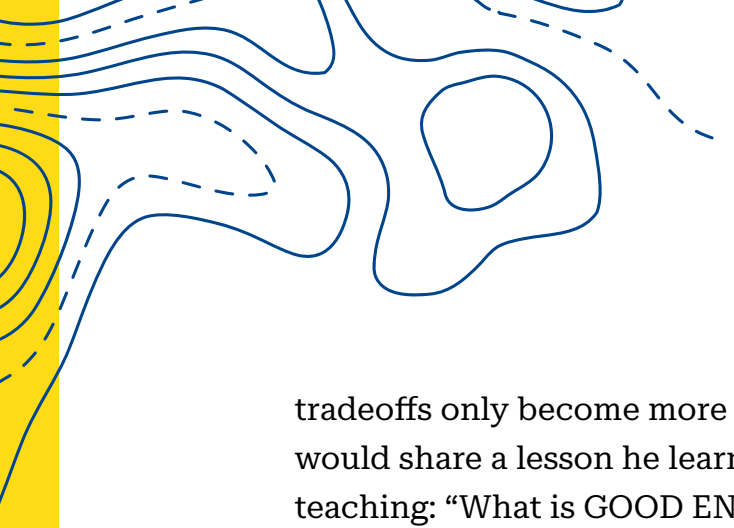
“Essentialism is not about how to get more things done; it’s about how to get the right things done. It doesn’t mean just doing less for the sake of less either. It is about making the wisest possible investment of your time and energy in order to operate at our highest point of contribution by only doing what is essential.”

~GREG MCKEOWN, ESSENTIALISM

OBSERVATIONS

TRADEOFFS AND FOCUS

In my own journey, I’ve noticed that time management only gets harder as your career progresses. With growth comes more choices. So, any skills you build to focus and manage



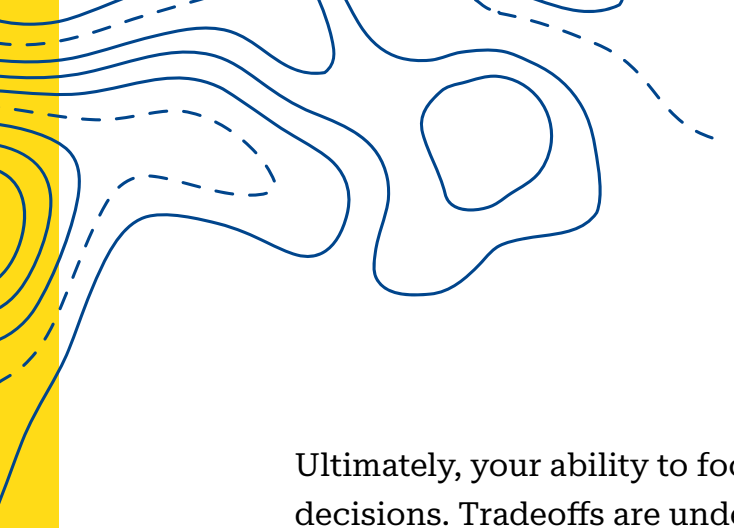
tradeoffs only become more valuable with time. My friend John would share a lesson he learned from over 20 years of university teaching: “What is GOOD ENOUGH for today? Life is always about tradeoffs and choices. We can never do everything every day. Once you make the choice, run with it!”

As I progressed in my career, I also noticed that each of my weeks had a different pace and weight. I needed to anticipate weeks that either had a bigger volume of work or heavier issues to manage—sometimes both. I only had so much energy going into each week; how would it get used up? If it was a heavier week, I needed to build in margin so that I could make it through in a healthy way. That also meant I had to be thoughtful ahead of time in picking my battles. Limits provide clarity. Remember the challenge from Eric, HDR’s CEO, in Chapter 5: the right question isn’t just “Could I take this on,” but “Should I”?

Some weeks, it was clear that I could do twelve things halfway or six well. That meant looking ahead, picking priorities, designing my day with breaks, and building my work around my most productive times of day.

“...the ability to concentrate is a skill that you have to train if you expect to do it well. A simple way to get started training this ability is to frequently expose yourself to boredom. If you instead always whip out your phone and bathe yourself in novel stimuli at the slightest hint of boredom, your brain will build a Pavlovian connection between boredom and stimuli, which means that when it comes time to think deeply about something ... your brain won’t tolerate it.”

~CAL NEWPORT, NYT



Ultimately, your ability to focus can also clarify your career decisions. Tradeoffs are undeniably difficult, but they can help us recognize which activities give us more energy. And if we have more focus for the things that give us energy—well, that’s a pretty powerful combination. I realized early on that I enjoyed development and facilitation, which were in demand. When I focused on building skills (both craft and character!) and seeking work opportunities related to development and facilitation, I grew more and felt more fulfilled. I still had to work through the challenging tasks that crop up daily in any job (e.g., team turnover, broken tools and systems, etc.), but I had a center of gravity to bring me back to my priorities.



QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

What takes up your energy?

EXERCISE: Throughout your day, take note of what grabs your attention the most—emails, social media, conversations, etc. At the end of the day, reflect on both the platforms and topics that caught your attention. How do they align with your values or goals?

How do you pick your battles?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a recent challenge. Ask yourself whether it was worth the energy you spent on it. Write down guidelines for deciding which battles are worth fighting—such as their impact on your long-term goals, relationships, or values—and use these guidelines for prioritizing future challenges.

What would you do with more time?

EXERCISE: Create a list of activities or goals you would pursue in your focus areas if you had an extra hour each day. Now, look at your current schedule and identify where you can “find” that time by eliminating low-value tasks. Test this new routine for a week and assess the impact.





PREPARATION

Consider these thoughts as you get ready for another angle on the “Do I Have Time?” question.

“Research to design stronger building materials is attempting to replicate an amazing property of trees. When wind bends a tree, it responds by growing tissue at weaker points to spread stress evenly.”

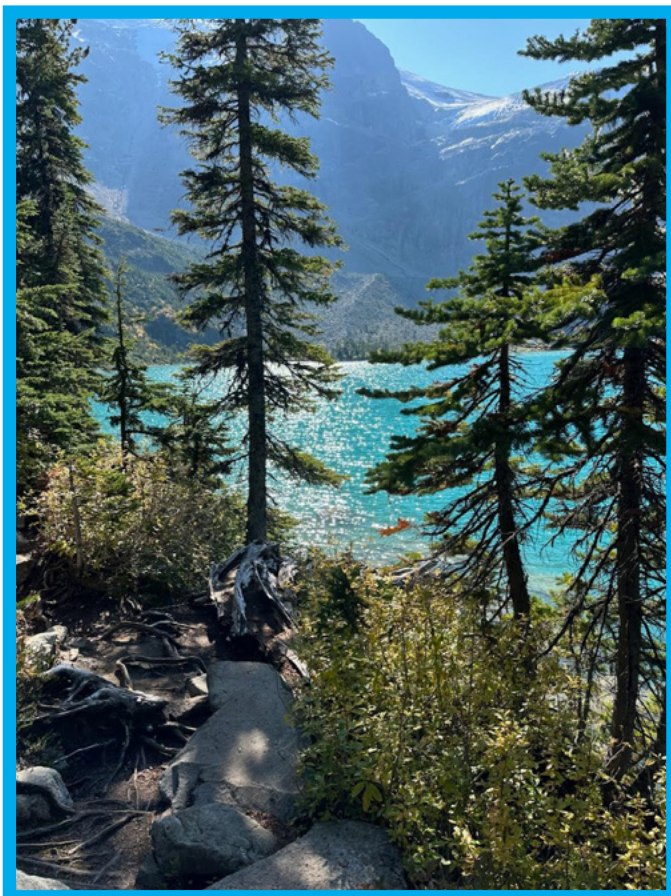
~MATTHECK, WHY THEY GROW, HOW THEY GROW

The Small Path

PHILIP BRITTS, WATER AT THE ROOTS

*The small path wound between the green barriers,
Contorted tree, and tangled undergrowth;
And a small path in my inner mind
Was winding through the tangle of ideas,
Trying to lead to a place of more meaning.
There came the moment when the leaf fell from the tree.
As I watched it twirling slowly earthwards
The talk of my companions faded from my awareness.
There is a voice which speaks to us
Within, from Without;
And when this voice is not in the voices of our companions,
At any moment we can be essentially alone.
Though my feet continued down the small path between the
tangles,
Mind joined spirit, alone, on the other path,
Heeding a voice, not of words but water.*

*If any revelation came, it is no more remembered,
And the talk of the others led to no fundamental discovery;
But I had been drinking from a far fountain.
At some other time, perhaps I shall remember the meaning,
And be able to say something of it,
That we can find again the source-water,
Not alone, but together.*





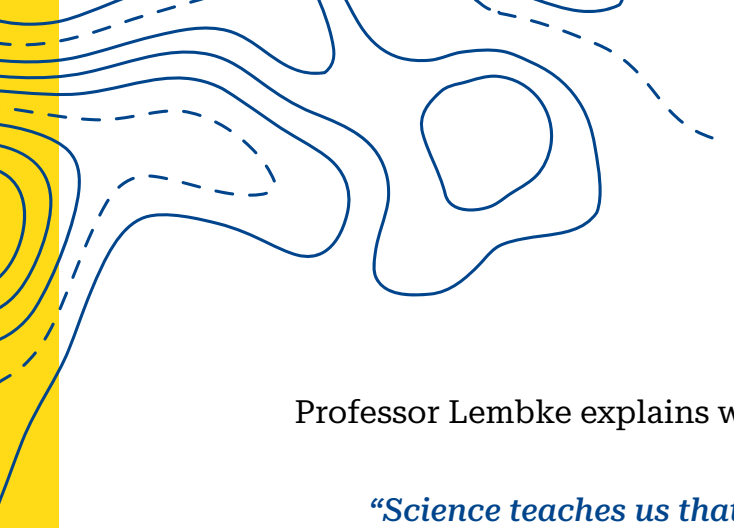
JOURNEY STORY

ANXIETY

I was having lunch with Brent, HDR's head of recruiting, when we started to discuss retention. He asked if I thought staff seemed more stressed than in the past. We debated whether the issue was higher workloads, or if there might be other factors at play. Company data on billable hours showed that workload levels did not appear to have changed much over the prior decade. Could it be more about the quality and not the quantity of time? Were we trying to get more done in the same time? Did less personal interaction and more multitasking add to stress? Are newer employees less equipped to cope? Uncomfortable situations typically don't create anxiety, they reveal it. Each possible explanation had some merit. After our conversation, I couldn't let these questions go. I did some online research, and in my next weekly leadership insight email, I shared the following research from a different field:

Anna Lembke, a professor at Stanford University School of Medicine, is widely recognized as one of the top researchers on anxiety, addiction and recovery. She writes,

“Researchers interviewed nearly 150,000 people in twenty-six countries to determine the prevalence of generalized anxiety disorder, defined as excessive and uncontrollable worry that adversely affected their life. They found that richer countries had higher rates of anxiety than poor ones. The authors wrote, ‘The disorder is significantly more prevalent and impairing in high-income countries than in low- or middle-income countries.’”



Professor Lembke explains why this might be the case:


“Science teaches us that every pleasure exacts a price, and the pain that follows is longer lasting and more intense than the pleasure that gave rise to it. With prolonged and repeated exposure to pleasurable stimuli, our capacity to tolerate pain decreases, and our threshold for experiencing pleasure increases ... But herein lies the problem. Human beings, the ultimate seekers, have responded too well to the challenge of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.”

She goes on to zero in on the conditions of our society today.

“As a result, we’ve transformed the world from a place of scarcity to a place of overwhelming abundance. Our brains are not evolved for this world of plenty. As Dr. Tom Finucane, who studies diabetes in the setting of chronic sedentary feeding, said, ‘We are cacti in the rain forest.’ And like cacti adapted to an arid climate, we are drowning in dopamine. The net effect is that we now need more reward to feel pleasure, and less injury to feel pain.”

In short, the more comfortable or sheltered we are, the weaker our coping mechanisms become. So, what do we do? Dr. Lembke offers one potential answer:

“... pressing on the pain side of the balance can lead to its opposite—pleasure. Unlike pressing on the pleasure side, the dopamine that comes from pain is indirect and potentially more enduring.”



It's a counterintuitive insight—pain leads to lasting satisfaction?—but it explains why, in the right doses, hard work can be so fulfilling. When we exercise, volunteer, complete a project, or support others in hard moments, those efforts—and the discipline necessary to perform them—shape us in healthy ways.

Each of us knows that there are benefits to discomfort. I don't enjoy taking a full day to practice for an important client presentation, but it almost always pays off. I don't always want to reach out to a very detailed-oriented expert, because I know they'll really mark up my work, but the project is much better for it. It can make us anxious at first, but it's good to be humbled and pushed into new directions. That's where the best growth can happen.

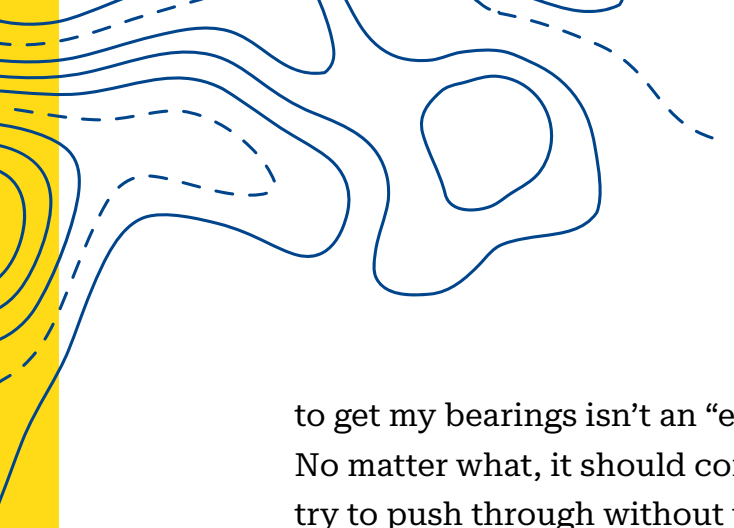
OBSERVATIONS

SILENCE

When I spoke with younger colleagues, they often asked how to handle the demands of the workplace. From inbox management to weekly planning, there are many disciplines that can help us focus on what's essential.

One discipline that I practice is less common culturally: starting and ending my day in silence. Many studies of athletics and other performance-based professions show the value of taking time to center and focus our minds. When we stop to listen in silence, that time strengthens us for the day ahead or helps us reflect on what we learned from the day that just ended. We are shaped by what we pay attention to.

This practice has become essential to me even in the busiest of times; in fact, the busier I get, the more I need the silence. Pausing



to get my bearings isn't an "extra" that I can tack on if time allows. No matter what, it should come first and last each day. I could try to push through without those moments of silence and rely on my own strength, but inevitably, I will become depleted—and replacing silence with screen time messes with my sleep. At that point, I'm neither productive nor fun to be around. For me, getting edgy is an indicator that I am veering off track.

I'm not naive about the demands on our time. But finding meaningful space is also a practical strategy for better results at work. My mom and dad, who had built our family business alongside other relatives, noted that the best construction staff had stronger communities and something that engaged them outside of work—a place where they found deeper roots. It can be exercise, art, music—any hobby or place where you engage your whole being in a contemplative, communal space. When you take care of yourself and focus on what matters most, life naturally flows out of you and helps you work from a place of peace and purpose.

“Trying to stick to our goals and resist distractions slowly depletes that precious gas tank of cognitive resources... design your day thinking that you have limited mental resources, knowing that taking time to replenish them will not only help you be less stressed and better able to resist distractions but also more creative...”

~GLORIA MARK, ATTENTION SPAN



QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Do you avoid pain?

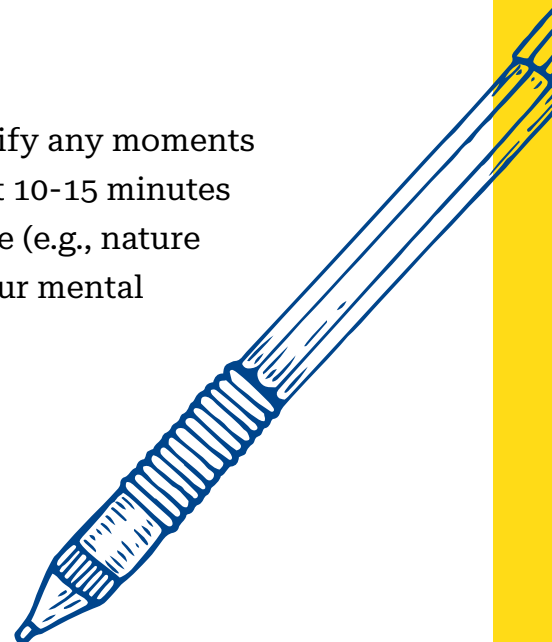
EXERCISE: Think of a situation you may be avoiding because it feels uncomfortable or painful. Write down the possible benefits of facing it head-on. Commit to taking one small step toward resolving the situation this week and reflect on how it impacts your progress.

How do you handle stress or anxiety?

EXERCISE: List the techniques or strategies you currently use to manage stress or anxiety. Then, research or consult a professional to try something new. Reflect on which approach works best for you and how it could be integrated into your routine.

How much solitude do you have in your schedule?

EXERCISE: Review your current schedule and identify any moments of solitude. If there are none, consciously carve out 10-15 minutes each day for reflection or time in a restorative space (e.g., nature walk, etc.). After a week, consider the effects on your mental clarity and well-being.



FURTHER RESOURCES FOR FOCUS

- Essentialism
BY GREG MCKEOWN
- Thinking, Fast and Slow
BY DANIEL KAHNEMAN
- A resource to go deeper on a physical exercise, hobby, creative art (e.g., *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron), for contemplative space





07

SHARE WHAT'S THE STORY?

Our journey isn't complete until
we pass on what we have been
given, including our story.

PREPARATION

No one goes on a journey alone, and we can find great meaning in the relationships we cultivate with our fellow travelers. Some of them even become mentors—people who are not our direct supervisors, but give their time and experience to develop others. They provide an independent view of career development, outside of our reporting chain, and can help inform our next steps. Who have been valuable mentors in my life and why?

I have found that a thriving culture is one where mentors will carefully listen to my story and vulnerably share their own. Do stories stick better than information?

In turn, I have found that the more I give, the more I am given. Does sharing, when it challenges us, bring deeper meaning?

“Our ability to be daring leaders will never be greater than our capacity for vulnerability ... [but] ... If you are not in the arena getting your ass kicked on occasion, I’m not interested in or open to your feedback ... When we own a story and the emotion that fuels it, we get to simultaneously acknowledge that something was hard while taking control of how that hard thing is going to end. We change the narrative.”

~BRENÉ BROWN, DARE TO LEAD



Consider sitting with one of the **Share** questions for five minutes in silence.

JOURNEY STORY

MENTORS


One day, our leadership team dropped our usual agenda; instead, we were diving into the question of why mentorship matters. Our CEO, Eric, said that everyone in the company should have a mentor. We debated what that looks like: is it a formal program, informal connections, or all of the above? What is most important to share from mentor to mentee, and vice versa?



The discussion shifted: one leader reminded us that in recent decades, the infrastructure industry has been focusing on resilience. Whether an engineering team is designing a house, bridge, or dam, they need to prepare for increasing climate risk. In this new reality,

where asking the right question could make the difference between weathering a storm or collapsing from it, mentorship is more valuable than ever: the mentee learns to ask risk-informed questions, and the mentor can adopt new technologies; together, they help each other prepare for what's next.

We noted a practical example of that shift: changing building codes. This picture from Florida illustrates the result of changing standards in the face of a powerful hurricane, with the more recent home faring much better than the older structure. The bottom line is this: while two structures can look similar on the surface, time will expose their true quality. **The best design and planning firms understand that the path to quality runs through mentorship, as they pass experience and technical expertise from one generation to the next.**



I shared how a top expert in dam safety had polled industry colleagues on what makes an impactful mentor.

“It was no surprise that competency was fundamental to good mentoring. However, what stands out most, and is most difficult to discuss and address in a structured mentoring program, is how much the “Character of the Mentors” influences the lasting impact of the mentoring experience ... For most, I expect that if we engaged [mentors] in the appropriate discussion, we would find that the character side of who they are has been a lifelong journey of discovery and self-transformation.”


Over and over again, we see this truth break through: if you want a resilient future, character matters as much as your expertise. Mentors can help with both.

OBSERVATIONS

SETTING THE STAGE

Mentorship offers profound perspective. By perspective, I mean the ability to step back to see a bigger picture and the patterns we might have taken for granted. Perspective helps us better see what we are facing today. It helps us recognize that career patterns tend to zig-zag more than they follow linear paths. And it helps us remember that the skill set for our present role may be starkly different from that of future opportunities, like becoming a manager.

In fact, mentors can help us evaluate leadership opportunities in



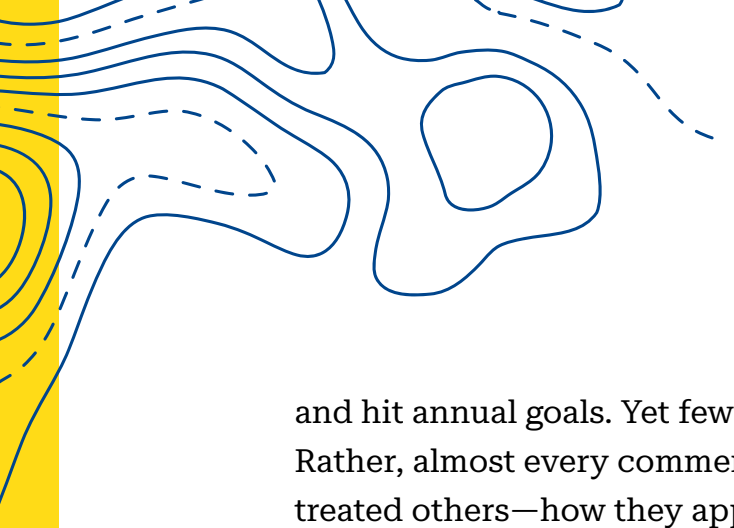
a more relaxed context. My friend Michelle, a writer and director in the finance industry, noted that she asks her mentees why they want to become a manager. She knows that people often see management and leadership as the only way to advance in their career. Next, she asks them what they enjoy about their current job and what they wouldn't want to give up. Sometimes, their answers to these two questions clearly point toward management as the best next step. Other times, their answers are at odds with becoming a manager. Michelle's guidance helps her mentees **reframe their choices: instead of making linear assumptions about advancement, they consider what qualities they're seeking in their next role.**

Mentorship requires a constant dance: balancing the need to get things done with the importance of developing others—setting the stage, but allowing others to step forward.

“Instead of being at the front of the stage, showing others the way, these leaders learned to set the stage and create an environment in which others were willing and able to do the hard work of innovation. That required emotional resilience, courage, and patience to amplify diversity of thought and navigate potential conflict, experiment and iterate a path forward with many false starts and missteps along the way, and hold options open so that even opposing ideas could be integrated in creative and useful ways.”

~LINDA HILL ET AL., “WHAT MAKES A GREAT LEADER”

Dr. Hill's comments hit home as I reviewed thank-you notes after retiring from a 30-year corporate role. I had spent three decades trying to get things done: to manage my time, complete projects,



and hit annual goals. Yet few notes mentioned accomplishments. Rather, almost every comment had something to do with how I treated others—how they appreciated times when I had offered support or helped them find a bridge to something new in their career. Out of over 100 comments, key words included mentorship, support, guidance, compassion, collaboration, and encouragement.

That feedback shows that anyone has the potential to be an effective mentor, at any point in their career, when we show up and truly listen to each other. How would you want to be remembered? What would you want others to write in thank-you cards addressed to you?

Mentorship also has a very practical outcome: it offers robust succession planning at every step of your career. **Part of a job well done is the legacy you leave**, and it's hard to take on the next role if you haven't developed a diverse group of candidates for your existing role. Succession planning is an issue across roles, sectors, and seniority levels. In fact, according to the 2024 HSBC Global Entrepreneurial Wealth Report, “an overwhelming majority—66%—lack a formal exit strategy or succession plan.” (2024 HSBC Global Entrepreneurial Wealth Report). Who are you developing to take your place?



QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Does your work get better when reviewed by someone else with more experience? Why do we resist getting reviews? Are we more open to someone coaching us in a sport than at work?


EXERCISE: Ask someone with more experience to review a piece of your work. Pay attention to your emotional response when receiving feedback. Reflect on any resistance you may feel and how you can adopt a mindset of continuous learning. Also, compare your openness to feedback in other areas, such as sports or hobbies, and think about how you can apply that attitude at work.

Who have been valuable mentors in my life and why?

EXERCISE: Think about the times in life when you have grown the most. Did a mentor play a role in any of those chapters? A lot of professional experiences are now a hybrid of remote and in-person work. How much in-person time do you need for effective mentorship in key growth areas?

Do you have options for who could take your place?

EXERCISE: Think about your current role at work or in a project. Write down the names of people who could potentially step into



your position if necessary. If there are gaps, consider how you can mentor or train someone to develop the necessary skills. Remember that the position may change, with different skills needed for the future.



PREPARATION

Consider these quotes as you get ready for another angle on the “What’s the Story?” question.

“I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”

~ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *AFTER VIRTUE*

“I never learn anything talking. I only learn things when I ask questions.”

~ATTRIBUTED TO COLLEGE FOOTBALL COACH, LOU HOLTZ

JOURNEY STORY

A WINNING STORY

My colleague Doug, President of HDR’s architecture practice, taught me a lot about the power of storytelling to convey meaning and value. He shared a story from a pivotal moment early in his career: when HDR, then a young firm, had the opportunity to bid on the design of a large new hospital and its accompanying research support facility. It was a big project that could define the firm’s trajectory, so they assembled a large team to prepare a presentation. Everyone was determined to bring their best.

Then, just as the team was about to travel to the presentation site, the client dropped a bombshell: they had decided to split the project into two parts. The hospital would be one presentation, and the smaller support facility would be another. The two projects,



though related, would have to be pitched independently, each with its own team and approach. For the hospital pitch, the senior leader selected the designers with the strongest resumes, confident that their work on prior hospitals would speak for itself. But Doug was given a different assignment: leading the “B team” for the support facility. At first, it felt like a setback. Their team had less experience designing buildings like the facility at hand, so in terms of qualifications, they were up against a significant challenge.

It didn’t take long for Doug and his team to realize that their best shot at winning the bid wasn’t through qualifications alone. So they shifted gears. **Instead of focusing on what they had done in the past, they focused on what they could create—a narrative that would spark imagination.** They pitched the idea of a cutting-edge healing research environment, a space that would not just serve as a facility, but as a place where medical breakthroughs could happen, a place where science and compassion would meet.

When the results came in, HDR learned that they won the bid for one of the two projects—the support facility, led by Doug and his “B team.” It reinforced the lesson that had stayed with Doug for the rest of his career: stories matter. In this case, what made the difference—what deeply connected with the client—was the story of the support facility’s potential to transform lives. It was a reminder that sometimes, it’s not just about what you’ve done, but about how your story can inspire others.



OBSERVATIONS TELL ME YOUR STORY

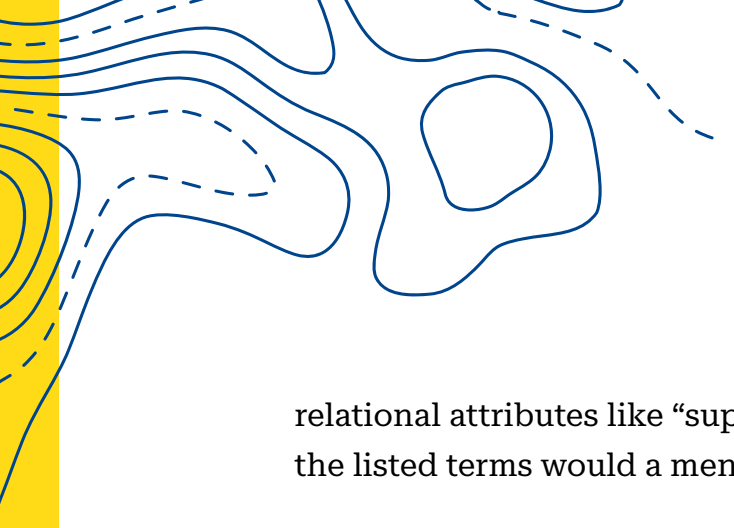
What do we need from our mentors? Brooke shared an honest insight on the question in reviewing this book:

“Personally, I don’t have the greatest associations with the word ‘mentor.’ It reminds me of the countless mentorship programs that felt so forced and artificial in college, with random older people trying to just fix all my issues or recruit me to work at their company. The way this section frames the idea is definitely more appealing.”

Perhaps what we need most is a place to hear stories and tell our own. Stories are one of the best ways to share what we’re learning and learn from others. However, when I share a story, is it authentic—from the heart—or is it a subtle virtue signal for the listener? Am I leaving room for others to decide where they fit into it?

When I ask someone, “tell me your story?”, I am using that question to minimize bias and stay curious. The connection goes deeper if I make the time to be there during challenging moments. I often hear others say that what helped them most through a difficult situation was mentors and friends who listened and validated them. What helped least were those who offered unsolicited advice or opinions.

In a webinar of hundreds of young professionals, we asked the question, “In one word, what do you need from a mentor or cohort?” This word cloud of responses suggests the importance of




relational attributes like “support” and “guidance.” How many of the listed terms would a mentee use to describe you?



The young professionals shared that when they came to a mentor for guidance, they weren’t looking for their mentor to fix the problem—they were seeking perspective and support as they worked through options. They needed their mentor to hear their story, not to impose their own.

“Once I know a patient’s story—the forces that shaped them to create the person I see before me—animosity evaporates in the warmth of empathy. To truly understand someone is to care for them. Which is why I always teach my medical students and residents—who are eager to parse experience into discrete boxes like ‘history of present illness,’ ‘mental status exam,’ and ‘review of



systems’ as they have been taught to do—to focus instead on story. Story recaptures not just the patient’s humanity but also our own.”

~ANNA LEMBKE, MD, DOPAMINE NATION

Listening doesn’t always come naturally—it’s a choice we have to make again and again. We learn to expect quick answers in school, where teachers typically wait just one second before they give an answer. But what serves us best—both as mentors and mentees—is the ability to step back to listen rather than jumping in with the answer to our own question. Think about someone who has listened well. What approaches did they use to share insights? Did they give you more than a second to answer?

I realize that it can be hard to find mentors, especially if you are in a more remote work environment or contribute as a contract worker. If you are in a setting that doesn’t have an established culture of mentorship, can you connect with associations to build community and identify mentors? Are there retired professionals, regardless of their field of practice, who you could consult for insights?

The best stories may come where you least expect them.



QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

What do you most value in a mentor? Would others see those same traits in you?

EXERCISE: Make a list of the qualities you most value in a mentor. Then, evaluate yourself: do you exhibit these same traits in your interactions with others? (Try revisiting your personal description from Chapter 1.) Identify one area for improvement and set a goal to develop that quality in your mentoring or leadership style over the next few months.

How do you feel when someone goes out of their way to ask you about your story and say thank you? What does it say about them?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a recent moment when someone really listened to you and expressed gratitude to you. Write down how it made you feel and what it communicated about that person's character. Challenge yourself to go out of your way to learn more about someone and thank them. Observe the impact it has on both of you.



FURTHER RESOURCES FOR SHARE

- **Mentoring Mindset, Skills and Tools**
BY ANN ROLFE
- **Made to Stick**
BY CHIP AND DAN HEATH
- **What Makes a Great Leader**
HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW





122 | WHAT'S YOUR NEXT CAREER STEP?

GUIDE REMINDER

and a Little More of
My Story

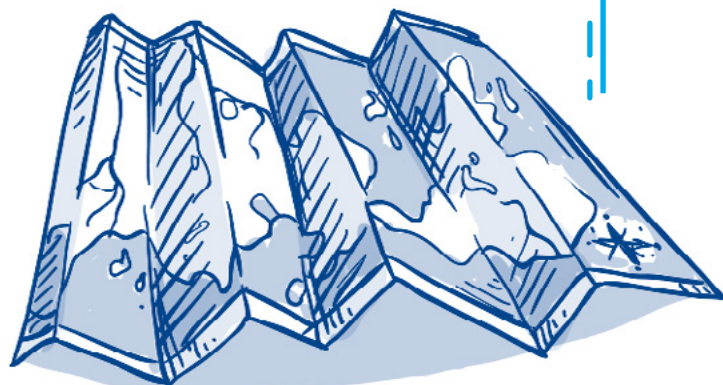


GUIDE REMINDER

I hope the questions in this guide help you better understand your story—finding new vantage points to see your path and inform your next steps. Each step only provides a limited view, so keep going: listen carefully, look closely, push through challenges, explore the edges of your map, and enjoy your journey alongside your fellow travelers.

Your willingness to ask questions and reflect on them deeply will never leave you the same.

What will you share when someone asks you, “Tell me your career story?”






ONE STEP BEHIND

Here is a little more about my path, shaped by curiosity and hope, always following one step behind a much bigger story. I have never taken these steps alone, and I am deeply indebted to friends and family, including, first and foremost, my life-changing partner Kristin. She has her own career journey, but graciously walks alongside me as well.

My career journey includes two significant workplace experiences, each packed with hard-earned lessons from many mistakes! The first was immersion in our family construction supply business, Shoemaker Drywall Supplies ([SDS](#)). It started with unloading trailer loads of itchy fiberglass insulation in exchange for grape soda money. Later, it centered on the hard work of driving construction materials through inclement weather and navigating tough interactions with no-nonsense supervisors on job sites. Our family's evening dinners included conversations about supplier price hikes,

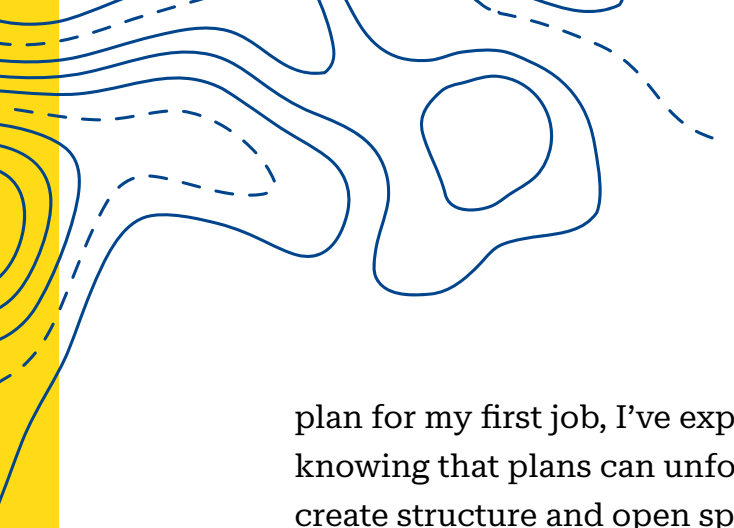


staffing dilemmas, and customer relations. At the time, I took these experiences for granted, not realizing that it was a rare privilege to start my career journey at the dinner table. In hindsight, these moments were invaluable, teaching me collaboration, perspective, responsibility, problem-solving, and conflict resolution. They also instilled a deep appreciation for my parents' and extended family's resilience and character, qualities that continue to inspire me today.

After completing a doctorate in natural resources management, the second major chapter of my professional story unfolded at [HDR](#), one of the largest employee-owned firms globally. At HDR, thousands of professionals work together to design and implement solutions that help communities thrive—addressing infrastructure challenges in water, transportation, healthcare, energy, and more. Their matrix-based approach brings the right experts together to tackle problems collaboratively. This method relies not only on technical expertise, but also a shared culture of respect, character-building, and collective purpose.

I began at HDR as a technical resource on projects and steadily took on greater responsibilities. Task leadership evolved into project management, which opened doors to client engagement and business development. These experiences eventually led me to lead a market sector and later serve as a group president. My final role at HDR was as Chief Talent Development Officer, where I identified and implemented best practices in career growth. We developed a strong team and so, as we discussed in Chapter 7, there comes a time to make room!

My career has since transitioned into a new phase: retirement. I still don't like that word, but I am thankful for the time to shift my focus and for two lessons. First, not unlike the apprentice



plan for my first job, I've explored various retirement scenarios, knowing that plans can unfold in unexpected ways. New rhythms create structure and open space to see what fits. This Guide was an unexpected example.

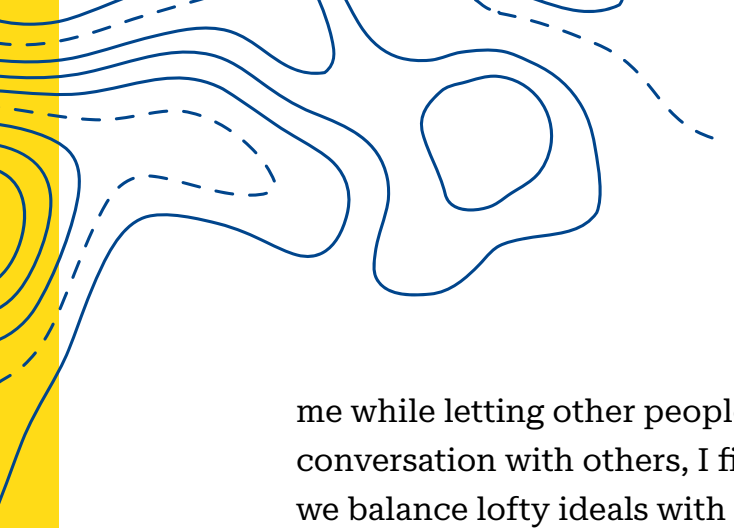
Second, it's so important to pause, reflect, and rewire. Try as we might, we can't just flip a switch from one season to the next. So I'm taking time to better understand the contradictions within my own life—the interplay of strengths and failures that shape who I am, knowing all the while that I am more than the pieces I examine.

The depth of my story includes a faith tradition rooted in questions. One of Jesus's questions, "Who do you seek?", offers a safe starting point to discover myself within a bigger story. I've also learned to run from those who claim to have all the answers and want to force them on others. Good friends have helped me be critical of myself anytime I have done the same.

So, I try to walk with questions in all parts of life. Questions have always resonated with me—I don't thrive within boxes, whether they're religious, cultural or corporate. Of course, I am human, so I use categories all the time to make sense of everyday issues. Yet like a tree root cracking a sidewalk, life breaks through and reminds me not to stay in my boxes. For example, work has become more meaningful as I slowly appreciate that I am neither self-sufficient nor in control; paradoxically, there is a lot of freedom in that!



Another paradox: I can remain rooted in what is important to



me while letting other people's wisdom shape my story. In conversation with others, I find assurance and openness; together, we balance lofty ideals with pragmatism.

The world is huge, and I only stand in a couple of square feet. So I stick with questions and watch the weather. I'm still learning to drop my self-centered map and see differently. I'm still learning to follow one step behind as a beautiful journey unfolds, far greater than I could ever fully see or comprehend on my own.

“The beauty I saw, it so exceeds our capacities, that truly it's a matter only for her maker.”

~DANTE, DIVINE COMEDY

Enjoy the journey!



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document is the collective wisdom of many colleagues, friends, and family that I have encountered along my journey. I cannot list them all, but your impact lives on in those you have poured into—both formally and informally—people like me.

Thanks to the content reviewers: Yetunde Adelekan, Dana Baugh, John Beaton, Martin Bell, Michelle Bissonnette, Khalid Bekka, Brooke Boan, Brian Conlin, Gillian Creese, Laura Dominguez Chan, Katie Duty, Brent Felker, Caden Gigliotti, Neil Graff, Michelle Gregory, Josylnn Hon, Namita Joshua, Eric Keen, Brent Kvittem, Patrick Lo, Lizzy Ojo Martens, David Sayson, and Ken Shigematsu.

Special thanks to editor [Lauren Dominguez Chan](#), a former White House speechwriter, who did wonders in drawing out the best in this Guide, and [Steph Martens](#) for visually bringing the Guide to life with her creative gifts.



**WHAT'S
YOUR NEXT
CAREER STEP?**

APPENDIX:

WORKBOOK





01

PLACE WHERE AM I?

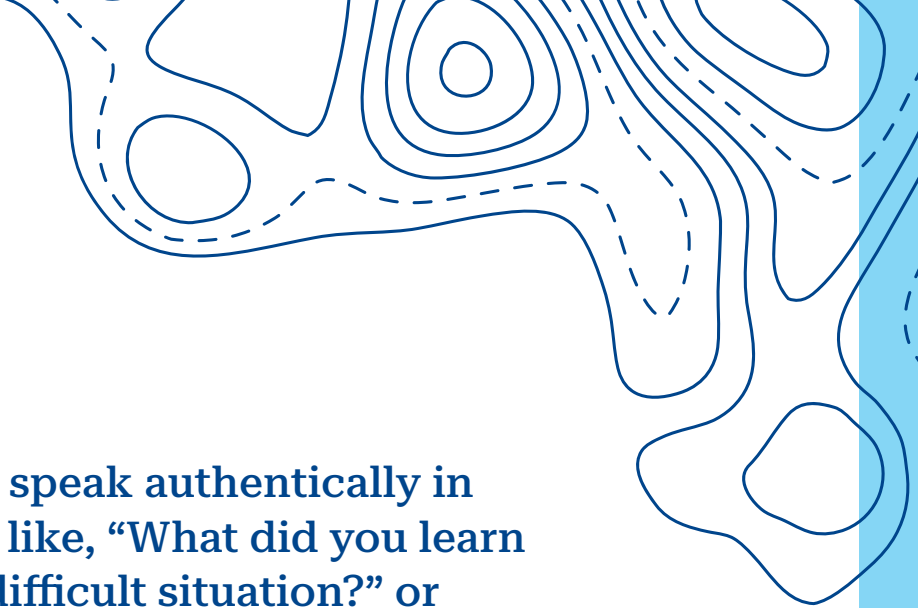
**IN ORDER TO DECIDE WHERE YOU'RE GOING,
YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHERE YOU ARE.**

Who do you have on your “personal board” or focus group to provide honest and diverse perspectives?

EXERCISE: List the individuals who currently offer you support and feedback. If that personal board feels incomplete, identify gaps and think about who could speak into your life and provide the perspectives you're missing. Who lets you know when you're off track? Who will give you the final 10% in honest feedback that most people would hesitate to offer?

How would others describe you?

EXERCISE: In one or two paragraphs, write down how you believe different people in your life—colleagues, friends, family—would describe your top three technical skills (the “what”) and characteristics (the “how”). Then, ask your personal board to independently develop their own list of your top three technical skills and characteristics. Compare your results.



Are you prepared to speak authentically in interview questions like, “What did you learn working through a difficult situation?” or “Describe a strength and a weakness”?

EXERCISE: Write down two specific situations where you faced conflict or challenges and what you learned. Did the resolution also create space for others to grow? Practice articulating these stories in a clear, authentic way that highlights growth and self-awareness.

How do you know when you are off track?

EXERCISE: Identify two patterns—emotional, mental, or physical—that are reliable signs you’re drifting off course. Identify a “reset action” that helps you step away and break the pattern. Are there passions in your personal life that could help you get back on track at work? Consider using some of the tools in Chapter 1 to help you better understand how you show up when you’re under stress.



02

POSSIBILITY WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR?

STRATEGIC PLANNING ISN'T JUST FOR BIG COMPANIES. EACH OF US CAN APPLY THE PRINCIPLES OF STRATEGIC PLANNING TO OUR OWN CAREERS.

How would you describe your core intent in your career? Knowing our limited perspective looking forward, what are you confident about even today?

EXERCISE: List what you pay most attention to or what you trust in today. Cognitive research has shown that your answer will play a big part in what you see and will shape who you become. Now write a short journal entry from the viewpoint of who you are 5 or 10 years from now. What are the key differences from today? Is your goal a specific place, the journey, or both?

What trends could have the biggest impact on your journey?

EXERCISE: Research current trends in your industry or area of interest. Make a list of those that seem most likely to influence your career. Then, identify one or two specific actions you can take to better understand or adapt to these trends.



What skills and experiences would you like to add to your portfolio?

EXERCISE: Create a “skills roadmap” by listing current skills and identifying gaps in your abilities or experiences that you’d like to fill. Note interpersonal and emerging digital skills (like AI or modeling) that might become critical to your area of interest. Set specific, time-bound goals for acquiring these new skills, whether through courses, mentorship, or hands-on experiences.

Has a problem ever created an opportunity or change in direction for you?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a time when you faced a significant problem, either personally or professionally. Write down how that problem, even if painful, led to an unexpected opportunity or change in direction. What skills did you use to make your decision? If you struggle to find an example, brainstorm a fictional current or future challenge.

03

TENSION CAN I HANDLE THIS?

CHALLENGES BECOME MORE MANAGEABLE WHEN WE LEARN TO EMBRACE PARADOX AND REFRAME SITUATIONS.

Has anyone shut down when you tried to give simple advice for a complex problem?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a situation in the past when you provided a simple fix to someone facing a tough issue (e.g., serious illness) that did not go well, or where your “help” was not welcomed. Why wasn’t your contribution received well? When you are in a tough spot, dealing with something complex, what kind of help do you most appreciate from friends?

Can you provide an example of a paradox?

EXERCISE: Make a list of challenges you currently face. For each challenge, identify whether it’s a problem that can be solved or a set of truths in tension that require ongoing management. If you can’t think of an example, consider well-known paradoxes (e.g., work-life balance).



What would be an example of reframing?

EXERCISE: Go back to the prior exercise and pick one of the challenges that you currently face. Now, brainstorm alternative ways to view the same issue. For example, how might it be an opportunity to grow a skill or build resilience? Reflect on how this shift in perspective could change your actions or feelings about the situation.

Can you get good at reframing if you are focused on yourself?

EXERCISE: Revisit one of the challenges from the prior question and attempt to see it from the viewpoint of a colleague, friend, or even from the perspective of an organization. Alternatively, see [Framing for Learning](#) by Amy Edmondson to learn how doctors used reframing to improve procedures and how their expertise sometimes hindered that process. Consider how focusing beyond yourself might lead to more creative or compassionate solutions.

Have you ever made a sacrifice that was worth it?

EXERCISE: Write down an example of a sacrifice you made in your personal or professional life. Reflect on the long-term outcomes of that decision. Did it lead to growth, opportunities, or fulfillment that made the sacrifice worthwhile? If possible, note a situation where a sacrifice didn't pay off and what you learned from it.



04

TEAM DO IT MYSELF?

UNTIL WE LEARN TO HEAR AND BE HEARD, COLLABORATION CAN SEEM LIKE MORE WORK THAN IT'S WORTH.

What does your network look like?

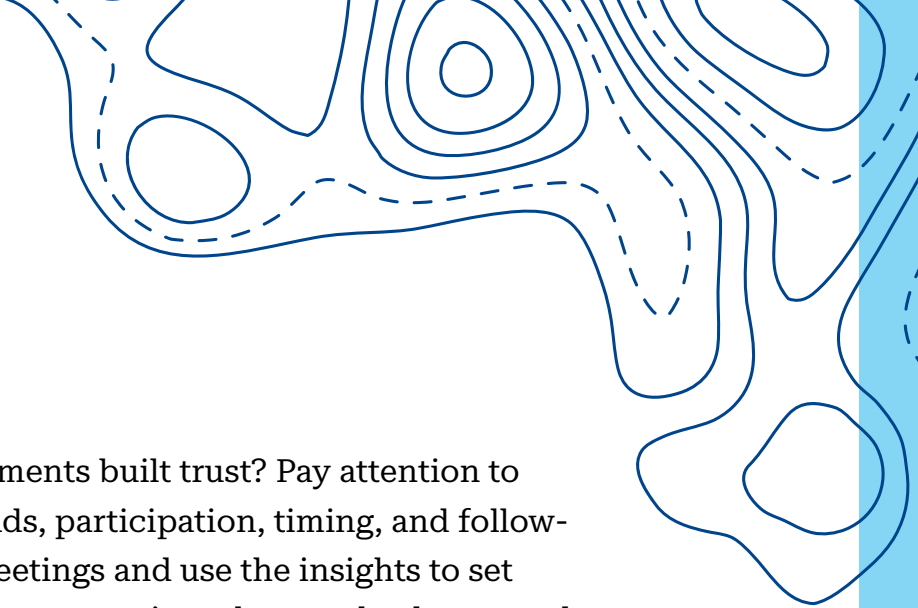
EXERCISE: Sketch out a “network map” of your professional and personal connections. Note areas where your network is strong and where it might be lacking (e.g., in certain industries, skill sets, or levels of influence). Set a goal to actively strengthen or expand your network in one specific area over the next month.

Describe a recent change that impacted you.
Were you included in the process?

EXERCISE: Identify a change at work or in your personal life where you were either included in the decision-making process or informed after the fact. Write down your feelings about both experiences and reflect on how your involvement (or lack thereof) influenced your reaction and support for the change. How could you factor that into your approach to driving change?

What does a good meeting look like?

EXERCISE: After your next meeting, jot down what worked well



and what didn't. Which elements built trust? Pay attention to factors like agenda, pre-reads, participation, timing, and follow-up. Compare this to past meetings and use the insights to set guidelines for improving future meetings that you lead or attend.

If someone is slow getting back to you, what do you assume?

EXERCISE: Next time you face a situation where someone hasn't responded to you, pause and write down your immediate assumptions. Then, challenge yourself to come up with three alternative explanations (e.g., unclear question). Reflect on how shifting assumptions might change your reaction to similar situations and how you can contribute to breaking down these barriers (e.g., information gaps) in your own workplace or social circles.

How effectively do your emails convey your intended message?

EXERCISE: Find a recent email. Borrowing a few tips from Smart Brevity, does it have a clear subject line of less than six words that catches the reader's attention? Does it then have one sentence that states "why it matters"? Does it then include a succinct list with only the necessary detail (e.g., dates, changes, next steps, etc.)? Closed out with a "bottom line" or requested action from audience? Does the email have the right tone for the intended audience? Rewrite the email and share the before and after with a mentor or colleague for feedback.

05

OWNER GIVE AND TAKE?

THINKING LIKE AN OWNER CAN CHANGE US AND CREATE THE RIGHT CONDITIONS FOR GROWTH.

When you're personally invested in something, do you treat it differently?

EXERCISE: Think of a situation that is a pure transaction, where you buy or rent something that has little personal meaning (e.g., paying bills and taxes for services). Then think of something you own or join that's invaluable (e.g., a close-knit team, a one-of-a-kind gift, a piece of art, a pet, a personal cause, etc.), where you would be gutted if something happened to it. Write down how your feelings and responsibilities differ between the two. What stands out?

Have you seen an example of a situation where ownership benefits growth?

EXERCISE: Identify a specific instance in your career or personal life where you have witnessed ownership provide a better experience (e.g., a coach, leader of a family business, owner of a non-profit, etc.). Write down what it was about how they ran their team, business, or non-profit that made a difference. Consider how you can apply this approach to your own career planning.



How does an owner deal with problems differently?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a recent work problem you faced, or a service you received, and consider how you reacted. Now, imagine the buck stopped with you—and that how you handled the situation would be made public. Would you have approached it differently? Write down the differences and brainstorm ways that a proactive, solutions-oriented “owner mindset” might change the situation.

What are some key characteristics of an owner mindset?

EXERCISE: List the qualities you associate with an owner mindset, such as accountability, long-term thinking, restoration, resourcefulness, openness, or commitment. Then, reflect on your current approach to work. Choose one characteristic to focus on and develop over the next month. If possible, track how it influences your decision making and results.

06

FOCUS DO I HAVE TIME?

WE OFTEN WORRY ABOUT HOW WE’LL NAVIGATE A DAY, A YEAR, OR A NEW CAREER STEP BEFORE WE EVEN GET STARTED. WHEN WE FIRST TRAIN OUR FOCUS ON WHAT’S MOST IMPORTANT, WE NATURALLY PRUNE AWAY THE OVERGROWTH.

What takes up your energy?

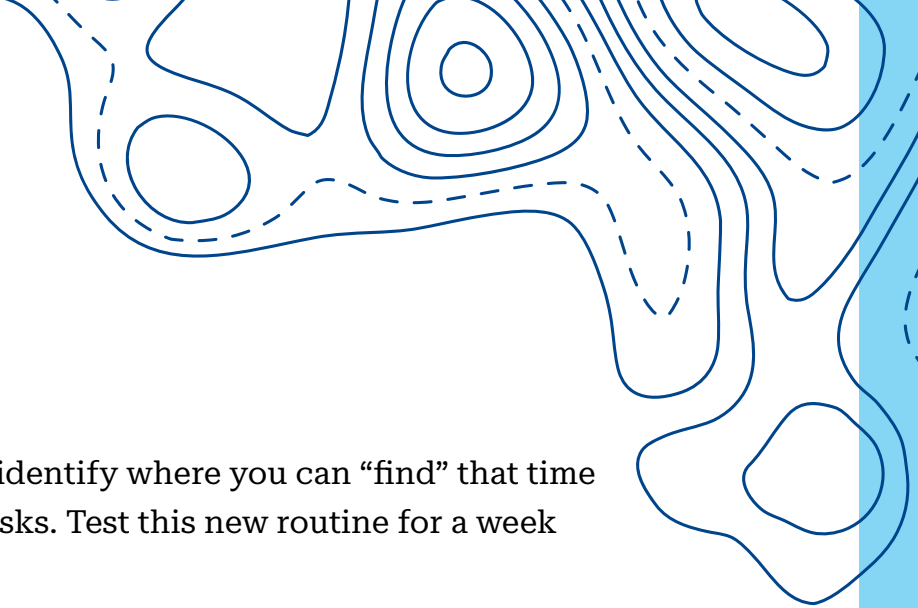
EXERCISE: Throughout your day, take note of what grabs your attention the most—emails, social media, conversations, etc. At the end of the day, reflect on both the platforms and topics that caught your attention. How do they align with your values or goals?

How do you pick your battles?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a recent challenge. Ask yourself whether it was worth the energy you spent on it. Write down guidelines for deciding which battles are worth fighting—such as their impact on your long-term goals, relationships, or values—and use these guidelines for prioritizing future challenges.

What would you do with more time?

EXERCISE: Create a list of activities or goals you would pursue in your focus areas if you had an extra hour each day. Now, look at



your current schedule and identify where you can “find” that time by eliminating low-value tasks. Test this new routine for a week and assess the impact.

Do you avoid pain?

EXERCISE: Think of a situation you may be avoiding because it feels uncomfortable or painful. Write down the possible benefits of facing it head-on. Commit to taking one small step toward resolving the situation this week and reflect on how it impacts your progress.

How do you handle stress or anxiety?

EXERCISE: List the techniques or strategies you currently use to manage stress or anxiety. Then, research or consult a professional to try something new. Reflect on which approach works best for you and how it could be integrated into your routine.

How much solitude do you have in your schedule?

EXERCISE: Review your current schedule and identify any moments of solitude. If there are none, consciously carve out 10-15 minutes each day for reflection or time in a restorative space (e.g., nature walk, etc.). After a week, consider the effects on your mental clarity and well-being.



07

SHARE WHAT'S THE STORY?

OUR JOURNEY ISN'T COMPLETE UNTIL WE PASS ON WHAT WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN, INCLUDING OUR STORY.

Does your work get better when reviewed by someone else with more experience? Why do we resist getting reviews? Are we more open to someone coaching us in a sport than at work?

EXERCISE: Ask someone with more experience to review a piece of your work. Pay attention to your emotional response when receiving feedback. Reflect on any resistance you may feel and how you can adopt a mindset of continuous learning. Also, compare your openness to feedback in other areas, such as sports or hobbies, and think about how you can apply that attitude at work.

Who have been valuable mentors in my life and why?

EXERCISE: Think about the times in life when you have grown the most. Did a mentor play a role in any of those chapters? A lot of professional experiences are now a hybrid of remote and in-person work. How much in-person time do you need for effective mentorship in key growth areas?



Do you have options for who could take your place?

EXERCISE: Think about your current role at work or in a project. Write down the names of people who could potentially step into your position if necessary. If there are gaps, consider how you can mentor or train someone to develop the necessary skills. Remember that the position may change, with different skills needed for the future.

What do you most value in a mentor? Would others see those same traits in you?

EXERCISE: Make a list of the qualities you most value in a mentor. Then, evaluate yourself: do you exhibit these same traits in your interactions with others? (Try revisiting your personal description from Chapter 1.) Identify one area for improvement and set a goal to develop that quality in your mentoring or leadership style over the next few months.

How do you feel when someone goes out of their way to ask you about your story and say thank you? What does it say about them?

EXERCISE: Reflect on a recent moment when someone really listened to you and expressed gratitude to you. Write down how it made you feel and what it communicated about that person's character. Challenge yourself to go out of your way to learn more about someone and thank them. Observe the impact it has on both of you.

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