The Dangerous Book for Leaders

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A Book on Leadership? Dangerous?

We are all familiar with the idea of *leaders* being dangerous.

Leaders with good intentions, but who lack skill, finesse, or simply awareness, can be dangerous. Likewise, infamous historical figures have often been highly skilled at leading, but had more nefarious intentions.

But a book?
How can a *book* be dangerous?

Much less a book of advice for leaders?

Books are dangerous when they are filled with dangerous ideas. But ideas are dangerous in a different way.

Human beings often label ideas as "dangerous" simply when they cut against the grain or challenge the status quo. The ideas that seem the most dangerous do not actually cause pain, but move someone beyond their comfort zone. Even when those ideas could encourage them to grow and change, those ideas are met with skepticism and derision at first… because those ideas threaten the very notion of who we are and what we should be *doing*.

This book is a dangerous book for leaders because it does just that. It will call into question your very role as a leader, and what you should be doing as a result.

Follow its advice, and you will be a leader that looks, sounds, and acts very differently from other leaders out there.

That will not be a bad thing. It will be a sign that you have, in fact, grown and changed.

Who This Book Is (Really) For

Leadership is a tricky topic because leadership exists within any group of people. That can be anything from a five-person craft circle to a Fortune 500 company to a high school marching band.

Leadership _books_, however, tend to talk as if businesses are the only places where you find leadership. (And maybe the military or a sports team or two.)

And to be candid, we are primarily talking to business leaders in this book. Those are the people we are most familiar with, and who we feel can benefit from these dangerous ideas. They are the people we hope will come to us with questions, so we can turn around and help their businesses thrive.

That said, we feel that many of the topics and ideas here will apply to leaders and leadership more generally. That's one reason why, for example, we will use the word "organization" instead of "business" or "company."

Ultimately, the problems faced by leaders are not just business problems. They are organizational challenges. And *people* challenges. Those exist whether you are selling widgets, running a not-for-profit, or managing colleagues in a lab.

If you find that an idea doesn't apply to your situation, that's OK. They are not arranged in a specified order. There is no "Step 1 through Step 10" or anything like that. You are free to use the ones that seem helpful and ignore the ones that don't.

And if you find yourself wanting more: Much of the material here has appeared, in some form or another, on our company blog over at Sketchdev.io. A visit there might uncover more topics that you find helpful on your journey, and just a bit dangerous.

1

Fixed Mindset vs. Growth Mindset

Dr. Carol Dweck, a research psychologist at Stanford University, spent the past few decades studying people's implicit views on intelligence and ability. She found that those views lie on a continuum, from thinking that all abilities are innate and fixed to thinking that abilities are more fluid and likely the result of training and practice.

Those that tend toward the "abilities are innate" view are said to have a *fixed mindset,* whereas those that feel that our abilities are the result of training and practice have a *growth mindset.* As it turns out, which mindset you have has a heavy influence on how you think about success, challenge, learning, and effort.

Individuals with a "growth mindset" tend to view their own abilities as needing refinement and training. Thus, they strive to learn and enjoy developing their own skills. They also tend to be more open to feedback and coaching, and adapt better to change.

Individuals with a "fixed mindset" take capacities like intelligence and skill to be mostly fixed. They rarely try to change other people, but also do not work to change themselves, either.

The difference between the two mindsets is most evident in reaction to failure.

Fixed-mindset individuals hate failure, or even the hint of failure, because they feel that it is a referendum on their (supposedly fixed) abilities. Evidence that suggests they might have done something differently (and thus better) is perceived as failure, and so fixed-mindset people become defensive or evasive with criticism.

Growth-mindset individuals accept that they can learn over time, and so are much more likely to see failure as an opportunity for learning. They tend to respond to failure by asking questions, thinking through challenges, and trying again.

Development projects (or any projects where evolution and change are needed) **are more likely to involve feedback, learning, and change.** These are projects where a growth mindset is most needed, and also the sort of projects for which leaders say they want a team composed of individuals with a growth mindset. But, for that to happen, the organization must have a hiring process in place to find and attract those people, and a culture where they can learn and grow.

The leaders themselves also need to model the behavior they want to see—which can be difficult. Leaders are often called upon for answers, directions, and vision, and so assuming a mindset where one frequently admits there is room to learn and grow takes a lot of reflection and diligence.

ASK YOURSELF:

Which mindset best describes you?

Which best describes your teammates, employees, or direct reports?

Do you find that one is more common in your organization? (And if so, is it because you hire people with that mindset?)

Which mindset are you encouraging in your organization, either implicitly or explicitly?

How to Change Your Language to Encourage Growth Mindset

Speaking from a growth mindset focuses more on *process* and *progress* than on end-results (and failures).

Instead of... (FIXED MINDSET)	Practice saying... (GROWTH MINDSET)
You're really good at _____.	See what you can do with _____.
This is impossible (hard, difficult).	This is challenging.
Stick to what you know.	Feel free to try new things.
I/we can't _____.	I/we can't _____ yet.
That report/product/deliverable is really good.	It's clear you worked really hard on that report/product/deliverable.
You did this wrong.	Have you considered...
We have a problem.	We have an opportunity.
Do you know _____?	Can you learn _____?
What's wrong with it?	How could we have done this better?
This is what you asked for.	What are we still missing?
Is it finished?	How far along are we?
You don't seem to understand this.	You don't seem to understand this yet.
"It is what it is."	"We have a pretty good idea of how to do this better next time."

2

Leaders are human, and so have strengths and weaknesses that can be both a help and a hindrance. Nowhere do those strengths and weaknesses become more apparent than when an organization is trying to make a cultural change.

Multipliers *vs.* Diminishers

In the book Multipliers: *How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*, authors Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown argue that leaders tend to fall into two distinct categories: Multipliers and Diminishers.

+ ***Multipliers*** have a way of bringing out the best in people, enabling them to make smart decisions and step outside of their comfort zones while staying accountable and avoiding unproductive debate. Multipliers tend to attract talent and end up leading happier, more productive teams.

— ***Diminishers*** are the opposite. Most are self-centered or concerned only with "empire building." Their leadership style tends to trigger people's protective impulses and often encourage blame and reactionary thinking.

However, many diminishers are not so self-centered. They are actually quite well-meaning. These are called "accidental diminishers." While they mean well, they tend to derail or demoralize teams instead of inspiring them.

Accidental diminishers include:

the "OPTIMIST"

A leader who wants to encourage the team and make them believe that they can do anything...but the team wonders if this leader truly understands the struggle or possibility of failure.

the "RAPID RESPONDER"

A leader who keeps things moving fast and has a finger in every pot...but the organization moves slowly amid the torrent of work.

the "PACESETTER"

A leader who sets a fast pace or a high standard of work...but too often leaves their team members behind.

the "RESCUER"

A leader who swoops in to save the day, ensuring success and saving the team's reputation...but that leaves their team too dependent on them.

the "IDEAS PERSON"

A leader with many ideas and a desire to inspire their team...but who often leaves them bewildered, or chasing after the latest idea du jour.

the "ALWAYS ON"

A leader with infectious energy...but too often, they end up sucking all the energy out of others.

Which accidental diminisher might you be?
Who could tell you, honestly, which you are?

Avoiding Your Diminisher Tendencies

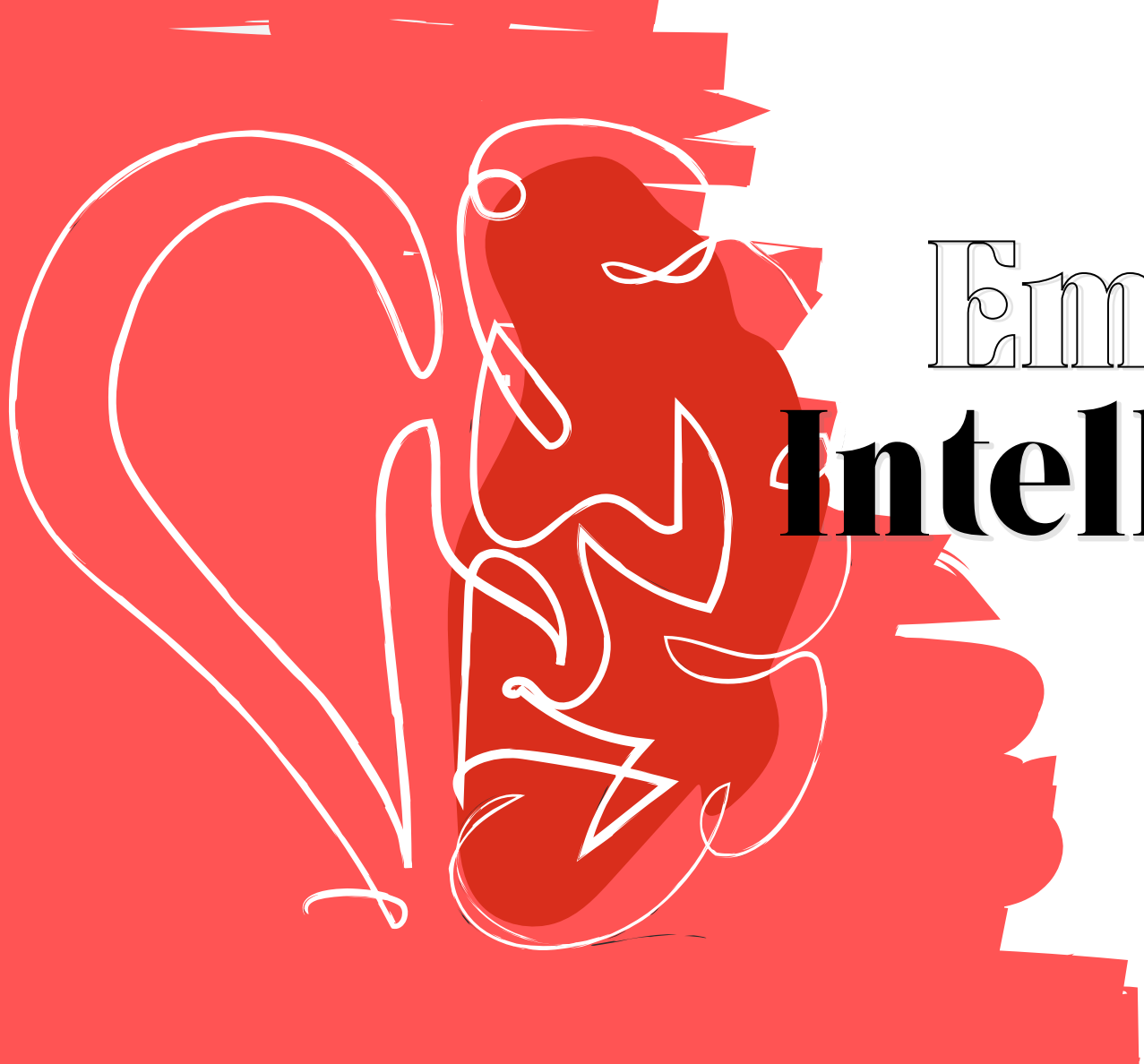
All of us have been a diminisher, of one type or another, at various points. Try these methods to avoid being an accidental diminisher:

- **Know thyself:** Be willing to identify your diminisher tendencies. For a fun way to start, try our "Which Problematic Leader Are You (Dealing With)" quiz.
- **Acknowledge the difficulty** of things, even as you share your optimism.
- **Wait a few hours,** or even a day, before responding to something when someone else can just as easily respond.
- **Be more transparent** about what you are doing (see section 11 of this book).
- **Slow down** so others can see your work and imitate your good example.
- When someone brings you a problem, ask: **"How do you think we should fix it?"**
- **Write down** (or record) your ideas. Prioritize which ones you will share and save the rest.
- **Watch how much you repeat** an idea. Instead, say something important and let others chime in as appropriate.

Why is this A DANGEROUS IDEA?

No one likes to admit that *they* are the problem. Indeed, problematic behavior often gets recast as behavior that is intended to be helpful.

As you go about finding diminishers, recognize that, unless handled carefully, you could discourage others. And if you do, don't hide behind the fact that you were just trying to help...



Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence informs not just your actions, but how your culture responds to pressure. And while it sounds intangible, emotional intelligence is defined by concrete, identifiable components. Each of these components is a skill in and of itself, which means that people can be trained to be better at them.

Social Skills. 

All good leaders needed to be respectful and communicative. Beyond that, how well you collaborate in a changing environment will show others just how important it is to do the same.

Self-Regulation. 

How you react as a leader to difficult situations sets the tone for others. Part of what it means to be a leader is showing others how to make decisions in a measured, controlled, and proactive way.

Motivation. 

How do you stay motivated when uncertainty is the norm? Strike a balance between the task in front of you while being aware of the big picture. In other words: Remember the long game and try to get folks to avoid being overly myopic.

Empathy. 

If there's one word that defines an empathetic person, it's this: Listening. Work on your active listening skills. The moment your team realizes they are being heard, the more they will see you as someone who respects and understands their feelings and emotional condition.

Self-Awareness. 

Leaders, you sit at the top of a food chain. What you do always rolls downhill and affects everyone below that decision. So, always ask yourself this before you speak or take any action: "How is what I'm about to do going to impact the people around me?"

Which of these skills seem the most important? The most learnable? Which ones do you need to work on? Who can help you to do that?

How to Start Increasing Your Emotional Intelligence Today

Ultimately, the best way to improve your emotional intelligence is to take "soft skills" training, especially for the skills listed above. Until you can make that happen, try out these things:

Learn your body's own signs. Most feelings are accompanied by subtle physical changes. For example, when you feel angry, how do you *know* you're feeling angry? Maybe you furrow your brow or clench your jaw. Maybe your eyes narrow, or your breath quickens. What about the pitch of your voice? Does it get higher? Lower?

A few times a day, for a few minutes each time, try to assess how you are feeling, and how that "reads" in your own body.

Read others' signs. Other people will have their own physical indicators of emotion as well. Look for them. What tells you that a team member is stressed? Annoyed? Proud? Eager?

As you try to read others, you might begin to notice that they do not always react, emotionally, the same way you would to a situation. When that happens, ask yourself: Why is that? From their point of view, what might be provoking the emotion?

Find three ways to compliment people throughout the day. If leaders set the tone in an organization, their praise not only brings positivity, but also highlights what should be noticed and appreciated. And while we would never recommend being emotionally manipulative, we do believe in helping others with their emotional self-regulation by creating a safe, positive atmosphere.

And though it shouldn't need saying, we'll say it: Be sure to make appropriate compliments. Praise work-related things at work and leave it at that.

Why is this A DANGEROUS IDEA?

In our culture, intelligence is tied to competence, while feelings fall in the category of "feel good." Think of how many TV and movie characters we respect because they are brilliant and capable despite an awful bedside manner.

Start talking about "EQ," and people might think you are fluffy. But then see what those same people say when you build happy, competent, emotionally mature, and capable teams.

VUCA

(Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity)

4

VUCA is an acronym that stands for *Volatility*, *Uncertainty*, *Complexity*, and *Ambiguity*. It was first used by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, two researchers at the University of Southern California, who discuss the key elements of the idea in their book *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*. It was later picked up by the U.S. Army War College and used in their curriculum to describe a post-cold-war multilateral world.

That said, the acronym is even more apt these days. One of the primary jobs of a leader is to understand these elements and shape the organization in such a way that it can survive, adapt, and thrive despite them—and possibly with them.

Volatility refers to the speed with which, and frequency at which, change happens. This can happen in an industry, a market, an organization, or even the world at large. For example, rapid fluctuations in supply chain, product prices, or competitors' responses are all examples of volatility.

Uncertainty refers to how much a situation or environment resists accurate prediction. It's not just failing to predict something because you lack knowledge or awareness; it's having a situation that could unfold in a number of ways, and there just isn't a clear algorithm for making a prediction with any sort of confidence. For example: If you received a wrapped present, you might not know what it is, but the situation is not uncertain, because there is *some one thing* in the box, and a reliable way to discover what that thing is: Open it. By contrast, the lottery is uncertain: There's no way to know what the winning numbers are before they are actually chosen.

Complexity refers to the degrees to which systems have many parts, and those parts often have a variety of relationships between them. (When *VUCA* was first conceived, there was not a distinction between complex and complicated—section 6.) While some complex systems are knowable and predictable, some are not. The interaction among the parts, and the system with its environment, make prediction and planning extremely difficult.

Ambiguity refers to how open a situation is to multiple different interpretations. We can easily understand how a word, phrase, or even an idea can be ambiguous. But situations can be ambiguous, too, when they can be "read" in many different ways, each way suggesting a different approach. For example, is a sudden decline in sales due to a seasonal dip, a passing trend, or a fundamental flaw in the latest release? Is a competitor lowering prices to beat out the market leader, or are they dumping an older model in anticipation of a new product?

Leaders need to know how to deal with situations that change rapidly and frequently (volatile), resist prediction (uncertain), have many moving parts (complex), and often admit multiple different interpretations (ambiguous).

? **To what degree does this describe your market? Your industry? Your daily workload? To what degree have you mastered these things?**

13 Dangerous Commandments for Thriving in a VUCA World

1. Accept and embrace change as a constant.
2. Better yet, say it out loud: "I will accept and embrace change as a constant."
3. Worry less about completing specific tasks, and more about expressing a vision and setting appropriate goals.
4. Work on preparedness—you can't put out fires unless you've taken a moment to fetch a bucket of water ahead of time.
5. Create systems with some "slack" so they absorb small changes without disruption.
6. Experiment.
7. Invest in intelligence whenever you can.
8. Use role playing and scenario planning to work out "what ifs."
9. Experiment some more. Move on from the experiments that didn't work out.
10. Invest in professional expertise to get the best handle on complexity.
11. Learn to discern those people who can thrive in VUCA environments, then recruit them.
12. Cross-train people on your teams.
13. Create a sense of "psychological safety" where others can try out ideas without judgment.

Why is this A DANGEROUS IDEA?

Identifying VUCA is not dangerous itself, but embracing the reality of it is. Human beings are biologically driven to hate and/or fear volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. It takes a lot for a leader to keep those emotions in check and embrace their reality. Not everyone will understand why.

5

Evolution

(of a Product)

Most of us think of products as finished pieces, ready to be used, sold, or traded. But products change over time. The car you are driving today looks and functions a little differently than the one your parents drove at your age, and both are different from the one your grandparents drove. The same is true of many products: Phones, ink pens, attic insulation, milk containers. Even the lowly paper clip went through an evolution. [1]

[1] For a fascinating tour of the different forms of paper clips over time, see **History of the Paper Clip**.

Two things are different about product evolution these days. (See, even the evolution of products, itself, evolves!) One, it happens much more rapidly than before. Two, it could happen to the very instantiation of a product the user is using.

A generation ago, if you wanted to have the latest product, you had to buy a newer version. But today, because of the ubiquity of software and the internet, a consumer might have any number of products—their mobile phone, their Facebook interface, even their home thermostat—update on-the-fly, without any additional purchase or without even knowing it is happening.

Indeed, modern software is a great example of a product that evolves on-the-fly, as it is being used. Take Facebook. In the movie *The Social Network*, Mark Zuckerberg (played by Jesse Eisenberg) explains that Facebook, like fashion, will never be "finished." Both are always evolving and changing into something new.

The process for creating (or rather, evolving) a product that evolves needs to be different. In the realm of software development, the best software is discovered over time through experimentation. This has some ramifications:

- One starts with an understanding of the problem the software must solve, but the solution is not fixed; it only becomes clear over time.
- New insights are gained through the course of development.
- One should not be locked into delivering against a set of specifications dictated at the start of the project.
- Software delivery failure is typically not a failure of execution. It's usually a failure to adapt to changing circumstances.

How do your products (events, outcomes, systems, whatever) evolve? How can your processes themselves change to help promote and guide that evolution, rather than put artificial boundaries on it?

Trying Out Your First Idea Evolution

Like products and processes, our ideas must evolve, too. This is especially true for leaders. If you have to deal with VUCA (as we discussed in section 4), you will need processes that let evolution occur.

So, as a first step: Take a raw idea and test it "in the marketplace." Gather feedback, and make changes from there. Some examples might look like this:

Bring an idea for a new product to a dozen of your best customers or clients. Get their feedback.

Take a look at your older products. Which have not changed in the past few years? Suggest to your teams that they change one. Get their feedback.

Think about the markets (demographic groups, audiences) you serve. What if you are missing an important chunk—what might they look like? What are you getting wrong about the ones you are not missing? Float these ideas by three trusted colleagues.

When the time for a new hire comes, **don't hire the *one.*** Hire three or four people on a trial and see which one handles the work best.

Ask: How do your products change (update, evolve) without your customers having to do anything? How can you automate evolution so that users are continually delighted?

Look at your organization's practices, both explicit and implicit. Choose one that everyone takes for granted. What would happen if that practice went away? Or changed radically? Get others to join you in this exercise. It's highly likely that you'll uncover powerful ways to evolve your organization's practices.

Complex *vs.* Complicated

The words “complex” and “complicated” are usually treated as synonyms, but there is an important difference.

Something that is *complicated* is not simple, but it is ultimately knowable.

Take an aircraft, for example. Most are marvels of engineering, with hundreds of thousands of precision-engineered parts. But, at the end of the day, the makers of aircraft know how to make one. And there are very specific processes in place to do so. Carry out those processes carefully and precisely, and you will end up with a functional aircraft every time. The process of making an aircraft is complicated, but not complex.

In contrast, something that is *complex* is never completely knowable, because there are too many interacting variables.

Take the same aircraft from above. How will it perform on a given flight? That's hard to know. Sure, we know how the aircraft is built. And the laws of aerodynamics are what they are. But there are many other variables at play during an actual flight. What will the weather be like? What's the wind speed? What is visibility like? Is the pilot experienced? Are there any defects that might affect performance? Is the aircraft carrying anything, or anyone? Not only do all these things have an effect on the flight, but they all interact with each other, many times in unpredictable ways.

When something is complicated, it can still be achieved through a well-defined process. But when something is complex, it needs a more empirical approach that incorporates inspection and adaptation.

Once you begin to understand this difference, you will begin to see it everywhere. Is the process by which a child becomes an educated adult complicated, or complex? Complex, obviously—which is why schools now go to great lengths to test children and devise flexible curriculums. What about buying a fast-food sandwich? These days, it's complicated: A lot goes into getting that pile of ingredients into your hands, but there are not many variables and the parts don't interact much (at least, not until it gets into your mouth).

Assembling an iPhone is complicated. Creating the first iPhone was complex.

Distributing a major motion picture is complicated. Producing a major motion picture is complex.

Take a look at your organization. What processes, policies, procedures, or products would be considered complicated? Which other ones sound a little more like they are complex? Are you leading your organization in such a way that it can deal with the complex?

Finding the Hidden Complexity

Chances are good that there is at least one thing in your organization, right now, that is complex. Sometimes that thing might manifest as chaotic and stressful—for example, that PR nightmare that must be dealt with. Other times, it might get shoe-horned into a process meant for things that are merely complicated—for example, that annual event your team has been planning for months.

TRY TO IDENTIFY that complex thing:

- What things (teams, systems) have a lot of "moving parts"?
- What things depend critically on input (or processes) from outside your organization?
- What do your team members do that's "mostly by feel"?
- What processes or events have a different outcome every time?
- What do you struggle laying out in an explicit step-by-step process?

AFTER YOU HAVE IDENTIFIED whatever that thing is, ask yourself:

- How can I make all the elements of that thing transparent?
- How can we see what's going on at each stage or step?
- How can I make it easier to respond at each stage or step?
- How can I remove roadblocks and "red tape" to changes made in the face of complexity?
- How do I give my team members (employees, etc.) more experience in dealing with these kinds of complex things?

7 What's Protected?

You can't read a book about danger without thinking hard about what gets protected.

We protect what we value, consciously or unconsciously. And when values are not aligned, that's when organizational problems emerge. In short, if you want to know what a person, a team, or even an organization as a whole really values, see what it protects.

What does that mean, exactly? In business we don't often think in terms of *protection*; we think in terms of things like *profit*, *value*, *return*, and so on. But everyone is also trying to do a job and preserve some part of the status quo.

Here are some examples of things people protect:

BUDGETS.

Team leaders and department heads often have to fight for budget dollars and are very much afraid of losing them quarter to quarter and year to year. Some will protect their budgets by spending cautiously, while others go on spending sprees to "use up" budget so that their line items are not cut next year.

TITLES AND REPORTING STRUCTURES.

Some people, having worked their way up the corporate hierarchy, are loath to implement any changes that might shift their position.

THE POWER TO ASSIGN WORK.

Some people don't necessarily want titles, but they want a large say in what gets done. They struggle when their roles change from someone who assigns work to someone who sits back and watches a product owner prioritize what gets done.

CLIENT ACCESS.

In some organizations and industries, client access is hoarded because it is seen as leverage. Who *really* gets to talk to the decision-makers?

PROJECTS.

Who decides what the next project or initiative is? Whoever decides that has a hand on the reins of the organization. Many people will protect that privilege.

JOB SECURITY.

When people fear they might not keep their current positions, they will avoid anything that might draw negative attention to themselves. Thus risky-but-profitable projects will be shunned, and feedback will be minimized so that no one gets "shown up."

Keep in mind that protection, by itself, is a good thing—noble, even. There are reasons to protect a process that works well, or a group of people that might be unfairly treated. Protecting something becomes a problem only when people react defensively and in a way that impedes further progress.

Here are some behaviors we've seen that point toward defensive protection:

- **Micromanaging** the work that teams do
- Insisting on **assigning work,** sometimes at the drop of a hat
- Coming up with **"special projects"**
- Sticking with **older workflows** or processes
- **Demanding justifications** for every little change
- **Blocking access:** To resources, clients, other teams, anything
- **Not seeking,** nor listening to, feedback
- **Delegating** any and all steps involved in change to someone else

What do you tend to protect? How? More importantly, why?
What do others in your organization try to protect?

How to Get at Your Organization's Real Core Values

You can better understand your organization's *real* values by taking a moment to reflect on what gets protected. Try filling in the blanks of this chart as inspiration as you reflect, or simply use it as inspiration:

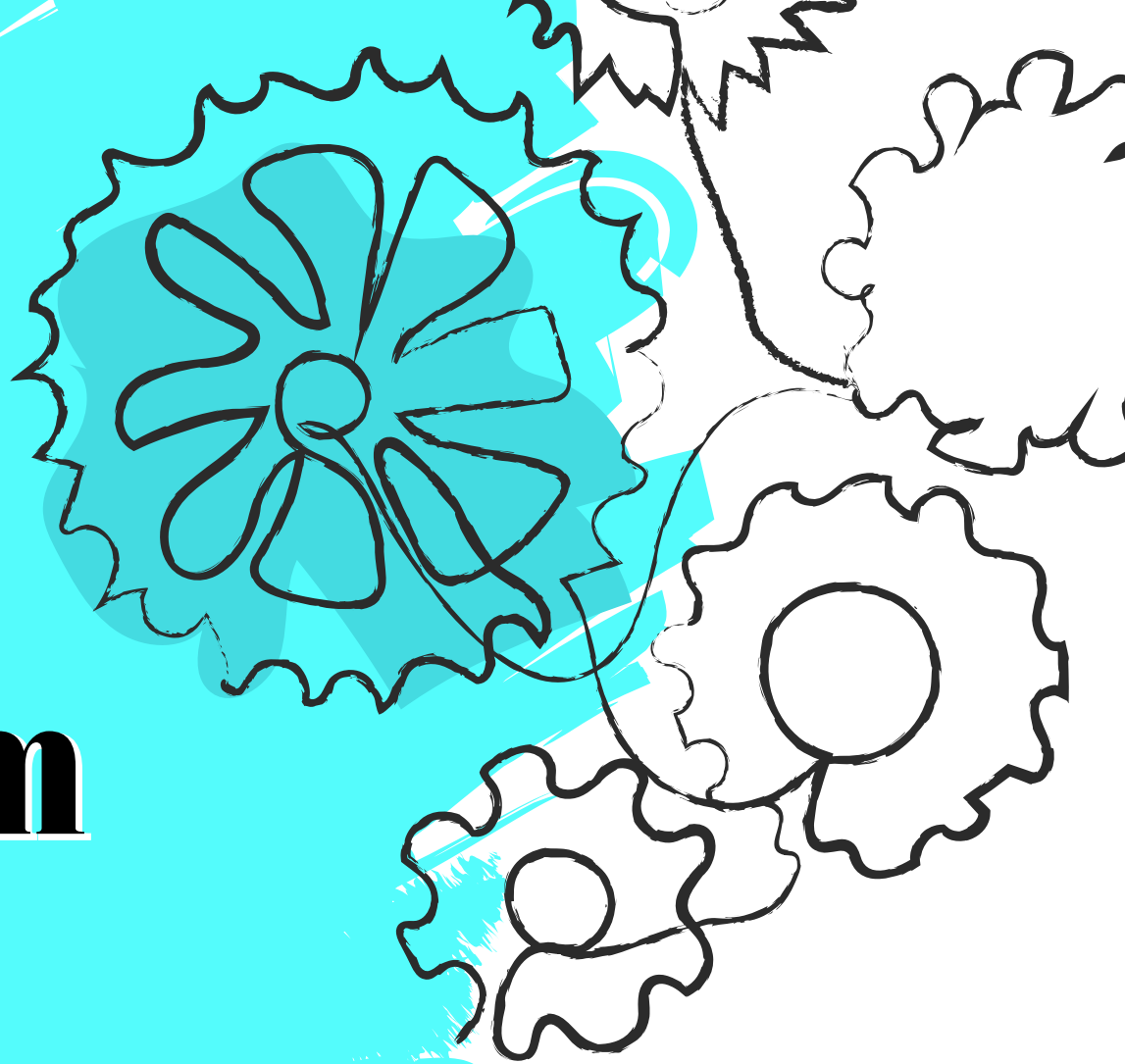
Who?	What do they protect?	How do you know?	Why are they protecting that/what can you do about it?
Your Supervisor			
HR Staff			
The Head of Your Organization			
The Last Person Who Criticized You			
	The budget		
	The client list		
	Their authority		
	Their position or job		
		They tend to micromanage	
		They are always criticizing	
		They resist new processes and new ways of thinking	
		They overdelegate	

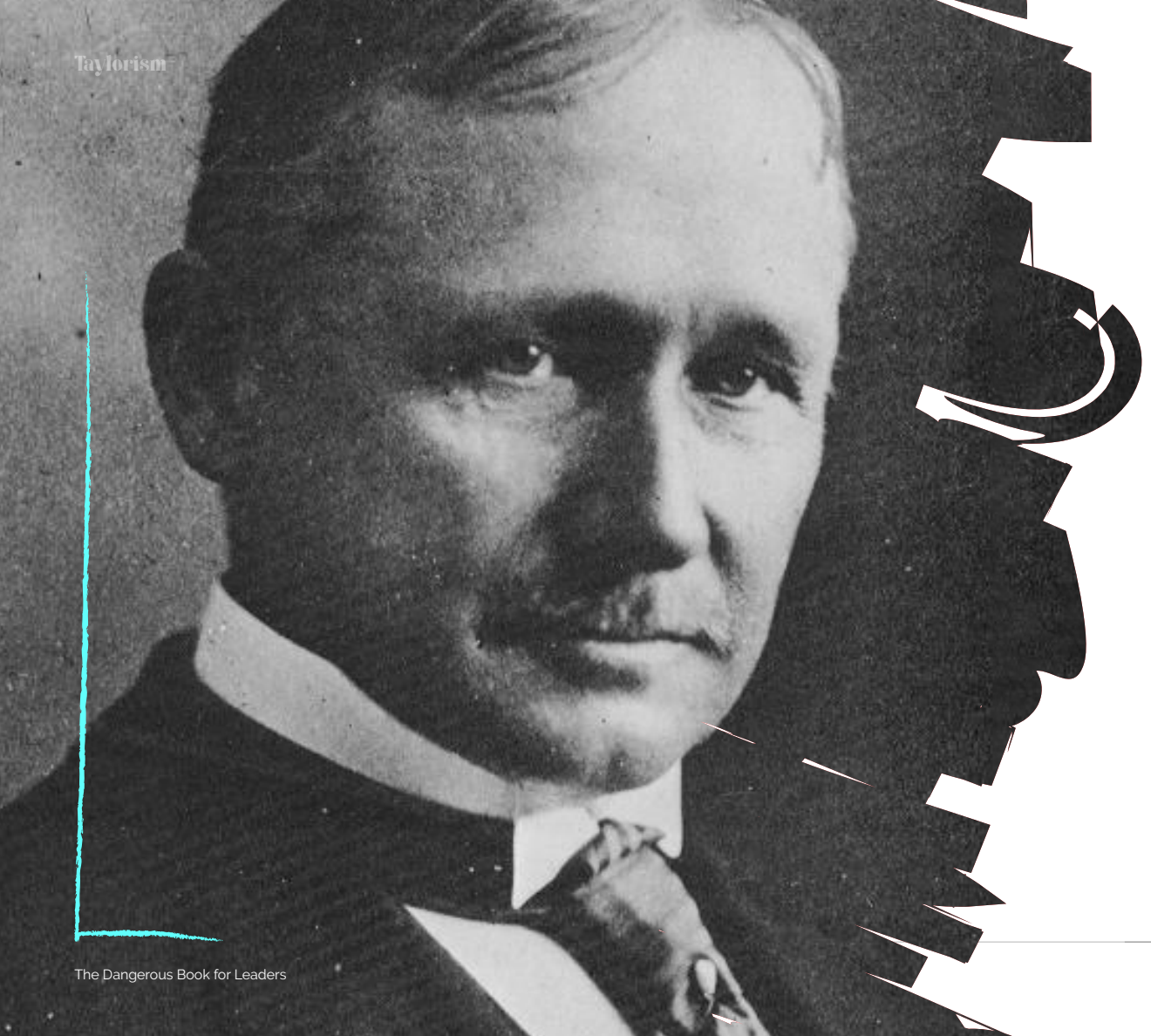
8

Taylorism

Leaders have been around for centuries, but most "leadership" methods are really management methods that are, by comparison, a relatively recent invention.

Specifically, modern management follows a movement once dubbed *Taylorism*, named after its inventor and first proponent, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915).





Taylor was a mechanical engineer who was obsessed with the idea of industrial efficiency. Over his career, Taylor formed ideas about how to improve efficiency in manufacturing, especially in the steel industry, using scientific principles. Taylor summed up his efficiency techniques in a book titled *The Principles of Scientific Management*, which made his approach widely popular in the 1910s and into the 1920s.

While managing laborers in factories, Taylor noticed that workers tended to work as slowly as they could get away with, meaning that neither people nor machines were reaching anything near their capacity. He thought that, if he could scientifically study workers, down to their very movements, he could uncover more efficient ways to work. Train workers on those methods and give them ample incentive (**read: money**) to work quickly, and efficiency would then skyrocket (or so the idea went).

What is most illuminating are the assumptions behind Taylor's work. For example, Taylor never argued, but simply assumed that:

- Workers care more about **staying employed** than about doing good, or fast, work.
- The singular best way to do a task can be found through **scientific studies,** not through practice by the workers themselves.
- For any task, there is a **singular best way** to do that task.
- Some of the most **important goals** for managers are efficiency and the elimination of waste.

Sound eerily familiar? Taylor's ideas, born of the late industrial revolution in the U.S., are what gave birth to modern management in its current form—and to management consulting.

Taylor's ideas stand in contrast to *craftsmanship*, which has been the norm for skilled work for most of human history. With craftsmanship, the idea is that quality items are best created by craftspeople who have the talent, experience, and motivation to do so. Think of a professional chef creating exquisite dishes, or a winemaker, or even a musical quartet. By contrast with Taylorism, craftsmanship holds that:

- Talented workers are already intrinsically motivated to do quality work.
- Though there are rules of thumb, there is no one best way to make an item, as there is infinite variety and evolving circumstances.
- The best way to inform the methods of the practice is simply to engage in the practice and then see what results.
- The important goal in any craft is to make high-quality, useful, delightful things.

What about your teams—are they managed in a way that resembles Taylorism? Or do they act as a group of craftsmen? Are leaders focused on efficiency and elimination of waste? Or do they strive to make high-quality, useful things?

How to Encourage Craftsmanship in Your Teams

1. **Encourage people to do good work for its own sake.** This will likely require a shift in culture and in the team's mode of operation, so try to be patient and supportive during this process.
2. **Build a culture around learning and mastery.** For example, institute a lunch meeting where team members can share best practices, as equals. Budget for more training. Start an internal book club or journal club. Arrange show-and-tell, and be creative as to what that actually looks like.
3. **Don't manage time, track progress.** Crafting can take time. It is not the most efficient process. Teach your team to be patient and keep the end goal in mind.
4. **Allow the team to be open to mistakes.** At worst, mistakes can be an opportunity for learning. At best, mistakes can lead to new, novel solutions...if you are prepared. Penicillin was a mistake that led to one of the most important advances in medicine of all time.
5. **Take pride in what you do.** When there is a success, celebrate it. Make sure that the time and effort your team puts in has a visible result. If they can somehow attach their name to it, even better.

Why is this A DANGEROUS IDEA?

While a discussion of Taylorism is a fun bit of history, managers and leaders will feel threatened if (when?) you start suggesting that their management techniques are from a bygone era (see **What's Protected? in section 7**). But there is always some mix of craft and Taylorism in any organization. Pick up on those things you are already doing that involves craftsmanship.

9

Self-organization **is simply the process whereby a structure or pattern appears in a system, without a central authority or external element imposing it through planning.**

Most groups of people, when left on their own, will self-organize. And even when groups are not left on their own—that is, when they are being led, managed, instructed, or corralled—they will still tend to self-organize some aspects of their group dynamics.

Stages of Team Self-Organization

Psychologist Bruce Tuckman came up with a catchy-sounding list of the stages of group self-organization in his 1965 paper, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups."

He describes those stages as:

1 Forming. The team meets and learns about the opportunities and challenges they are faced with, which then informs their shared goals. Members at this stage are just becoming oriented to the tasks that need to be done, and to each other.

2 Storming. The team starts to "sort itself out," with team members learning about each other and eventually gaining each others' trust. As team members start to feel more comfortable with each other, they will start to voice their own opinions or act a bit more naturally, and this can lead to friction and even outright conflict. Successful teams manage to minimize these "storms" or at least resolve them quickly and proceed to the next stage.

3 Norming. At this stage, teams have implicitly adopted norms of behavior and begin to enforce them (if needed). More importantly, team members have learned to tolerate each others' quirks. As conflicts are resolved, there is usually a sense of relief and newfound purpose here, and a spirit of cooperation emerges.

4 Performing. With team norms and roles established, the team members focus once again on achieving common goals. The team can make decisions on its own (for the most part). Dissent is allowed, within reasonable bounds, and channeled in appropriate ways.

? Every team goes through these stages, though how long each stage takes, and what that stage looks like, will vary from team to team. This process happens with or without an overarching authority figure. **ASK YOURSELF: How can your organization take advantage of this natural process? What stage is your team (or teams) currently experiencing? What norms are being established, and are they the team norms you want established?**

How to Lead (Serve) a Self-Organizing Team

If you have a team that organizes itself, how do you lead it?

Notice that, for many groups, this question does not even come up, because the management of the group is not touted as *leadership*, but rather as a kind of *service*. Think, for example, of the manager of a rock band. They do all the things that we expect a manager to do: Book work, set schedules, handle agreements, worry about logistics. They also know how to deliver news—both the good and the bad—in a way that keeps the band feeling safe and motivated. But there is no question that the band's manager *works for the band*, not the other way around.

So, to "lead" a successful self-organizing team, try these steps:

Change your vocabulary. Talk less about leading and managing. Instead, talk about arranging, coordinating, problem-solving, and most of all, *serving*.

Make your actions match that new vocabulary. A change in language can influence your behavior...but only if you let it. Let go of your tendency to manage tasks and instead focus on coordination and problem-solving.

Pay attention to team composition. Select the right people, then monitor their dynamics. Reorganize the team if needed to get the dynamics to come out right.

Invest in some training. Make sure team members have the desired skill set—both for the work they need to do, and for working well as a team.

Play a mentorship role. Or, if you need, find someone else to play that role for a time.

Look for, and remove, single points of failure. A point of failure can be a single person, a process, a policy, a piece of equipment, anything. It could even be yourself. Be both daring and humble when it comes to identifying points of failure, then remove them.

Why is this A DANGEROUS IDEA?

Too many people assume that, when you say "self-organized," what you are really saying is "hands off." And people fear what will happen when something organizes itself. It is the job of the leader to let others know what to expect when (and as) self-organization unfolds.

Solving vs. Framing

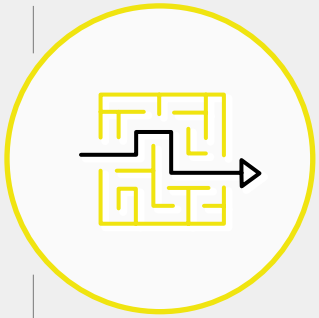
(and the XY Problem)

10

One of the most important jobs a leader has is to solve problems for teams, removing their barriers to being productive.

Trouble starts when leaders try to solve problems their teams themselves should be solving.

The best thing a leader can do for a team is to *frame* a problem in such a way that the team can solve it. When they do this, they get the most creativity and engagement from that team.

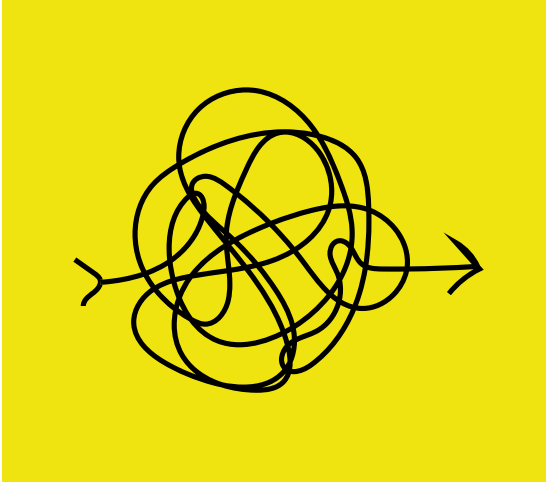


When a leader goes too far down the path of *solving* the problem, they end up handing the team a list of rote tasks to be performed. There is much less buy-in from the team, and thus much less engagement and virtually no creative problem-solving.

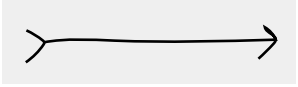
This might not be bad if the team is encountering a well-known problem with a set solution (i.e., something that is complicated, as discussed in section 6). But most problems are more elusive than that (they arise out of complexity). When most leaders get into problem-solving, they try to reduce those elusive problems into something less mysterious, something they have done dozens of times before. They think like industrialists, not designers. And then they wonder why their organization is not more innovative.

The other side of this is something known as "The XY Problem."

The XY Problem is our tendency to ask experts for a specific solution for a problem (Y), rather than describing the problem to be solved (X) and asking for their expert opinion. A seasoned expert, when asked for Y, will often ask the person why they want Y in order to head off this problem.



For example: A user asks the IT helpdesk how to perform a specific transformation of data from an important database. The IT professional spends a day-and-a-half figuring out how to do exactly what the user requested. After presenting the solution (and its workarounds), the IT professionals asks: "Why did you want to do these transformations, anyway?" The user then states it was to get some other piece of information…information that could readily be had using a single existing command in the database interface.



The user here simply did not understand that this command existed, or that it was the best way to get what was wanted. Because the IT professional did not ask about the end goal, she wasted a lot of time on a clunky solution that was inferior to another, simpler solution.

ASK YOURSELF:

Where have you gone too far in solving your teams' problems for them?

Are you asking them to help you do Y, when really you should be asking about X?

Warning Signs
That You're Solving Too Much

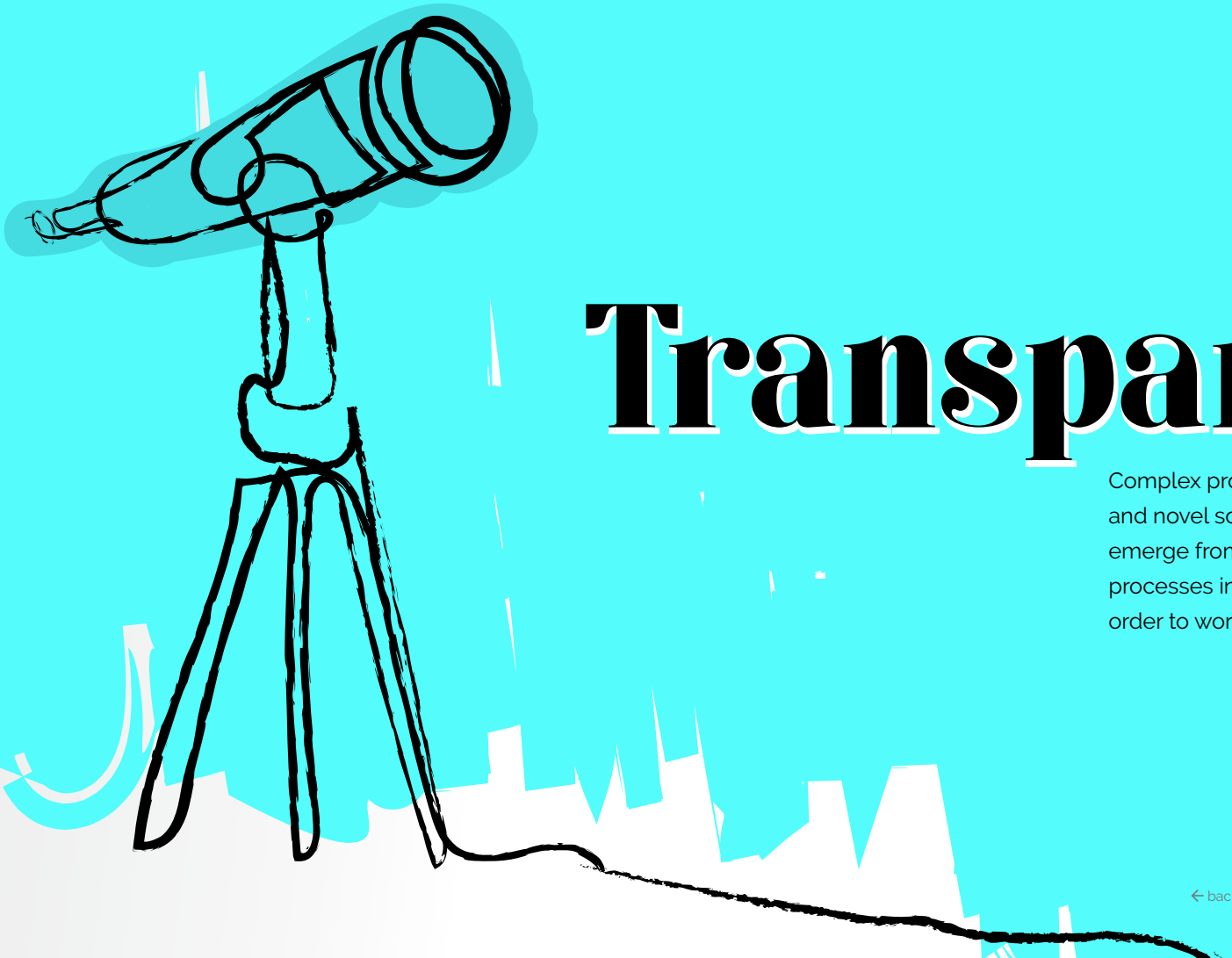
Review what you have asked of your teams over the past six months. Look at how you frame those requests. Specifically, look for language that starts in these ways:

- **Can we build (devise, write, etc.)...**
- **Do you think we can do...**
- **What would we need in order to...**
- **How long will it take to...**
- **We need to add (fix, test, etc.)...**

These are all phrases that (politely) request that a certain solution be considered. Thus, they are also signs that you are solving before you talk to your team, rather than allowing them to find the right way to frame the problem. Instead, try using some of this language:

- **How might we...**
- **What might be the way to...**
- **How would you solve ...**
- **How can we have both...and...**
- **Is there a way around...**

Try to catch yourself solving problems, and instead work on framing them. Then present them to your teams and watch what happens.



Transparency

Complex problems require novel solutions, and novel solutions are more likely to emerge from iterative processes. Those processes in turn require *transparency* in order to work appropriately.

11

Transparency is simply the posting or sharing of information (in a way that is easy to access and use, of course). This could be information about productivity, performance, revenues, sales, sourcing, pricing, competition, accounts, policies, business values—practically anything.

When information is not transparent, it is because a) that information is hidden or difficult to extract in its current form, and/or b) one or more people want it to remain that way. Keeping information hidden is, for example, one way in which people protect their perceived authority, status, or work habits. That makes the implementation of transparency something that is clearly dangerous.

But when information is transparent, it can be used for better guidance and decision-making.

Some examples of transparency:

A company becomes transparent about **what it pays its employees,** and is subsequently held accountable for its gender pay-gap. It then very visibly addresses that gap.

Another company **opens up its internal processes** to its vendors, who then make recommendations for better performance and closer partnership.

A not-for-profit board makes its **decision-making more open and public,** engendering more goodwill and bolstering its reputation even as it is held further accountable.

A struggling department tells its employees about its **rocky financial situation,** and the employees in turn get creative about ways to save money and fairly reduce salaries.

A development team adopts scrum and becomes transparent about **what is being worked on,** and by whom, at any time to anyone walking past the scrum board.

> Transparency goes hand-in-hand with accountability. That accountability leads to higher-quality goods and services, and more trust on behalf of users and stakeholders.

What processes tend to be hidden or obscure in your organization? What can you help bring to the light?

Seven Tactical Ways to Make Transparency Happen

1

Start a spreadsheet— Google Sheets works just fine—and make it public. Have someone write a script or build an automation to keep it updated.

2

Put a display in a (very) public area. Task someone with keeping it up-to-date.

3

Have IT **give your teams greater access** to resources with the pertinent data (read only, of course).

4

Work on **integrating your systems** with those of your vendors.

5

Work on **making data available** and easy-to-understand on your client-facing web pages.

6

Create a dashboard, and then give everyone the opportunity to view it.

7

Answer questions when asked directly.

Remember,

ideas only *seem* dangerous when they threaten the status quo. People get protective when they feel the status quo is threatened.

The job of a leader is not to manage teams of professionals. Those professionals already have a good sense for what they need to do. A good leader helps to remove obstacles, whether external or internal. Oftentimes that will mean challenging "the way things are done," i.e. the status quo.

This means that ideas like the ones in this book should be brought on gradually, and with thought. There's no need to sell radical change. Incremental and iterative are the name of the game.

So here is your challenge: Think about which ideas in this book most resonated with you. Pick three, and make a commitment to execute on the "how-to" section in the coming quarter. Record what happens!

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