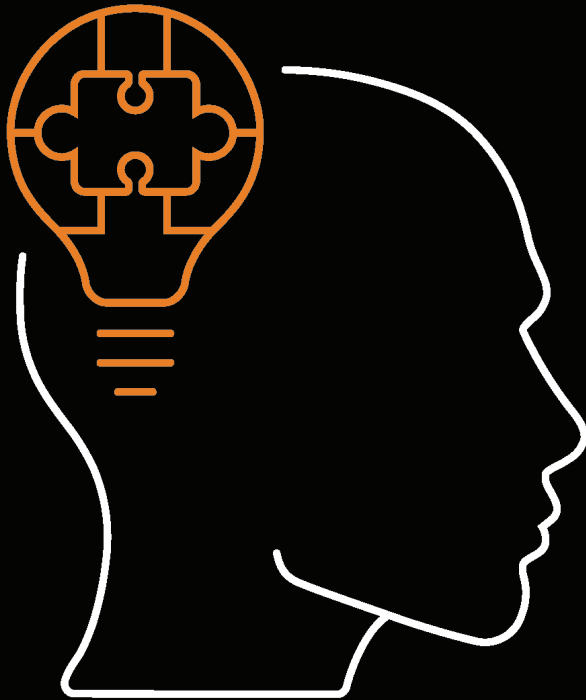


The Active Manager

Grow managers into
confident leaders



By Dr. Mike Ashby
and Ryan Castle

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT YOU

You're here because you want to grow as a manager. Maybe you've been leading for years or just stepped into the role. No matter where you are, you've got more to give. This book is about unlocking that potential and boosting your impact.

The fact that you're reading this tells us you're open to learning. That's a powerful start. Openness sets great managers apart—it's how you thrive and help others thrive too. Throughout these pages, we'll share practical tools and proven methods that make your job more effective and rewarding.

Growth doesn't end. The more you commit to the practices here, the more pride and influence you'll feel in your role. This book isn't just lessons—it's a guide proven by thousands who've transformed how they lead. Stick with it, and you'll see opportunities unfold and your career move forward.

ABOUT US

Since 2003, we've been helping managers achieve lasting change. Our approach isn't about theory - it's about doing. In 2018, we launched a program aimed solely at operational managers: The Active Manager Program (AMP). The focus? Contribution. Not just yours as a leader but lifting your whole team's game.

When managers work better, everyone benefits. Workplaces become more human, more fulfilling. This book will show you how to create that environment, using methods that have delivered real results across industries.

What you'll find in this book is the result of years of refining the tools and techniques that have already helped managers

in many different industries. The goal? To help you not only navigate the challenges of leadership but thrive in your role, with more control, clarity, and purpose.

While many leadership books and programs offer advice, what you'll get here is a practical, proven guide that has been tested and fine-tuned through real-world application. It's my pleasure to welcome you to your journey towards being a more active and effective leader.

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ACTIVE MANAGER OVERVIEW

ABOUT THE TOPICS

This book is adapted from the Active Manager Program, a leadership training course designed to make you a more effective manager through daily learning and reflection. You'll see references to the Active Manager Program as you read because this book is built on the same practical principles.

The program itself is a year-long structure of learning, practice, and coaching. It pairs you with your direct manager for follow-ups, creates a space for peer discussions to fuel social learning, and is supported by facilitators who guide you in applying new skills.

Here, we've distilled that into about 10% of the course content. It's a starting point for you to explore these concepts on your own. We want you to take control of your growth. This book is your tool to empower yourself as a manager.

CORE SKILLS YOU'LL COVER

These skills are layered intentionally to build upon each other, making sure you don't just learn but truly integrate the skills into your daily work. Real growth happens when you apply what you read.

Active vs. reactive management

Think about how you manage your day. Most managers don't realize how much time they spend putting out fires, reacting to one thing after another. This chapter will show you how adopting an Active Management approach can make you more effective with less effort, leaving you more time for what truly matters.

Manage your capacity

Time feels scarce, but it's not really about time - it's about capacity. We'll teach you how to reclaim up to 25% of your time by focusing on high-value activities you're currently overlooking. This change will reshape how you see your workday and give you tools to stay in control.

Working with your team

Managing people isn't simple; everyone comes with their own styles and needs. Here, you'll learn how to align your management style with your team's dynamics, creating better clarity and boosting their contributions. You'll become a leader who brings out the best in every team member.

Meeting magic

Meetings should move your team forward, not drain your energy. This chapter breaks down how to run efficient, purposeful meetings where decisions are clear, actions are defined, and everyone's time is valued.

Lift your game

Using the practices from this book will free up time to focus on what truly matters. This chapter is about sustaining high performance—not just when you're at your peak, but every single day.

Clear communication

It's not just about speaking—it's about ensuring your team feels heard. You'll learn how to communicate in a way that fosters understanding and engagement, improving team results.

Difficult conversations

No one looks forward to tough talks, but they're part of the job. We'll share techniques to help you approach these conversations confidently and turn them into productive discussions.

Smart delegation

Great managers don't try to do it all; they know how to manage talent effectively. This chapter covers smart delegation—empowering your team to take on more and freeing you to focus on high-impact tasks.

Coaching

Managing means coaching, too - motivating and enabling your team members to do more. This chapter will help you find and refine your coaching style so you can guide different individuals effectively.

Better decisions

Clarity breeds confidence – but not too much! Here, you'll develop decision-making and problem-solving skills that help you make better calls, faster. You'll also learn how to empower your team to do the same, easing the pressure on you to handle every issue.

Developing your people

The best managers don't just achieve goals; they nurture growth. Learn how to motivate and engage your team, reduce turnover, and keep your top talent inspired.

Managing stress

We live with pressure all the time, only the degree varies. Allowing that pressure to become stress is a choice. You'll learn where stress comes (and doesn't come) from, and simple de-stress techniques.

THE BOOK

Reading this book is just the start. To truly benefit, you need to move beyond reading and into active learning. Here are practical steps to make the most of your experience:

Take notes

As you go through each chapter, jot down notes in the margins or keep a journal for reflections. This activates different parts of your brain, reinforcing what you learn. Notes help make the content yours, connecting the concepts directly to your day-to-day work.

Revisit your notes

Don't just move on after finishing a chapter. Schedule time - weekly or bi-weekly- to go over your notes. You'll often spot new insights on a second read. This practice sharpens your understanding and shows where you can stretch your skills further.

Read it slowly, don't skim

This book is built to be clear and to the point. Each section is crafted to give you maximum impact. Skimming risks missing key takeaways. Read each chapter intentionally, absorbing and applying the ideas as you go.

A WEEKLY PLANNER

Planning isn't just helpful - it's essential for effective management. Using a weekly planner has kept me focused and prevented the chaos of an overloaded schedule. Here's how to make this tool work for you:

Start each week with a plan

Take 10 minutes every Monday to write out your plan for the week. This anchors your focus on the most important tasks and keeps you from being swept away by emails, meetings, and urgent to-dos.

Identify your three priorities

Choose the top three tasks for the week that align with your long-term goals and leadership growth. This keeps your attention on high-value work and helps you avoid busy work that doesn't move the needle.

Reflect on your progress

Active Management means practicing self-awareness. At the end of each week, pause and reflect. What did you achieve? What did you learn about your approach and your leadership? Where do you need to adjust? This habit speeds up your growth and helps you stay tuned into your strengths and areas for improvement.

GETTING VALUE FROM THE BOOK

To make sure you're making the most of this book, consider these simple strategies:

Pay attention!

Engage fully when reading, taking notes, or practicing the exercises. The more present you are, the more you'll absorb. Real growth comes when you apply what you learn to your situation.

Keep the book visible

Keep this book within reach - on your desk, by your phone, or wherever you'll see it. Often, great ideas don't get implemented simply because they're forgotten. Keeping it close keeps those ideas fresh and actionable.

ACTIVE VS REACTIVE

“The biggest benefit is that our people aren’t on autopilot anymore: they’re starting to think about what they’re doing, why they’re doing it, and how they’re doing it.” - Gary

Let’s start with a simple truth: if you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.

If you want to change your results, you have to change your approach. But why do we find it so difficult to adapt? A major reason is our tendency to stay busy without pausing to evaluate how we are actually functioning. If you have a nagging feeling that there’s a better way to manage, that you’re not reaching your full potential, or that work feels more reactive than proactive, you’re likely caught in a Reactive Mindset.

Developing an Active Mindset can shift your approach and help you work smarter. In this chapter, you’ll learn how to:

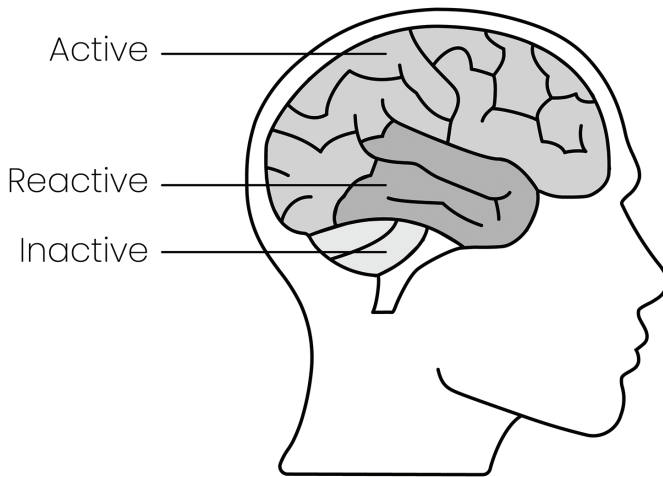
- Understand your current habits
- Activate an Active Mindset
- Use that mindset to improve your management

The focus is on making significant contributions. Your actions, driven by both conscious and unconscious thoughts, shape these contributions. To enhance your impact as a manager, you need to reframe your thinking.

THE MINDSETS

Many of us spend our days thinking about what’s next or revisiting what just happened. Mindfulness, however, is about being present. Active Management involves intentional focus on being a manager in the current moment. The alternative, Reactive Management, is when we function

on autopilot, relying on ingrained habits without conscious thought. A step further is Inactive Management, where we're physically present but mentally absent.



Your brain, which makes up only 2% of your body weight but consumes 20% of its energy, is wired for efficiency. It prefers familiar paths to save energy, defaulting to what's known and comfortable. While this is great for daily routines, it isn't as helpful for leadership roles. In essence, your conscious mind passes tasks to your subconscious, leading to Reactive or even Inactive Management.

IDENTIFY YOUR DEFAULT SETTING

In the next meeting you go to see if you can catch yourself:

- Thinking about the next meeting
- Going through your list of things to do today
- Trying to solve a problem unrelated to the meeting
- Wishing you were on Zoom so you could turn your video off and do something 'useful'
- Regretting (once again) that you chose not to prep for this meeting because, once again, it's taken you 15 minutes to work out what the meeting is about

and the casual brilliance you told yourself would compensate for your lack of prep is, once again, not.

In the next conversation you have with a team member, observe yourself:

- Have you already made a judgement about the person and what they're about to say?
- Do you recognize the problem and therefore the solution before they've finished?
- Do you prepare your answer while they're talking?
- Are you intent on making sure they understand that you're more important than them?
- Do you 'already know'?

This is the Reactive Mindset, running subconscious habits of thought that have operated for years, and it characterizes the vast majority of all manager-team interactions.

The key to Active Management is to apply an Active Mindset to everyday situations so that we interrupt our Reactive Mindset – the habit we've formed in the way we think, what we think about and what we know.

An Active Mindset means being present and open in the moment. It's simple, but hard. If it seems obvious and easy to you, perhaps you haven't dug deep enough.

In Active Manager language, it's your path to making a bigger contribution.

Breakthrough Moment: Reducing stress with an Active Mindset

David was promoted to technical lead because he seemed to have the capacity to manage multiple projects. Whatever was going on, he knew about it and if there was a problem, he was already on to it. His typical day involved reacting

to urgent issues—whether fixing software bugs or handling resource conflicts, he seemed to be in three places at once, keeping the plates spinning.

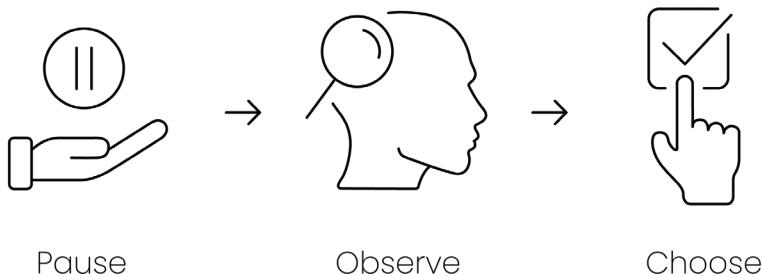
But his capacity to juggle wasn't infinite. The technical lead role doubled his workload and halved his resilience because now he had people issues to deal with as well. After learning to apply an Active Mindset, David paused each morning to reassess his to-do list. He started delegating smaller tasks to his team and reserved his energy for the high-priority work that only he could do. The result was less stress, a more empowered team, and more meaningful contributions to his projects.

ACTIVATING AN ACTIVE MINDSET

An Active Mindset is all about training your attention. It's about fully experiencing the present and using your conscious mind to pause, observe, and make thoughtful choices. This interruption of automatic reactions allows for better decisions.

To activate an Active Mindset:

1. Pause and don't react immediately.
2. Observe your thoughts and responses.
3. Choose how you will respond.



The choice you make is not that important. The really important thing is to understand how your reactions play out in your habitual behaviors. The better choice will pretty much take care of itself once you create a moment for reflection.

Here are examples from participants who applied the Active Mindset:

- Be mindful in the moment. Being present and giving 100% of my attention to my team in front of me rather than letting my mind wander.
- Watch as my mind wanders during conversations and meetings. Refocus and really learn to listen and not make judgements.
- Actively engage my mind when I am meeting staff, considering problems, or looking at solutions. Quite often I rely on what has worked before and don't always really challenge what the problem is, the people involved, or the solution.
- Listen with my eyes and not be already thinking of an answer while they are talking.
- Think more about my initial reaction and ask myself why.

Breakthrough Moment: Breaking the habit of bad meetings

James, a manager, often treated meetings as chores rather than opportunities to contribute meaningfully. He used to joke that there were only three certainties: death, taxes, and meetings. His mind was usually elsewhere - planning the next meeting or worrying about emails piling up. In one particularly hectic week, he realized he hadn't remembered the key points from a strategy session he'd attended and was expected to start applying.

Determined to change, James decided to fully engage in the next meeting. He asked insightful questions, offered

valuable input, and really listened. By being present, his team had more productive discussions, and decisions were made faster. This transformation not only improved James' contributions but his team felt more energized by the improved collaboration.

APPLICATION

Let's apply the concept of Active vs Reactive thinking. Practice this simple skill: every time you start a task, pause for five seconds and ask, "Is this something only I can do?" This question embodies the Active Mindset—pause, observe, and choose. If it's truly something only you can do, proceed. If not, delegate or schedule it for later training.

It's not that important what choice you make. The most important thing is to understand how your subconscious shows up in the things you do every day. Once you take some time to think about it, the better choice will pretty much take care of itself.

Discuss this practice with your manager for their input. Regularly reflect on your observations and jot them down for future review. Here's some observations on 'only do what only you can do' from people who've done the Active Manager Program:

- What's the value of leading vs doing? I'm uncomfortable with not doing.
- How do I demonstrate my effectiveness if I'm not doing?
- My sense of worth is tied up in a list of ticked boxes.
- I just need to get stuff done, the sooner the better. I don't have time to think.
- Stopping and thinking whether I need to be doing this or can someone else do it has enabled me to delegate better.

These reflections demonstrate the power of awareness and conscious choice. Pause, observe, choose.

American writer David Foster Wallace started a commencement speech by telling the story of two young fish swimming along. They cross paths with an older fish swimming the other way, who greets them and says, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ The two young fish swim on, and finally one of them turns to the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’

At the end of the speech Wallace says, ‘It is about simple awareness – awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: “This is water, this is water.”



Exercise

What happened when you asked yourself, “Is this something only I can do?” What did you observe in your reactions?

Breakthrough Moment: Delegating Decisions with Confidence

Joan, a department head, often found herself inundated with minor decisions—whether approving office supplies or troubleshooting scheduling conflicts. One day, when faced with a routine staff request, Joan paused and asked herself, “Is this something only I can do?” She realized that her team could handle it with some support. By delegating the task, Joan empowered her staff and freed up time for more strategic work. Over time, her team became more confident and Joan shifted from task-doer to leader.



PRACTICE

Every time you begin a task, ask yourself, “Is this something only I can do?” Reflect on your reactions and what you observed.

OUTCOMES

Let me give you some examples of the choices you can make once you’re aware of your reaction, in the words of people who’ve done the Active Manager Program:

“I’m being mindful in the moment. Being present and giving 100% of my attention to my team in front of me.”

“Catching my mind wandering during conversations and meetings. Refocusing and really learning to listen and not make judgements. Thinking more about my initial reaction and asking myself why.”

“I have a deeper awareness of myself, and I’m making better choices.”

“Listening with my eyes and not be already thinking of an answer while they are talking.”

FURTHER READING

David Foster Wallace, “Plain old untrendy troubles and emotions”. *The Guardian*.

MANAGE YOUR CAPACITY

“I’m really working on the quality of my hours rather than the quantity.” - Darren

We talk about capacity management rather than time management because time is only one part of doing our jobs well. Energy is key—many people put in hours but are worn out and unproductive.

Few of us feel we have enough time for everything. Time feels scarce, becoming an easy excuse for not doing important work. The reality? We all have the same hours—it’s how we use them that counts. “I didn’t have time” usually means “I didn’t make it a priority.” Lao Tzu once said, “To say I didn’t have time is to say I didn’t want to.”

Capacity laws

- Your to-do list will always outgrow your available time.
- Opportunities outnumber your resources, including time and energy.
- The urgent shouts louder than the important.
- We equate being busy with being valuable.

The better rule? *Do less to get more done.* Limiting work hours forces focus on essentials and helps avoid burnout.

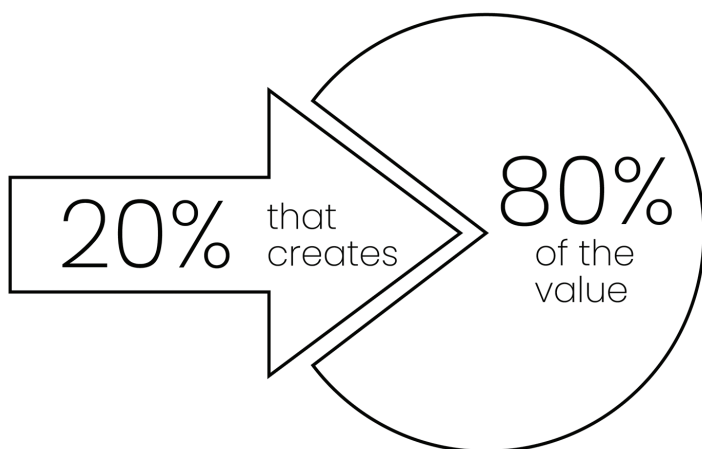
Results of managing capacity

- Greater efficiency with time and energy.
- More time for what’s important.
- Sustained energy for both work and home.
- A shift from feeling time-strapped to feeling in control.

LIMIT YOUR HOURS

Discuss this with your boss if needed. Some workplaces care about outputs, not hours. Start experimenting on your own if possible. In environments where hours matter, explain to your boss that this is about working smarter, not less.

When you're working to a deadline and the clock is ticking down, you tend to get really focused on the things that matter most to the project or task. You let go of stuff that doesn't make a big contribution so that you can focus on the big things. Limiting your hours is the same principle but applied every day. If you limit your hours, you will have to focus on the most important: the 20% that creates 80% of the value.



Don't be bureaucratic; sometimes, extra effort is needed. The goal is to make this a choice with an Active Mindset. People with a Reactive Mindset work late regularly, handling trivial tasks and missing the important ones, draining their energy.

Setting limits creates space for meaningful work. When faced with small, trivial requests, protect your time with the phrase, "I'd love to, but I can't." If saying no is tough, start with yourself - busy-ness is often self-driven, especially for perfectionists.

Treat your capacity like a valuable resource. In fact, treat it like you'd treat the last piece of paper on the toilet roll.

Leaving work at a set time, even with unfinished tasks, builds the discipline and strength of honoring commitments. This control is a major part of your growth as a manager.

Ensure what's left unfinished isn't critical. Identify critical tasks and carve out time to complete them.



Exercise

Set your start and finish time. Agree with your manager and stick to it.

Breakthrough Moment: Boundary Setting

Anoushka, a marketing director, was always the last person in the office, answering emails and tackling every small task that came her way. She realized that she was constantly burned out and struggling to find time for thinking ahead.

After coming across the techniques in this book, Anoushka decided to experiment by limiting her working hours. She set clear boundaries, arriving and leaving at specific times, and prioritized her most important work during her peak energy hours. She communicated her new approach to her team and manager, explaining that while she would still be available for urgent issues, her goal was to be more efficient during the day.

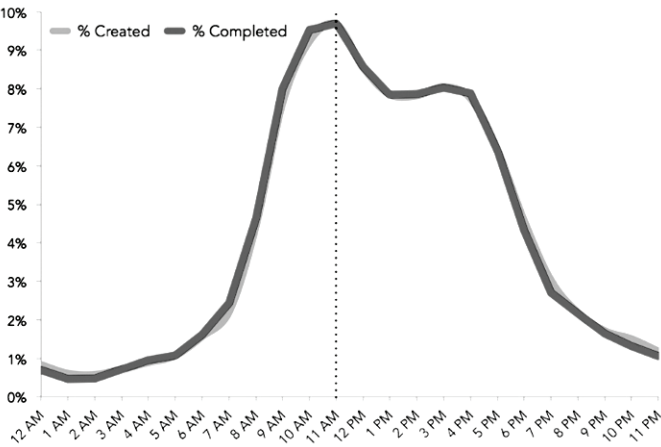
After a few weeks, she noticed that not only was she completing more valuable work, but her team was becoming more self-sufficient, and her stress levels decreased significantly.

OPEN YOUR PRODUCTIVITY WINDOW

Research from Redbooth shows that 11:00 am is the most productive time for task completion. Do your most important work during this peak.

At what time of day do people create and complete the most tasks?

Percentage of tasks created/completed by time of day



Based on two years of Redbooth data (10/2015 — 10/2017)



Save repetitive tasks for the afternoon, and cap deep work at four hours to avoid burnout.

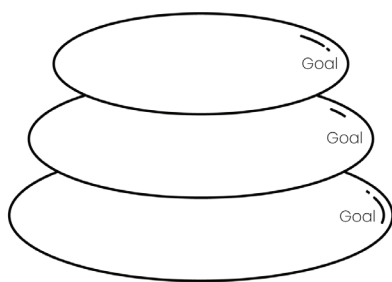


Exercise

Identify your most productive time of the day.

MEET WITH YOURSELF

Prioritize by having a “meeting” with yourself. Stephen Covey’s rocks and stones analogy fits: place big tasks (rocks) first, and smaller tasks (stones and sand) will fit around them. Fill your bucket with sand first, and you’ll have no room for rocks.



Achieve **[result]** by **[date]**
or Greatest Contribution

Hold weekly and daily planning meetings with yourself. These are your most valuable meetings.

Weekly meetings

- Write down your practice for reinforcement.
- Identify three “big rocks” for the week.
- Schedule deep work time.

Daily planning

- Review your weekly plan and note steps for each rock.
- Plan in the morning or the night before.
- Choose your highest-impact task for the day.
- Commit to completing it.



Exercise

Define and commit to your daily and weekly planning routines.

Breakthrough Moment: Best meeting of the day

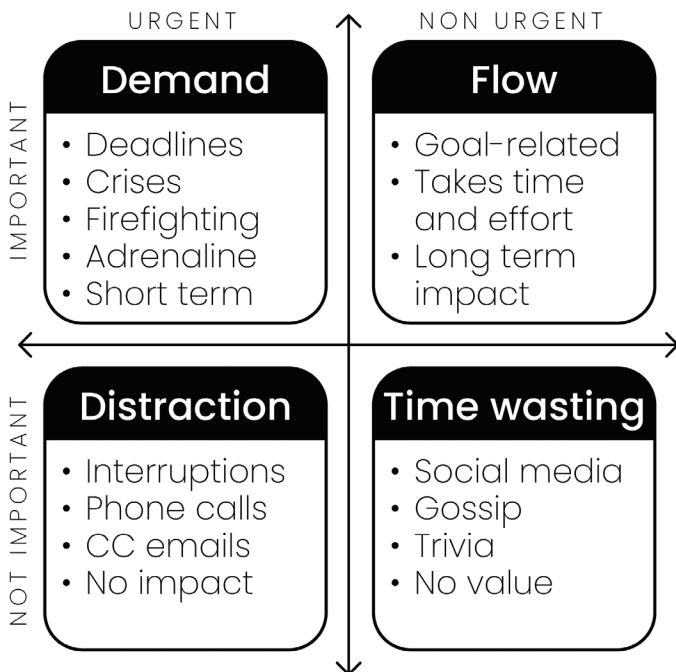
Pablo, a senior operations manager, constantly felt overwhelmed by the number of tasks he had to manage. He rarely paused to reflect on his priorities, which led him to spend most days responding to urgent issues rather than focusing on long-term goals.

After learning about the importance of self-meetings, Pablo began scheduling 30 minutes every morning to meet with himself. He used this time to review his “big rocks” and plan his day. Within a month, Pablo noticed a significant change: by setting aside this time to plan, he felt more in control of his workload, less reactive to unexpected demands, and more strategic in how he managed his team. His productivity improved, and his stress levels dropped.

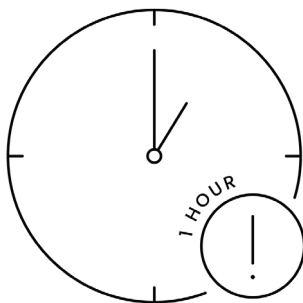
ACTIVE PLUS: SUPERCHARGING PRODUCTIVITY

This section is for people who’ve done all the above and are ready for a bigger challenge.

Sort your to-do list by “urgent” or “important” using the Eisenhower Matrix:



Schedule your *Hour of the Important*. This is time for valuable work that isn't urgent. Let your manager know and turn off distractions. This hour can transform your productivity, helping you prevent fires and keep priorities on track.



Exercise

Schedule your *Hour of the Important* daily.

Breakthrough Moment: Shift to the Eisenhower matrix

Sarah, a team leader, found that most of her day was spent reacting to urgent tasks. After learning about the Eisenhower Matrix, she decided to categorize her to-do list. She realized that many of the things she considered urgent weren't important. By dedicating time each day to the non-urgent but important work, Sarah found she was able to prevent fires rather than constantly putting them out. Her workload became more manageable, and her team started responding to issues with more autonomy.



PRACTICE

Choose one or more:

- Use the phrase, “I’d love to, but I can’t.”
- Commit to set work hours.
- Plan weekly: define your rocks and block deep work time.
- Plan daily: outline key contributions.
- Schedule your *Hour of the Important* daily.

OUTCOMES

Here are some real-life examples of things people who have finished this chapter said about how it helped them:

“Knowing my energy and time limits and adjusting tasks to fit those limits. Saying ‘I’d love to, but I can’t’ to extra tasks that impact my important list.”

“I’m using my daily and weekly planning to create balance in my life and committing to fixed working hours. I have more time and energy for my family and self-care.”

“I’ve created time to take a step back and assess the big goals both in terms of my life and career, but also the big goals at work.”

WORKING WITH YOUR TEAM

“Working with Your Team brings the team’s understanding of skills and weaknesses that each team member might have and helps them improve” - Danny

Working with your team has had a positive effect on a number of learners. One of the managers said now she understands her people better, she is consciously tailoring her communication style to her people and her people have started to take initiative and reach deadlines without needing her all the time. She is noticing less distractions and more capacity to step away from the tools and focus on her own important tasks.

This chapter might be a game-changer. Many managers have breakthroughs when they realize their blind spots, understand their working style, and learn how that fits (or doesn’t) with their role and team.

Ever felt like your words go unnoticed in meetings? Wondered why discussions get stuck or why some colleagues push your buttons? This chapter will help you navigate those challenges and improve team dynamics.

You’ll learn to:

- Work effectively with different types of people.
- Get stronger contributions from your team members.
- Enhance team collaboration.
- Understand how your style affects interactions.

THE FOUNDATION OF TEAMWORK

Forget about perfect compatibility—many successful teams aren’t “naturally” compatible. Instead, they leverage a diversity of perspectives and approaches. A strong team

has varied thinkers: big-picture visionaries, detail-focused analysts, people-centric diplomats, and driven doers. This variety is essential to avoid missing out on valuable ideas.

Diversity and team success

Diversity goes beyond gender, age, and ethnicity; it's about *diversity of thought*. Recognizing and engaging with the different work styles in your team can unlock hidden potential and foster a collaborative environment. Here's how to start:

- Identify your style and biases.
- Recognize your team members' styles.
- Adapt your approach to connect with them.

Without these steps, you're left managing in Reactive Mode, wondering why communication fails.

Breakthrough Moment: Team communication

Maria, a marketing manager, struggled with getting her team on the same page. Meetings often dragged on with little decision-making, and she felt like her team members weren't listening to her. Maria recognized that her team's diverse work styles were causing misalignment. By understanding each member's style and adjusting her approach, Maria was able to create a new meeting structure that accounted for everyone's strengths. Meetings were shorter, decisions were clearer, and the team worked more cohesively.

YOUR STYLE: KNOW YOURSELF

Think about your preferences in daily business settings:

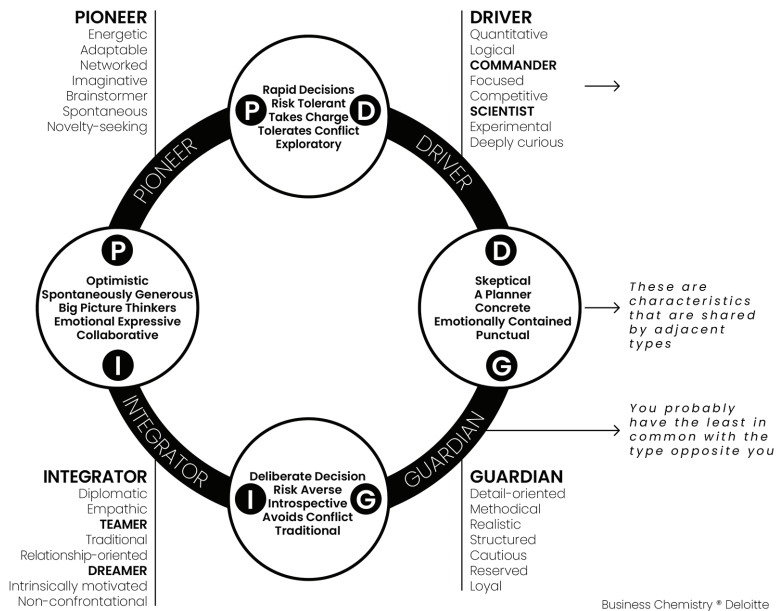
- In meetings, do you listen, ensure everyone is heard, push for decisions, or explore ideas?
- When making decisions, do you focus on details, trust your instincts, or take bold actions?

- How do you delegate—detailed instructions or general guidance?
- What part of your job excites you most (e.g., brainstorming new ideas, networking)?

Personality types and assessments are like maps: they represent the world, but they aren't the world itself. They tell us something about how we operate and how others operate, which can be useful for self-awareness. Of the hundreds of personality type frameworks out there, we've chosen Business Chemistry®. It's simple to recognize, easy to learn, and really useful – it fits our 80/20 philosophy and we use it a lot.

- **Pioneers:** Outgoing, big-picture thinkers, adaptable, and quick to act.
- **Drivers:** Results-focused, analytical, decisive, and competitive.
- **Integrators:** People-focused, seeking consensus and alignment.
- **Guardians:** Detail-oriented, valuing consistency and thorough analysis.

Most people lean into one primary style with elements of others. It's common to have a go-to style and an opposing style that feels unnatural. For example, a Driver might struggle to understand an Integrator, who prioritizes group cohesion over quick decisions.



Check the traits for each type so you can identify yourself. Here's what we've learned:

- People are usually strongly one type but they may lean into one or both of the types next to them on the wheel. The authors highlight on the wheel the characteristics that adjacent types share. We like the idea that it's a sliding scale rather than boxes
- You might identify with two or even three styles, but you'll probably find:
 - There's one that will be your go-to style most of the time
 - There's almost always a style that you are definitely not, and it's almost always on the opposite side of the wheel from your dominant style
- There are two kinds of Drivers. 'Scientists' value analysis, experiment and deduction, and 'Commanders' like to make decisions, get things done, compete and win

- Integrators also break into two types, ‘Teamers’ and ‘Dreamers’ – Teamers are more traditional and relationship-oriented, whereas the Dreamer is more internally motivated and non-confrontational



Exercise

Identify how you typically operate. What’s your biggest contribution (e.g., big-picture thinking, thorough analysis)? Reflect on a recent situation where your style influenced the outcome—how did it impact your team?

Breakthrough Moment: Navigating different communication styles

Ahmed makes rapid, confident decisions because he’s a Driver. However, his pace often rushed his team, especially his Integrator team members, who needed time to align and get everyone on board. Ahmed deliberately slowed down during critical discussions and encouraged his staff to contribute after realizing his Driver tendencies. Though it took longer, the team’s contributions improved his decisions and improved his relationships with colleagues.

RECOGNIZING OTHERS’ STYLES

Remember, this isn’t about boxing people in but understanding general preferences to improve communication. Here’s a quick guide:

- Strategic thinkers: Pioneers and Drivers.
- Operational thinkers: Integrators and Guardians.
- Focused: Drivers and Guardians.
- Comfortable with ambiguity: Pioneers and Integrators.

Understanding these dynamics can explain why certain meetings or collaborations feel stuck. For example, a Pioneer may clash with a Guardian over detailed planning, while an Integrator may struggle with a Driver's fast-paced decision-making.

I'm a Pioneer; I like shiny new things, big ideas, new possibilities. I'm very adaptable, work fast and love an audience. I'm a Driver as a second preference because I can make decisions reasonably easily, I'm comfortable with risks and like to win. Ryan is a strong Driver but he's good with new ideas as well. We make a great team, and it works even better since Ryan took over as the CEO and I took the lead on strategy.

Except that we're not really a team: we're a good partnership, but we can both be in too much of a hurry, which can put stress on our people. That can have an impact on quality (the first casualty of speed is quality). Our management team is rounded out with people who can take care of the detail and who are in tune with the people doing the work to bring our great ideas to life on time. That's a team.

So, which are you? We're all capable of all the styles at various times and as situations change. For example, I can coach people with empathy, but I actually work alone a lot, and don't like criticism, conflict or losing control. I'm a Pioneer, Driver and Integrator in that order. I can do detail, but it's usually when I have no choice. And Ryan always has to check my spreadsheets. And PowerPoints.

Here's my perspective:

Knowing that I'm a Pioneer, I realize that I'm at risk of being too high level or too abstract, and that I need to frame my contribution in a way that non-Pioneers can connect to. And even if I'm not able to do that, knowing that I'm a Pioneer helps me to remember to go into Active Mindset so I can pause and put my

communications in context – I often say ‘just thinking aloud here’ to help my team to know that sometimes I’m just exploring, so they don’t take my words and musings as firm decisions about our future. Finally, it helps me remember that detail is my blind spot.

To be honest, I don’t do it as much as I should. I still sit in my Pioneer and don’t reach out to the other styles as often as I could. But I do it more than I used to. And I’m still working on it.

Progress, not perfection.



Exercise

Think of a recent situation where a misunderstanding stemmed from style differences. How might recognizing these styles have changed the interaction?

Breakthrough Moment: Pioneers vs. Guardians

Li, a Pioneer, constantly felt frustrated with her Guardian colleague, Carlos, who always seemed to question her ideas. Li loved to jump into new projects, while Carlos wanted to carefully assess all the details first. After learning about the different styles, Li realized that Carlos’s caution was an asset. By valuing his approach and giving him the time to evaluate risks, their projects became more successful, with fewer errors and smoother implementation. Carlos, in turn, shifted from his view that Li was impetuous and impractical, and together they formed a stronger team.

WORKING TOGETHER: THE ACTIVE MANAGER'S APPROACH

Not everybody is like you.

I know that's obvious but we operate 90% of the time as if everyone else thinks the same way we do, or should do, or would do if we explained ourselves (that's the Reactive Mode).

Not only is different not wrong, different is actually really good and important. Each perspective adds value, and your job as a manager is to harness these perspectives:

- Be aware of your style and how others perceive it.
- Leverage individual strengths (e.g., have Integrators facilitate discussions, let Pioneers drive brainstorming, enlist Guardians for detailed planning, and assign Drivers to task execution).
- Adapt your language and methods to connect with team members of differing styles.
- Pull opposites closer by valuing their input, openly discussing differences, and asking for their perspectives.
- Pay close attention to introverts, especially Guardians or Dreamer Integrators – you have to create space for them by reining in Pioneers when they get too enthusiastic and inviting them to contribute from their perspective: 'How do you think this will go with the team?', 'What are the key risks we have to address?'



Exercise

Identify your opposite in the team and consider how you can work more closely with them.

Breakthrough Moment: Balancing speed and quality

Arjun, a Driver, and Fatima, an Integrator, were frequently at odds in their project management meetings. Arjun pushed for faster delivery and Fatima emphasized the need to ensure the team wasn't overwhelmed. After learning to value each other's styles, they struck a balance: Arjun set clear deadlines, and Fatima was able to implement check-ins to ensure the team's well-being and project quality. Together, they delivered projects on time without sacrificing team morale or quality.

ACTIVE PLUS: DEEPENING TEAM UNDERSTANDING

Introduce this concept to your team:

- Share the idea of diverse styles at a team meeting, making it clear that this isn't about labels but better collaboration.
- Encourage team members to complete a Business Chemistry assessment.
- Have an open discussion about team dynamics and individual styles, using personal examples.

Role play

Have team members switch roles to see how others think and respond. Ask a Guardian to put on Pioneer hat and vice versa. Explain that the purpose is just to observe how differently other people think and how you appear to others.

Two good things will happen because of this discussion. First, your team will work together more effectively because they understand and value each other more, and second, if you haven't already shared content from this book, it will take you on a little trip into your Discomfort Zone. Remember

your Active Mindset – pause, observe your reaction, make a choice.



PRACTICE

- Observe how styles play out in your team interactions.
- Seek out perspectives from those who are your opposite.

OUTCOMES

Here are the things that other people have gotten from this chapter:

“I’m better at empowering different views, playing to people’s strengths, and pairing opposites so that they can learn from each other’s strengths.”

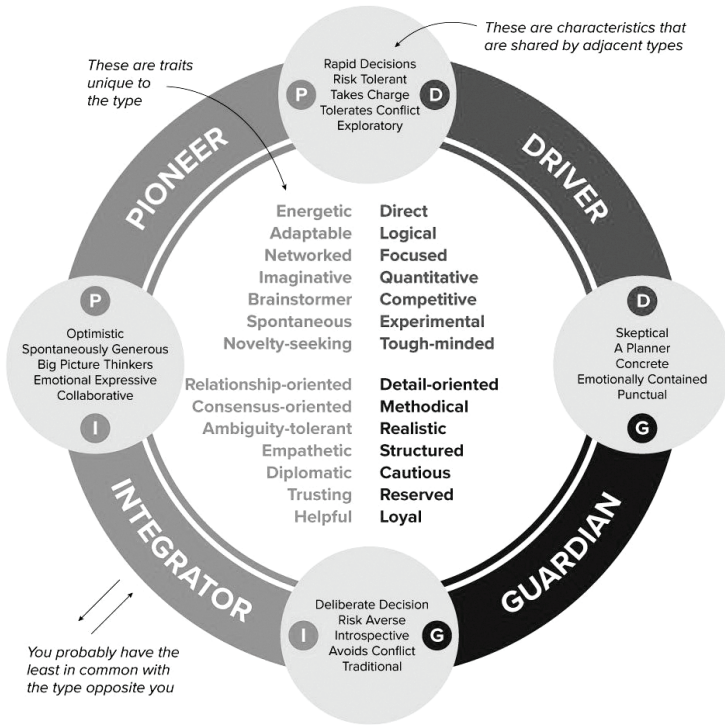
“Working as a team and being aware and respectful of other people’s styles and strengths to achieve our work goals.”

“Identifying my way of thinking and working, and reaching out to those who are opposite to me on the wheel. I’m way more comfortable not having all the answers by myself.”

FURTHER READING

This is the link to our version of the Business Chemistry assessment tool: <https://tbco.at/wwyt>

This is the Team Management Wheel from the book written from the article. The book is called *Business Chemistry* by K Christfort and S Vickberg (2018).



If your organization has done something like DiSC, then you can either use that instead of this framework, or you can map this to your DiSC profile. Broadly, Drivers would be a D, Pioneers an i, Integrators an S and Guardians a C. The big difference is that Business Chemistry® focuses on how people work rather than personalities or thinking types.

MEETING MAGIC

“Meeting Magic was revolutionary for the organization. When I first started the Active Manager program, I was spending between 22 to 25 hours a week in meetings. Now, it’s down to 12 to 14, so that’s saved me up to 10 hours a week.”
– Andrew

Meetings often have a bad reputation: a place where time and productivity are lost. Bartleby’s Law posits that 80% of meeting time for 80% of attendees is wasted, and with 73% admitting to multitasking and 90% daydreaming during meetings, this may be an understatement. Many meetings are unproductive due to underdeveloped chairing skills. Despite spending over a third of their time in meetings, 71% of senior managers find them ineffective because participants come unprepared, discussions drift, and topics often miss the mark.

Meetings should be tools for progress. Your job is to ensure they’re efficient and effective. Here’s how to:

- Waste less time.
- Get better results.
- Build your reputation as a manager worth working for.

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

Preparation is key

Most meetings happen without enough preparation, but investing a bit of time beforehand makes a huge difference. Always start by asking: *Do we need this meeting?* This question is particularly important for recurring meetings that may have outlived their original purpose.

Meet only when:

- You need a decision or input.
- You want to generate ideas.
- You need status updates or reports.
- You have important communication that isn't suitable for email.
- You're making plans.
- You want to build team connections (e.g., a staff meeting).

Who should attend

More attendees mean higher costs and longer meetings. Only invite those essential for the meeting's purpose. Decision-focused meetings should have no more than six to eight attendees, while larger groups can be involved for discussions.

Agendas

Agendas may seem boring but they're essential. They keep meetings on track. Collect agenda items beforehand and prioritize them. Start with the most significant item (the 'elephant in the room' item). Limit your agenda to five items for an hour-long meeting, and frame agenda points as questions to maintain focus (e.g., "*What are our priorities for this week?*").

Preparation for attendees

Distribute background material beforehand to give participants time to prepare. This is particularly helpful for introverts who appreciate time to think. Even drafts are useful to prompt input.

- ✓ Is it needed?
- ✓ What's it for?
- ✓ Who's required?
- ✓ What's the agenda?
- ✓ Share it



Exercise

Review each of your regular meetings. Identify the purpose and assess how well it is achieved. If outcomes fall short, consider what changes could improve them.

Breakthrough Moment: From time-wasters to productivity boosters

Carlos, a finance manager, dreaded his weekly team meetings. They seemed to drag on endlessly, with team members drifting into irrelevant discussions and decisions rarely being made. Carlos decided to overhaul his approach. He created focused agendas, prioritized key items, and kept meetings short. The results were immediate - meetings were 30 minutes shorter, decisions were made faster, and his team left with clear action steps. Team members even commented that they felt more productive and engaged after each meeting.

RUNNING YOUR MEETINGS

Chairing is a skill

Chairing meetings effectively can be learned. While we'll touch on dealing with derailers shortly, remember: **you're the facilitator, not the main voice.**



My insight on chairing:

I'm an experienced and skilled facilitator, but I have a weakness – actually two. The first is that I always believe there will be a 'ritual burning of the agenda' so I don't follow it as closely as I should (having said that, I also think I get away with it, but you're only allowed to do that when you're as old as me!).

My other failing is that I over-participate. I could argue that I do it with the intention of guiding the meeting, but it's also possible that I'm a loudmouth who would be a better chair if I let others talk more and followed the agenda.

Key roles for a chair:

- Get agreement on the agenda.
- Start discussions: introduce items or invite someone to lead.
- Identify the objective of each agenda item (e.g., decision, update).
- Keep the meeting on schedule or decide to defer items if needed.
- Summarize discussions to ensure clarity.
- Assign action items and let team members report back.



Mostly the chair's job is to shut up and let others talk, but it's also to guide the discussion. The Active Manager is listening to the conversation with one ear on the content and the other on how it lines up with the objective of the discussion, ready to either refer a conversation to another meeting or to bring the discussion back on track with a summary of where you've got to so far. At some stage you may have an intuition that more discussion isn't going to make any difference, so summarize the discussion and assign an action.



Exercise

List your meetings by objective (e.g., decision, update, planning). Draft an agenda for each type.

Reflect on the meetings you chair. How could you step back to let others contribute more?

Breakthrough Moment: Learning to step back as the chair

Kyle knew he tended to dominate the meetings he chaired, though he didn't put it that way. He preferred to think that his active participation was guiding the conversation, even though there didn't seem to be much enthusiasm from the team.

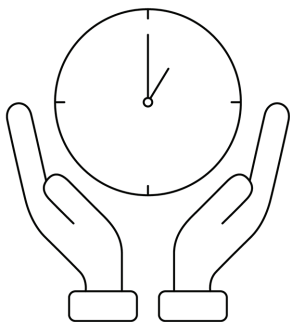
His manager didn't buy that for a minute. Jana told him he needed to stop talking to let others step forward. His job was to facilitate, not dominate. With that very clear guidance ringing in his ears, he consciously stepped back, allowing others to take the lead in discussions. Team members started contributing more, and Kyle noticed how much stronger the decisions were when the whole team's input was heard. Not only that, but people were also noticeably more engaged and the energy was much more positive.

RUNNING REMOTE MEETINGS

Online meetings are now standard but come with challenges. They're more exhausting due to the concentration needed and different energy use. Here are key strategies:

- Keep them short: Limit to two agenda items and involve only those necessary.
- Prepare offline: Share briefs or context ahead of time.
- Be clear: state what you want the meeting to achieve

- Start on time: keep the discussion on the question
- Maximize face time: Encourage cameras on and mics off to mimic real interaction.
- Keep screen share off when you're not using it.
- Speak to the camera. Set your camera at eye level. And speak to it as if it were an individual. It's a bit awkward but it has more effect



- ✓ Keep agenda short
- ✓ Distribute materials
- ✓ Clarify expectations
- ✓ Start on time



Exercise

Plan your next online meeting with a reduced agenda. Share context in advance to cut meeting time in half.

Breakthrough Moment: Making remote meetings more efficient

Mary, an HR manager, struggled with the endless Zoom meetings that had become the norm since the pandemic. She found them draining, with many discussions running over time. She decided to experiment with shorter, more focused online meetings. She distributed written updates beforehand and used the actual meeting time to address specific decisions or discussions. By keeping cameras on and focusing on face-to-face interactions, her meetings became more engaging and productive. Mary's team appreciated the change, and they found themselves more energized at

the end of each session. They also appreciated that online meetings tended to finish early.

DEALING WITH DERAILERS

Meetings kill brain cells because people behave in ways that the chair doesn't manage. Failure to deal with derailers means you're wasting precious time, and even more precious goodwill. It's your job as chair to deal with the derailers.

We're going to give you some techniques for rerailing the derailers, but there's a bigger point. These techniques only work if you can identify what's going on. And this means you have to go into Active Mindset and become aware of what's actually going on. Pay attention and be alert to the derailing patterns, and don't hesitate to use the re-railers. If you're not sure, use them anyway. You are much more likely to be late than early in observing the derailers and it's better to be overly strict than too slack.

Here are the derailers and some easy re-railer solutions:

Derailer: Re-railer Solution

Latecomers: Start on time; don't recap for late arrivals.

Dominators: Ask quieter members for input; speak to dominant participants privately if needed.

Topic changers: Redirect politely: "Hold that thought; we'll come back to it."

Repetition: Summarize their point to acknowledge and move on.

Running over time: "I'm conscious of time; let's move on."

Lack of clarity: Summarize and confirm what's agreed.

No momentum: Assign action items and review next time.

Pointless meetings: Stop holding them.



Exercise

Identify three derailers in your meetings. Plan how to handle them next time.

Breakthrough Moment: Reining in the dominators

Owen, a Driver, often noticed that a few loud voices dominated his meetings, while quieter team members like Min, a Guardian, rarely spoke up. Owen began directly inviting quieter team members to share their thoughts, balancing out the discussion. He set clear ground rules for no interruptions and asked dominating members to hold their thoughts. The result was a more balanced conversation, and Owen discovered that Min's thoughtful insights were some of the most valuable in the group.

ACTIVE PLUS: CONNECTION IN TEAM MEETINGS

Efficiency is essential, but don't forget that team meetings are also about connection. Gallup's Q12 survey highlights the importance of having friends at work, which boosts productivity and retention.

How to run effective team meetings

A well-run team meeting can contribute to more personal connection and a positive culture where people work well with others. Just be aware, this will only work if your style outside the meetings supports that aim. If you're a cold or transactional kind of manager the rest of the time, the team meeting won't create a well-connected team.

So how do we run a good team meeting? The purpose of a team meeting is to update and connect, not make decisions. It's important to let people know that, because they will get frustrated if they're expecting structure and decision. Some people might struggle with this because they don't want to waste time, so make sure it starts and finishes on time and is run effectively.

Start the meeting with an individual check-in. This might be reporting on progress towards a personal goal like training for a half marathon or maintaining a streak with yoga or language classes, or something else they're doing outside of work. This will change and evolve. At The Breakthrough our current topic is what we're proud of, pondering or pursuing. It can be light or serious – laughter and (very occasional) tears are equally valuable in helping people feel more connected and create a sense of belonging.

Sometimes people might talk about a book they've found interesting, or what's in the headlines. What matters is that people share something about themselves. Your job is to make sure everyone gets heard with respect, occasionally encourage people to share more and keep assessing whether the meeting is creating positive energy or it needs more spice.

Then have a review/preview, which is usually quicker than the personal check-in. We use the idea of 'biggest contribution last week and focus for this week,' which people define for themselves. You might put it in the context of your goals, but be careful with this: the value of inviting people to nominate their contribution is that they decide what their best looked like last week. The other benefit of this is that everyone at the table gets to hear what people are working on.



Exercise

If you don't have regular team meetings, start one.
If you do, add some of these techniques.

Breakthrough Moment: Creating Connection in Team Meetings

Li, a Pioneer, used to view team meetings as purely functional - meant to discuss tasks and make decisions. However, after learning the value of creating connection in meetings, Li

introduced a weekly check-in where team members shared personal updates or achievements.

Raj, typically quiet in these meetings, started talking about his marathon training. Soon, others were sharing their personal goals, and the energy in the room soared as the team bonded in a way Li hadn't expected. Li then adopted the practice of starting each team meeting with a personal piece, and it never failed to lift the energy. The unexpected benefit was that the team were more upbeat when they approached the strategic portion of the meeting, translating into a more cohesive and motivated team that worked better together.



PRACTICE

- Before each meeting, remind yourself:
“Chairing is a skill, and today I’m going to focus on enabling everyone to contribute.”
- Use a re-railer technique that challenges you the most.

OUTCOMES

Here are some things people have said about what they found most useful after using the skills and practices for Meeting Magic:

“Keeping meetings more engaging, short and direct, enabling everyone to contribute, and asking them to contribute if they’re being quiet.”

“My department got rid of a bunch of unnecessary meetings, and they rarely go over time or off-topic.”

“Agenda creation, sharing those materials, starting on time, and coming prepared to one-on-ones for effectiveness and overall efficiency.”

LIFT YOUR GAME

***“Active Management has enabled me to overcome my challenges. Practices like OUT empowered me to face each moment bravely, one step at a time.”
– Katerina***

You know the feeling: it's the end of the day and you've been busy, but struggle to pinpoint what you've actually accomplished. Or it's the end of the month and you realize you haven't made any real progress on the big project everyone agrees is critical. It's not about a lack of ideas; it's about a lack of action.

Everyone deals with this challenge. The authors of *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* describe life in the whirlwind, where:

- Urgent demands take precedence.
- Core activities consume most of your time.
- The focus is on keeping operations running smoothly.

This sounds like Reactive Management. Adopting Active Management practices from this chapter will help you:

- Initiate, drive, and complete new initiatives.
- Break unproductive habits.
- Propel your team and the business forward.

Active and Reactive modes are both necessary. You can't—and shouldn't—always be in Active mode. Daily tasks need attention. However, if you operate in Reactive mode 100% of the time, you risk stagnation. But spending even 20% of your time in Active mode can yield tremendous benefits for your business, career, and personal satisfaction.

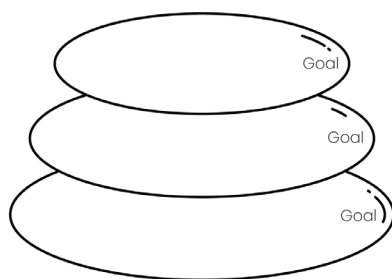
This chapter is about improving the quality of your contribution and taking yourself seriously as a manager.

The most successful managers are proactive: they create opportunities and act on them before they become urgent. They do this by taking control of their time and creating space for what matters most.

GET CLEAR

Clarify your goals. High-quality contributions come from high-quality goals, not a high quantity of tasks. Making significant contributions isn't about checking off more items on a to-do list; it's about tackling the big, impactful projects.

Revisit the “three big rocks” concept from *Manage Your Capacity*. Identify your three main priorities, then move forward with clarity to be more effective with your time.



Achieve **[result]** by **[date]**
or Greatest Contribution

It's not the little tasks (sand) that consume the most time, but the medium-sized ones (stones) that can drain your energy if you're not careful. Without clarity on the scope of these tasks, you may drift into aimless activity, driven by a Reactive Mindset. This leads to stress and a sense of overload.

Here's Ryan's strategy for overcoming overwhelm:

'First I get it all out of my head and on to a list, starting with thinking about my three big rocks: the most important and/or urgent contributions I need to make. Some people make goal setting very complicated, but

as someone who has had to be very disciplined about my three rocks, I keep it simple: ‘this by then.’ Every time I’ve done this, I’ve realized that the list is not as long or as difficult as I thought. (It can be very noisy inside our heads).

Then I do an Active Mindset triage on the stones. For each one I ask ‘What does fit for purpose look like here?’ Fit for purpose is the only right answer to the question ‘How good does this have to be?’

This process stops the pinball machine in our minds, and it gives us clarity about how to make best use of our time, which calms us down. Quite often, the solution is a lot simpler than we’d imagined, especially if we can adopt the 80/20 principle – 80% of the value comes from 20% of the effort.



Exercise

Ask the quality question: What does ‘fit for purpose’ look like for your tasks?

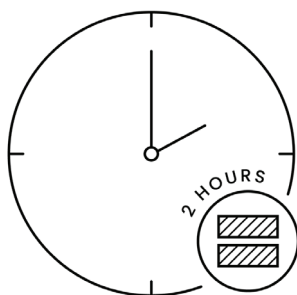
Breakthrough Moment: From busy to productive

Aisha, a sales manager, constantly found herself at the end of each day wondering where all her time had gone. Her days were packed with unnecessary meetings, distractions, urgent emails, and quick tasks that demanded her attention, but weren’t part of her big projects. By 6 PM, she felt exhausted and busy, yet when she reflected on her achievements, it was only “bits and pieces”, with little or no meaningful progress on the new market entry strategy her team had been discussing for weeks. It seemed like each day was just a cycle of putting out fires. The frustration grew even more when she realized that despite her long hours, the big goal was falling behind time.

Aisha adopted an Active Mindset approach. She identified her three big rocks - key priorities that would drive the most value for her team. She set clear goals around each rock, and blocked out time for them. Every morning, she reviewed these goals and adjusted her plan for the day, being ruthless about not spending her valuable time on less critical tasks. Before long, Aisha saw a transformation: she made steady progress on her big projects, felt less overwhelmed by the daily grind, and ended each day with a sense of genuine progress. Her team noticed the change too, as she was more focused, engaged, and able to provide better guidance.

TIME ON

Amid the daily hustle, how do you make space for growth? The answer lies in a practice many in the Active Manager Program describe as challenging but invaluable: dedicating two hours a week for future-focused work, known as *Time On*. This time should be treated as a commitment to yourself.



Setting aside this time allows you to focus your energy on achieving long-term goals. Without it, your schedule will be consumed by the urgent and immediate. You might find it helpful to structure an agenda for their *Time On* sessions.

Managers often worry their boss won't support this. However, in most cases, managers are delighted to see employees prioritize growth. It's essential to approach *Time On* without

guilt—valuing quality over activity requires an Active Mindset and deliberate choices.

The biggest value you bring to the business is between your ears, not at the end of your arms. Get over yourself, upgrade your version of yourself and your role. Stop depriving the business of your best thinking.



Exercise

Schedule your *Time On*—decide when and where it will happen each week.

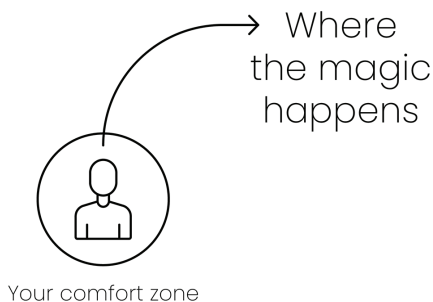
Breakthrough Moment: Embracing time on

Javier, a customer service manager, constantly felt buried under the weight of daily demands. His day would start with a flood of emails and urgent issues - customer complaints, team questions, and unexpected fires that needed putting out. At the end of each week, he'd have everything done, but the idea of setting aside two hours a week for “Time On” seemed almost laughable—how could he possibly afford to take time away from the whirlwind of day-to-day operations?

To his surprise, his manager understood the importance of Time On and was enthusiastic about the idea. Javier scheduled his Time On sessions for Thursday mornings, blocked them on his calendar, and set up a quiet space to avoid interruptions. At first, it felt strange to be away from the daily hustle, and he worried about missing something urgent. But within a few weeks, Javier began to see the value. He used the time to research a new training program for his team, identify process improvements, and properly think about his own career development. Soon, Javier found that the two hours he committed to Time On were not only his most productive hours but also the most rewarding.

GET OUT

If you're serious about growth, adopt the OUT practice: do *One Uncomfortable Thing* daily.



Reflect on recent situations where you avoided discomfort. Perhaps you sidestepped a challenging conversation or let a behavior slide to avoid confrontation. Ask yourself why. Often, it's easier to stay comfortable, but that limits growth.

At one end of the spectrum of 'uncomfortable' is the simple discomfort of feeling a bit awkward or unfamiliar. For a quick example, cross your arms. Now reverse your arms. It feels a little weird. At the other end, speaking in public is excruciating for lots of people. Right this minute you may be feeling a physical tightening and constriction at the very thought of it.

In between those extremes it's drawing a line with a team member or doing things that aren't fun like performance management issues. It's challenging yourself about how to do something better even though it's hard or risky – that moment of 'this might not work.' It's asking your manager for feedback about areas you could work on to improve as a manager.

Courage isn't the absence of fear; it's feeling fear and acting anyway. A line from *We Bought a Zoo* captures this well: "*Sometimes all we need is 20 seconds of insane courage.*" As Ed Hillary said, it's not the mountain that we conquer

but ourselves. Your OUT practice builds your character and effectiveness.

We love this quote from Troy: ‘One of the big things that stuck with me, and I still talk about it with my wife all the time, is doing one thing every day that makes you uncomfortable. I force myself to do that every day. And when I’ve done it, I realize it’s actually not even uncomfortable. It’s all in my head.’

Breakthrough Moment: Building confidence through discomfort

Katerina, a newly promoted team leader, avoided difficult conversations with her team members. She would awkwardly avoid moments where she could have addressed a performance issue or given direct feedback, convincing herself that it wasn’t the right time. The truth was, Katerina dreaded the discomfort of confrontation, preferring to keep the peace even if it meant letting issues slide. It felt easier, but she could see that the real cost was her team’s growth. Her confidence dwindled as she watched small problems snowball into bigger challenges.

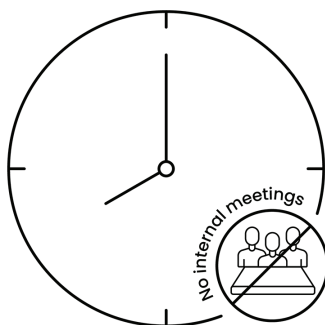
After learning about the OUT practice, Katerina decided to push herself out of her comfort zone. She started small: she struck up a conversation with someone she didn’t know very well. It turned into a moment of connection she didn’t expect. Next, she asked for feedback on her leadership style from a trusted colleague. Each time, she felt a sense of accomplishment that bolstered her self-esteem. Soon, Katerina worked up to having a tough conversation she’d been avoiding, and to her delight, the conversation went surprisingly smoothly.

Over time, these small acts of courage transformed how Katerina approached her work and her team. Instead of fearing mistakes, she embraced challenges, seeing them as

opportunities to build her confidence and improve her skills. Tackling discomfort made her feel stronger mentally and emotionally, and her team thrived under her more direct and thoughtful leadership.

IMPLEMENT A MFD (MEETING-FREE DAY)

Consider how to create an environment where you and your team can focus. You might have heard of Alcohol Free Days (AFDs). Their equivalent at work is MFDs – Meeting Free Days.



In our business Friday is our MFD: we don't schedule any internal meetings on Fridays. The whole day is clear for business development activities like networking, research, outside meetings, training, learning. Some of us use them for productivity bursts: getting through big chunks of work, projects, reports, process and product development – anything that requires head space and concentration. Not all organizations can implement an entire day without meetings. If so, agree on a meeting-free block of three hours. Use this time for *Time On* or deep, focused work.

Here's what people have said about lifting their game:

- I'm actively looking for (and better at) handling uncomfortable situations and thoughts by pushing myself to deal with them
- I'm focusing on the business rather than being stuck in business by planning a 'time on' every week
- Working on my career vision, more time for future thoughts and planning where I see myself in 3 years
- Getting out of my comfort zone more
- Continue making improvements on how I conduct myself, both in and out of the business



Exercise

Talk with your team about setting an MFD and commit to it.

Breakthrough Moment: Embracing meeting-free days

Dwayne, a product development manager, often found himself frustrated by how little uninterrupted time he had to focus on critical projects. His days were filled with back-to-back meetings, leaving only small pockets of time to work on strategic planning and product innovation. His team felt the same way. They would start a project, only to be pulled away by yet another internal meeting.

Dwayne proposed the idea to his team: no internal meetings on Wednesdays. After a few weeks of trial, the results spoke for themselves.

His team approached Wednesdays with a sense of excitement and focus. Without the constant pings of meeting reminders, they used the time for "deep work" on projects that had been dragging. Dwayne himself dedicated part of each Wednesday to his Time On sessions, using it to plan

future product strategies and connect with industry research. The change not only improved productivity but also boosted the team's morale.

ACTIVE PLUS: DEVELOPING YOUR CAREER

If you've mastered these exercises, take it further. Use part of your *Time On* to envision your career in the next three years. A clear vision energizes and sets an agenda for growth. Start acting like the manager you want to become, as this will guide your behavior today.

Be today what you would become tomorrow. Think and act as if you're already a great manager, because acting the part changes how you feel inside. Get your head into the future so that your hands and your feet may follow. Take your career seriously – and watch how others respond.

Each month, use 20 minutes of *Time On* to reflect: How did you progress? When were you Active? Reactive? Miss any opportunities? This ongoing self-assessment keeps you aligned with your goals.



Exercise

Think about where you want to be in three years. What actions and skills will you need to get there?



PRACTICE

- Always ask: "What does fit for purpose look like?"
- Commit to *Time On*.
- Do your daily OUT.
- Implement and honor an MFD.
- Develop and follow your career plan.

OUTCOMES

Here's what people have said about lifting their game:

"I'm actively looking for (and better at handling) uncomfortable situations and thoughts by pushing myself to deal with them."

"I'm focusing *on* the business rather than being stuck *in* the business by planning a 'time on' every week."

"Working on my career vision and creating more time for future thoughts and planning like where I see myself in 3 years."

"Getting out of my comfort zone more."

FURTHER READING

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey.
The 4 Disciplines of Execution, Chris McChesney, Jim Huling,
and Sean Covey.

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

“The training is making a difference because the staff are using shared language, holding each other accountable, we understand and work with each other better ” - Wendy

Poor communication can make achieving the right outcomes difficult and allow unnecessary issues to arise. Consider the story of the CEO who once commented about the absence of blueberry muffins in a meeting; from then on, blueberry muffins appeared everywhere he went. Here's a similar tale from my corporate days: when I'd think aloud, saying, "Maybe we should..." it would eventually return weeks later as a directive awaiting his sign-off.

Think of a time when you wondered how someone could so badly misunderstand what you meant, despite your clarity. Or when you misheard or misunderstood someone else and ended up going down the wrong path. How much time did you waste?

Ryan recently worked with managers who missed important business cues and were slow to act as a result. Discussions with the MD revealed that the best source of dynamic indicators was simple: their people. If you don't listen, they won't tell you. This chapter will help you develop communication skills to find hidden wisdom and insight within your team.

When you improve your communication, you will:

- Have team members who feel heard and share ideas honestly.
- Reduce miscommunication and save time, energy, and motivation.
- Be recognized as an authentic manager, clear in speech and attentive in listening.

- Lead a more engaged and productive team, enhancing overall success.

Concept

Effective communication centers on accuracy: sending and receiving relevant information accurately. Take a phone call as an example. It's considered effective when the listener hears the speaker's words with clarity.

Misunderstanding often happens because communication involves thoughts and emotions filtered by both parties.

Here's my perspective:

"I give many speeches, each tailored with different examples, but the core message is consistent. Almost every time, someone will come up and say, 'I really connected when you said [insert insight],' and I think, 'I never said that. Wish I had!' This happens because they interpret the message through their lens. And dis-communication—where nothing is communicated—is just as problematic. People fill gaps on their own."

Good communication requires focusing on the other person. How can you phrase things so they understand? What are they truly saying? This practice engages your Active Mindset and heightens your self-awareness and awareness of others.

SPEAK CLEARLY

There's a range of communication styles:

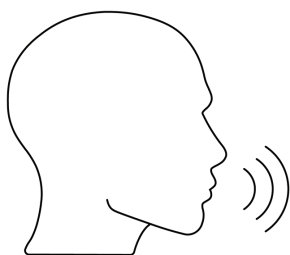
- Aggressive: Intimidating with yelling or threats.
- Manipulative: Selectively presenting information for a desired outcome.
- Passive Aggressive: Subtle aggression without volume.

- Fudging: Avoiding clear facts to sidestep conflicts.
- Matter of Fact: Direct but devoid of relational context.
- Clear: Expressing genuine thoughts and feelings, irrespective of potential reactions.
- Digressive: Over-explaining background while missing the main point.



Speaking clearly is tough because we often worry more about how we're perceived than being true to ourselves. In work, this means prioritizing what's best for the business. Speaking your truth requires courage, but sticking to these two principles can help:

- Where there's insight, there's responsibility. Your job is to speak up.
- Ask the Buddha's questions: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?



- ✓ Where there's insight, there's responsibility
- ✓ True? Necessary? Kind?

Tips for Speaking Clearly:

- There are three calls you can make when you need to give a decision or a response: yes, no and wait. Wait is a good placeholder while you get more information.

- Provide context but get to the point. Stick with it until understood, then move on.
- Know your type (refer to *Working with Your Team*). Pioneers should indicate when they're brainstorming. Drivers should invite questions. Integrators should end with clear next steps. Guardians should check clarity.
- Check understanding with questions like, "Does that work for you?" Avoid, "Does that make sense?" since it rarely prompts honesty.



Exercise

Evaluate where you are on the communication style continuum. Where do you need improvement?

Breakthrough Moment: Learning to speak clearly and listen actively

Alejandro, a regional sales director, often felt frustrated when his team misinterpreted his ideas. He would think aloud about a new sales strategy or process improvement—from his perspective, he was inviting collaboration. However, his team would take his ideas as concrete decisions. It ended up wasting time and effort, because his team would start tasks only for them to be scrapped or realigned.

Alejandro started focusing on speaking more clearly and actively checking for understanding. He practiced adding disclaimers like, "Just thinking aloud here," when he wanted to float an idea, and he began to end discussions with, "Let's summarize what we've agreed on before we move forward." This small shift made a big difference—his team knew not to jump to conclusions, and Alejandro felt more confident knowing that his intentions were being understood. It also invited deeper collaboration.

Alejandro's clarity created a more open and honest dialogue with his team, which deepened their trust in him as a leader. Alejandro found that his own confidence grew as he became more intentional about his words, knowing he was fostering a more engaged and aligned team.

LISTEN ACTIVELY

Encouraging team members to communicate clearly with you starts with active listening. This means respecting their beliefs, staying open, and avoiding the urge to always be right.

Techniques for Active Listening:

- Maintain eye contact and engage genuinely.
- Focus fully on their words and cues, such as body language.
- Don't interrupt—let the conversation guide you.
- Ask open-ended questions, e.g., "That's interesting. Can you tell me more?"
- Summarize to confirm your understanding: "What I hear you saying is... Have I got that right?"



Exercise

Which Active Listening techniques challenge you the most? Why?

Breakthrough Moment: Listening beyond the words

Margaret, an operations manager, had always considered herself an excellent communicator. The truth is, she was good at getting her point across, but she wasn't listening as intently as she could have been. When people would say things like, "Everything's fine" or "No issues here," she wasn't sure what was beneath the surface.

She decided to pay close attention next time she sensed she was missing something.

During a one-on-one with Marco, a usually upbeat team member, Margaret sensed his body language was cagey – folded arms, avoiding eye contact, and fidgeting. Instead of talking to him about it, she sat back, and observed him, and decided *not* to speak, instead letting him fill the slightly awkward silence. Marco remained cagey, but eventually he referenced something about feeling overwhelmed by their new project's size. Margaret might have missed this if she had spent that time telling him her thoughts. She only said, "It sounds like you're feeling a lot of pressure with this timeline?" and then she listened closely without interrupting.

Margaret's active listening transformed their dynamic. Marco felt genuinely heard, and their conversation led to adjustments that made the project more manageable for him. Over time, other team members also began to share more openly, because Margaret was truly listening. And the team became more effective, because communication was flowing.

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Digital communication requires special attention, as it lacks non-verbal cues. Emails are useful for quick updates, records, and FYIs, but assume that critical messages may go unread or misinterpreted. Structure long emails with clear subheadings and direct requests for action. If an email requires more than five lines, consider calling instead.

And if your email is a request for action, be clear about what you want by when. If there's more than one recipient and you want to make sure everyone is clear about who's being asked to do what, use the @name convention to flag the action to the person concerned.



Exercise

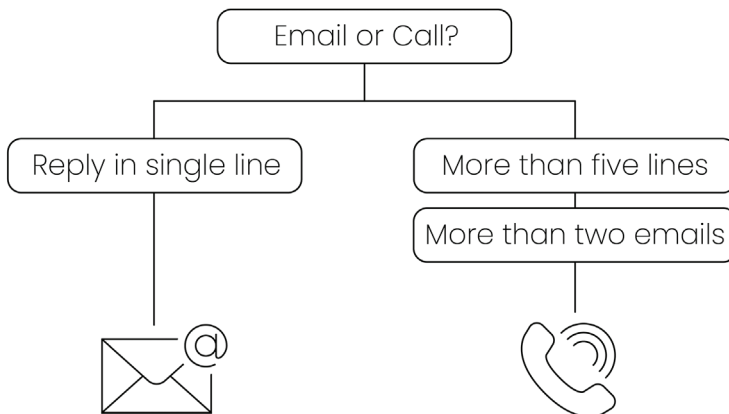
Review the last 24 hours of your sent emails. How many met the ideal format? What types of emails could you avoid sending?

ACTIVE PLUS: BE MORE HUMAN

In a digital age, high-touch interactions set you apart. Ryan's rule: if it's longer than five lines or will involve back-and-forth replies, make a call.

Here are some ways we can be more human.

- The only thing you should send by email is something that can be replied to in a single line
- Keep in mind that an email thread is not a conversation
- If an email is going to take more than five lines, call them
- If it takes more than two emails, call them



Lots of people will ignore this and continue to send emails instead of having a conversation. But the Active Manager

understands that in a high-tech world, high touch is everything. Connecting at a personal level will help you stand out.

The real advanced lesson is called mirroring, which is valuable because it helps people to feel heard. According to Chris Voss (*Never Split The Difference*), mirroring is the simple practice of repeating back the two or three key words that someone has just said, sometimes as a simple affirmation and sometimes with an invitation to say more. Someone says they are really feeling under the pump with workload and you might say, with genuine curiosity, ‘Under the pump, okay, tell me some more about that.’ Half of the conflict in the world would go away if people felt heard.

Mirroring forces you to really listen with empathy, and it’s a useful way to deepen your understanding of the other person as well as building rapport. The fifth of Stephen Covey’s famous 7 Habits of Highly Effective People is ‘seek first to understand, then to be understood.’



Exercise

Think of three recent emails where calling would have been more effective. How will you approach these situations differently in the future?

Breakthrough Moment: Knowing when to pick up the phone

Daria, a project manager, often found herself overwhelmed by the sheer number of emails in her inbox. Each day, she’d send out detailed instructions, progress updates, and requests for action. Despite her best efforts to be clear, she was over-loading her emails with information, and she often missed the subtext to conversations, because the people she spoke to weren’t in front of her. Daria realized that while email felt convenient for her, it wasn’t always the best way.

She began following a simple rule: if a message required more than a few lines or had the potential for back-and-forth clarification, she'd pick up the phone instead. This direct approach reduced misunderstandings, had better and more enjoyable conversations with his colleagues, and gave Daria more confidence.



PRACTICE

- Choose a clear-speaking practice that feels most challenging and commit to improving it.
- Take action when you gain insight.
- Practice summarizing what others say to develop strong listening skills.
- Set calling as your default over emailing.

OUTCOMES

Here's what happened for people who became clearer communicators after completing the Active Manager Program:

"I'm a better listener now because I keep an open mind and not only do people feel more heard, but I have learnt how to absorb more information."

"I take more consideration with how I communicate, and what form is appropriate for the type of communication."

"Members across the team have unlocked a higher level of teamwork after we got better at summarizing to ensure that we all understood the same thing from conversations."

"I have far more confidence in general, but also feel like I have a direction and methods I can use when I find myself in difficult conversations."

FURTHER READING

Never Split the Difference, Chris Voss.

Writing for Busy Readers: Communicate More Effectively in the Real World, Jessica Lasky-Fink and Todd Rogers

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

“We had to have difficult structural conversations in our business. The particular leader in that area, he’d come from being a leading hand, and he’d never had a structural conversation before. Using *Difficult Conversations*, he did a great job of it - delivering it with great empathy and being well-prepared.” - Kerry

We try to avoid uncomfortable discussions every day, whether it’s dealing with underperforming colleagues, workplace strife, demanding clients, or saying “no” or “I’m sorry.” Our dread of the repercussions makes difficult conversations hard to have. This chapter will focus on workplace conversations we’d rather avoid but must have to resolve company challenges. Many of these strategies can be applied outside of work too.

We’ve all faced that dilemma: should we avoid or confront? Many have tried to sidestep a problem, only to end up feeling taken advantage of or wondering why they didn’t stand up for themselves. The other person, meanwhile, misses the opportunity to improve or adjust. Often, managers “pussyfoot then clobber”—they tiptoe around the issue and then suddenly come down hard on the person, leaving them blindsided.

When we choose to confront, we fear it could make things worse, likening it to throwing a hand grenade without being able to control the fallout. However, avoiding a difficult conversation is like holding onto a live grenade after pulling the pin.

Disarming the grenade: Two keys

1. Purpose: Understand that the aim of a difficult conversation is to process and resolve an issue through communication.
2. Empathy: This means sensing the other person's emotional state to improve communication—not agreeing with them or feeling what they feel, but being aware of their emotions.

Difficult conversations are inevitable. The challenge lies not in the action itself but in our mindset. This chapter is designed to help you think differently about these conversations, equipping you to process and resolve issues. It's not about "winning" or proving a point, nor will it make the conversations easy. Instead, it will help you manage yourself better and engage constructively.

This chapter isn't meant for formal underperformance reviews, but the principles here are still highly relevant.

You'll learn how to:

- Approach hard conversations confidently.
- Maintain your balance to stay on track.
- Use three techniques to deliver your message while making others feel heard.
- Work well with difficult people.

Reflect on a recent difficult conversation and think about one you need to have. Bring an open mind and be willing to rethink your reality. Every difficult conversation involves:

- What happened.
- Feelings.
- Keeping your balance.

“WHAT HAPPENED?”

Conflicting versions of “what happened” make issue resolution harder. Each party holds their version of reality strongly, leading to the belief that the other is wrong. Difficult conversations aren’t about facts; they are about interpretations, shaped by:

- The truth assumption: The belief that “I am right, you are wrong.” Recognize that you only have your version of the truth, and they have theirs.
- The intention invention: Assuming we know others’ intentions when we don’t. Separate actions (what they did), impact (how it affected you), and your assumptions about their motives.
- The blame frame: Focusing on blame stops us from finding solutions. Replace blame with contribution. Early on, take responsibility for your part and help them see theirs.



Exercise

Think about a difficult conversation you’ve had. What assumptions did you make about the truth? How did you invent their intention? Who was to blame? Reconsider the blame: how did you contribute?

Breakthrough Moment: Disarming difficult conversations with empathy

Manaia, a team lead in a fast-paced tech company, often found herself avoiding difficult conversations with his team. She would put off addressing performance issues, worrying that a direct confrontation might damage the relationship or demotivate her team members. There was one moment when a particular project began to lag behind schedule. In this case, Manaia knew exactly where the lag was coming

from. Alisha was a talented developer but her consistency had recently been slipping. The thought of the conversation filled her with anxiety; the performance issues put a lot of pressure on her. Her team was falling behind, and it didn't reflect well on her as their team leader.

Manaia decided to apply the Active Mindset principles she had learned. She wanted to make sure that Alisha didn't feel persecuted. When they had a meeting about it, she knew she had to be empathetic. She started by acknowledging Alisha's strengths and then instead of telling her what she was doing wrong, she invited her to reflect, by sharing her observations in a calm, non-judgmental manner: "I noticed that your recent projects haven't been going so well, and I'm wondering if there's anything that might be affecting your work." She made sure to avoid assumptions or accusations, or letting her stress as team leader enter into her communication. It turned out, Alisha was unmotivated because she felt her work was repetitive.

Manaia created a space where Alisha felt safe to be honest. From there, they slowly reshaped her role and tasks. It wasn't easy, but Manaia's empathetic approach meant Alisha had no hard feelings, and her performance picked up significantly. For Manaia, the experience showed her how difficult conversations aren't the same as confrontations.

FEELINGS

Difficult conversations are inherently about feelings, even at work. Ignoring feelings only suppresses them, allowing them to influence tone, body language, and voice. Suppressing emotions can fuel conflict. We listen better when we feel heard. Sometimes, strong expression is warranted, especially when behaviors clash with business interests or team welfare. Start by acknowledging your own feelings calmly, then invite them to share theirs. Avoid judging their vulnerability; acknowledge their feelings without evaluating them.

A simple question like, “How do you feel about that?” can open up the conversation. Once they’ve spoken, share your feelings clearly and calmly.



Exercise

Reflect on that difficult conversation. What emotions were at play? Were they expressed?

Breakthrough Moment: Acknowledging feelings to clear the air

Leilani, a marketing director, was frustrated with Daniel, a team member whose performance had recently slipped. She would focus on facts and solutions during their discussions and saw no issue with sharing her frustrations in a calm way that most people were comfortable with. However, Daniel misinterpreted her as being annoyed at him. He felt she was being harsh, and their working relationship deteriorated.

Leilani decided to try something new in their next one-on-one. She knew Daniel was an emotional person, so she invited Daniel to share how he felt, and decided to save the performance improvement conversation for another time. Leilani listened without interrupting, which was uncomfortable at first, but soon Daniel opened just a little bit about being intimidated by Leilani’s direct communication style, and it made him uncomfortable asking clarifying questions about his tasks and his roles, meaning he wasn’t getting the support he needed to do his job. She explained that her direct communication style wasn’t a personal attack, it was about getting the best out of her team.

The honest exchange allowed them to better understand each other’s perspectives, leading to an immediate improvement in their working relationship. While other people appreciated Leilani’s ability to calmly share her frustrations, she now knew that all she needed to do was occasionally check in

with Daniel to make sure he hadn't held back on asking for help, and Daniel realized that Leilani cared about him as a team member.

KEEPING YOUR BALANCE

Disagreements may spark surprising reactions. It's not their response that unbalances you; it's your reaction to it. Here's how to regain composure:

1. **Pause and breathe:** Create space between impulse and response. Use three deep breaths to engage your conscious brain.
2. **Let go of control:** Their reaction is theirs to own, shaped by their history.
3. **Anchor to purpose:** Focus on the business's best interests to maintain balance.



Exercise

Think about a difficult conversation where you lost balance. Did you react with fight, flight, or freeze? Which technique could have helped?

GOING IN STRONG

Preparation is key. Engage your Active Mindset to stay constructive. Go in to learn, not win. Aim for understanding over agreement. Remind yourself: all behavior has context - get the information.

Three purposes to keep in mind:

- Learn their story and feelings without judgment.
- Express your views calmly.
- Collaborate on solutions with “we have a problem” as your mindset. The “we” includes you, them, and the company.

You will get knocked over in the conversation. The real gig here is how you hold on to yourself. Before a conversation, you can prepare by reminding yourself that you only have responsibility for yourself, and set yourself up by saying 'I've got this.' Remember, you're not responsible for their feelings or reactions, only your own. 'I've got this' is a great way to trigger an Active Mindset to help you see what's really going on in the conversation.

ACTIVE PLUS: THE POWER OF CONTRIBUTION

Here are my thoughts on this:

One of the insights that has had the greatest impact in my personal life is the idea of contribution.

I arrived at this after an issue arose in my wider family. In trying to work out who was most to blame, I realized that pretty much everyone in the room had made a contribution over the years, some more than others to be sure, but no one was innocent, including me. At that point I saw how useless blame is.

Every difficult conversation has contributions from all parties. Consider your role: what did you tolerate or ignore? Were expectations clear? Did your biases play a part? Recognizing your contributions fosters empathy and openness, key to resolving issues.



Exercise

Identify contributors in your last difficult conversation, especially your own role.



PRACTICE

Who do you need to have a difficult conversation with? Use the Difficult Conversations Cheat Sheet to prepare for it

- Practice these techniques ahead of having a difficult conversation. Get confident with them before you need them:
 - Adopt a learning mindset in conversations
 - Consider how you contributed to the issue
- When you get into more difficult conversations, practice one of the following:
 - Understanding you're responsible only for yourself and your reactions: 'I've got this'
 - Recovering your ground – take three breaths and go into Active Mindset so you can choose your response

OUTCOMES

Here's what people have said after improving their approach to difficult conversations:

"I'm addressing issues more mindfully, with better preparation."

"I'm more empathetic and focus on learning, not winning in these conversations."

"Practicing these techniques has made me more confident in tough conversations. At home as well as at work."

FURTHER READING

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (Penguin Books, 2010), from the Harvard Negotiation Project.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS CHEAT SHEET

Step 1: Prepare a walk through

- Sort out what happened:
 - Where does your story come from (information, past experiences, rules)? What about theirs?
 - What impact has this situation had on you?
 - What you think their intentions might have been – realizing that you don't actually know what they intended.
- Understand emotions – explore your emotional footprint, and the bundle of emotions you experience.

Step 2: Check your objectives for the conversation and decide whether to raise the issue

- Objectives:
 - What do you hope to accomplish by having this conversation?
 - Shift your stance to support learning, sharing, and problem-solving.
- Decide:
 - Is this the best way to address the issue and achieve your purposes?
 - Is the issue really about your identity?
 - Can you affect the problem by changing your contributions?
 - If you don't raise it, what can you do to help yourself let go?

Step 3: if you are going to raise the issue, write down these prep notes

- What happened?
 - What is my story?
 - What do you think their story might be (remembering that you won't know until you ask them)
- Impact/Intent:
 - What were my intentions?
 - What was the impact on me?
 - What did I think were the other person's intentions?
 - What was my impact on the other person?
- Contribution:
 - What did I contribute to the problem?
 - What did the other person contribute?
 - What feelings underlie my attributions and judgements?

SMART DELEGATION

“The challenge I felt stepping into a managerial role was being the one making the big, tough decisions. The tools from Smart Delegation certainly helped. Asking if this is something only I can do, or considering whether a decision is reversible or irreversible... It certainly grew my confidence and gave my team new confidence because I’m delegating good tasks to them.” - Steve

There’s an old African proverb: ‘If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.’ Your job is to manage talent, building a team of capable people around you. One of the best ways to do that is through smart delegation – a good manager is by definition a good delegator, giving their people room to grow rather than trying to do everything themselves.

If you’re still finding yourself stressed by workload, behind on your schedule, doing routine tasks or things that are below your pay grade or outside your job description, you’re not delegating enough. If you feel like your staff aren’t developing their skills or that they seem disengaged and unproductive, you’re not delegating enough.

According to McKinsey, only 9% of managers worldwide are happy with how they spend their time. One study says that managers spend 41% of their time on roles that could be handled by others – that’s two days a week. According to Gail Thomas in her book *The Gift of Time: How Delegation Can Give you Space to Succeed*, while more than 85% of managers acknowledge they should delegate more, they hold themselves back through guilt, habit, and lack of trust (find these sources in Further Reading at the end of these notes).

Smart delegation offers opportunities to practice the Active Mindset: guilt, habit, and lack of trust are all reactive. We talked right at the start about ‘only do what only you can do’ – this is the next level.

Learn the skills of smart delegation and you will:

- Free yourself for higher-value tasks.
- Create space to make a bigger contribution.
- Build a team of people who bring energy, skill, and initiative to their work – and do it better than you could.

LETTING GO

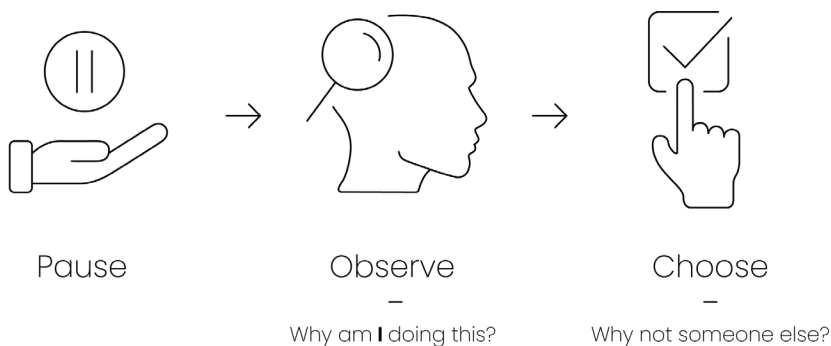
Getting to the next level means creating more value. Since you can’t create more time, you have to create more space by transferring some of your activities and tasks to others. Do this properly and you will not only create space for yourself, but also create space for your people to grow into.

Letting go is hard because:

- The habits of mind that got you here will stop you from progressing. One such habit is called self-enhancement bias – we value tasks more highly because we’re involved in them. Here’s a fun fact – 60% of people rate themselves more highly than either their seniors or peers do.
- We like the satisfaction of ticking off our to-do list, so we hold on to things that others could do.
- It’s faster to do it ourselves than to delegate it, and we can be sure it will get done to our standard (see self-enhancement bias).

How to let go

1. Notice your habits: Start by observing your tendencies when starting a task. Go into Active Mindset: Pause. Observe: Why am I doing this? Your first answer might be 'because it has to be done.' Ask again with an emphasis on why am I doing this? Be honest – is it because it's valuable/easier/faster for you to do it?
2. Question your excuses: Why can't this be given to someone else? The immediate excuse that arises is often a reactive response. Typical excuses include:
 - All my tasks are urgent and important.
 - I don't have anyone to delegate to.
 - Everyone else is too busy.
 - No one else knows how to do it, and training them would take too long.
 - I can't.
 - I won't.



These are lazy arguments rooted in fear. Counter them with Active Mindset responses:

- I've got better things to do with my time.
- If I let this go, I can get on with [x].
- This is a great development opportunity for [insert name]; I shouldn't keep it from them.
- I don't do this stuff anymore (remind yourself of your manager identity).

Staging this internal debate might feel odd, but mastering delegation requires conscious effort. It's why only 15% of managers believe they delegate as much as they can, despite the obvious benefits.

My insight:

"I've always found it easy to delegate. Some think I'm very good at it (as in, lazy). I'm not lazy; I work with great intensity and focus on what I choose to do. I do what I'm good at and enjoy, letting others handle the rest. I've always been mindful of not holding onto tasks someone else could grow from."



Exercise

What are your three main excuses for not delegating? Write an Active Mindset response for each.

Breakthrough Moment: Letting go for growth

Lee, a senior marketing manager, struggled with delegation. He often found himself working late. He didn't like the idea of delegation. He felt that training someone else would take more time than just doing it himself, and he worried that the final product wouldn't meet his high standards. He didn't realize it was related, but his team's engagement was waning as they weren't being challenged with new responsibilities.

After learning about the Active Mindset, Lee started questioning his unwillingness to delegate. He was working on a detailed report, when he asked himself: "Why am I doing this myself? Is this something only I can do?" He realized that Mei, a team member eager for more analytical work, could take it on. Lee took the time to coach her through the first few steps.

Investing time upfront would pay off in the long run. Over the next few weeks, Mei grew more confident, delivering high-quality work, even better than his own. Lee found himself with a little more time to focus on strategic projects. From there he got really good at delegation. Eventually, his team's engagement grew as they took on more meaningful tasks. The change wasn't just in his workload; it was in how he approached leadership—empowering his team and reclaiming his focus on the bigger picture. By letting go, Lee not only developed his team but also rediscovered his own sense of purpose and satisfaction at work.

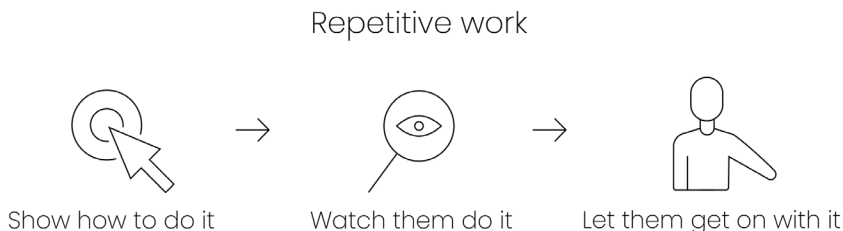
ACTIVE DELEGATION PRACTICES

Delegation is a powerful motivator. Assigning tasks to someone signifies trust and confidence. However, delegation is not abdication; done poorly, it demotivates and earns you a reputation for ineffectiveness.

There are two types of delegation:

- Task delegation: Assigning work someone already knows or can learn with guidance.
- Capability delegation: Entrusting responsibilities that require judgment and decision-making.

Task delegation can be delegating something that someone already knows how to do or has the tools to work it out, or else it might be something you can show someone how to do, watch them do it, then let them get on with it.



Task delegation essentials:

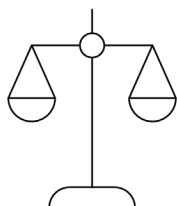
- Switch to Active Mindset and be clear about ‘what by when.’
- Track delegated tasks using a system (e.g., Asana, Trello, or calendar reminders).
- Follow up on or before the due date. Ask, “How did you go with [task]?”

The second type of delegation is capability, where the person will have to use their judgement to make decisions on your behalf. If it’s something they’ve done before, talk with them about their brief so that they’re clear about your expectations.

If the task is new to them:

- Discuss why it’s important and why they’re chosen.
- Let them outline their approach; guide them as needed.

Use their judgement



Talk with them about:

- ✓ Why important?
- ✓ Why them?
- ✓ Coach on how to do it

Here’s my take:

I can remember listening to someone describe how they would go about taking over from me in a customer communications exercise. Every fiber of my being was screaming ‘that’s not how I would do it’ while I nodded and asked questions. I kept chanting to myself ‘not wrong, just different’. And actually nobody noticed a thing (other than the team member who was a bit concerned at my chanting).



Exercise

Think of a time you delegated effectively. What were the benefits? Recall a time it didn't work and identify your contribution to that outcome.

Breakthrough Moment: Delegating for growth

Anika often found herself hovering over her team members after assigning tasks, worried they wouldn't approach things the "right" way (her way). One day, she realized she was feeling burnt out from doing tasks that others could probably handle.

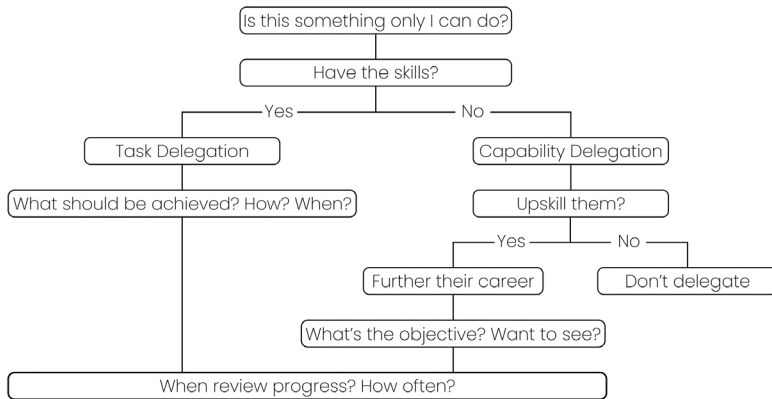
She started small by assigning a new client presentation to Tariq, a junior team member eager for more responsibility. Anika walked him through the objectives, explained why it mattered, and then let him take the lead. Even when his initial ideas differed from hers, she resisted the urge to take over, focusing instead on asking guiding questions and providing feedback.

Over time, Tariq not only delivered a solid presentation but also brought fresh ideas that the client loved. Anika's confidence in her team grew, and the team, in turn, felt more engaged and capable, knowing they had Anika's trust and support.

APPLICATION

For the next month, before starting any task, pause for 15 seconds and ask:

- Is this something only I can do?
- Does the person I could delegate to have the needed skills? How do I upskill them?
- What should be achieved, and by when?
- Can I develop someone's career by delegating this?



Additional tips:

- Let them work independently but assure them of support.
- Avoid micromanaging; it demotivates.
- Treat mistakes as learning opportunities.
- Develop a plan that aligns with their career aspirations over the next 12 months.

A couple of final points:

- The standard you should expect is fit for purpose. Start with the assumption that they only have to do it 70% as well as you would. There are only a few things that have to be 100%, most of which relate to what the customer will see or experience but might also include process accuracy and product quality.
- Do not allow people to delegate up! Push back gently but firmly. No is the most loving word.



Exercise

What can you delegate now and over the next 90 days?

ACTIVE PLUS: CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Advance capability delegation by inviting your team to identify areas they wish to develop. Use their input for coaching conversations. Get feedback on your delegation approach and reflect on ways to improve.



Exercise

What feedback have you received about your delegation skills? How will you address it?



PRACTICE

Successful delegation means moving into Active Mindset: stop the impulse to just do it yourself and think for 15 seconds about questions like:

- Deploy your Active Mindset responses when you start to make excuses for not delegating
- For delegation tasks, be clear on ‘what by when’
- Ask yourself the Active Mindset question: Is this something only I can do? And then define the delegation path – how will you delegate this activity?

OUTCOMES

Here’s some examples of higher effectiveness that comes from smart delegation, in the words of people who have done the Active Manager Program:

“Reminding myself that a good manager equals a good delegator. Using an Active Mindset to ask myself if this something only I can do, and identifying tasks that other people can do.”

“Letting go and trusting my team, making sure they have skills for the task while I play a supporting role.”

“Giving people room to grow, and working together if things go wrong, treating mistakes as learning opportunities. My team are becoming more skilled because of this.”

“More time freed up for me to focus on the big picture and important tasks.”

FURTHER READING

Barbara Davidson, *How to get better at delegating*, Headway Capital blog.

Birkinshaw, J. & Cohen, J. *Make Time for the Work That Matters*, Harvard Business Review.

The Gift of Time: How Delegation Can Give you Space to Succeed, Gail Thomas (2015).

COACHING

“One of our participants was really struggling around understanding management and leadership, and we reframed it in the Coaching course to help him see you are a leader in this business, not just a manager. And that really unlocked for him this idea of leadership versus management.” - Tatum

A CEO once shared their journey of investing in employee development, specifically in coaching quality. The main challenge was manager buy-in. While 85% of managers thought they were effective or very effective coaches, only 35% of employees agreed they received adequate coaching. Research supports this gap—managers consistently overestimate their coaching abilities (*The Leader as Coach*, HBR 2019).

Many managers feel they lack the time or patience for coaching, viewing it as a slower process compared to directing. Though coaching is proven to be one of the most effective management techniques, it's also underused. Managers often rely on telling rather than guiding, and coaching feels less direct. As *The Leader as Coach* authors note, coaching limits the use of a manager's most familiar tool: authority.

It's this lack of authority that makes coaching hard. Managers often know the “right” answer before the conversation even begins, and the instinct is to drive employees to that answer instead of guiding them. As one client put it, “It's easier to just blast on; it feels faster to answer the question myself.” But easier isn't always better.

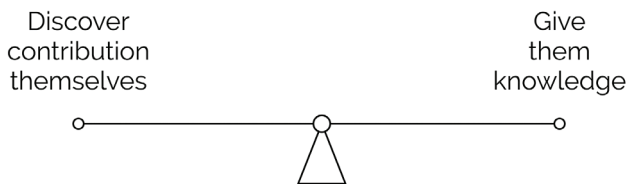
Don't assume your people don't need it—everyone benefits from a coach. Even top performers have coaches because they can't objectively watch their own performance.

Today, coaching is an essential management practice. It's a basic expectation for employees, not a bonus. The CEO who shared their story explained that in their organization, managers must demonstrate coaching ability to advance. This approach was inspired by a prior role, where a coaching-focused culture boosted market share by 8% in a highly competitive industry.

There are two parts to coaching:

- Helping people discover their contribution for themselves
- Giving them the knowledge they need to do it well.

The trick is getting the balance of those two.



Coaching is managing – motivating and enabling individuals to do and be more. It's not one size fits all: you will have your own style and voice, and you will need to adapt it for individuals and situations. This chapter explores some common themes and approaches that you can adopt and adapt to help you achieve that balance between directing and enabling.

Develop the skills in this chapter and you will:

- Become more confident in choosing the right kind of coaching
- Feel like you're mindfully guiding the work and performance of your team
- See your team's performance improve as you provide regular coaching.

What we really want is for you to get comfortable coaching. Most managers don't coach because it feels uncomfortable. You'll get some great tools and easy techniques that will help you think differently about how to coach and act differently – but, most importantly, you'll learn how to be natural and relaxed with it.

COACHING FRAMEWORK

We feel the standard coaching training tends to focus closely on the enabling aspect – helping people work out solutions for themselves. In real life, we need a range of styles depending on the situation and the person.

There's a simple continuum we can use to work out under what circumstances we should use different coaching styles. It's based on the balance of enabling versus directing: how much information you give to people about what to do, and enabling their development, giving them space to learn.



At one end you've got deep-ending: throwing people in the deep end and letting them get on with it. That's the right choice when:

- People are self-motivated and want autonomy (for example, Pioneers and Drivers as covered in the Working With Your Team chapter)
- They already have the information they need to move forward
- The job isn't mission critical
- They are already going along well

But that's a smaller number of situations than most of us would like to believe. Most often when we give people new assignments and let them get on with it – it's not coaching.

At the other end is directing – also a style most of us are used to, also not coaching. Again, it's the right choice when:

- The job really needs to go well
- There's no margin for learning through errors
- People don't have the information (or experience) they need to do the job, regardless of how motivated they are
- People need structure and clarity (especially Guardians and Drivers).

Most of us have default ways of reacting—often without thinking deliberately. These responses generally work well because, most of the time, there's no major issue to handle. They even hold up under more intense situations, like when someone repeats a mistake. Sometimes, a strong reaction can be just what's needed to get the message across. Drawing a line or holding up a mirror can help someone see that they're not meeting expectations, whether due to process issues or a lack of effort. It's natural to feel frustrated when capable people fall short, especially if it's because they're not putting in enough effort.



Exercise

Think of a time you demonstrated one or both of these two styles. What led you to the choice? Was the result what you wanted? Would you do anything differently next time?

Breakthrough Moment: Finding the balance in coaching styles

Yumi, a manager at a logistics company, struggled with balancing directing and enabling. When a new process for managing client shipments was rolled out, she assigned the task to Amit, a capable but less experienced team member. Yumi thought that giving Amit autonomy would help him grow, so she opted for the “deep end” approach, expecting him to figure things out on his own. However errors started surfacing in the way shipments were documented, causing delays and confusion.

Realizing that her hands-off approach wasn't working, Yumi had a conversation with Amit to understand his perspective. It turned out that Amit was unclear about certain parts of the new process and didn't feel comfortable asking for help, worried it might make him seem unprepared. Yumi decided to switch to a more hands-on, directive approach, walking Amit through the critical parts of the process while encouraging him to ask questions.

The change was immediate. Amit quickly gained confidence and began applying the new process more accurately. With Yumi's support, he soon felt comfortable enough to take the lead again. The shift not only improved Amit's performance but also strengthened his relationship with Yumi, as he felt supported rather than thrown into the deep end without a lifeline.

THE COACHING MOMENT

The Coaching Zone is where we go into our Active Mindset and are deliberate about directing and enabling. There are two types: in the moment and pre-arranged.

First up for the Active Manager is the Coaching Moment. This is the biggest area for improvement for most managers.

It arises when we can see that people don't have the information/experience they need to do the task, they're open to learning and the job is not highly time or quality sensitive. If we're in Reactive Mode we'll go fully directive ('not like that, like this') or deep-ending ('they'll work it out').

Here's how you get people to do their job better. In that instant of insight/intuition that someone is struggling, go into Active Mindset: pause, observe the person and the situation, then choose to make it a coaching moment. Here's what you do:

- Be present – stop what you're doing and focus on this person, who they are, what they need and what's going on.
- Get uncomfortable by using a phrase like 'I'm going to give you some coaching here' or 'this is a coaching moment.' It not only makes it easier for people to accept your suggestion, it also makes them feel like they're getting coached. Many people get lots of coaching but it's not until it's signposted that they're conscious of it.
- Give them responsibility for the task and for coming up with the solution.
- Provide courageous feedback. Be the clear mirror for the reality of how they're performing. Give them the information they need to understand that they've got an issue.
- Ask great questions. The right questions can create lightbulb moments for employees. It's more powerful for people to come up with insights for themselves than any directive, answer or solution you can give them.
- Give them the information they need to work out how to meet their challenge. Don't give them the answers, keep asking questions to help them work it out.
- Close with commitment: what will they do differently next time?

This whole conversation can take anywhere between three and 10 minutes depending on the situation – it doesn't need to take long, and the better you get at it the faster you'll go. Like all Active Manager skills, practice it, deliberately and often. And if you genuinely run out of time, set up a session as we'll cover in the next section.

Beyond the Coaching Moment, there's some after-care:

- Catch people doing it well. Recognize when people are developing themselves, when they are paying attention to process and improving it, and not just results.
- Give the occasional kick in the pants – create genuine accountability for commitments.



Exercise

Think of a time you could have taken a Coaching Moment. What might have been different?

Breakthrough Moment: Making the most of a coaching moment

James, a team leader at a regional marketing firm, noticed that Sophia, one of his newer team members, was struggling with creating effective client proposals. Instead of immediately stepping in to fix the issue, James saw a chance for a coaching moment.

He put his own work aside, approached Sophia, and said, "Let's take a coaching moment here." Sophia, who often felt like she was on her own, appreciated the direct approach. By framing it as a coaching session, James made it clear that this was a learning opportunity, not just a critique.

Rather than dictating changes, James asked, “What do you think is the most important element in capturing the client’s needs in this proposal?” This opened the door for Sophia to reflect on her approach and identify where she might have gone off track. James continued to guide with questions, helping her uncover solutions herself rather than simply telling her what to do.

By the end of their short conversation, Sophia had a clear plan for improving her proposal and felt more confident in her ability to tackle similar tasks in the future. James followed up a few days later, praising her for the progress she had made. This not only solidified the learning but also made Sophia feel recognized and valued for her growth.

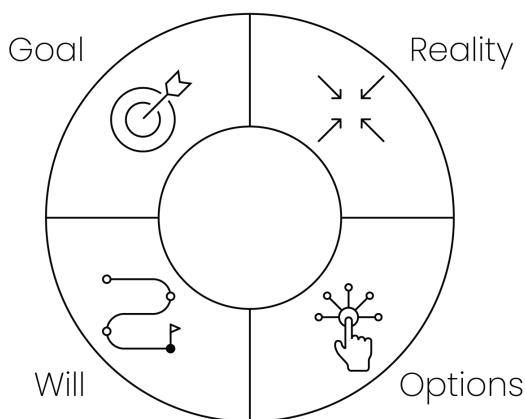
THE COACHING SESSION

The second opportunity is the Coaching Session. This is more formal than the Coaching Moment. It might be a meeting you (or they) schedule to work in depth on an issue, or it might be a formal, regular coaching session you’ve set up.

This conversation will be with people who don’t have enough information/experience to work it out for themselves, and the situation is likely to be something like:

- A low-urgency task or ongoing project
- Part of their role that they’re not confident in yet
- Some career and capability discussion

The GROW model was originally developed in the 1980s by performance coach Sir John Whitmore. We use it here because it’s simple and effective. We use it ourselves, as do most of our coaches.



Whether it's for an immediate issue like 'how do I deal with this technical problem' or giving advice on long-term personal development, here are the steps to cover:

- Goal: ask them straight out what they want to accomplish out of the session.
- Reality: what do we need to know about what's happening?
- Options: open it up with 'So what do you think we should do about this?' In helping them decide, watch where their energy increases or decreases. Our coaching clients always gave us the answers to their own questions with the lift in their voices.
- Will: ask 'What will you do?' If the session has been successful, they'll have a clear plan with a commitment to an objective and an action plan or new behavior. Then ask 'out of 10, how achievable do you think this is?' If they score below eight, make it more achievable.

We've simplified the GROW model down to the essentials—the 20% that delivers 80% of the value. While a detailed GROW Guide at the end of the chapter is available as a helpful resource, we believe that becoming a great coach requires more than just following a template. GROW

provides a starting framework, but real learning happens as you navigate and adapt through real experiences.

And if you're curious about how coaching might be received, a study by Training Industry Inc. sheds some light. Learners typically prefer instructor-led training, ranking it high on their list, while on-the-job coaching is often much lower in terms of preference. However, when asked about effectiveness, they overwhelmingly rate on-the-job coaching as the most effective approach for developing skills—from onboarding to leadership. So, even if on-the-job coaching isn't their first choice, your guidance as a coach will likely be recognized as the best path for their growth.



Exercise

Think of someone you could use this approach with. What might happen?

Breakthrough Moment: The power of the GROW model

Moana noticed that Aroha was struggling with prioritizing tasks in a long-term project. To address this, she scheduled a dedicated coaching session using the GROW model. They began by identifying Aroha's *goal*—to gain more confidence and clarity in managing the project's milestones. This helped Aroha articulate what success would look like, making it easier to focus the conversation.

They then explored the *reality* of Aroha's current situation. Moana asked open-ended questions like, "How's this been working out for you so far?" and "What challenges are you facing?" As Aroha talked, Moana shared some insights about common hurdles in similar projects, adding valuable context without taking over the conversation. This helped Aroha see the gaps she needed to address and understand where she might need extra support.

Next, they turned to *options*. Moana guided the conversation with questions like, “What do you think we could try differently?” and “How might these changes impact the team?” Aroha suggested a few approaches, and Moana offered feedback, helping refine the ideas. They wrapped up with a *will* statement: “What will you do next?” Aroha left with a concrete plan and a commitment to act, feeling more equipped to take charge.

HOW TO COACH BETTER

Coaching is a skill that can be learned. You’ve got the framework and some of the behaviors, so let’s talk about what you can practice so that your coaching is more engaging and productive.

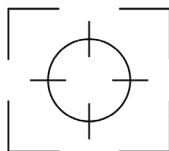
Always have the goal of coaching in mind. A good coaching session is one where people get:

- Awareness of their performance and whatever’s stopping them reaching their potential
- Clarity about what behavior or attitude change is required
- Commitment to change their behavior



Awareness

+



Clarity

+



Commitment

They'll achieve awareness and clarity through a mix of working it out for themselves and you giving them the information they need and can't get otherwise. The commitment is theirs alone.

To help them with their commitment, you need to make some commitments yourself. In any coaching setting, make sure you:

- Pay attention. Put your phone away and build rapport by giving your full attention. Maintain comfortable eye contact and an open posture (avoid hunching, crossing your legs, or hunkering behind a desk). That's how you make the space safe.
- Are genuinely curious and ask open questions. Allow time and opportunity for the other person to think and speak. Check your understanding of their answer.
- Notice nonverbal cues. Listen with your eyes: does the tone of voice and facial expression match what they're saying? If not, comment on what you notice and ask them to tell you more about it.
- Be brave. Hold up the mirror when it's needed.
- Hold back. Don't take responsibility for the answer; let them hit the nail on the head.
- Get to the energy. You'll be getting close to the mark when their voice and demeanor sparks up. Keep them on that path.
- Close it out: what by when?

If you focus intently on listening, every other coaching skill will fall into place. Shift into Active Mindset—be fully present, making this conversation your sole focus.

You'll know you've done it right when the coachee leaves with a fresh idea, a commitment to a specific action, and a noticeable boost in confidence from realizing new possibilities.

And then there are *The Uncoachables*. Most of us have encountered them—they're certain they know it all and that you have nothing to offer. To effectively work with them, you'll need to mirror their behavior back to them and set clear expectations. This skill is expanded in the *Difficult Conversations* chapter, but for now, know that if they're not causing a performance issue, you can often just enable or direct them. Meanwhile, stay mindful of any signs that it might be time to have *The Conversation*.



Exercise

Think about your current coaching. Based on these skills, what do you need to change? Start doing? Stop doing?

Active Plus: apply GROW further

If you're thinking 'I've already got this,' congratulations: here's your Active Plus challenge. Just bear in mind that managers consistently overestimate their coaching skill, so you might like to start with an anonymous assessment of your coaching skills by your team.

Here's your Active Plus opportunity: apply the GROW model to yourself as well as your team. It's a highly effective way to self-manage, not just to use with other people.

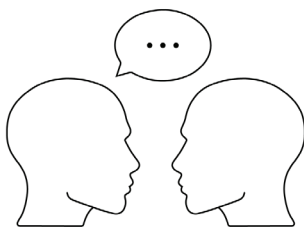
- Apply it to your own career:
- What's your long-term Goal? Promotion?
Developing the team?
- What's the current Reality? Where are you at and what's stopping you?
- What are your Options? How can you overcome your constraints and seize the opportunities?
- Finally, what Will you do? What's your next step and when will you achieve it by? How motivated do you feel about your decision?

You can use GROW alongside any formal personal development planning your organization might use with your team. Set up monthly sessions with your people to break their longer-term aspirations down into short-term GROW sessions.

You don't have to wait for The Coaching Session or even The Coaching Moment. You can practice your coaching skills every day. The great thing about people is that they'll present you with coaching opportunities or coachable moments pretty much all day. They call it their work.

At the conclusion of a piece of work or a meeting, whether it went well or not, ask your team member these three questions (you'll need to go into Active Mindset for this; pay close attention):

- How do you think that went? Invite them to step back and consider the outcome.
- Why do you think it went like that? Guide them towards the process.
- What will you do next time? Reinforce what works and correct what doesn't.



- ✓ How do you think that went?
- ✓ Why do you think it went like that?
- ✓ What will you do next time?

There are lots of follow-up questions, but the point is to get them to see how the process contributed to the result. People can't always directly affect the result, but they can always affect the process.

And of course, you should include yourself: ask yourself those three questions after every coaching session.



Exercise

Take five minutes to do Active Coaching on at least one occasion every single day.

Breakthrough Moment: Higher level use of the GROW model

When Kai noticed that Malia was struggling with a long-term project to build a seamless user interface, she scheduled a coaching session using the GROW model. They began by discussing Malia's goal: delivering a user-friendly design that met client needs. Malia admitted feeling stuck, overwhelmed by the complexity of integrating new features. Kai shifted the conversation to "Reality," asking, "How's it working out so far?" Malia opened up about how she was getting bogged down in perfecting small elements rather than focusing on the bigger picture. Kai provided gentle feedback, pointing out that while attention to detail was one of Malia's strengths, it was holding her back in this case.

As they moved to "Options," Kai encouraged Malia to brainstorm ways to break the project down. Malia suggested prioritizing key features first, and Kai guided her through potential approaches with open questions like, "How would this affect your timeline?" Seeing Malia's enthusiasm build, Kai pushed further: "What will you do next?" Malia committed to a new approach: focusing on core functionality first and revisiting details later. They wrapped up by agreeing on a weekly check-in. Malia left the session with a clear action plan and renewed confidence, knowing she had the space to experiment and grow while still being supported.



PRACTICE

- Engage your Active Mindset as often as possible to decide whether to ignore, direct or enable
- Practice the Coaching Moment at least once a day
- Start setting up GROW sessions with your team
- Apply the GROW model to yourself

OUTCOMES

Here are some examples that illustrate the power of coaching from people who have finished the Active Manager Program:

I'm better at giving my people my full attention, and I'm not telling them the answer, we're talking things through and I'm guiding them to learn."

"There's less stress for me when it comes to training people because I'm able to let them hit the nail on the head rather than trying to control the whole process."

FURTHER READING

HBR Guide to Coaching Employees, HBR (2014).

A Manager's Guide to Coaching: Simple and Effective Ways to Get the Best From Your Employees, Brian Emerson and Anne Loehr, AMACOM (2008).

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'The Leader as Coach: How to Unleash Innovation, Energy, and Commitment', Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular, *HBR* (November—December 2019).

‘Leadership That Gets Results, Daniel Goleman, HBR (Mar–Apr 2000).

‘What Learners Want: Strategies for Training Delivery’, Training Industry Inc. report (2021).

THE GROW GUIDE

The model was originally developed in the 1980s by performance coach Sir John Whitmore.

G – Establish the Goal

- Ask what they want to achieve.
- Think beforehand about what you think they could achieve.
- It should be a stretch goal (what they can’t get to with their current behavior).

R – Current Reality

- Ask your team member to describe their current reality.
- Useful coaching questions in this step may include the following:
- What is happening now (what, who, when, and how often)? What is the effect or result of this?
- Have you already taken any steps towards your goal? How have they worked out?
- Does the goal conflict with any other goals you might have?

O – Explore the Options

- Help your team member brainstorm as many possible options for reaching their objective. Then discuss these and help them decide on the best ones.
- Offer your own suggestions but let your team member offer suggestions first and let them do most of the talking.
- Guide them in the right direction but don't make their decisions for them.
- Typical questions that you can use to explore options are as follows:
 - What else could you do?
 - What if this or that constraint were removed? Would that change things?
 - What are the pros and cons of each option?
 - What factors or considerations will you use to weigh the options?
 - What do you need to stop doing in order to achieve this goal?
 - What obstacles stand in your way? And how might you get past them?
 - The point is to help them find the answer that works for them.

W – Establish the Will

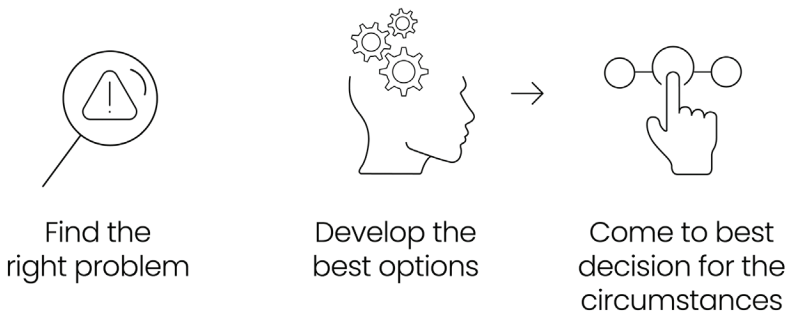
- Get your team member to commit to specific actions in order to move forward towards their goal.
- Useful questions to ask here include:
 - What will you do now, and when? What else will you do?
 - What could stop you moving forward? How will you overcome this?
 - How can you keep yourself motivated?
 - When do you need to review progress? Daily, weekly, monthly?
 - Decide on a date when you'll both review their progress.

BETTER DECISIONS

“The Active Manager Program brought cohesiveness to our approach to problems. It set the groundwork for that next level of growth.” - Steve

Good decision-making is a cornerstone of strong leadership. By applying your *Active Mindset*, you’ll sharpen your ability to observe and refine your problem-solving approach, building that invaluable asset: good judgment.

This means tackling the real problem, weighing the best options, and choosing the path that maximizes value. Remember, a perfect solution that’s unworkable is no solution; good judgment is often about choosing the “next best” option. In this chapter, we’ll cover how to pinpoint the true problem, generate effective options, and make the best decision for each situation.



Decisions rarely turn out exactly as we expect. Our ability to predict the future is limited, and we often make it worse by failing to clearly define and address the real problem. Instead of digging deeper, we stop gathering facts, overlook potential outcomes, and rely on assumptions. Archaeologist Leo Klejn put it well: assumptions are like escalators—they take you to the next level before you realize it.

This chapter will teach you to think beyond the surface of a problem. You'll learn to assess context, gather what's essential for decision-making, and compare options. Strong problem-solving and decision-making skills help you anticipate outcomes more accurately and make better judgments about what really matters.

With these tools, you'll gain confidence in your decisions, take ownership, and be ready to tackle more strategic and complex challenges.

FRICK'S RULES FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

A good decision is the one that best solves a problem.

A good decision starts with recognizing that there is a problem. Sometimes we try to just avoid the problem. We unconsciously decide to *not* decide. The signs of a problem might be there but we don't see it, either because we're not paying enough attention, or because we've chosen to treat it as normal ('it is what it is').

Sometimes, we get fixated on a problem, and adrenaline and anxiety take over, clouding our judgment. We start to oversimplify, falling into 'all-or-nothing' thinking when what we really need is a more analytical, detached approach.

We also often end up treating symptoms rather than the root cause. Root Cause Analysis can help, and it's as simple as asking "why" five times. Start with the issue in front of you and keep digging by asking why each outcome happened until you reach the core problem. This process activates an Active Mindset, pushing you past surface-level symptoms to the real issue.

Solving the right problem is half the battle, but we still need smart solutions. Management author Walter Frick offers three rules to guide us toward better decision-making.

Rule 1: Be less certain about everything

According to Frick, this applies especially to men, rich people and experts.

Typically, nothing plays out the way you think it will. Certainty kills thought (i.e. you stop thinking if you believe you've got the answer).

Take the time to think about how you could be wrong. This is an Active Mindset activity: your impulse will be to feel comfortable with the decision, and you won't want to think about how you might have got it wrong. The best way to be less certain is to engage with the different working styles in your team, especially your opposites (as discussed in the Working with your team chapter). The Guardian will often help a Pioneer make a solution more practical and workable. The Integrator perspective will help the Driver achieve team buy-in. I try to follow this rule: 'being a Pioneer I am always too optimistic'.

Rule 2: Ask 'How often does that typically happen?'

Being data-driven gets you away from the specifics of the case (the 'inside view'). It also helps you avoid being swayed by short term emotion – as Klejn says, examples can prove anything you want, and there is always a counterexample.

Instead look for data as evidence about the problem. A statement that 'our billing system doesn't work' can turn into 'we have accuracy problems with the 2% of our billing that is direct debit' when you probe for evidence and data (that's a true story). Good questions include:

- How often?
- How much?
- How many?

Think about similar cases to get some principles before considering the specifics. For example, when we're thinking about whether we'll have a unit produced on time, we should start with how often we've achieved that. That will improve the accuracy of our prediction for next time.

Listen for 'all or nothing' statements and 'either or' choices. According to decision-making author Paul Nutt, 30% of teenagers give themselves only two choices, as do 29% of companies. Two-choice decisions fail 52% of the time versus 32% of two-plus choice decisions.

Rule 3: Think in probabilities.

How likely is a certain outcome? Nothing is 100% certain, so you're making a prediction.

Active Mindset decision-making is grounded in probabilities – how likely is it that something will occur as you've predicting. You don't have to assign a statistical probability like a weather forecaster; thinking in terms of high, medium and low likelihood is enough. It also provides you with some protection if it goes wrong – you're saying 'there's a strong likelihood' rather than 'this will certainly happen.'

Rule #1: Be less certain about everything

Rule #2: Ask 'How often does that typically happen?'

Rule #3: Think in probabilities



Exercise

How could you improve your problem-solving and decision-making using Frick's rules?

Breakthrough Moment: Taking a step back

Charlie, a project lead at a fast-growing tech company, was known for her enthusiasm and quick decision-making. However, when her team faced consistent delays in product releases, she realized that her go-with-your-gut approach wasn't delivering the results they needed. She took a step back and decided to approach the situation using an Active Mindset, starting with the basics of problem-solving: was she even addressing the right problem? Charlie initiated a Root Cause Analysis, repeatedly asking "why" until she uncovered the true issue: her team's processes were built for speed but lacked checks for quality control. Addressing this helped her focus on the real challenge, not just the visible symptoms like missed deadlines.

She then applied Frick's rules to refine her decision-making. Rather than jumping to solutions, Charlie started asking her team how often the delays occurred and in which stages they were most common. It turned out that only a small subset of their projects faced bottlenecks, specifically those involving new and untested software components. This insight allowed Charlie to focus efforts on refining those processes. As she learned to think in probabilities, she managed the team's expectations better, framing outcomes as "likely" rather than certain. The result? Improved accuracy in forecasts and a more realistic approach to project timelines, making Charlie's leadership more effective and her team more productive.

BREAKTHROUGH PRINCIPLES FOR PROBLEM-SOLVING

In addition to Frick's three rules for decision-making, here are a few of our own.

Is it fit for purpose?

“Fit for purpose” is our core standard for quality—no more, no less. Quality means a product does exactly what it’s meant to do. A high-quality product meets its purpose perfectly, while a low-quality one fails—even if it’s well-made or expensive. For example, a Ferrari is high-quality as a sports car but would be terrible as an earth mover.

The level of completeness needed to be “fit for purpose” varies. A Ferrari needs 100% performance to be worthwhile. But an SUV, designed for versatility rather than speed, only needs about 80% on handling. Similarly, a published article must be flawless in grammar and spelling, while a podcast can be 80% polished without losing value to listeners.

Always keep “fit for purpose” at the forefront of decision-making. It’s not about cutting corners; it’s about finding the balance between over-delivering and under-delivering.

Who can help me?

When facing a problem or making a decision, look for people who can help, whether within your team or outside it. This requires acknowledging that you don’t have all the answers and that your problem is likely not unique. There’s usually someone with expertise that can deepen your understanding or offer a new perspective.

Compared to what?

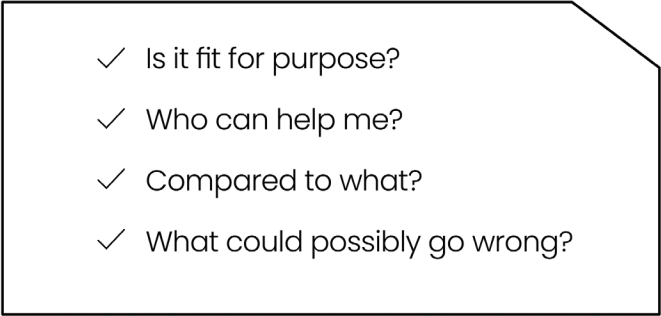
“Compared to what?” is a powerful question when evaluating a proposed solution, answer, or idea. If there’s only one comparison, you’re stuck with an either/or choice, which limits your options. This question reminds us that every solution has trade-offs, and none are perfect. It’s about understanding the range of choices, all of which come with their own limitations.

What could possibly go wrong?

Take time to consider what might go wrong. This is a valuable Active Mindset exercise: instead of focusing only on what could go right, deliberately explore potential pitfalls. Venture capitalists are familiar with this approach—they anticipate risks but often overlook the possibility of multiple risks happening at once. While you can't prepare for everything, having a “devil's advocate” can help you refine your approach. Healthy skepticism often leads to stronger solutions.

And in that context, there are three phrases that should set off alarm bells when you hear them (especially if it's you that's saying them):

- ‘With any luck’ – hope is not a strategy
- ‘Split the difference’ – it's not a better idea just because it's the average of two extremes
- ‘Just this once’ – you're about to take the first step on a slippery slope

- 
- ✓ Is it fit for purpose?
 - ✓ Who can help me?
 - ✓ Compared to what?
 - ✓ What could possibly go wrong?

Under What Circumstances

My wife Francesca came up with this. It's a great antidote to the always or never trap, because it's never never. There are circumstances under which your absolute just doesn't hold. ‘Under what circumstances would we change our

pricing model?’ ‘Under what circumstances would we refuse a customer request?’

It’s a great way to open situational thinking and get really clear about the boundaries of our policies and behavior.



Exercise

Take a current problem and apply these rules. What impact do they have on how you were thinking about your problem?

Breakthrough Moment: Fit for purpose

When Maia, a department head at a regional healthcare provider, faced delays in rolling out a new patient management system, she decided to refine her decision-making approach. She realized that the team’s habit of perfecting every feature was leading to missed launch dates. Applying the principle of fit for purpose, Maia asked herself, “Does this feature need to be flawless, or is 80% enough for implementation?” By shifting the team’s focus to delivering what was necessary rather than perfect, they saved time and kept the system improvements on track.

Recognizing that she didn’t have all the answers, Maia reached out to a consultant with experience in healthcare IT systems. This outside perspective helped her identify new ways to streamline the rollout without sacrificing patient care. It reinforced her belief in the value of seeking help and gave her fresh insights on balancing quality with speed. Maia’s openness to learning and commitment to “fit for purpose” enabled her team to meet their deadlines without compromising service quality, strengthening her leadership and the department’s performance.

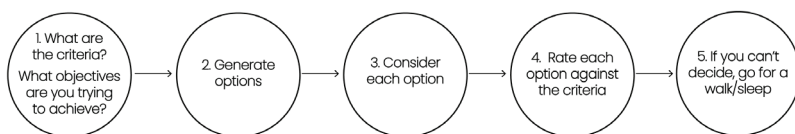
HOW TO MAKE BIG DECISIONS

You've done the problem analysis, now you have to make some decisions. Here's how we make big decisions. We often use a spreadsheet to help us capture the process because it forces us into an Active Mindset.

Let's say you're trying to decide on an app for a new microlearning program. Here's how you might go about it:

- What are the criteria? What objectives are you trying to achieve? For example, you might want a solution that is widely used, easy for learners to use and well supported (there might be a host of technical requirements, but you've agreed that these are the top priorities). If you find it helps, assign a weighting to these criteria based on their importance (for example 20% for widespread use, 30% for support, 50% for ease of use).
- Generate options. How do competitors deal with the issue? What have you seen work in similar situations? Brainstorm with knowledgeable people to get as many options as you can.
- Consider each option. Don't just take the path of least resistance; favor the right option over the easy one. Talk with your team and ask for views from people opposite you on the Working Styles wheel from Working with Your Team chapter. Address questions like:
 - How reversible is the option (see Active Plus)?
 - What will we regret most about this option in six months?
 - How important will this seem in six months?
 - Rate each option against the criteria – and make sure you apply the criteria consistently. Klejn again: weigh pros and cons on the same set of scales.
- If you can't decide, go for a walk/sleep on it. Let your brain do the sifting while you do something

else. Even better, sleep on it. It will be clearer in the morning because your brain has had time to lose all the frippery.



You'll likely give more weight to certain criteria without even realizing it. For instance, you might pass over an option that ranks highest in usability and support just because it's not widely adopted. This tendency is called a *revealed preference*—in this case, it shows that popularity is actually your top priority.

However, be cautious: sometimes our revealed preferences are actually biases—judgments made without sufficient evidence. If you have a personal favorite, put it under extra scrutiny. Stress-test it to ensure your choice isn't driven by assumptions or outdated information.

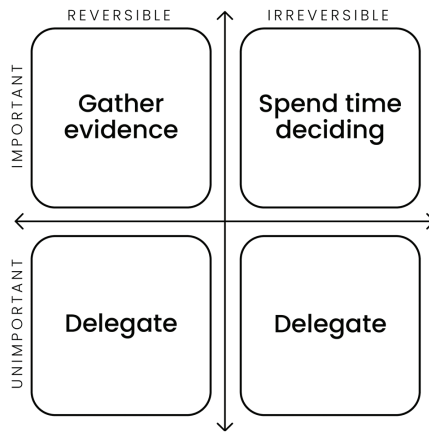


Exercise

Run your current problem through the five steps, or review a recent decision. Did you follow these steps? What would you do differently next time?

ACTIVE PLUS: SIGNIFICANT AND/OR REVERSIBLE DECISIONS

Shane Parrish at Farnam Street blog developed a model we've used a lot for decisions and for coaching managers on decisions. He has a nice matrix based on how significant and/or reversible the decision is, and what to do in each of the four cases:



Source: Shane Parrish, Farnam Street Blog

Most of your decisions will be simple, but some will carry lasting consequences. These big-impact decisions need time, space, and a deliberate approach. Many crises arise because we made choices reactively, without pausing to engage our Active Mindset.

We make countless decisions every day, so time is tight. The first step to better decisions is to pause, observe, and choose - use your Active Mindset. McKinsey research shows that even a brief pause of 50-100 milliseconds helps the brain focus on relevant information.

Create more time by delegating inconsequential decisions, whether they're reversible or not. The 80/20 rule applies: only 20% of your decisions will lead to 80% of the consequences. Ask, "How much does this matter?" If the answer isn't "A lot," hand it off to your team. This lets them learn and frees you up for high-value decisions. Just be sure to review their choices with them, so they improve over time.

For consequential but reversible decisions, embrace the chance to experiment. Monitor the outcomes closely. If something isn't working, reverse it quickly—the longer you delay, the messier it becomes. But if it's working well, commit fully—don't settle for small wins.

Develop this skill by reflecting on which facts and data points had the most impact on your decisions. Identify the 20% of factors that drove 80% of the results. As you refine this ability, you'll cultivate that rare, valuable skill: strategic thinking. This approach will serve you well for both reversible and irreversible high-stakes decisions. Follow the rules from this chapter and, most importantly, give yourself time to make thoughtful, impactful choices.



Exercise

Start a decision journal for the consequential/reversible decisions. What do you expect to happen, why do you think that, how do you feel (physically and emotionally)? And then record what actually happened.

Breakthrough Moment: Making big decisions with an Active Mindset

Alex, a senior product manager at a tech startup, faced a major decision when his company needed to choose an app platform for a new microlearning program. Seeing that this decision was highly consequential and not very reversible, Alex used a structured approach to guide him. He first listed the key criteria: ease of use for learners, support quality, and market reach. Assigning weightings to these, he aimed to ensure his decision focused on what truly mattered to the company's goals. Alex then brainstormed with his team, listening to their perspectives and discussing potential options.

To avoid bias, Alex stress-tested his personal preference by evaluating it against others on the same criteria, questioning assumptions and potential blind spots. He even applied the 'sleep on it' rule, stepping away to let the options percolate in his mind. Alex's methodical approach allowed him to make a well-considered decision, resulting in smoother adoption of

the new platform and better user engagement from day one. By taking time to pause and reflect, he balanced speed with strategic thinking.



PRACTICE

- Apply Frick's Rules to your problem-solving or Breakthrough principles – choose one that you find most uncomfortable
- Look for root causes, not symptoms (use the five whys)
- Use your Active Mindset for every decision: pause, observe what's going on, then choose how you will make the decision
- Delegate all but the consequential decisions to your team – and review with them
- Regularly use your Time On (development time) to review your decisions and the results of your decisions – what were the 20% of facts/data that had 80% of the impact?

OUTCOMES

Here's some feedback we've received from people who went through the Active Manager Program and now use an Active Mindset to make better decisions:

"I'm getting better at strategizing by using data."

"More time to focus because I delegate inconsequential decisions."

"I'm more confident because I'm comfortable being uncertain of outcomes."

“The team can make decisions faster with less mistakes, but also we have a strong review/feedback process for any future updates.”

FURTHER READING

Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work, Chip Heath and Dan Heath, Crown Business (2013).

Business Think: Rules for Getting it Right — Now and No Matter What, Dave Marcum, Steve Smith and Mahan Khalsa, John Wiley & Sons (2003).

Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking, Malcolm Gladwell, Back Bay Books (2007).

The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders, Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, McGraw-Hill Education (2003).

Why Decisions Fail: Avoiding the Blunders and Traps that Lead to Debacles, Paul Nutt, Berett-Koehler Publishers (2002).

A Russian Perspective on Theoretical Archaeology: The Life and Work of Leo S. Klejn, Stephen Leach, Abingdon: Routledge (2016).

‘Decision-making in uncertain times’, Andrea Alexander, Aaron de Smet, Leigh Weiss, McKinsey, March 2020.

DEVELOPING YOUR PEOPLE

“I think it has impacted company culture as a whole. It has made us more confident in what we’re doing, and how we can work with our people to get the best results.” - Catherine

Finding great talent is a core challenge for any manager. Changing demographics have made this more difficult and it’s not going to get easier soon. While AI will reduce the need for talent in some areas, it will amplify it in others. With a shrinking workforce and economic growth, competition for skilled people remains fierce.

Keeping great people has always been tough, but it’s become even harder. Employees have more options, and many prioritize lifestyle and flexibility. One strong motivator for retention is a sense of progress and personal development at work—most people love to learn, and younger employees especially gravitate towards opportunities for growth. In his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink emphasizes that people are driven by autonomy (control over their work), mastery (improving and creating), and purpose (making meaningful contributions).



- ✓ Autonomy – Direct their own lives
- ✓ Mastery – Learn and create new things
- ✓ Purpose – Better ourselves and our world

Why It Matters

Investing in personal growth and development is key to leveraging the potential of your team, and it aligns with what

they desire most. While it requires effort and time—sometimes hard to find—it can transform your team’s contribution level. Developing your team leads to higher engagement and creates space for you to focus on strategic tasks.

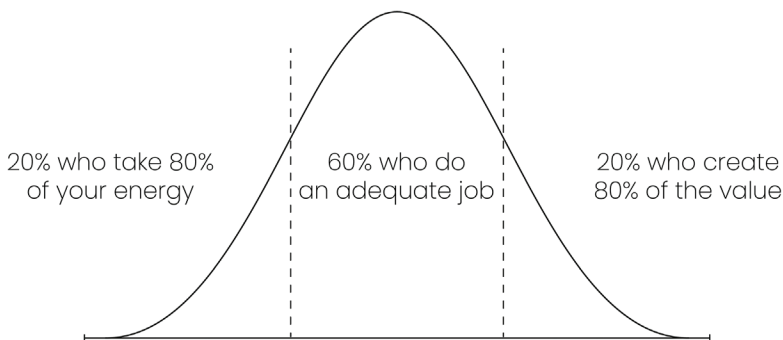
As the saying goes, “What if I train them and they leave?” But the real question is, “What if you don’t train them and they stay?”

WHO TO FOCUS ON

The main question for any good manager is: How do I get a better contribution from my people? The goal is to enable learning—a skill that unlocks all other capabilities. While you can’t push someone up a ladder they don’t want to climb, it’s your job to create an environment that shows them the ladder and encourages them to use it.

In your team, there’s likely a natural distribution:

- Top 20%: High performers creating most of the value.
- Middle 60%: Adequate performers with room for growth.
- Bottom 20%: Low performers consuming most of your energy.



Each group requires a tailored approach.



Exercise

Sketch out your team's performance distribution. Reserve the bottom tier only for those who are true performance challenges.

Breakthrough Moment: Creating opportunities

Jiang, a regional manager at a logistics company, faced the challenge of building a high-performing team in an industry with tight labor markets and fierce competition for talent. With limited options to hire new staff, Jiang recognized the importance of investing in the growth of her existing team. She knew that creating opportunities for development could keep her best employees engaged and boost their contributions. Inspired by the principles of autonomy, mastery, and purpose, she aimed to cultivate an environment where learning and growth were woven into the team's culture.

However, Jiang's team included a mix of personalities and ambitions. Some team members were highly motivated to take on new challenges, while others seemed content to stick to their current roles. Rather than get frustrated, Jiang focused on enabling learning for those who were ready and willing. She offered tailored development paths, from technical training to leadership coaching, and encouraged her people to see beyond their day-to-day tasks. By setting the right culture and offering a ladder for growth, Jiang watched as her most engaged team members started to take ownership of their learning, contributing new ideas and driving projects forward. It wasn't easy, but the payoff came when the team's increased capabilities gave her the bandwidth to focus on more strategic goals.

WHERE TO FOCUS YOUR TIME

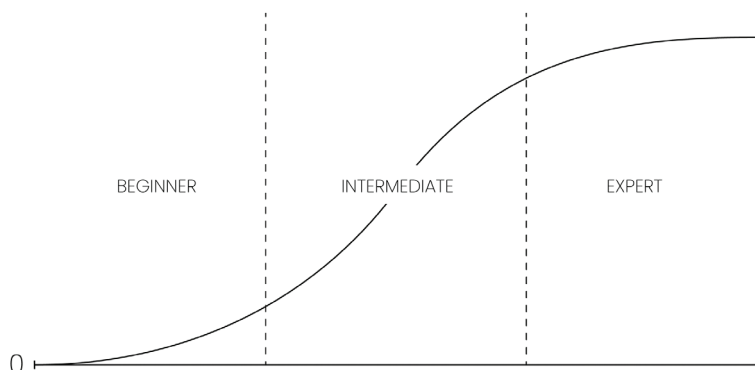
While it's tempting to spend your energy on your top performers, the best approach is often to enable them to

explore and grow independently. Reinforce their value, provide good challenges, and let them map their paths with your guidance.

With the bottom 20%, ensure they meet their core responsibilities without over-investing in changing them.

Take the time you would have spent with them and give it to the 60% in the middle so that you can move that distribution curve to the right.

People in this group aren't motivated only by rewards and recognition; they also want a sense of progress. The focus with the 60% is not on getting good, it's on getting better. This is an important point: with the 60% you're aiming for progress, not perfection. Better, not best. Even more important, you're looking for that progress all the time, continuously.



Your job is to shape a development path that presents the opportunity for people to make that progress. I always imagine a learning curve shaped like an 's'. At the bottom we're beginners, which usually lasts for about six months in most roles, then our expertise increases and we're intermediates; our skills and the challenges are in sync but we're still learning. After three to four years we become experts, and learning growth flattens off.



Exercise

Identify beginners, intermediates, and experts on your team. What skills do your intermediates need to advance?

Breakthrough Moment: Providing guidance and driving innovation

At a healthcare technology firm, Simon, a project manager, noticed that his top performers thrived when given the freedom to explore their own interests. Understanding the value they placed on autonomy, he encouraged them to set personal goals and work on projects that aligned with their career aspirations. Instead of closely managing their every move, Simon provided guidance when needed and regularly acknowledged their contributions, allowing them to drive innovation within the team.

Simon also recognized that he was dedicating too much time to a small number of team members who consistently showed low engagement. He decided to focus on ensuring they met their core responsibilities without investing additional energy in trying to change their mindset. This shift allowed Simon to redirect his efforts towards the 60% of his team who had potential but needed encouragement to reach the next level.

For this middle group, Simon developed tailored growth plans, setting incremental progress goals and offering opportunities for continuous learning. He aimed for improvement rather than perfection, understanding that small steps forward could make a big difference over time. This focus on steady growth helped shift the team's performance upward, resulting in a more motivated and capable workforce.

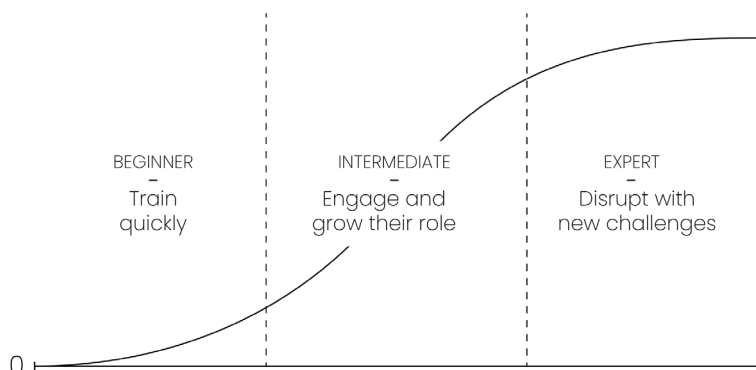
YOUR ROLE AS A MANAGER

The initial challenge is helping beginners quickly move up the learning curve—this is where training comes in. For intermediates, your role is to engage and challenge them so they don't plateau.

Your job with the experts is to disrupt them. Charles Handy says life is a series of 's' curves – we jump from one to another. Find new challenges inside their role that send them back to the beginning of the learning curve, so they have to start from scratch. Ask them to think about the Future of Work and how technology might affect their role – in fact, how might they adapt their role to move ahead of the change curve.

The other growth opportunity is to look outside their technical skill and consider their development stage in different aspects of their job. They might be 'high intermediate' on their technical skills, for example, but much lower in productivity and other skills. We are always at different levels on different learning curves – for example, I'm an expert writer but I'm an absolute beginner in content management.

One of the things to consider with your experts is to delegate more of your work to them. This has the advantage of freeing you up to add more value as well as giving them something new to master.





Exercise

For each person, identify their next challenge and how you can get them started on it.

CREATE A LEARNING MINDSET

Here's how you create a learning mindset in your team (and yourself):

- Adopt a teacher identity: You're there to inspire and enable, not just direct.
- Start with 'skills that can be learned': Create a growth mindset.
- Embrace mistakes: Welcome them as learning opportunities.
- Praise effort over results: Reinforce processes and persistence.
- Teach what you've learned: Share your knowledge and experiences.



- ✓ Use 'These are skills that can be learned'
- ✓ Learning is going to be a struggle
- ✓ Welcome mistakes but don't tolerate not learning from them
- ✓ Talk to people about how they performed
- ✓ Praise for effort, not results
- ✓ Teach what you've learned



Exercise

Schedule one conversation per week with each team member focused on their current challenges. Reflect on what you learned about enabling them.

Breakthrough Moment: Tailoring development to skill sets

Lars, a manager at a growing tech company, understood that investing time in training his beginners would pay off. He focused on guiding new hires through their initial phase, knowing that the more effort he put in now, the less support they'd need later. This approach allowed his new team members to become productive faster, ultimately saving time down the line.

For the intermediates - those good but not great performers - Lars aimed to keep them growing. He introduced new challenges and responsibilities, offering training that nudged them beyond their comfort zones. By identifying areas for growth and guiding their development, he helped these team members push past a plateau.

With the experts, Lars kept them engaged by assigning challenges that disrupted their routine and reignited their passion for learning. He encouraged them to think about the future of their roles, pushing them to adapt and innovate. Delegating some of his own tasks provided these experts with fresh opportunities, while also freeing up Lars to focus on strategic priorities.

CREATE FEAR-FREE FEEDBACK

Feedback is essential for learning. Mistakes are events, not personal failings. Honest, timely feedback promotes growth, even when it's uncomfortable.

Feedback rules:

- Make feedback fast, frequent, and constructive.
- Focus on behavior, not the person.
- Praise progress as often as you critique.
- Provide feedback immediately after performance.

- Use the Buddha's guide: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?

ACTIVE PLUS: TEAM FEEDBACK

For further development, ask for team feedback on your coaching and feedback style. Apply what you learn to improve.



PRACTICE

Choose one of these practices (preferably the one that makes you most uncomfortable):

- Observe where people are at in their development
- Look for progress to praise as often as you can
- Praise people when you see them making an effort and learning
- Use the phrase 'these are skills that can be learned' as often as possible
- Provide fear-free feedback, positive and critical, immediately as it occurs to you

OUTCOMES

Here's what people have said about developing their people:

"I now praise progress, not just results, and see improved morale."

"I provide honest, growth-oriented feedback."

"I'm no longer afraid of difficult feedback conversations."

FURTHER READING

Why Motivating People Doesn't Work (and What Does) by Susan Fowler

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success by Carol Dweck

Drive by Daniel Pink

The Empty Raincoat by Charles Handy

MANAGING STRESS

“The impact of training our staff in these skills is reflected in our ability to cope with pressure and growth, and to not get overwhelmed.” Dane

Stress doesn't need much introduction. Here, we'll focus on:

- Managing stress in the moment.
- Practices to reduce exposure to stress.

Let's start with the big picture. Resilience is your ability to bounce back from setbacks or withstand pressure without breaking. But here's the truth: you're already resilient. Whatever worst-case scenario you imagine, you've handled something before, and you'd adapt again if needed.

In my life I have experienced violence in my childhood, 6 different primary schools, 8 different broken hearts, a broken marriage, family dysfunction, financial wreckage, 4 redundancies, cancer, a medical accident that left my wife with a disability, multiple knockdowns, lockdowns, takedowns and shakedown — you get the idea.

You've coped with your own version of this, because life deals us all tough hands sometimes (and we can make choices that don't work out). And we're fine, thanks. Or at least we're getting through it and going to be okay.

The focus here isn't about “building” resilience—it's about reducing stress, especially at work. Stress management is a skill, and this course will teach you:

- A quick de-stress technique.
- How to reduce work stressors.
- How to manage stress caused by others.

WORKPLACE STRESS

Workplace stress is real, and I've been through it myself (refer to the earlier list of setbacks). My reactions amplified it, and while I still experience stress, I've learned to manage it better.

Typical stress signals include:

- Shallow breathing or big sighs.
- Tense jaw, neck, or abdomen.
- Irritability and impatience.
- Fatigue or broken sleep.
- Rumination (obsessive, repetitive thinking).

Conflict is often a stress trigger. Anger stems from fear, and where there's fear there's stress, creating a spiral. Recognizing stress signals is the first step to switching from Reactive to Active Mindset. This awareness gives you a choice: manage the symptoms or address the causes.

Just to be clear, stress can be a useful warning sign. While that idiot in the carpark this morning upset you, that's not what's really stressing you. Sometimes stress arises not because of what's happening in the moment, but a build-up over time or perhaps what it triggers from your past. Understanding how that plays out is good self-awareness and may point you towards some issues you haven't resolved.

Breakthrough Moment: Stress pointers

Lisa, a mid-level manager at a manufacturing company, found herself increasingly irritable and reactive during work. She noticed her stress indicators—frequent sighing, jaw clenching, and obsessive thoughts—were affecting her focus and interactions with her team. After an unproductive conflict with a colleague, Lisa realized her stress response was escalating problems rather than solving them.

She began applying strategies from the Active Manager Program, starting with identifying her stress pointers and pausing to observe her reactions before responding. By practicing “pause, observe, choose,” Lisa replaced her reactive habits with thoughtful responses. Additionally, she implemented a five-minute mindfulness routine and started setting boundaries with colleagues by saying, “I’d love to help, but I can’t right now,” to prioritize her workload effectively.

These small but deliberate changes helped Lisa regain control. Her sleep improved, her team meetings became more productive, and she handled high-pressure situations with a calm and proactive mindset. By addressing both symptoms and causes of stress, Lisa transformed her work environment and strengthened her leadership.



Exercise

What’s currently stressing you at work? Where are these feelings coming from? (e.g., your thoughts, someone else’s actions, competing demands, or physical discomfort?)

CONTROLLING ATTENTION

The foundation of stress management is controlling your attention. Stress often drags you into past frustrations or future anxieties, leaving you in Reactive Mindset.

To break the cycle:

- Avoid: Ignoring stress doesn’t make it go away.
- Ruminate: Replaying “what if” scenarios fuels fear and aggravates stress.
- Transfer: Dumping stress onto others might help short-term but strains relationships.
- Detach: Step back, gain perspective, and choose your response.

Detachment exercise

When stress arises, ask yourself:

1. Is someone going to die?
2. Is this truly important?
3. Will it matter in 3 months?
4. Am I going to be okay?

Even these simple questions can disrupt stress spirals.

Breakthrough Moment: Detaching from the emotion

Sam, a project manager, often felt overwhelmed by the steady stream of interruptions during his mornings. One day, after receiving a curt email and being approached by three team members with minor issues in quick succession, Sam found himself spiraling. His thoughts bounced between past frustrations (“This always happens!”) and future fears (“I’ll never meet the deadline!”). He realized he was caught in a Reactive Mindset.

Instead of reacting, Sam paused and asked himself a few key questions: “Is anyone going to die? Will this matter in three months? Am I going to be okay?” This simple detachment exercise helped him disrupt his stress spiral and return to the present moment. From there, Sam prioritized the customer’s issue, delegated minor tasks, and calmly addressed the email later in the day.

By consciously managing his attention and detaching from the emotion of stress, Sam transformed what could have been a frazzled day into a productive one. This practice helped him see that stress is often about perspective, and with awareness, he could stay in control.

HOW TO DE-STRESS

Shift out of Reactive Mindset by pausing. Create space between the impulse and your response by shifting attention outward.

The BEAT Formula:

- **Breathe:** Low and slow, deep into your diaphragm. Start with a 5-count inhale/exhale and gradually increase to 6, then 7. Focus on the rhythm to reclaim attention.
- **Experience:** Observe your emotions, thoughts, and sensations as they pass. Picture them like trains entering and leaving a station.
- **Accept:** Don't resist your feelings. Resistance strengthens them, while acceptance weakens them. Use phrases like "This is how it feels to..." to name and defuse emotions.
- **Transition:** Shift your focus to something grounding—take a walk or reflect on gratitude. Remember: you are not your thoughts.



Exercise

Use the BEAT method on your biggest stressor right now.

WORKLOAD

Work stress often feels like overload:

- **Too much:** An overwhelming to-do list.
- **Too hard:** A daunting project.
- **Too soon:** A tight deadline.

This isn't always about actual workload but our perception of it. Active Mindset helps reshape that perception.

Too much

Overload often stems from unclear priorities. Steps to manage it:

- Get clear: List tasks and clarify expectations with your manager. If there's a mismatch between expectations and capacity, discuss:
 - Adjusting scope.
 - Extending timeframes.
 - Adding resources.
- Get help: Delegate tasks or hire short-term support. Longer-term, discuss increasing resources or dialing down expectations.
- Let go:
 - Follow the principle: *only do what only you can do*.
 - Ditch the distractions (phone alerts, unnecessary emails).
 - Let others step up—it's their growth opportunity.
 - Develop a ritual to mentally "close" your workday.
- Delegate:
 - Stop doing tasks someone else can handle (even if they're 25% less efficient).
 - Automate repetitive tasks.
 - Each time you take on something new, decide what you'll stop doing.
- Prioritize: Use tools like urgent/important or the rocks and stones method from earlier courses.

Too hard

Some tasks or projects feel overwhelming. Address them by:

- Getting help:
 - Involve your team to find alternative approaches.
 - Hire experts for their capabilities or solutions.
- Changing scope:

- Focus on the 20% of work that delivers 80% of value.
- Start with a minimum viable product (MVP) and refine.
- Pilot small steps to test progress.
- Breaking it down:
 - Identify the next smallest step.
 - Set a deadline for just that step.
 - Schedule time to act.

Too soon

Tight deadlines crush us when we:

1. Miss them and stress further.
2. Justify missing them and dodge accountability.

Better approaches:

- Get help: Shift scope, timeframe, or resources.
- Create space: Block uninterrupted time for deep work (Google CEO Sundar Pichai does this). Turn off notifications and focus.

Breakthrough Moment: Reducing overload

Amara, a senior marketing coordinator, felt constantly overwhelmed by her workload. Every day seemed packed with too much to do, including urgent campaign deadlines, complex client requests, and a flood of emails. Recognizing her stress was coming from a sense of overload, she decided to apply Active Mindset techniques.

She started by making a list of all her tasks and consulting her manager to clarify priorities. Together, they adjusted deadlines and delegated less critical tasks to team members eager for growth opportunities. Amara also let go of

distractions by silencing notifications and setting boundaries for focused work during her “Hour of the Important.”

By getting clear, asking for help, and prioritizing effectively, Amara transformed her sense of overload into a manageable plan. She delivered better results, stayed calm under pressure, and created space for higher-value work without burning out.



Exercise

Identify three ways to reduce work stress today.

ACTIVE PLUS: STRESS AND PEOPLE

People can be a major source of stress—interruptions, expectations, and their own stress responses. Here’s how to lower stress levels for both you and your team:

- Cut unnecessary meetings.
- Encourage regular, disciplined work hours.
- Stop sending after-hours emails, and they’ll follow your lead.
- Introduce meeting-free focus days.
- If intense work periods arise, be clear about the timeline—and reset normal hours quickly.

Show genuine concern for your team:

- Watch for stress signals or unusual behavior, especially in high performers who might mask their struggles.
- Schedule check-ins about them, not their tasks.
- Hold these check-ins outside the office—go for a coffee or walk.

For poor performers, address their issues early (refer to the Difficult Conversations chapter). For toxic colleagues or

managers, stay authentic, clear, and professional. Treat them how you want to be treated, even if they don't reciprocate.

If nothing works, ask yourself if the job is worth the stress. No job is more valuable than your health or relationships.



Exercise

Ask your team:

- “How do I get in the way of you doing your job?”
- “What can we do to reduce stress this week/month?”

Breakthrough Moment: Focus on what matters most

James, a team leader at a tech company, found his stress levels spiking due to constant interruptions from his team and mounting tensions with a difficult colleague. Acknowledging his role in the team's stress, James implemented small but effective changes. He stopped sending emails outside of work hours, introduced a weekly meeting-free day, and encouraged his team to define and stick to regular working hours.

To support his team emotionally, James scheduled one-on-one check-ins over coffee, focusing on their well-being rather than tasks. This helped his high performers open up about hidden pressures. For the difficult colleague, James applied clear communication and active listening strategies, but when the toxicity persisted, he leaned on the BEAT de-stress technique and reassessed the value of the relationship.

These steps improved team morale, reduced his stress, and provided clarity on what was within his control. By creating a healthier work environment and managing his own responses, James maintained focus on what mattered most—his team's success and his well-being.



PRACTICE

Three practices to work on:

- Catch yourself in moments of stress.
 - go to your senses
 - get the BEAT (Breathe, Experience, Accept, Transition)
- Help is all around. Get good at realising when you need it and then asking for it.
- Schedule time to have conversations with your people about them, not their tasks.

OUTCOMES

Here are the things that other people have gotten from this chapter:

“Identifying stress by knowing my stress pointers, managing that stress without avoiding it, and detaching from it and using the Active Mindset to find a solution.”

“That it’s normal to feel how I feel. I just need to channel it properly. As well as being better at asking for help and delegating.”

“Remembering what’s important for myself and my staff in terms of our mental and physical wellbeing.

Catching my thoughts when I’m becoming stressed.”

“Making time to talk to my team about them, rather than just their tasks. I realize now that’s just as important for productivity.”

FURTHER READING

How to Turn Everyday Stress into “Optimal Stress” by Jan Ascher and Fleur Tonies, McKinsey Notes, 2021.

The Emotionally Intelligent Office by The School of Life (2019).

PRACTICES SUMMARY

Active vs reactive

- Every time you begin a task, ask yourself 'is this something only I can do?' Practice the Active Mindset – pause, observe, choose

Manage your capacity

The suggested practices were about creating boundaries in your day. Choose one or more of these practices to work on:

- Use the phrase 'I'd love to but I can't'
- Commit to arrive and leave at set hours – agree it with your boss, be consistent
- Commit to weekly planning – define your three rocks and block out time for intense mental effort work
- Commit to daily planning – your contribution for today
- Schedule the Hour of the Important every day

Working with your team

- Actively observe their styles (and yours) at play – every day
- Actively seek out your opposite's opinion in their area of strength – every day

Meeting magic

- Say to yourself before each meeting, 'Chairing is a skill that can be learned, and the particular skill I'm going to practice is enabling everyone to contribute' – then do it
- Get uncomfortable: focus on using the re-railer you need the most but feel most challenged by

Lift your game

- Always ask ‘what does fit for purpose look like?’
- Commit to Time On
- Do your daily OUT (One Uncomfortable Thing)
- Implement and honour the Meeting Free Day with your team
- Develop your own personal career plan

Clear communication

There were a number of good practices for speaking clearly, choose the one the one that makes you most uncomfortable

Accept responsibility and act when you have an insight

- All of the Active Listening practices are good, but the best and hardest skill to develop is summarising – focus on getting better at this will unlock a lot of other great communication skills
- Set your default to calling or talking to people before you choose to email

Difficult conversations

Who do you need to have a difficult conversation with? Use the Difficult Conversations Cheat Sheet to prepare for it

- Practice these techniques ahead of having a difficult conversation. Get confident with them before you need them:
 - Adopt a learning mindset in conversations
 - Consider how you contributed to the issue
- When you get into more difficult conversations, practice one of the following:
 - Understanding you’re responsible only for yourself and your reactions: ‘I’ve got this’

- Recovering your ground – take three breaths and go into Active Mindset so you can choose your response

Smart delegation

Successful delegation means moving into Active Mindset: stop the impulse to just do it yourself and think for 15 seconds about questions like:

- Deploy your Active Mindset responses when you start to make excuses for not delegating
- For delegation tasks, be clear on ‘what by when’
- Ask yourself the Active Mindset question: Is this something only I can do? And then define the delegation path – how will you delegate this activity?

Coaching

- Engage your Active Mindset as often as possible to decide whether to ignore, direct or enable
- Practice the Coaching Moment at least once a day
- Start setting up GROW sessions with your team
- Apply the GROW model to yourself

Better decisions

- Apply Frick’s Rules to your problem-solving or Breakthrough principles – choose one that you find most uncomfortable
- Look for root causes, not symptoms (use the five whys)
- Use your Active Mindset for every decision: Pause, observe what’s going on, then choose how you will make the decision
- Delegate all but the consequential decisions to your team – and review with them

- Regularly use your Time On (development time) to review your decisions and the results of your decisions – what were the 20% of facts/data that had 80% of the impact?

Developing your people

Choose one of these practices (preferably the one that makes you most uncomfortable):

- Observe where people are at in their development
- Look for progress to praise as often as you can
Praise people when you see them making an effort and learning
- Use the phrase ‘these are skills that can be learned’ as often as possible
- Provide fear-free feedback, positive and critical, immediately as it occurs to you

Managing stress

Three practices to work on:

- Catch yourself in moments of stress.
 - go to your senses
 - get the BEAT (Breathe, Experience, Accept, Transition)
- Help is all around. Get good at realising when you need it and then asking for it.
- Schedule time to have conversations with your people about them, not their tasks.

“Thank you for taking the time to explore The Active Manager. It’s a privilege to share these ideas with you, and I hope they’ve given you the clarity and confidence to lead with purpose and impact.

Leadership is a practice - it takes courage, curiosity, and commitment. I’d love to hear how you’re applying these concepts in your role. Feel free to connect and share your journey.

Let’s get to work!”

— Dr. Mike Ashby

Leadership is a continuous journey. Here’s how you can keep building on what you’ve learned:

- Explore more actionable tools, tips, and strategies by visiting thebreakthrough.co.
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