

THE PASTURE WAS NEVER EMPTY · CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations

Chapter Ten of The Pasture Was Never Empty

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Chapter Ten of The Pasture Was Never Empty

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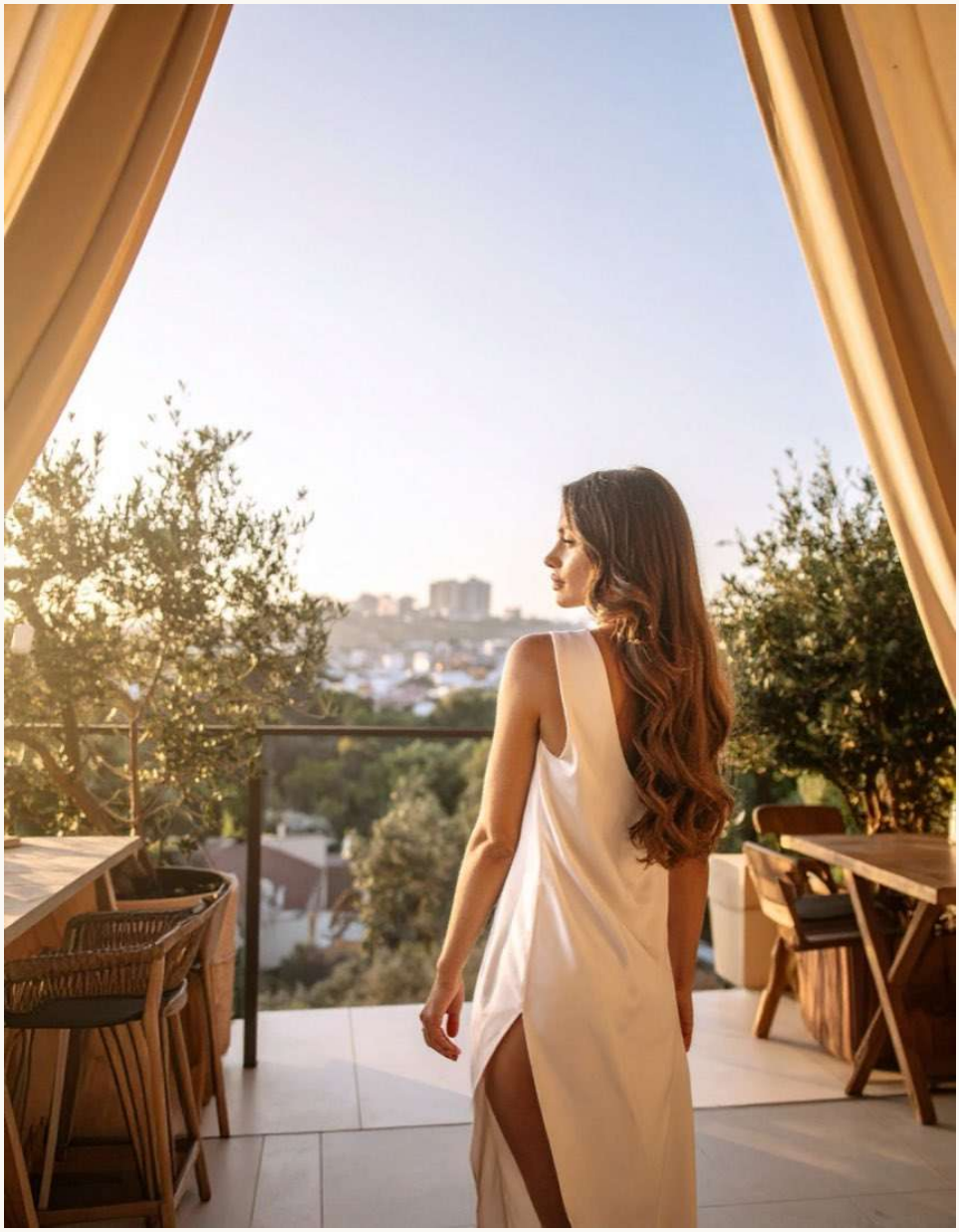
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ABSTRACT

Every commons in this book was governed by people talking. The herdsmen at Lloyd's gate, the farmers before the cathedral door in Valencia, the fishers of Alanya drawing lots each September: the institutions they built were, in the end, agreements reached in conversation and kept in conversation. A leader who wants to govern a commons inside an organisation will find the same. The charter, the ladder and the health sheet are written down after people have agreed. Getting them to agree is a series of conversations, and a few of those are hard. This chapter takes six of them: with a board, with finance or head office, with a union or works council, with business partners, with family, and with the sceptic who has read Hardin. For each it sets out the worry the other person brings, what is true in it, and a script. The scripts are written to be read aloud and then put away. Nobody should recite them. Their job is to give a leader a first sentence and an order of ideas when the conversation arrives, which is usually before the leader feels ready.

CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations



The Hard Conversations

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE PASTURE WAS NEVER EMPTY · CHAPTER TEN

Why the conversations are the work

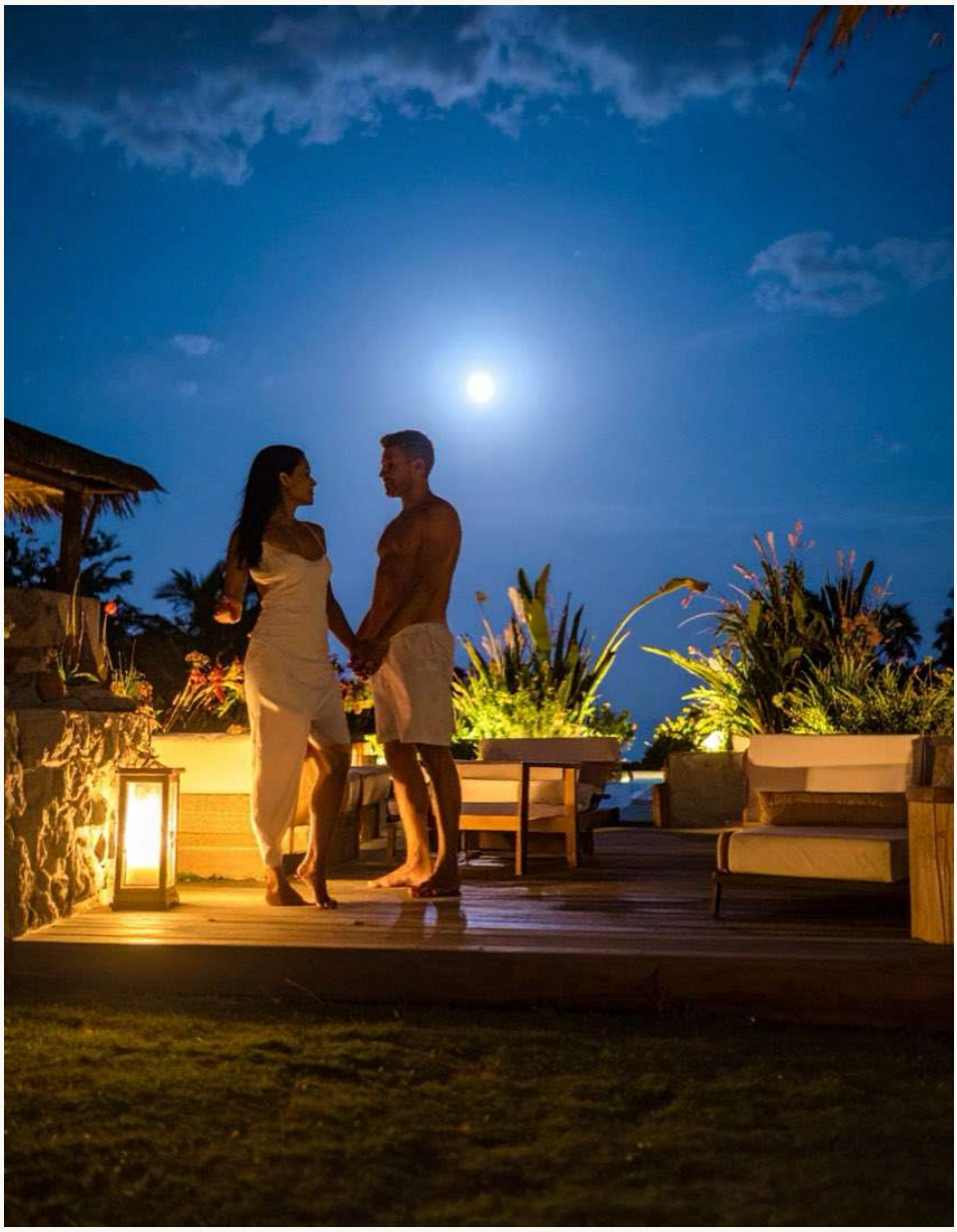
Every commons in this book was governed by people talking. The herdsmen at Lloyd's gate, the farmers before the cathedral door in Valencia, the fishers of Alanya drawing lots each September: the institutions they built were, in the end, agreements reached in conversation and kept in conversation. A leader who wants to govern a commons inside an organisation will find the same. The charter, the ladder and the health sheet are written down after people have agreed. Getting them to agree is a series of conversations, and a few of those are hard.

This chapter takes six of them: with a board, with finance or head office, with a union or works council, with business partners, with family, and with the sceptic who has read Hardin. For each it sets out the worry the other person brings, what is true in it, and a script. The scripts are written to be read aloud and then put away. Nobody should recite them. Their job is to give a leader a first sentence and an order of ideas when the conversation arrives, which is usually before the leader feels ready.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* gives the reason these conversations cannot be skipped:

> *People comply more willingly with rules they helped create.*[67]

The claim of this chapter is this: every hard conversation about a commons is easier when it begins with what is true in the other person's worry, shows them what they can already see, and offers them a role in the rule rather than a rule to accept. Each script below follows that order.



A word on posture

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A word on posture

The Luminous 100's reading of Crucial Conversations names the condition every hard conversation needs before technique matters: a relational field that holds more than one point of view at once without collapsing into the narrowest one present. In practice that comes down to three habits.

The first is to speak about the resource, not the person. "The bench worked nine evenings last week" is a fact the other person can look at with you. "Your team takes too much" is an accusation they must defend against.

The second is to bring something they can see. A shared view, a health sheet, a single number with its source, turns an argument about impressions into a conversation about evidence. Most hard conversations about a commons are hard because each side is describing a different part of something nobody has seen whole.

The third is to ask before proposing. The Luminous 100's reading of Nonviolent Communication supplies the question that does the most work in all six conversations:

> *what is the living system between us — our team, our family, our community — needing that neither of us is providing?*[68]

Asked sincerely, it moves the conversation from who is to blame to what the shared thing needs.

With a board

The worry. A board's job is to protect the organisation and its owners. A director hearing that a leader wants to hand the governance of a shared resource to its users will worry about three things: loss of control, loss of accountability ("who is responsible if it goes wrong?"), and a fashionable idea taking management time from the business.

What is true in it. All three are fair. Self-governance without accountability is not what Ostrom described; every one of her principles has someone accountable for something. The board does need to know who is responsible. And an initiative that cannot show a result in a quarter should not take a board's attention.

The script.

> *"I would like ten minutes on one shared resource that is costing us more than it should, and on how I propose to govern it. The resource is [the specialist bench]. Here is what it is costing now: [two people left in a year; nine evenings a week of overwork; about half of requests met within a fortnight]. These figures come from [source], and I can show the detail. The usual answers are a policy from the top or a charge-back system. We have tried the first twice. The evidence from research on shared resources, the work for which Elinor Ostrom shared the Nobel memorial prize in 2009, is that resources like this are often governed best by the people who use them, inside limits set from above. So I am asking the board to do three things. Approve the outcome I propose to hold the users to: [the total load and the overwork limit]. Note that I, as sponsor, remain accountable to you for that outcome. And allow the users to design the method for one quarter. At the end of the quarter I will bring back a one-page health sheet: the condition of the resource, how it was used, and whether the arrangements for catching problems are working. If the outcome is not met, the board can decide what happens next."*

The finer point. The script separates outcome from method and keeps the leader accountable for the outcome. That is principle 7 in a boardroom: the board does not lose control of what matters to it; it declines to control what does not. A director who still objects is usually objecting to the method being outside their sight, and the answer is the health sheet, not a defence of self-governance.



With finance or head office

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With finance or head office

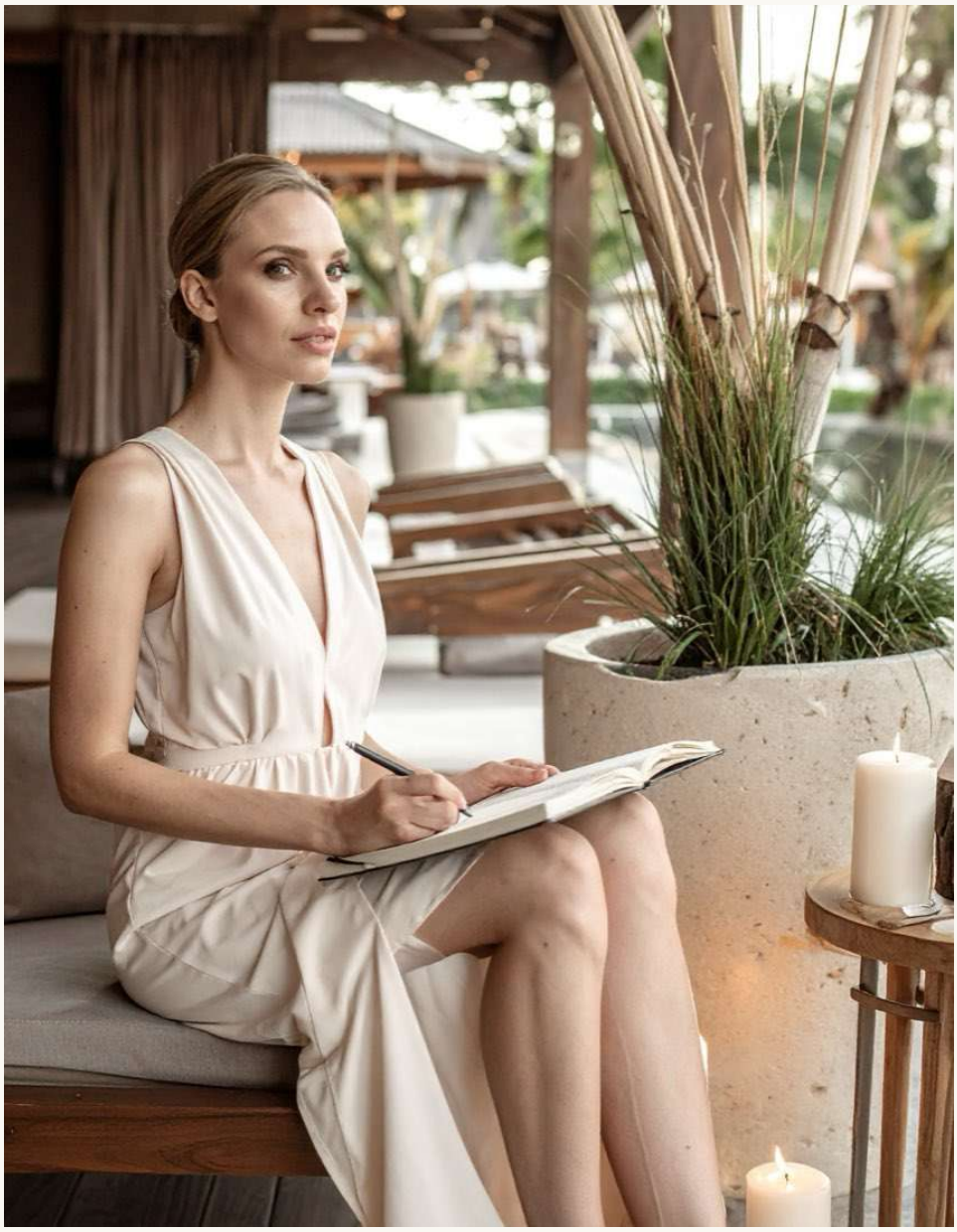
The worry. Finance owns the numbers and is held responsible when they go wrong. Its worry is that a budget divided among users who set their own rules will leak; that each team will spend to its allocation whether it needs to or not; and that finance will be blamed for an overrun it no longer controls.

What is true in it. An allocation can become an entitlement. Teams that fear losing next year's share will spend this year's, and a commons governed carelessly can be more wasteful than one held centrally. Finance also carries obligations, to auditors and regulators, that no team can take over.

The script.

> *"I would like to change how we govern [the cloud budget], and I want to do it with you rather than around you. At the moment nobody owns it, and you are left with the quarterly email and the freeze. Neither works for long, and both put you in the position of the person who says no. What I propose is this. You set the ceiling and the reporting you need; those do not change. Inside the ceiling, the six teams divide the budget among themselves, see their own spending daily, and agree how they will respond when one of them overruns. A small reserve stays unallocated for experiments and surprises. Two things protect you. First, an unspent allocation does not reduce next quarter's share, so nobody spends to protect a number. Second, you see the same daily view the teams see, and you are invited to the fifteen-minute review each week if you want to be. What would you need to see after a quarter to be comfortable with this?"*

The finer point. The script answers finance's real fear, the spend-it-or-lose-it habit, with a rule that removes the incentive. It gives finance the same information as the users, so that finance is not monitoring from outside but sees what the commons sees. And it ends by asking finance to set its own test, which turns a sceptic into a co-designer of the health sheet.



With a union or works council

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With a union or works council

The worry. Where employees are represented, any new arrangement touching how work is shared, allocated or monitored raises fair questions. Is this a way to intensify work under a friendlier name? Will the "monitoring" in the principles be used to discipline people? Who decided that this was a matter for the team rather than for collective agreement? Does the ladder of sanctions bypass agreed disciplinary procedures?

What is true in it. Monitoring can become surveillance, as Chapter 3 discussed. Sanctions designed by peers can fall harder on some than others. And an arrangement that gives teams discretion over a resource

can, if poorly designed, become a way of shifting management's problems onto workers. Representatives are right to ask.

The script.

> *"Before we change anything about how [the specialist bench's] time is shared, I want you to see what we have in mind and to have a say in it. The problem we are trying to fix is overwork: [nine evenings a week across eight people; two departures in a year]. The aim is to reduce it, and the measure we will be held to includes evenings worked. Three things we propose, and I would like your view on each. First, a shared view of how the bench's hours are used, by team, not by person. Its purpose is to show where demand comes from, not to watch individuals. Second, the specialists and the project leads agree together how the time is divided and what happens when a team asks for more than its share. The responses are about the team's requests, not about any employee's conduct. Nothing in this replaces the disciplinary procedure we have agreed with you, and we would like that written into the arrangement. Third, the specialists have an equal voice in changing the rules, and any rule can be raised for change at the weekly review. Would you be willing to look at the draft before it goes to the team, and to tell us what you would change?"*

The finer point. The script draws a clear line between the commons' ladder, which governs the use of a shared resource by teams, and the employment relationship, which is governed by agreement. It names the purpose of the monitoring and limits it to what that purpose needs. And it invites the representatives into principle 3 before the rules exist, rather than consulting them afterwards. Santa Anna's book gives the test such monitoring has to pass: observation that is

> *transparent, community-embedded*[67]

and not surveillance.

With business partners

The worry. Partners in a small firm, co-founders, the owners of a practice, share commons more intimate than any budget: each other's time, the firm's reputation, its cash, its best clients. A conversation about governing those is hard because it can sound like an accusation. "We should agree how we draw on the firm's cash" is easily heard as "you have been taking too much."

What is true in it. Sometimes one partner has been taking too much. More often each has a different, unspoken idea of what is fair, and the commons has drifted into an open-access arrangement in which each is quietly keeping score.

The script.

> *"I want to raise something that is not a complaint about either of us, and I would like us to decide it together. We share a few things that nobody owns: the cash in the business account, the time of [our one associate], the firm's name with [our two largest clients], and each other's evenings. At the moment we have no agreement about any of them except goodwill, and goodwill is doing a lot of work. I would like us to write one page. What each of us can draw without asking. What we each put back in. How we will tell each other early when one of us needs more, and what happens if we disagree. I will go first on what I think I have been drawing, and what I think I put back. Then you, and then we see where the differences are."*

The finer point. The leader goes first, naming their own use before anyone else's. That is the graduated response's first rung turned on oneself, and it makes the other person's honesty safer. The page that results is the One-Page Commons Charter from Chapter 6 at the scale of two people. The sibling volume on employee ownership takes up the larger version of the same question, when the partners are the whole workforce.



With family

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With family

The worry. In a family, the hardest commons are rarely money alone. They are a parent's time and care, the house where everyone grew up, the holiday home three siblings inherited, the attention of the one adult child who lives nearby. The worry a family brings to a conversation about governing these is that writing anything down will turn love into contract. "We don't need rules; we're family."

What is true in it. A family is not a firm, and a family that governs itself like one has lost something. Rules can harden relationships that were held by care. And some families do share well without a word written.

The script.

> *"I love how we look after [Mum / the cottage / each other], and I want it to stay easy. That is why I want to suggest something. At the moment it works because we are all being generous. But [I live closest and do most of the visits / two of us use the cottage most summers and one of us pays most of the repairs], and I can feel it starting to sit in me, and I would rather say so now than in five years. Could we spend an hour together, once, and agree a few things? Who does what. What each of us puts in. How we tell each other if it starts to feel uneven. And when we look at it again. It is not a contract. It is a way of making sure none of us has to keep quiet to keep the peace."*

The finer point. The script names the speaker's own feeling, plainly and once, and frames the agreement as protecting the relationship, not policing it. Santa Anna's book says what a well-held family commons offers its members, in its account of the nervous system's response to shared provision:

> *This is not dependency — it is interdependence*[69]

Chapter 11 takes the household commons further, with a charter written for a kitchen table.



With the sceptic who has read Hardin

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With the sceptic who has read Hardin

The worry. In every organisation there is a person who, on hearing the word *commons*, says: "Tragedy of the commons. Shared things get wrecked. Give each team its own budget, charge for everything, and let people be responsible for their own." Sometimes the person is senior. Often they are clever, and well read.

What is true in it. Hardin is right about open access. A shared resource with no boundary, no rules and nobody watching will often be overdrawn, as Chapter 2 set out. And privatising a commons, dividing it into separately owned pieces, sometimes does work: where a resource can be divided without losing its value, as Netting observed of Törbel's vineyards in Chapter 7, private holding may be the better arrangement.

The script.

> *"You're right about the open version, and that is what we have now: nobody owns [the bench], nobody watches it, and it is being overdrawn exactly as Hardin would predict. Where I part from him is on the cure. Hardin thought the only choices were to divide it up or to have someone above control it. Elinor Ostrom spent thirty years studying shared resources that people had governed themselves, some for centuries, and found a third option that often works better when the resource cannot be sensibly divided. And I don't think the bench can be. If each team owned an eighth of a specialist, nobody would get the specialist who knows the thing they need, and the eight specialists would stop learning from each other. So the test I'd suggest is practical. Can this resource be divided without losing what makes it valuable? If yes, divide it, and I'll help. If not, let's try the governed version for a quarter and measure it. Would you be one of the people who reads the health sheet at the end?"*

The finer point. The script agrees with the sceptic first, about something that is true, then names the precise point of disagreement, and ends by offering the sceptic a role in the test. Santa Anna's book describes the third option the sceptic has not considered as

> *neither the privatization solution of the right nor the regulation solution of the left.*[67]

A sceptic invited to read the evidence is usually a more careful reader than an enthusiast, and a commons is better for having one at the Thursday meeting.

When the conversation goes badly

Some of these conversations will go badly. A director will refuse; a partner will hear an accusation; a sibling will leave the room. A few principles help.

Stop before the conversation becomes a contest. A commons conversation that one side wins has already failed, because the loser will not keep the rule. Say what you heard, say you would like to come back to it, and set a time.

Return with the evidence, not the argument. The shared view, the health sheet and the single figure with its source do the persuading that more words cannot.

Offer a smaller scale. A board that will not approve a quarter may approve a month. A family that will not write a page may agree a single question to ask each other each season.

And accept the answer when it is genuinely no. Principle 3 cuts both ways. A group that declines to govern a commons in the way a leader proposes is exercising the very right this book is about. The Luminous 100's reading of Stakeholder Mapping replaces the strategist's question with a better one:

> *What gifts does each stakeholder carry that our initiative needs?*[70]

Sometimes the gift is the refusal, and what it teaches about the design.

The sibling volume on markets embedded in society reads Albert Hirschman's choice between exit and voice, which is what each of these conversations offers in miniature: a way for someone unhappy with a shared arrangement to speak rather than leave.

At Lloyd's pasture gate the herdsmen are talking, and not all of them agree. That is what the gate is for.



The Tool: The Conversation Cards

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The Tool: The Conversation Cards

Six cards, one for each conversation. Copy each onto an index card, fill in the blanks before the conversation, and keep it in a pocket. Do not read it aloud.

Every card has the same five lines.

What is true in their worry:

What they can already see (bring it): (a figure, its source, a shared view)

What I am asking for: (an outcome to approve, a role, an hour)

What stays theirs: (their control, their procedure, their veto, their relationship)

The question I will ask before proposing anything:

Card 1 · The board. Outcome I will be held to: . Method I am asking them to leave to the users for one quarter: . What I will bring back: the health sheet, on .

Card 2 · Finance or head office. Ceiling and reporting they keep: . Rule that removes spend-it-or-lose-it: . Their test after a quarter (ask them): .

Card 3 · The union or works council. What the monitoring is for, and what it is not for: . The line between the commons' ladder and the agreed disciplinary procedure: . The draft they will see before the team does: .

Card 4 · Partners. What I think I draw: . What I think I put back: . The page we will write together: .

Card 5 · Family. The feeling I will name, once: . What the agreement protects: . The one hour, and when: .

Card 6 · The sceptic. What Hardin got right about our resource: . Can it be divided without losing its value? . The role I will offer them in the test: .

After any card is used, write one line in the keeper's record: what was agreed, what was not, and when you will return.

A note on method

The scripts are this book's suggestions, not tested protocols. Where employees are represented, the law and the collective agreements of the jurisdiction govern what must be consulted on and how; a leader should take that advice before acting.

References

1. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*. Developmental Canon, Luminous Prosperity Inc., 2026, "The Revived Commons: Collective Stewardship of Shared Wealth."
2. Santa Anna, A. *The Luminous 100*, No. 82, "Nonviolent Communication (Marshall Rosenberg)," Luminous Upgrade. Luminous Prosperity Inc. The point about holding several views at once is paraphrased from No. 81, "Crucial Conversations (Patterson, Grenny, et al.)."
3. Santa Anna, *Ecstatic Economics*, "The Commons Revival: Shared Stewardship of Shared Wealth."
4. Santa Anna, *The Luminous 100*, No. 85, "Stakeholder Mapping," Luminous Upgrade.

The Hard Conversations

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