

THE STRATEGY THAT REACHES THE FLOOR · CHAPTER TWO

The Ball Thrown Back

The middle is where a target is most often lost, because the only direction it is allowed to travel is down.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

The middle is where a target is most often lost, because the only direction it is allowed to travel is down. It is ten to seven on a Thursday evening in November, and the regional manager is sitting in her car in the car park of the third hotel she has visited today. The engine is off. The windscreen has begun to mist at the edges, and the light from the hotel's lobby falls in a long yellow square across the tarmac beside her. On her phone is the email she has been waiting for since September: next year's targets for her twelve hotels, one line each, agreed by the executive team that afternoon. She is asked to cascade them to her general managers by Monday. She reads the list twice. Ten of the lines are hard and fair. Two are not. Both belong to hotels where she spent an hour this week, and at both the general manager walked her past a housekeeping rota that already runs two people short on a Saturday.

CHAPTER TWO

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Ten to seven, the car park

It is ten to seven on a Thursday evening in November, and the regional manager is sitting in her car in the car park of the third hotel she has visited today. The engine is off. The windscreen has begun to mist at the edges, and the light from the hotel's lobby falls in a long yellow square across the tarmac beside her. On her phone is the email she has been waiting for since September: next year's targets for her twelve hotels, one line each, agreed by the executive team that afternoon. She is asked to cascade them to her general managers by Monday.

She reads the list twice. Ten of the lines are hard and fair. Two are not. Both belong to hotels where she spent an hour this week, and at both the general manager walked her past a housekeeping rota that already runs two people short on a Saturday. The only way either hotel reaches its line is by cutting the hours that keep its rooms clean, and the strategy deck that came with the email says, on its second page, that next year is the year of the guest. Her stomach has the particular heaviness of a person who knows she will be the one to say the number out loud on Monday, to people she respects, and who does not believe it.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these evenings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. Anyone who has managed managers has sat in that car.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon describes her position with more precision than most management textbooks manage.[9] Writing about whose view of an organisation can be trusted, it says:

> *Middle managers occupy the most paradoxical position: they see enough to know that the view from the top does not match the reality at the bottom, but they often lack the authority to act on this knowledge and may be incentivized to smooth the discrepancy rather than surface it.*

This chapter makes one claim. The middle of an organisation is where a strategy is most often lost, and it is lost not because middle managers resist it but because the only direction most firms let a target travel is down. A strategy reaches the floor intact when the person in the middle is allowed, and expected, to throw it back with the truth attached.

Counter-effort

There is a familiar story about middle managers and strategy, and the research supports part of it. In 1986 William Guth and Ian MacMillan studied how middle managers responded to strategies they believed compromised their own interests.[10] Working from expectancy theory, they found strong if indirect evidence that such managers could redirect a strategy, delay it, reduce the quality of its implementation, or sabotage it outright. They gave the behaviour a useful name: counter-effort. It is the energy a person spends, quietly, making a decision she disagrees with turn out the way she expected.

The evidence is survey-based and the authors called it indirect, and it should be read that way. It has lasted because most executives recognise the pattern, and because it confirms what they already suspect: that the middle is where good strategies go to be slowed down.

What the study is less often read for is its cause. Counter-effort, in Guth and MacMillan's account, follows from a belief that one's interests are being compromised and that there is no other way to say so. The regional manager in the car park is not plotting. She is facing a choice between two kinds of counter-effort. She can pass the two lines down as they stand and watch the general managers find the hours somewhere the strategy will not see, or she can quietly soften them, adjusting what she asks of the two hotels and car-

rying the difference herself, and hope nobody notices in March. Either way the executive team will not hear what she knows. Santa Anna's canon describes the second choice with some tenderness: "The middle manager who carries the emotional burden of translating corporate euphemisms into human reality for their team, cushioning the impact of decisions they had no voice in making."

The canon also describes where the cushioning ends up. Writing about information in hierarchies, it observes that each layer filters what it passes upward to match what the next layer expects, and then states the result in a single line: "By the time a frontline reality reaches the C-suite, it may be unrecognizable." The two housekeeping rotas will reach the executive team in the spring as a variance on a line, explained in a sentence about labour markets.

Up, as well as down

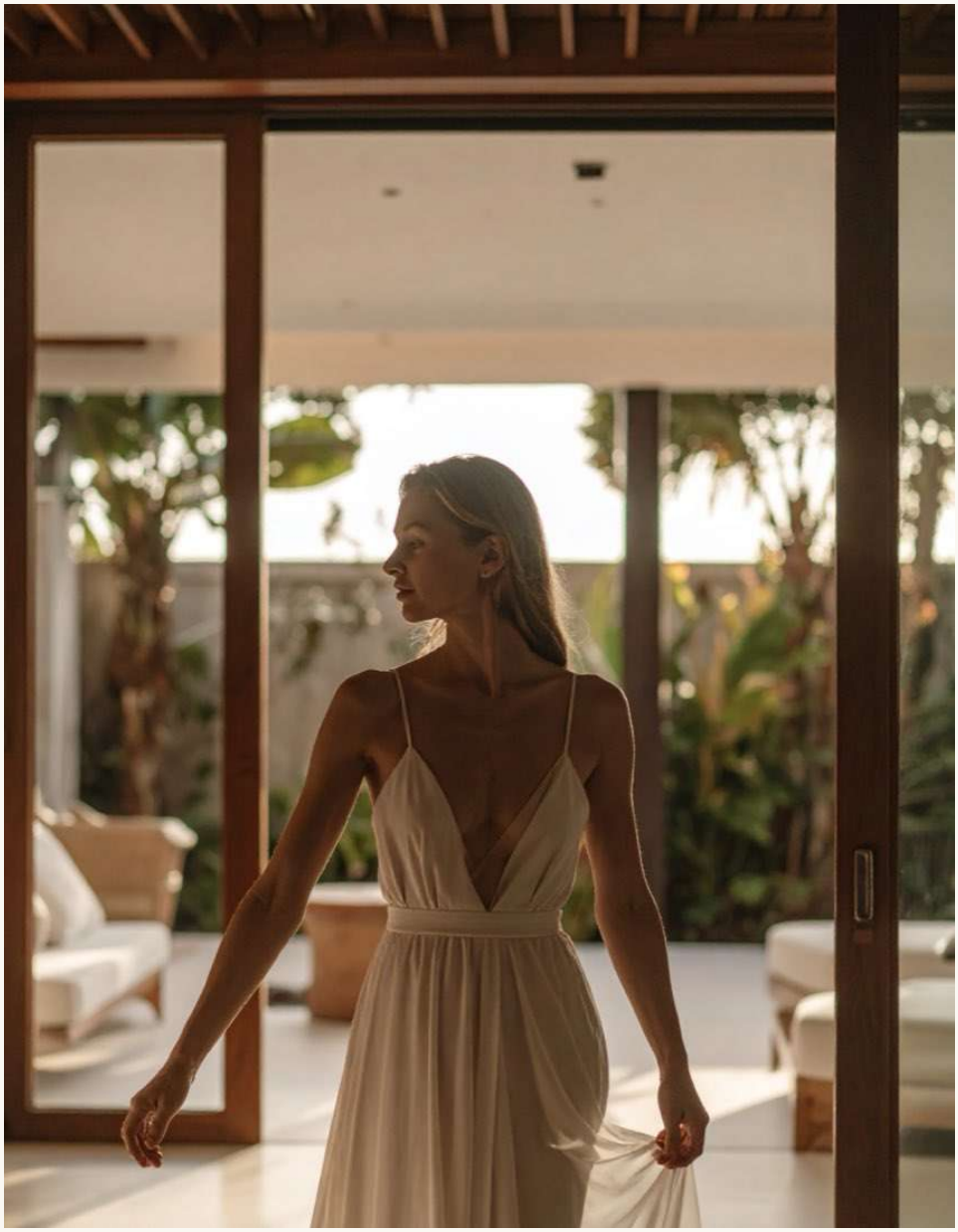
Through the 1990s two researchers, Steven Floyd and Bill Wooldridge, set out to describe what middle managers contribute to strategy beyond carrying it out. Their answer was that the contribution runs in both directions. In a 1992 research note they distinguished between the influence middle managers exert downward, implementing and facilitating, and the influence they exert upward, championing alternatives and synthesising information for those above them.[11] In 1997, studying 259 middle managers, they found that managers in boundary-spanning roles reported more strategic influence than others, and that firm performance was associated with more uniform downward influence and more varied upward influence across the middle-management cohort.[12]

The second finding deserves a careful reading. It is correlational, from self-report, and it does not show that upward influence causes better performance. What it does show is that in the better-performing firms in their sample, middle managers did not all push the same message upward. Some of them, at least, were sending back something different from what had been sent down. A firm whose middle managers all report that the targets are achievable is not, on this evidence, a firm with an aligned middle. It may be a firm with a quiet one.

A review of the field by Wooldridge, Schmid and Floyd in 2008 drew the same picture across two decades of work: middle managers as interpreters, sellers and synthesisers of strategy, not merely its conduits.[13] And Frances Westley, writing in 1990 about middle managers in bureaucratic organisations, described the particular moment at which this contribution is won or lost.[14] It is the strategic conversation between a manager and the person above her. Middle managers who are excluded from such conversations, she argued, become de-energised, and the exclusion is inefficient and in the end expensive. But inclusion alone does not guarantee energy: managers can be invited into the conversation and still leave it flat, if what they bring is not taken up.

Read the car park with those findings in mind. The regional manager has not been excluded from strategy; she has been sent it. She has, as Floyd and Wooldridge would put it, a boundary-spanning role: she walks

the hotels and attends the executive meetings. She holds precisely the information upward influence exists to carry. What she lacks is a channel through which a target can travel back up carrying the housekeeping rota. Without one, her knowledge becomes counter-effort or cushioning, and either way it is lost.



The work of holding two things

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The work of holding two things

There is a cost to the middle that does not appear in the research on strategy at all, and it is the cost the regional manager feels first. In a three-year field study of a large firm attempting radical change, Quy Huy

found that the middle managers who helped their groups adapt did two seemingly opposed things at once.[15] They committed emotionally to change projects they personally championed, and they attended carefully to the emotions of the people the change landed on. Low commitment to change produced inertia. High commitment with little attention to the people produced chaos. Doing both, which Huy called emotional balancing, was what allowed the organisation to change and still keep serving its customers well.

Huy's study is one firm, studied closely, and it should not be read as a law. But it describes something many managers will recognise as their working week. To pass the two lines down and also look the general managers in the eye on Monday, the regional manager must believe in next year's direction and also honour what the housekeeping rota is telling her. Holding both is work. It is done by the people a firm most depends on, and nobody budgets for it.

Santa Anna's canon, writing about what happens when promises are made under pressure, names the cost of not doing that work honestly. A commitment extracted under pressure, it says, "is not a genuine commitment. It is a performance of commitment, and the person making it knows the difference even if no one acknowledges it." The general managers who accept their lines on Monday without argument will have performed commitment. In March the performance will end.

The canon also describes, in the same chapter, the shape of the culture this produces when it is repeated year after year: "The result is a culture of broken promises that everyone expects and no one names." Every January the targets go down. Every December some of them are missed, by the margins the middle predicted. The board learns that the organisation is weak at execution. The organisation learns that the targets are not really meant.

Sense made sideways

If the middle cannot send what it knows upward, it does not stop knowing it. It talks sideways. In 2004 Julia Balogun and Gerry Johnson published a study of middle managers living through the restructuring of a large organisation, followed over many months through diaries and interviews.[16] Their finding, summarised here from the published study and not reopened for this book, was that the managers made sense of the change chiefly with one another, in informal conversations among peers, and largely in the absence of the senior managers who had designed it. What the restructuring came to mean on the ground was settled in those conversations, and it was not always what had been intended.

That is the regional manager's Friday, if nothing changes. She will ring the two other regional managers she trusts on the drive home. Each of them will have their own two lines that will not hold. Between them, in three phone calls, they will agree what next year's targets really mean, which ones are serious, which ones will be quietly adjusted, and what to say to the general managers so that nobody panics. It is the same corridor the house has described in [the meeting after the meeting]({{BOOK:orgdev-flow}}), moved into a car and spread across a region. It is intelligent, and it is invisible to the people who set the targets.

The sideways conversation is not a failure of loyalty. It is the system doing what living systems do when a channel is blocked: finding another one. The canon names the general pattern in its chapter on information, in the line already quoted, and the practical consequence follows from it. A firm that wants to know what its middle knows has to give the knowledge a road upward that is quicker and safer than the phone call on the drive home. Otherwise the phone call wins, every November.

A ball, and a hand to catch it

There is a long-standing management practice built for exactly this, and it comes from Japan. Hoshin kanri, often translated as policy deployment, grew out of Japanese quality management in the 1960s and was set out in English by Yoji Akao in a book first published in 1991.[17] At its centre is a process the Japanese practitioners called catchball. A goal is not handed down. It is thrown, with its reasons, to the level below, which considers what it would take, what it can offer and what it would need, and throws it back. The ball goes back and forth until both levels hold a target they believe, and the plan to reach it. Alongside it runs nemawashi, a gardener's word for preparing the roots before a tree is moved: the patient, one-to-one conversations in which a proposal is tested with the people it will affect before anyone is asked to decide.

Barry Witcher and Rosie Butterworth studied hoshin kanri in practice over two years in three Japanese-owned manufacturing subsidiaries in Britain, and published their findings in 2001.[18] They described it as a framework that links the achievement of top management goals with daily management at the operating level, translating policy objectives into targets for quality, cost, delivery and education. They found it participative in how objectives are developed and deployed, and driven by a process of review; they also found it hard to sustain through changes in people and organisation, and difficult to administer across departments. In the same year Ceri Tennant and Paul Roberts published a study of how the catchball process itself is implemented.[19] The research is case work in a small number of firms, and much of the wider writing on hoshin kanri comes from practitioners and consultants. What it supports is the description of the practice and its difficulties, not a measured effect on results.

What catchball changes is the direction a target is allowed to travel. The house's Luminous 100 makes the same point about the most popular modern goal framework, objectives and key results, in its own language: it says that living-systems awareness "reveals that cascading OKRs down the org chart is a mechanistic practice that fragments the living whole". A target that only falls cannot learn anything on the way down. A target that is thrown and returned carries information in both directions, and the return is where the information is.



The car park, on Monday

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The car park, on Monday

Picture the regional manager doing it differently. On Monday morning she does not cascade the twelve lines. She sends each general manager the line for their hotel with the two pages of the strategy deck that explain it, and asks three questions, to be answered by Wednesday on a single page: what it would take to reach this line with what you have now; what you could reach if one thing changed, and what that thing is; and what reaching it would cost elsewhere in the hotel, in your own words.

Ten of the pages come back saying, in effect, hard but possible, with a list of what they will try. The two she worried about come back saying what she knew in the car park, and something she did not. One general manager has written that he could reach his line without cutting housekeeping if the group let him close the hotel's restaurant on Sunday evenings, when it serves eleven covers. The other has written, simply, that her line cannot be reached without reducing room cleaning, and that her guest scores will fall.

The order of what she does next matters more than the questions. She reads all twelve before speaking to anyone. She answers each general manager in writing within a day, even if the answer is only *received, and I am taking it up*. She takes the two pages, unedited, to her director, together with a page of her own: what the region can commit to, what it could reach if two decisions were made above her, and what the remaining gap would cost the guest. She does not soften the two lines herself. She throws the ball back, with the truth attached, and asks for a decision.

The canon's chapter on commitments sets out the discipline she is practising, in a phrase that could be printed above every catchball: "Commitments are calibrated to capacity." It is not a refusal of ambition. It is an insistence that a target agreed in November should still be believed in March, and that the place to discover it will not be is the car park, not the year-end review.

There are failure modes, and they are predictable. A director who answers the returned ball by restating the target has taught the region that the questions were decorative. A regional manager who sends the questions and then argues with the answers has done the same. And a firm that runs catchball only on targets it has already announced to the board has made it a negotiation over how to absorb the shortfall, not a way of setting the target. Chapter 7 carries the run sheet for this practice, and Chapter 6 places it in the order of a first ninety days.

The gain in this is easy to underrate because it shows up as an absence. When the ball comes back in November, the two hotels' shortfall is met as a decision about a restaurant and a rota, made by people who can see the whole region. When it does not, the same shortfall is met in March, as a variance, by people trying to explain it. The difference between the two is the cost of a strategy learning in the wrong month, and it can be measured from records the firm already keeps, which is how the house has argued [a gain should be measured before anyone shares in it]({{BOOK:orgdev-flow}}). The regional manager's page is the earliest point at which that difference is visible. Further down, the same line on her email will become a number that starts to stand in for the purpose it was meant to serve (Chapter 3), and the earlier problem, a strategy that arrives as three good words and no choice (Chapter 1), is the reason her director's answer has to come back as a sentence and not a slogan.

What the director owes

Catchball is usually described from below, as a way for the middle to speak. It is at least as much a discipline for the level above, because a ball that is thrown back has to be caught. The regional manager's director

now holds twelve pages and a summary, and a choice about what to do with them that is harder than it looks.

The easy response is to thank the region and keep the targets, on the grounds that the targets were agreed by the executive team and the board has seen them. That response is common, and it is the end of catchball in that firm, because every regional manager will hear about it within a week. The harder response is to treat the returned ball as information about the strategy, not as a negotiation over it: to ask what the two hotels' pages say about the year of the guest, whether the targets and the strategy can both be true, and, if not, which one gives way.

The canon's chapter on commitments sets out the questions a body should ask before it accepts any promise, and they read as if written for the director's desk: *"Do you genuinely have the capacity to fulfill this? What would need to be true for this commitment to be realistic? What support do you need? And what are you willing to let go of to make space for this?"* The last question is the one most often left out. A target that adds to the work and removes nothing is a target that will be met by removing something the target does not see, and in a hotel that is usually the housekeeping hours.

There is also a matter of time. Catchball takes longer than cascading. The targets will reach the general managers a week later than planned, and the executive team will have to meet once more before the year begins. That week is the cheapest week of the year in which to discover that two of the lines are wrong. Every later week is more expensive, and the most expensive is the one in March when the shortfall is discovered as a fact.

Finally, the director owes the region an answer in the same form the region used: in writing, specific, and quickly. A ball thrown back and caught in silence teaches the same lesson as a ball that is never caught. Witcher and Butterworth's finding that hoshin kanri is hard to sustain through changes in people is, read from the director's chair, a finding about this moment. The practice lasts as long as the people above keep catching.

Running catchball in your own building

The article this chapter began as followed one regional manager and one set of targets. The book can go further, into the finer points of running catchball across an organisation, and the first of them is choosing where to begin.

Catchball is best begun with the next cycle of targets rather than the current one. Targets already announced to a board carry a weight that makes every returned ball look like a request for relief, and the conversation becomes a negotiation over a shortfall. Targets not yet set can be thrown and returned honestly, because nobody has yet promised anything. In practice this means the first catchball is held in the months before the planning cycle closes, and the leadership team agrees in advance that the returned balls will be

read before the targets are fixed. If the cycle has already closed, choose one priority whose targets are still open, or one region, and begin there.

The second finer point is what travels with the ball. A target thrown down without its reasons cannot be returned with anything useful, because the level below can only say whether the number is achievable, not whether it is the right number. Each target should go down with the part of the strategy it serves, in a sentence, and with what the level above believes about how it could be reached. The level below then answers three questions: what it would take to reach the target with what is there now; what could be reached if one thing changed, and what that thing is; and what reaching it would cost elsewhere. The third question is the one that finds the housekeeping rota. It is also the one people are most reluctant to answer in writing, and the reply to the first honest answer to it decides whether it is ever answered again.

The third is the shape of the return. A returned ball is most useful when it separates three things: what the level below commits to, what it could reach with a named decision from above, and what it believes cannot be reached without a cost to something else the strategy values. Mixing the three produces a single, softened number, which is the cushioning described earlier in this chapter. Keeping them apart lets the level above see exactly which decisions are its own.

The fourth is the number of rounds. In the hoshin kanri literature the ball goes back and forth until both levels hold a target they believe. In most organisations two rounds are enough for most targets and a third for one or two. More than three usually means that the level above has not yet decided what it is willing to let go of, and the right move is to stop throwing and make that decision.

The fifth is the people in the middle of the middle. Catchball between a director and a regional manager does little if the regional manager then cascades to her general managers in the old way. The practice has to run at every level the target crosses, and each level has to hold its own returned balls before passing anything upward. That takes longer than a cascade, by a week or two at each level. The canon's line on commitments calibrated to capacity is the reason the time is worth spending: a target that has been tested at every level is one that every level has reason to believe.

The sixth is the sideways conversation. The regional managers will still talk to each other on the drive home, and they should. The practical step is to bring that conversation inside: before returning their balls, the regional managers meet for an hour, without their director, to compare what their general managers have said. They will find the same patterns, and they will return balls that say so. A pattern reported by six regions is harder to dismiss than one reported by one, and it is also more often right.

And the decision that most changes the result is what the director does with the first returned ball that says a target is wrong. If it is answered with a decision, in writing, within the week, and the target or the strategy changes because of it, the practice will hold. If it is answered with the original target restated, catchball is over, and every later round will be a ritual. Chapter 6 places catchball in the first two months

of a ninety-day plan, for one priority, and Chapter 7 gives the three questions, the return page and the director's questions as working pages.

Ten to seven, a week later

It is ten to seven on the following Thursday, and the regional manager is in the same car park. The windscreen is misting again at the edges. On her phone is an email from her director, sent at four. It says that the Sunday restaurant can close for a trial of three months, that the second hotel's line has been lowered and the difference moved to the group's own budget for the year, and that the executive team would like the three questions used across every region next November.

She reads it once. Then she writes two short replies, one to each general manager, and starts the engine.

The light from the lobby still falls across the tarmac in the same yellow square. She drives out through it.

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